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**Defending the Doctrine of the Mean Against Counterexamples: A General Strategy**

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*Aristotle's doctrine of the mean states that each moral virtue stands opposed to two types of vice: one of excess and one of deficiency, respectively. Critics claim that some virtues—like honesty, fair-mindedness, and patience—are counterexamples to Aristotle's doctrine. Here, I develop a generalizable strategy to defend the doctrine of the mean against such counterexamples. I argue that not only is the doctrine of the mean defensible, but taking it seriously also allows us to gain substantial insight into particular virtues. Failure to take the doctrine seriously, moreover, exposes us to the risk of mistaking certain vices for virtues.*

**Keywords:** honesty, patience, fair-mindedness, virtue, doctrine of the mean, Aristotle

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**1. Introduction**

According to Aristotle, 'moral virtue is a mean ... between two vices, the one involving excess, the other deficiency' (1109a, 20-24).<sup>i</sup> Courage, for example, relates to feelings of fear (1106a, 35). Agents prone to excessive fear are 'cowardly' while agents prone to deficient fear are 'rash' (1104a, 16-22). Both states—cowardice and rashness—miss the intermediate (i.e., virtue) with respect to fear (1104a, 10-22). The courageous agent, however, hits the right mark with respect to fear (she has the right amount of fear, among other things).<sup>ii</sup> If the doctrine of the mean is correct, then similar stories can be told about each moral virtue.

Aristotle's doctrine is often criticized.<sup>iii</sup> One strategy against it aims to show that some virtues constitute counterexamples. To illustrate: honesty is widely considered to be a moral virtue.<sup>iv</sup> Honesty appears only to have a vice of deficiency, however: one is either honest or less-than-honest (i.e., dishonest). If so, then honesty undermines the doctrine of the mean. But if a paradigmatic moral virtue (like honesty) undermines the doctrine of the mean, then the doctrine seems beyond rescue. Fair-mindedness and patience may cause problems in the same way. Each appears to lack a corresponding vice of excess, and so, each appears to be a counterexample to Aristotle's doctrine.

In this essay, I develop a general strategy for defending the doctrine of the mean against these kinds of counterexamples.<sup>v</sup> Defending the doctrine is warranted, I argue, because it seems particularly useful for purposes of character education (in which the development of virtue requires that we ‘calibrate’ our character properly along several different spectra). In other words, the doctrine of the mean provides a useful ‘guidance system’ for the practice and formation of virtue. Moreover, the doctrine is instrumentally useful in other ways, as it provides greater insight into the nature of particular virtues. Here, I show how taking the doctrine seriously can enhance conceptual accounts of the virtue of honesty—and, to some extent, the virtues of fair-mindedness and patience—as thinking in terms of the doctrine of the mean enables us to attend carefully to the distinct ways in which agents may fail to be virtuous. Failure to take the doctrine of the mean seriously risks overlooking some of the ways in which one may fall short of understanding, developing, and expressing virtue.

With that in mind, I begin with an overview of the doctrine of the mean, flagging some of the criticisms it has received. Next, I outline Miller’s (2021) account of honesty, explaining why he concludes that honesty is a counterexample to Aristotle’s doctrine. Third, I consider four ways in which an agent might exemplify a vice of excess relevant to honesty. I then respond to two objections that might be raised against my account. Taken as a whole, this process provides a framework for defending the doctrine of the mean against counterexamples. After describing that general framework, I conclude by showing how it resolves problems arising from two other (apparent) counterexamples: fair-mindedness and patience. Not only does this show that the doctrine of the mean is defensible against counterexamples, but the process also provides valuable insight into several particular virtues (honesty, fair-mindedness, and patience), each of which is currently receiving close attention in the literature.<sup>vi</sup>

## 2. Aristotle on the Doctrine of the Mean

The doctrine of the mean states that each moral virtue is opposed to a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency. Courage is opposed to cowardice (excessive fear) and rashness (deficient fear). Temperance is opposed to ‘self-indulgence’ (excessive appetite) and ‘insensibility’ (deficient appetite). And so on. Put differently, the relevant spectrum for courage is *fear*: courageous agents feel neither too much nor too little fear. The relevant spectrum for temperance is *appetite*: temperate agents have appetites that are neither too strong nor too weak.<sup>vii</sup> The same goes for all other moral virtues: there is some spectrum along which virtuous agents hit an intermediate point between the errors of excess and deficiency.

Two points of clarification are needed. First, vices of excess and deficiency do not involve too much or too little of a particular *virtue*. Rashness is not excessive courage. Instead, rashness is a state distinct from courage.<sup>viii</sup> One worry is that in everyday language, agents are sometimes described as being ‘too virtuous.’ For example, we might hear someone described as being ‘generous to a fault.’ For Aristotle, however, such a person is *too giving*; they give more than they

should. And any state of character that regularly leads someone to give more than they should is not really generosity. Instead, the generous agent gives ‘to the right people, the right amounts, and at the right time’ (1120a, 25). So, failure to give in this way—which occurs when someone habitually gives too much *or* too little—precludes the virtue of generosity. Hence, there is no such thing as ‘excessive generosity’ on Aristotle’s account. The same goes for all virtues; virtues are not something that agents can have to an excess.<sup>ix</sup>

Second, although the doctrine of the mean posits two types of vice, that does not imply that there cannot be subcategories of each type of vice. Continuing with generosity, the virtue involves excellence with respect to ‘giving and taking’ (1119b, 25). Failures with respect to giving may come apart from failures with respect to taking. An agent may habitually give too much (an error of excess) while taking too little (an error of deficiency). Does such an agent exhibit the vice of excess or the vice of deficiency? If our answer is ‘neither,’ that might seem to threaten Aristotle’s doctrine.

Fortunately, Aristotle addresses this concern directly. Generosity, we have seen, involves at least two spectra (giving and taking).<sup>x</sup> And there are two ways to err along each spectrum. It follows that there are four general categories of moral error that stand opposed to generosity: self-indulgence, prodigality, meanness, and stinginess (see *Table 1*).

*Table 1*

	<b>Excessive Giving</b>	<b>Deficient Giving</b>
<b>Excessive Taking</b>	Self-indulgence	Meanness
<b>Deficient Taking</b>	Prodigality	Stinginess

Aristotle explains that ‘prodigality exceeds in giving and not taking, and falls short in taking while, meanness falls short in giving, and exceeds in taking’ (1121a, 12-13). And while prodigality and meanness are two types of failure, there are also more complicated ways of erring with respect to generosity. Self-indulgent agents, we are told, ‘take recklessly and from any source; for they have an appetite for giving, and they do not mind how or from what source’ (1121b, 1-2). Self-indulgent agents, therefore, are like prodigal agents in terms of their giving, but more like mean agents in terms of their taking. They exhibit a blend of prodigality and meanness. Relatedly, ‘those who are called by such names as “miserly,” “close,” “stingy” all fall short in giving, but do not covet the possessions of others nor wish to get them’ (1121b, 21). Like self-indulgent agents, stingy individuals exhibit a combination of prodigality and meanness; they err like mean agents in terms of giving and err like prodigal agents in terms of taking.

Since there are four vicious character traits listed here (rather than two) has Aristotle undermined

his own doctrine? No. In each case, moral errors reduce to some error(s) along at least one spectrum (giving or taking). Nothing in the doctrine of the mean requires that there be exactly one spectrum relevant to a given virtue. By comparison, consider a targeting system that operates within three-dimensional space. Though there are three axes to consider when aiming, there are precisely two ways of erring with respect to each axis. One may aim too far to the left or to the right, too far from oneself or too near, and too high or too low. If we aim to hit an exact point in space, then there is exactly one way of doing so—precision with respect to all three axes—and an infinite number of ways to miss the mark.<sup>xi</sup> Education in virtue involves ‘calibrating’ one’s character along several different spectra, where there are always two ways of erring (one of excess and one of deficiency) along each spectrum. It is critical to distinguish between the spectra along which we measure something (e.g., fear, giving, appetite) and the resulting state of one’s character (which, in the case of vice, may be a complicated blend of excess and deficiency).<sup>xii</sup>

In sum, the doctrine of the mean says each moral virtue stands opposed to errors of excess and deficiency, respectively. If someone has a vice of excess, that does not imply that they are *too virtuous*. Instead, each vice of excess precludes its corresponding virtue. Some character traits involve a combination of excess and defect (along different spectra). This, we have seen, poses no problem for the doctrine of the mean. What would be especially troubling for the doctrine, however, are direct counterexamples. A successful counterexample would show that some particular virtue lacks a vice of excess (or a vice of deficiency). And it would be an especially compelling counterexample if it were a paradigmatic moral virtue. Since Aristotle’s doctrine is said to apply to moral virtues generally, it had better apply to traits that are most clearly virtues. According to Miller (2021), honesty presents one such (compelling) counterexample. I will now consider Miller’s account before explaining why he thinks it poses a problem for Aristotle.

### 3. Honesty as a Counterexample?

The core<sup>xiii</sup> of Miller’s (2021) account is this:

**Honesty:** ‘The virtue of honesty is the virtue of being disposed, centrally and reliably, to not intentionally distort the facts as the agent sees them and *primarily* for good or virtuous motivating reasons of one or more kinds  $K_1$  through  $K_N$  of sufficient motivating strength ...’ (108, emphasis in original)

This is a subjective account of honesty. The honest person consistently and accurately represents the world to others *as she sees it* (Miller 2021, 6). Honesty, therefore, is compatible with the possibility that agents are mistaken.<sup>xiv</sup> Additionally, the virtue of honesty requires that agents be motivated not to distort the truth for the right sorts of reasons. Someone who—only out of fear of punishment—habitually refrains from distorting the truth may exhibit honest *behavior*. On Miller’s account, however, they would fail to exhibit the virtue of honesty.<sup>xv</sup> Virtuously honest agents, in contrast, are motivated by things like friendship, justice, benevolence, etc.<sup>xvi</sup> When assessing an

agent's honesty, therefore, we must consider (a) whether or not the agent routinely and intentionally distorts 'the facts' as she sees them and (b) whether or not the agent is motivated by the right kinds of reasons.

So why might honesty constitute a counterexample to the doctrine of the mean? If we think about accuracy of one's representation along a spectrum, at one end we have 'perfect representation.' At the other end is 'complete misrepresentation.' One extreme (perfect representation) seems to be what honest agents characteristically do. That is, agents will either represent things accurately (and so, land at one extreme of the spectrum) or fail to do so (and so, are deficient in their representation of the facts). If correct, then there is seemingly no room for any 'excess' here. A person's representation of the facts is either accurate (honest) or less than accurate (dishonest).

Miller (2021) makes this point, noting, 'the vice of excess would ... have to do with being *too* honest' (138). He then elaborates, 'such a person says true things by her lights with no intention of misleading ... but says too many of them or says too much about any one thing or says what she thinks is true but not at the right time' (2021: 138). It seems strange to refer to this kind of person as a failure with respect to honesty. Stranger still is the claim that they are vicious. If anything, Miller argues, such a person—whom we might call an 'oversharer'—appears to lack '*tact* or *discretion*' (140, emphasis in original). That is, oversharing may violate some social norm(s), but it does not obviously violate any ethical norms. It makes little sense, therefore, to think of oversharing as 'a *vice* of excess.' And if no candidate for a vice of excess can be found, then honesty is a compelling counterexample to Aristotle's doctrine.

#### 4. Identifying a Vice of Excess

I will argue that there is a vice of excess with respect to honesty. Hence, honesty is not a counterexample to the doctrine of the mean. Importantly, failure to recognize that there is a vice of excess with respect to honesty may lead us to drift into vice unknowingly. After all, developing virtue is like travelling along a narrow path, with a precipice on either side. Knowledge of the lines between virtue and vice serve as guardrails along this path; knowledge of both types of vice protects us from drifting into vice in either direction. Where we lack knowledge of a given vice (i.e., where we lack one of these guardrails), therefore, we risk mistaking vice for virtue (and so, we risk veering off the narrow path and plummeting into the abyss). And although I focus heavily on honesty, the lessons learned here will apply to virtues across the board. That is, a pattern will emerge that allows Aristotle's doctrine to be defended against counterexamples generally.

Recall that each vice of excess involves an excess along some spectrum that is relevant to a given virtue, rather than consisting in an excess of the virtue itself. On this point, Miller's discussion occasionally runs into trouble. At times, he refers to the (hypothetical) vice of excess as 'excessive honesty' (2021: 140). Probably, this is a simple infelicity. But it does draw attention to the need to be careful here. Just as the 'fear' and 'confidence' spectra are central to courage, we must identify

the spectra that are central to honesty. What, in other words, is honesty measuring?

Looking at Miller's account, there are four candidates to consider: (1) the agent's reliability in not distorting the facts, (2) the facts themselves (i.e., the facts as they appear to the agent), (3) the degree of distortion that is occurring (or not occurring), and (4) the agent's motivation (or concern) not to distort the facts. Each of these candidates admit of excess and deficiency in some sense. Ultimately, the fourth candidate allows us to identify honesty's vice of excess most clearly.

#### 4a. Candidate 1: Excessive Reliability

Reliability admits of a spectrum, in that agents may be perfectly reliable, somewhat reliable, somewhat unreliable, etc. Were there a vice of excess with respect to honesty along the 'reliability' spectrum, therefore, the vicious agent would be *too reliable* at not distorting the facts. Miller hints at this possibility: 'if we are using the Aristotelian framework, then a person who is disposed to act like this is someone with the vice of excessive honesty, i.e., the vice of being disposed to intentionally report the facts as the agent sees them *too reliably*' (2021: 139, emphasis added).

Being 'overly reliable' is an unlikely candidate for a moral vice, however. After all, reliability is morally neutral. Virtuous people are reliably good, vicious people are reliably bad. So, reliability is a feature of both virtue and vice. If reliability is to be a workable candidate, then it must be that an agent's being 'overly reliable' is restricted in scope when it comes to honesty. In that case, the vice of excess would involve being overly reliable at a specific kind of thing (i.e., not intentionally distorting the facts). For example, some situations may call for an intentional distortion of the facts. In the name of 'therapeutic privilege,' withholding the truth from patients (or even deceiving them) may be what is called for by the standards of good medical care.<sup>xvii</sup> In those cases, it would be problematic if a physician were *too reliable* or *too disposed* to tell the truth. An overly strong disposition not to distort the facts would, in other words, lead them to behave badly.

One worry, following Miller, is that it seems strange to think of the physician's failure as a failure *with respect to honesty*. Instead, it makes more sense to say that the physician is fully honest but lacks prudence or some other trait that would help them to see that this is not a situation that calls for total, blunt honesty. As Miller remarks, such an agent 'is failing, but in a different area of his moral life than that to which, strictly speaking, honesty pertains' (153). The problem, then, is not that the agent is *too reliable* when it comes to not distorting the facts. Instead, they seemingly lack some other feature(s)—such as 'tact, discretion, circumspection, and temperance'—that would otherwise hold their disposition not to distort the facts in check.

#### 4b. Candidate 2: Excessive Sharing of 'Facts'

A second candidate for honesty's vice of excess involves 'the facts,' which may be quantified in a way that admits of excess or defect. People may share too little information, the right amount, or too

much information in a given situation. Honesty, in this case, might involve sharing the appropriate amount of information (for the purpose of communication, as determined by context) so as to accurately represent the world as one sees it. Sharing ‘too much information’ (‘oversharing’) would be a paradigmatic expression of honesty’s vice of excess.

This view preserves the doctrine of the mean. Oversharers, on one hand, provide too much information (more than is required, based on context) whereas lying and misleading, on the other hand, involve providing too little information (i.e., less than would be sufficient, in a context, for portraying an accurate picture of the world as the agent sees it). Importantly, the quantity of utterances (or the quantity of other types of communicative acts) is not what is being measured here. Rather, in a given situation, some information is sufficient to provide one’s interlocutor with an accurate picture of the world as it appears to oneself. Excess involves including all of that information *plus more* (often much more) than would be sufficient. Deficiency involves including *less than* sufficient, relevant information. Hence, lying and misleading are standard cases of deficiency even if liars speak more than overshangers. Put differently, liars may speak at length—providing an excessive number of utterances—but their failure is still one of deficiency. They have failed to provide sufficient information to accurately represent the world as they see it.

Miller considers oversharing as (possibly) associated with honesty’s vice of excess. He writes that ‘an honest person withholds or restrains himself from communicating *too many of her beliefs* when it would be inappropriate to do so’ while ‘the excessively honest person does not exhibit such restraint’ and so, communicates too many of her beliefs (2021: 139, emphasis added). Once again, however, it may seem odd to think of the overshanger as a failure with respect to *honesty*. Oversharing may just violate social or linguistic norms (without implicating an agent’s honesty). Grice’s (1975) ‘maxim of quantity’, for instance, states that one should be ‘as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange’ without being ‘more informative than is required’ (45). Oversharing runs contrary to this norm. But being a bad interlocutor does not make a person a failure with respect to honesty. Nor does it make a person morally wicked.

#### 4c. Candidate 3: Excessive Precision

Next, we might attempt to quantify the precision with which an agent presents the facts. Portrayals of the facts may be perfectly precise, somewhat precise, somewhat imprecise, and so forth. Excessive precision could involve communicating with so much precision that the content of what is being communicated is lost on one’s interlocutor. Imagine, for instance, that a physician reports that a patient’s scans indicate she is suffering from glioblastoma. In the same number of words, the physician might also say that scans indicate the patient has a brain tumor. Supposing the patient has little understanding of medical terminology, the first kind of report is overly precise (and so, unhelpful to the patient). Even so, describing glioblastoma as glioblastoma is more precise than referring to it as ‘a brain tumor.’ The latter expression is ambiguous, after all. But the less precise

description seems appropriate in this situation.

Importantly, excessive precision is distinct from oversharing. The quantity of facts (or amount of information) is not at issue here. Yet, the same concerns arise for excessive precision as in the discussion of oversharing. Excessive precision seems primarily to violate some linguistic or social norms, rather than moral norms. The physician who uses technical terms, for example, may be in violation of Grice's (1975) 'maxim of manner,' which requires that one 'avoid obscurity' where possible (46). But even so, there is more going for the third candidate than the second.

Suppose our overly precise physician refuses to speak in plain terms. She has, let's assume, no intention of misleading or deceiving patients in doing so. But her obsession with precision impedes her ability to communicate clearly in this case. Is this merely a linguistic or social error? I am not entirely convinced. Something seems morally wrong with placing such high value on precision, especially to the detriment of a person's well-being. The real problem, however, is this. Were the disposition to communicate with excessive precision genuinely a vice that contrasts with honesty, then this disposition must preclude the virtue of honesty. On Miller's account, excessive precision does not preclude honesty. Our physician might be unkind, cruel, malevolent, or uncaring, but does not fail *with respect to honesty*.

The first three candidates, therefore, are not especially promising. Thus far, we have identified ways in which agents may err in their communication about (or representation of) the world: failing to recognize when a situation calls for restraint, oversharing, and using greater precision than is warranted. What we need is for the relevant failure to (a) be *incompatible* with the virtue of honesty—just as both cowardice and rashness are each incompatible with courage—and (b) involve a *moral* failure, not merely failure with respect to social or linguistic norms. This brings us to the fourth (and, I will argue, most promising) candidate.

#### **4d. Candidate 4: Excessive Motivation (or Concern) Not to Distort the Truth**

An agent's motivation (or concern) not to distort the truth ranges from 'extremely strong' to 'extremely weak' (or 'nonexistent'). For example, it is easy to imagine someone who is so concerned not to distort the truth that they refuse to deceive others, even when playing deception-based games. Such a person might be said to be *overly concerned* with not distorting the truth.<sup>xviii</sup> More worrisome are cases in which agents insist on communicating the truth (as they see it) when there are excellent reasons to avoid doing so. I propose that honesty's vice of excess be cashed out in terms of excessive motivation (or concern) not to distort the truth.<sup>xix</sup>

To illustrate honesty's vice of excess, imagine that a nurse mistakenly runs an HIV test for a patient. The test comes back positive. The nurse learns the results and informs his patient that the test was (accidentally) performed. Before the nurse can deliver the results, however, the patient



states that she does not want to know the results.<sup>xx</sup> Suppose that the nurse is motivated by an overwhelming obsession not to distort the truth and so, discloses the positive result anyway. Doing so seems morally problematic. The nurse goes beyond merely violating linguistic or social norms, in other words, and causes real harm. Similar stories may hold for people whose excessive concern not to distort the truth leads them to spoil surprise parties, engagement proposals, and so forth.

As a bonus, describing the vice of excess in terms of ‘an excessive motivation or concern not to distort the truth’ preserves some key insights from our discussion of the first three candidates. First, those who are overly concerned not to distort the truth might be called ‘too reliable’ in not distorting the truth. Their excessive concern, after all, may regularly lead them to convey the truth in cases where it should not be shared. Not all cases of being ‘too reliable’ will express the vice of excess, however. Rather, being ‘overly reliable’ only expresses honesty’s vice of excess when one is ‘too reliable’ because of an excessively strong motivation or concern not to distort the truth. When someone is ‘too reliable’ for other reasons, the vice of excess would not occur.

Second, those who are overly concerned not to distort the truth might often be chronic overshangers. Such people might think that were they not to disclose significant amounts of information, they would distort the truth (which *must* be avoided, in their view). Not every instance of overshanging would be the result of a corrupt character, of course. Some overshangers will simply lack tact.<sup>xxi</sup> But overshanging is likely evidence for the vice of excess (even if not vicious behavior per se).

Third, if overly precise agents are driven by an excessive motivation not to distort the truth, then they exhibit the vice of excess. Recall the physician who refuses to speak to patients in plain language. If driven by an excessive concern not to distort the truth, then the physician exhibits honesty’s vice of excess. Alternatively, if someone communicates with excessive precision for another reason (e.g., they mistakenly assume that their audience has sufficient education to understand them), then they do not exhibit the vice of excess. So, even though the first three candidates are not central to honesty’s vice of excess, they are not entirely irrelevant either.<sup>xxii</sup>

At this point, I expect two major objections. First, it may seem that not all agents who fail in excessive ways are *moral* failures. And even if they were, it would not be their *honesty* that is the problem so much as, say, their lack of benevolence or empathy. Second, it may seem that my proposal does not adequately account for ordinary language expressions, which sometimes describe people as being genuinely ‘too honest.’ I will respond to each objection in turn.

## 5. Objection: Honesty is Not Implicated in Relevant Cases

First, Miller may object that when it comes to agents who are overly concerned not to distort the truth, it is not their *honesty* that is implicated. Rather, these agents are perfectly honest (in their refusal to distort the truth) even if they exhibit some other morally problematic behaviors or traits.

The nurse who discloses an unwanted test result, for instance, acts in a harmful way. But if honesty's vice of excess is exemplified in such cases, it must be that the agents fail with respect to honesty. Put differently, excessive concern not to distort the truth must *preclude* the virtue of honesty. It is not yet clear that this is the case.

In response, recall that for Miller (2021), honest agents must be driven by 'good or virtuous motivating reasons of one or more kinds  $K_1$  through  $K_N$ ' where relevant reasons include one's sense of duty, justice, beneficence, and so forth (101). Not all motivating reasons are consistent with possessing the virtue of honesty; some motivating reasons preclude honesty. If an agent avoids cheating 'only to avoid getting caught' for example, their action has 'no moral worth' (i.e., it is not an expression of the virtue of honesty) (90). Motivation, therefore, allows Miller to distinguish between (a) the *virtue* of honesty, (b) honest *actions*, and (c) 'other dispositions which might *mimic*' the virtue of honesty (101, emphasis added).

Honesty's vice of excess precludes the virtue of honesty even if it is a disposition that mimics the virtue of honesty. Put differently, those who possess the vice of excess will lack the virtue of honesty, even if the vice of excess disposes them to perform honest actions with significant regularity. The problem with the vice of excess, then, is not that one's behavior is dishonest. Dishonest actions are indicative of dishonesty (honesty's vice of *deficiency*). In contrast, possessing honesty's vice of excess primarily consists in one's internal motivation and concerns being faulty in very particular ways. To illustrate, imagine two soldiers charge into battle together, even though the odds of survival are very low. What they do appears to be courageous. They may even behave as the courageous agent would behave. Yet, suppose we learn that one soldier is motivated to fight for what is good or 'noble,' while the other is only motivated to shed as much blood as possible (and cares nothing for what is good or noble). Though both act as the courageous agent would, only one soldier exhibits the virtue of courage (or so Aristotle would have it).<sup>xxiii</sup> On Aristotle's account, acting in ways consistent with courage (even habitually) is insufficient for one to possess the virtue of courage.

The same follows for honesty. Performing honest actions (even habitually) is insufficient for one's possessing the virtue. An excessive motivation not to distort the truth renders agents subpar (i.e., less than excellent) precisely in the domain over which honesty presides: the domain that has to do 'with relating to oneself and others in appropriate ways, given how the world appears to one' (Miller 2021: 92). An excessive, overpowering, or overwhelming drive not to distort the truth renders an agent faulty when it comes to relating to others in 'appropriate ways.'

What of the nurse who shares an unwanted test result, then? What he *did* was honest. He intentionally did not distort the facts. But, as we just saw, the virtue of honesty requires that certain motivations drive agents not to distort the facts. Faulty motivation precludes the virtue and the nurse's obsession with not distorting the truth is a faulty motivation. Hence, the nurse lacks the virtue of honesty.<sup>xxiv</sup> One could object that by having a faulty motivation, all that is shown is that

the nurse lacks the virtue of honesty. It is another thing to say that the nurse exemplifies a vice. In response, the present account posits two general categories of vice, each of which stands opposed to honesty. First, we have traits characterized by a *lack of concern* for not distorting the facts. Second, we have traits characterized by an *excessive concern* for not distorting the facts. Dishonest individuals (liars, cheaters, thieves, and bullshitters, etc.) fall into the first category. These individuals lack an appropriate concern not to distort the facts. Honesty's vice of excess, I have argued, applies to those who are overly concerned not to distort the facts. Hence, it is one's concern with respect to not distorting the facts that is most central to honesty, rather than the (non)occurrence of distortions.

In sum, it was objected that agents like the nurse (who shares an unwanted test result) are fully honest, even if they are moral failures in some other way. In response, I argued that these agents lack the virtue of honesty (excellence with respect to honesty) when their motivations and concerns are flawed in certain ways. This is so even if such agents possess traits that mimic honesty (from outsiders' perspectives). There is at least one major advantage of this view (over the view that relevant agents are perfectly honest but flawed in some other way). On my view, there is a common moral error running throughout relevant cases. People that we might call 'too honest' typically express (or act in accordance with) honesty's vice of excess. They each miss the 'appropriate' mark with respect to 'relating to oneself and others ... given how the world appears' to them. In contrast, the objector's view is that no common moral error occurs across these cases. The nurse who discloses an unwanted test result is cruel or unkind. People who spoil surprise parties are unjust. And so on. On this (the objector's) view, all 'overly honest' agents just so happen to err in terms of some virtue *other than* honesty. It would be simpler to posit that there is a common moral error across these cases. This is what my account does. 'Overly honest' agents have some morally problematic feature in common, rather than just so happening to express distinct moral errors.

## 6. Objection: Ordinary Language and Cases of 'Excessive Honesty'

Next, one may object that given how language is commonly used, it seems possible for agents to be 'too honest' in a literal sense. Worse still, as Bloomfield (MS) argues: since agents can be 'too honest' it follows that honesty is not really a virtue in the first place. After all, 'there are times when one ought not to be honest, when there are never times when one ought not to be virtuous' (Bloomfield, MS: 20). Failure to account for honesty's vice of excess, therefore, may put honesty's status as a virtue in jeopardy. So, those who think that honesty is a virtue must find a way to account for cases of 'excessive honesty.'<sup>xxv</sup>

In response, honesty's vice of excess not only precludes honesty, but is also the type of trait to which locutions like 'too honest' refer. Four observations by Aristotle concerning virtue, vice, and language will help to defend this claim. First, Aristotle observes that 'many of the states [including virtues *and* vices] have no name' (1107b, 2-3). When vices lack a name (as in the case of honesty's vice of excess), they will likely be easier to overlook. In ordinary language, we might use phrases

like ‘too honest’ or ‘overly generous’ simply because the vice we intend to pick out is not named. Our expressions, then, may just serve as helpful shorthand.

Second, and relatedly, there are good explanations for why certain vices might lack names (or are ill-defined) in ordinary language. Some vices are much more common than others. As Aristotle writes, ‘we ourselves tend more naturally to pleasures,’ and so, ‘are more easily carried away towards self-indulgence than towards propriety’ (1109a, 14). Given the relative frequency with which self-indulgence occurs (in contrast to ‘insensibility’), it is unsurprising that in ordinary discourse, our concepts and terms are much more precise concerning the former than the latter. In the case of honesty, dishonesty—*deficiency* with respect to honesty—is far more common than the vice of excess. As such, it is unsurprising that honesty’s vice of excess is not well-defined in ordinary language. This is where careful analysis can help to identify the precise errors made by agents who are described, in plain language, as being ‘too honest.’

Third, some vices are more ‘opposed’ to relevant virtues than others. A vice that is relatively similar to its corresponding virtue may generally be harder to distinguish from the virtue itself. As Aristotle remarks, ‘the things to which we ourselves more naturally tend seem more contrary to the intermediate’ (1109a, 13-14). Cowardice, for example, is said to be more opposed to courage than is rashness (1109a, 9). In the case of honesty, dishonesty (lying, cheating, stealing, etc.) seems more opposed to honesty than its vice of excess. In everyday life, therefore, there may be little need to distinguish between honesty and its vice of excess. Indeed, it might even be difficult to tell the difference between honest agents and those who exhibit the vice of excess. By comparison, it might be difficult to distinguish rash people from courageous people. The difference between the courageous agents and cowards, however, is probably much more apparent. Honesty’s vice of excess is akin to rashness in this way. It may be clear (to the average person) that those who exhibit honesty’s vice of excess have done something wrong or misguided (e.g., by disclosing too much information). Given the proximity of the vice of excess to the virtue of honesty, using shorthand expressions like ‘she’s too honest’ will usually be sufficient to convey two things: (a) that an error of *some* kind has occurred and (b) that the error pertains to honesty in some way.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Fourth, since the vice of excess is more akin to honesty than dishonesty, my account predicts that honesty’s vice of excess will generally be judged to be *less bad* than dishonesty. By comparison, when writing about those who give too much (and so, fail with respect to generosity in some way), Aristotle says that such agents are ‘thought to have not a bad character’ because

... it is not the mark of a wicked or ignoble man to go to excess in giving and not taking, but only of a foolish one. The man who is prodigal in this way is *thought much better than the mean man* ... because he benefits many while the other benefits no one. (1121a, 25-26, emphasis added).

In everyday discourse, we may not judge such ‘prodigal’ people to be terribly wicked. But, for

Aristotle, such agents are still failures with respect to the virtue of generosity. Our attitudes of condemnation (or praise) towards agents, therefore, sometimes come apart from the question of whether or not those agents possess virtue. Returning to honesty, those who exhibit the vice of excess are generally not thought to be significant moral failures or wicked people (at least, not in the same way or to the same degree as liars, cheats, and thieves). Relatively speaking, their errors may seem minor and forgivable most of the time. But, following Aristotle, they are still failures with respect to the virtue of honesty, even if only minor failures (in comparison to dishonest people).

To summarize: given the relative rarity of honesty's vice of excess, it is unsurprising that ordinary language does not properly account for it. Locutions like being 'too honest' are, I suggest, a kind of imprecise shorthand that picks out honesty's vice of excess (or, perhaps, actions that are characteristic of honesty's vice of excess). With generosity, we saw that calling someone 'too generous' refers to their excessive giving. But giving is the spectrum most central to generosity, not generosity itself. And, importantly, habitually giving to excess precludes the virtue of generosity. Similarly, agents who are 'too honest' go to excess in their concern not to distort the facts. Such excessive motivation or concern precludes the virtue of honesty (even if the agent frequently behaves in genuinely honest ways). As such, 'excessively honest' people do not have the *virtue* of honesty to an excess.<sup>xxvii</sup> If correct, then my account of honesty's vice of excess preserves the doctrine of the mean, harmonizes with ordinary language data better than competitors' views, and undermines Bloomfield's argument that honesty is not virtue.<sup>xxviii</sup>

## 7. A General Strategy for Addressing Counterexamples

The above discussion of honesty provides a template for how the doctrine of the mean might be defended against counterexamples generally. First, when faced with a potential counterexample, we must be careful to distinguish between the virtue in question and any spectra relevant to that virtue. One way to check whether or not the distinction is being made is to see if people are talking in terms of being *too virtuous* (e.g., describing people as 'too honest,' 'too patient,' 'too fair-minded,' etc.). Such remarks are good evidence that the lines are being blurred between a virtue and the spectrum (or spectra) relevant to it.

Second, in addition to distinguishing a virtue from relevant spectra, it is important to remember that, for Aristotle, although each virtue relates to passions, actions, intentions, and motivations, different virtues center around different things. Courage most centrally involves fear (a passion). Generosity, in contrast, is especially concerned with giving (a type of action, rather than a specific passion).<sup>xxix</sup> Honesty, I have argued, centers especially around one's motivation (or concern) not to distort the facts. Agents may err in deficient and excessive ways with respect to this kind of concern, even supposing that deficient concern is far more prevalent. Not only must we be careful to separate a virtue from its spectra, therefore, but we must also home in on whichever spectrum (or spectra) is most central to the virtue under examination.

We must also consider whether or not a given type of vice is especially prevalent and must consider which vice (excess or deficiency) is ‘closer’ to a given virtue. The vice that is closer to a given virtue will usually present with several key features. It will be less well-defined in ordinary language, people may commonly have difficulty articulating the difference between that vice and its corresponding virtue, and (all else being equal) our moral judgments of that vice will be relatively less severe than our judgments concerning the second corresponding vice (i.e., the vice that is more opposed to the virtue in question). Using this strategy, I will consider two more virtues that are thought to pose a problem for the doctrine of the mean. These are fair-mindedness and patience, respectively.<sup>xxx</sup> I will argue that the strategy outlined here generalizes well.

### 8. Fair-mindedness: Not a Counterexample

King (2021) argues that fair-mindedness is a counterexample to the doctrine of the mean because ‘going beyond fairness does not bespeak vice’ (240). In other words, it seems there is no vice of excess with respect to fair-mindedness, as evidenced by the fact that we do not ‘automatically fall out of virtue by exceeding fairness’ (King 2021, 242). Worse still (for the doctrine of the mean), is that ‘excessive fair-mindedness’ may actually be *virtuous*. As King (2021) argues, ‘there’s a virtue – intellectual charity – that lies beyond fair-mindedness’ (240). Either way, if King is right that fair-mindedness has no vice of excess, then once again, the doctrine of the mean is in trouble.

In response, we must separate the virtue of fair-mindedness from spectra relevant to it. The virtue, King (2021) writes, has the central feature of ‘*even-handedness*, a habit of treating the views and arguments of our dissenters no less favorably than we treat our own’ (230). Fair-minded agents avoid ‘all manner of misrepresentation and harmfully skewed assessment’ (230). In a word, fair-mindedness ‘requires not giving views a leg up just because they’re ours’ (231). If so, then fair-mindedness is centrally concerned with a spectrum of ‘favorability.’ We might view others’ views to be less favorable, as favorable, or more favorable than our own. Hence, if the requirement of fair-mindedness is that we view others’ views as favorable as ours, then there are two ways of missing the mark (i.e., in deficient and excessive ways, respectively).

Critically, seeing others’ views as more favorable than our own is quite different than King’s expression of ‘exceeding fairness’ (240). In other words, King (2021) conflates excessive *fairness* (the virtue) with excess along the spectrum of ‘favorability’ (along which fairness hits the right mark). To show this, it seems that fair-mindedness’s vice of excess consists in the habit of generally viewing others’ views as *more favorable* than our own *simply because they are not one’s own view*. Were an agent to operate on the assumption that others’ views are always better than her own view—*no matter the evidence to the contrary*—the agent would exhibit a serious intellectual flaw.<sup>xxxi</sup>

What of King’s (2021) claim that ‘beyond fair-mindedness’ is another intellectual virtue:

‘intellectual charity’? Fair-mindedness’s vice of excess involves seeing others’ views more favorably than one’s own views, simply because they are others’ views. Intellectual charity, in contrast, involves practices like ‘construct[ing] the best versions of others’ views and arguments,’ ‘interpret[ing] others’ views as being as plausible as we reasonably can,’ etc. (242). Yet, as King (2021) admits, charity ‘requires only that we think as well of others’ views ... as we *reasonably* can’ (244). Should we think well of others’ views *beyond what is reasonable*, then we will have erred to excess. King, therefore, implicitly acknowledges that there is a vice of excess with respect to intellectual charity. So, there is a vice of excess with respect to fair-mindedness, a vice of excess with respect to intellectual charity, and most importantly, the vice of excess with respect to fair-mindedness is distinct from intellectual charity. This is because intellectual charity only requires that see others’ views in the best light *within reason*. It does not require that we see others’ views more favorably than our own *simply because they are others’ views*.

The confusion here ultimately resides in conflating fair-mindedness’s vice of excess with ‘excessive fair-mindedness.’ We must separate the virtue of fair-mindedness from its spectra. Once we do so, it becomes clear that there is a vice of excess, even by King’s own lights. So, the doctrine of the mean is preserved. Further, the previous section explains why this confusion might be especially common. The vices of excess related to fair-mindedness and intellectual charity are relatively rare and more closely resemble fair-mindedness (and intellectual charity) than their corresponding vices of defect. King (2021) confirms this point, noting the rarity of the vice of excess (implicitly) when writing, ‘I rarely worry that our society is vulnerable to an epidemic of blindness toward others’ faults’ (243). Since fair-mindedness’s vice of excess is (a) rare and (b) resembles the virtue of fair-mindedness much more than unfairness, this is good evidence that the conceptual and linguistic territory surrounding the vice of excess will not be well-defined. Hence, we must be especially careful when judging that no such vice exists.

### 9. Patience: Not a Counterexample

Patience is one more virtue that is said to conflict with the doctrine of the mean. As with honesty, people are sometimes described as being ‘too patient.’<sup>xxxiii</sup> Rather than there being a vice of excess with respect to patience, the story goes, patience itself may be excessive. If it is possible to be ‘too patient,’ however, then patience falls within the scope of Bloomfield’s critique: it is not a virtue.

Pianalto (2016) defends patience’s status as a virtue in the same way that Miller (2021) defends honesty. When someone is ‘overly patient’ (e.g., because they are afraid to stand up for themselves), Pianalto writes:

Rather than blaming an excess of patience, we should blame a deficiency of confidence or an excess of fear. In other words, if we want to understand the source of error, we should consider the vices that cause the error, rather than offering the suggestion that a virtue itself sometimes leads to vice. ‘Too much patience’ is not a failure of patience, but rather a

failure to possess some other virtue. (105)

There are two concerns with this response. First, on Pianalto's view, excessive patience is genuine patience. The error in these cases, Pianalto claims, involves patience being 'pressed into the service of vicious ends' by vices (like cowardice).<sup>xxxiii</sup> But if Bloomfield (MS) is correct—that 'the virtues never bring about moral failure'—then patience is not a virtue (3). Second, Pianalto's (2016) solution is in tension with the doctrine of the mean. If 'excessive patience' is genuine patience *plus* vices like cowardice, then there is (seemingly) no room for a standalone vice of excess with respect to patience. If so, then patience is a counterexample to Aristotle's doctrine.

In defense of the doctrine of the mean, there is room for a vice of excess concerning patience (and showing this will preserve the status of patience as a virtue as well). One benefit of identifying patience's vice of excess is that it provides a simpler solution to Bloomfield's challenge than Pianalto's response. If patience has a vice of excess, then we need not attribute additional vices to agents in every case of 'excessive patience.' What, then, does patience's vice of excess involve?

Once again, we must distinguish patience from relevant spectra. Patience, Pianalto (2016) claims, centrally involves 'the disposition to accept unavoidable burdens as well as those avoidable burdens that one can reasonably judge it to be wise to accept' (54). People can be disposed to accept too many burdens (the vice of excess) or too few burdens (the vice of deficiency; namely, 'impatience'). So, the vice of excess involves a disposition to accept burdens that one 'really ought not accept' (52). On my account, someone who is 'too patient' is not *really* patient (in the virtuous sense), but is, instead, habitually willing to put up with more than they reasonably should. And this is compatible with the claim that they often behave in genuinely patient ways or have some character trait that mimics the virtue of patience.

Pianalto (2016) expresses concerns about this type of view. He writes, 'it seems odd to suggest that at one moment, the person's effort is an instance of patience, but at the point where acceptance has become unreasonable, the person is now exercising a vice instead of a virtue' (54). In response, I will employ one of Pianalto's own qualifications regarding patience. The patient person *generally* accepts burdens that one can reasonably judge to be worth bearing. It is not the case that an agent's character slips from being virtuous (or patient) and becomes vicious every time the 'reasonable burden' threshold is crossed. When assessing an agent's character, what matters is what they are disposed to do. If an agent is disposed to bear burdens that are unreasonable to bear (i.e., this is something they do with sufficient regularity), then they possess and express the vice of excess. But either way, we cannot judge an agent's character on the basis of one event.

Furthermore, given the similarity of patience's vice of excess to patience itself—especially in comparison to impatience—the lines between patience and its vice of excess will likely be difficult to draw. Furthermore, when assessing agents' patience (or failure with respect to patience), it is likely that we would judge impatient agents to be greater failures than those who possess the vice



of excess. In fact, we might not be able to tell the difference between patience and its vice of excess in many cases. Expressions like ‘she is too patient’ are consistent with this claim. Namely, the speaker observes that (a) there is some flaw in the agent and (b) that the flaw is associated with patience in some way. My account grants (a) and (b), whereas Pianalto’s account denies (b). In this way, my account fits with ordinary language data better. Ultimately, absent a clear distinction between patience and its vice of excess, it will be easy to conflate the latter with an excess of the former.

Does this imply that ordinary language users are misusing language? Not really. Phrases like ‘being too patient’ seem to be simple shorthand. Were people given the opportunity (and conceptual resources) to unpack their words (e.g., by separating patience from its spectra) they would, I suspect, quickly assent to the claim that it is an excess along some spectrum that is the problem. When someone is called ‘too patient,’ for example, the speaker may just mean something like ‘he’s waiting longer than he should.’ The excess, in other words, is occurring along the spectrum of time being spent (i.e., the burdens being borne) for the sake of some goal. The person who is ‘too patient’ is erring by bearing burdens they should not reasonably bear. So, again, by separating the vice of excess from its corresponding virtue, we can clarify the nature of the error that is occurring *without* denying the speaker’s claim that the error in question relates to patience.

If the above is correct, then patience has a vice of excess, and so, is not a counterexample to Aristotle’s doctrine. What about cases where agents are said to express *genuine* patience, though it is ‘pressed into service’ by some vice(s)? Pianalto (2016) notes, for instance, that ‘it might require great patience in order to thrive as a thief, political terrorist, or a serial killer’ (106). And again, if Bloomfield (MS) is correct that ‘the virtues never bring about moral failure,’ then patience can never lead to wrongdoing (if it does, then it is not really a virtue).

In response, an appeal to patience’s vice of excess is needed. The patient terrorist may exhibit patient *behavior*—or even a disposition that *mimics* patience—despite lacking the *virtue* of patience. The burdens one must bear to perform an act of terror (or murder) are simply not something a reasonable person would judge to be ‘wise to accept.’ Reasonably speaking, no burdens should be endured to perform such wicked acts. If so, then the ‘patient’ terrorist endures more burdens than they reasonably should. In doing so, they express patience’s vice of excess, rather than the virtue of patience itself. This holds even if the terrorist regularly behaves in patient ways. Critically, since the virtue of patience is not exhibited in such cases, Bloomfield’s argument—that patience is not a virtue—is undermined.

## 10. Conclusion

In this essay, I have described a general way of defending Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean against counterexamples. By considering alleged counterexamples—like honesty, fair-mindedness, and patience—I have shown that careful attention to the distinction between virtues and the spectra that

they measure both preserves Aristotle's doctrine and allows us to gain substantial insight into each virtue as well. Not only that, but this process harmonizes well with ordinary language use— more so than alternatives on offer—and preserves the virtue status of traits like honesty and patience. It seems, therefore, that Aristotle's doctrine provides more value (and greater insight) than critics sometimes suppose.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> All citations of Aristotle's work will refer to the *Nicomachean Ethics* unless otherwise noted.

<sup>ii</sup> While there is much more to be said regarding Aristotle's treatment of courage (e.g., with respect to its connection to confidence, fearing the right objects, etc.), doing so is unnecessary for present purposes.

<sup>iii</sup> See especially Hursthouse (1980) and (2006), as well as Losin (1987).

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. Miller (2021: ix).

<sup>v</sup> That is, my focus is upon ways in which contemporary discussions of particular virtues commonly lead authors to reject the doctrine. This is worth emphasizing because the doctrine of the mean has received so much attention (in general) throughout the years. For some especially illuminating discussions of the doctrine (and defenses of it against different objections than the ones I consider here), see Hardie (1965), Brown (1997), and Mintoff (2013).

<sup>vi</sup> Note, my task here is not to defend everything that Aristotle says about virtue. 'Honesty,' for example, may not rightly be counted as a virtue on Aristotle's view, even if something like 'truthfulness' (1127a114-1127b33) is a virtue. For more on truthfulness as a virtue, see Miller (2021: ix) and especially Zembyat (1993) and Curzer (2012: 195-222). In short, my goal is to defend the *doctrine of the mean* against alleged counterexamples in contemporary discussions. Not only is the doctrine of the mean defensible in this context, but, as I will show, taking it seriously provides greater insight into the nature of particular virtues themselves.

<sup>vii</sup> As with courage, there is much more to be said about temperance (e.g., regarding desiring the right objects, in the right way, etc.) but here, I intend only to illustrate a central way in which temperance is a mean between two extremes. That one's appetites are neither too strong nor too weak is, at least, a necessary condition for temperance, though not a sufficient one.

<sup>viii</sup> One reviewer argues that perhaps two traits opposed to courage—namely, rashness and cowardice—collapse into one on Aristotle's view. Aristotle, after all, discusses agents who seem rash—in that they 'display confidence' when no danger is present—but they 'do not hold their ground against what is really fearful' (1115b, 29-30). Here, however, it seems that Aristotle is acknowledging that many people who *appear* to be rash (or overly confident) are secretly cowards. This does not imply that cowardice and rashness collapse into the same vice. Rather, it shows how vice may be obscured by appearances; people can hide their cowardice by pretending to be rash (even though rashness and cowardice remain conceptually distinct vices). No doubt, the same goes for many moral virtues and vices (where people can pretend to have traits other than those they actually possess).

<sup>ix</sup> As Aristotle puts this matter, 'virtue is a mean' though 'with regard to what is best and right' virtue is 'an extreme' (1107a, 6-7).

<sup>x</sup> Importantly, 'we include spending under giving' (1121a, 12). 'Giving' to excess, therefore, includes cases of *spending* to excess.

<sup>xi</sup> Compare this to one of Aristotle's central claims about virtue: 'it is possible to fail in many ways (for evil belongs to the class of the unlimited ... and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way' (1106b, 30-31). These points show why some criticisms of Aristotle's doctrine are unsuccessful. Hursthouse (2006), for example, argues that Aristotle's view 'implausible' since it posits a 'mysterious mathematical symmetry of there being precisely two, opposed, vices corresponding to each virtue' (99). Yet, the targeting system example shows why Aristotle's doctrine is not so implausible after all. For more responses to Hursthouse, see see Urmson (1973), Welton and Polansky (1995), Curzer (1996), Pearson (2006), Koehn (2012), and especially Mintoff (2013).

<sup>xii</sup> Though Hardie (1965) does not make this point explicitly, he does helpfully separate virtues from 'quanta' (187).

<sup>xiii</sup> For the complete account, see Miller (2021: 132).

<sup>xiv</sup> See Miller (2021, 38).

<sup>xv</sup> See Miller (2021, 89).

<sup>xvi</sup> Here, Miller (2021) defends a 'pluralist' account with respect to the honest agent's motivation; there is no single motivating reason that is uniquely characteristic of honesty (93-104).

<sup>xvii</sup> For a discussion of therapeutic privilege, see Sirotin and Lo (2006).

<sup>xviii</sup> I am grateful to Tobias Flattery for providing this example.

<sup>xix</sup> This account is somewhat similar to a view defended by Sungwoo Um (2023). For Um (2023), honesty involves a respect for others' 'right not to be deceived' (1). Someone might err to excess in respecting others' right not to be deceived. Specifically, Um (2022) writes, the vice of excess is 'a disposition to avoid deception even when it is strongly required by the circumstances and no one's [right not to be deceived] about the given matter is being disrespected in that context' (13). My account differs from Um's in some important ways. First, it does not require a specific commitment to there being 'a right not to be deceived.' Rather, my view is more general. Second, Um's description implies that the vice of excess manifests when someone *refrains from deceiving* others in a case where deception is called for. Not so, on the account I defend. Agents may be overly concerned not to distort the truth even in cases where deception would be impermissible. Hence, my account is compatible with the view that deception is *never* permissible (though my account does not entail this claim either).

<sup>xx</sup> See Sirotin and Lo (2006) for a discussion of this very type of case.

<sup>xxi</sup> Take, for instance, Miller's (2021) agent who in order to fill a silence, rattles off 'a long list of what he has done, including what he ate for breakfast and how many times he has visited the bathroom' (139).

<sup>xxii</sup> Though I favor the fourth candidate as central, nothing prevents us from opting for a pluralist account regarding honesty's vice of excess. Reliability, quantity of information, precision, and motivation/concern might all be ways in which—on an Aristotelian view—one can fail in excessive or deficient ways. Like generosity, honesty might just pertain to a range of different spectra. I have no argument against anyone who finds the pluralist account to be more plausible than the view that candidate 4 (motivation/concern) is most central honesty's vice of excess.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See *NE* 1116a, 10-12. For one competing account of courage, see Roberts (1984).

<sup>xxiv</sup> It may seem odd to say that the nurse lacks the virtue of honesty (since he is not *dishonest*). On the present account, however, not all failures of honesty entail dishonesty. 'Dishonesty' denotes the vice of deficiency; 'dishonesty' does not refer to all forms of *non-honesty*. Honesty's vice of excess, as I discuss in the next section, is a kind of non-honesty that lacks a name, even though it precludes the virtue of honesty all the same.

<sup>xxv</sup> Miller (2021) also responds to Bloomfield: 'the moral failure that comes along with the label [of being "too honest"] is not one that has to do with honesty. It is a failure with respect to the part of a person's character which is responsible for regulating how that honest behavior is going to be exhibited in a particular situation' (154). The problem, Miller (2021) concedes, is that this response 'will be counterintuitive on folk psychological grounds' which seemingly posit that it is possible to be excessively honest (154). Though Miller doubts that there is 'a settled folk view here,' my proposal—that there is indeed a vice of excess pertaining to honesty—fits well with the folk view. Locutions like being 'too honest', I will argue, refer to cases in which agents express (or act in accordance with) honesty's vice of excess.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Once again, my account harmonizes with both (a) and (b), whereas Miller's (2021) explanation of 'excessive honesty' denies (b).

<sup>xxvii</sup> One reviewer raises an interesting question here: is an excessive motivation or concern not to distort the truth just 'the vice of scrupulosity?' I do not think so. Following Abramowitz and Hellberg (2020), I understand scrupulosity to be form of obsessive-compulsive disorder that involves an unhealthy obsession with avoiding wrongdoing (literally

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meaning ‘fearing sin where there is none’). I will not attempt to untangle connections between mental disorders and moral vices, but I think we should be unsurprised if we find that scrupulosity often leads individuals to develop and express the vice of excess with respect to honesty (as I define it). This does not imply that the vice of excess is identical to scrupulosity, however. For one thing, one may develop honesty’s vice of excess (an unhealthy concern not to distort the truth) for some other reason. Someone might, for example, develop the vice for nonmoral reasons, as in extreme cases of ‘epistemic fetishism,’ where, Kvanvig (2018) writes, an ‘exaggerated weighting’ of epistemic considerations swamps every other type of consideration (e.g., moral considerations, social considerations, etc.). It seems conceivable, moreover, that someone might exhibit scrupulosity in some domains without doing so in the domain relevant to honesty (as odd as that may be). So, even if scrupulosity and honesty’s vice of excess generate the same behavior (in some cases), they remain conceptually distinct. Ultimately, if scrupulosity (as a mental disorder) often leads one to develop to the vice of excess with respect to honesty, this seems no more surprising than finding that psychopathy often leads one to develop a deficiency with respect to compassion.

<sup>xxviii</sup> For a different defense of the claim that, contra Miller (2021), there is a vice of excess relevant to the virtue of honesty, see Battaly (2024, 8-10), which was published while this essay was undergoing the review process.

<sup>xxix</sup> See *NE* 1119b, 25.

<sup>xxx</sup> Justice is another virtue that is sometimes said to present problems for the doctrine of the mean; see Crisp (2000). I set aside discussions of justice for two reasons. First, given how complicated Aristotle’s account of justice is, adequately addressing it would require far more space than I can devote here. Second, Aristotle’s account of justice has already been discussed at length. See Wolterstorff (2007) and Porter (2016).

<sup>xxxi</sup> Fair-mindedness is an intellectual virtue, so we need not claim that its vice of excess constitutes a *moral* error.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Giuliano and Sapienza (2020), for instance, provide a study on the ‘psychological costs’ of ‘being too patient’ (3).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Miller (2021) makes a similar claim regarding honesty: cases of ‘excessive honesty’ seem to involve genuine honesty. As he puts it, ‘it is likely true that the person who is being ‘too honest’ needs to be exhibiting honest behavior in the first place’ (153).

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