

# Pletho's Criticism of Aristotle's Virtues: A Note on *De differentiis* 12

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πῶς οὖν ἂν καὶ ἀντιλέγοις ὀρθῶς περὶ ὧν γε οὐ συνίης;  
Pletho, *C. Schol. pro Arist. Obiect.* 29.26–27

THIS PAPER undertakes a critical examination of Pletho's arguments, in his *De differentiis*, against Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. These arguments are, so I shall argue, based on a misunderstanding of Aristotle. From reading the concluding remarks of a recent account of Aristotelian ethics in Byzantium, one could come under the impression that Pletho offers a well-informed interpretation of Aristotle's ethics.<sup>1</sup> The following remarks will question this contention at least as far as Pletho's interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine of virtue is concerned.

Pletho's *On the Differences between Plato and Aristotle* appeared in 1439 and caused within a few years a considerable upheaval among Greek intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> The text provoked a long debate in which many prominent Greeks took part, not least Gennadios Scholarios. His *Against Pletho's Objections to Aristotle* appeared in

<sup>1</sup> L. Benakis, "Aristotelian Ethics in Byzantium," in C. Barber and D. Jenkins (eds.), *Medieval Greek Commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics* (Leiden 2009) 69: "the Mystran philosopher's knowledge of the Aristotelian corpus is in any case well-known from his entire body of work (for *Nicomachean Ethics*, see, for example, *De differentiis*, V, 1–2 and elsewhere)."

<sup>2</sup> See C. M. Woodhouse, *Gemistos Plethon. The Last of the Hellenes* (Oxford 1986) 191–307, and P. Schulz, "Georgios Gemistos Plethon, Georgios Trapezuntios, Kardinal Bessarion. Die Kontroverse zwischen Platonikern und Aristotelikern im 15. Jahrhundert," in P. R. Blum (ed.), *Philosophen der Renaissance* (Darmstadt 1999) 22–32.

1443. Pletho responded to Scholarios between 1443 and 1449 with *Against the Counterarguments of Scholarios concerning Aristotle*, which provided some justifications for the claims propounded in *De differentiis* (and a good deal of personal attacks on Scholarios).<sup>3</sup> In *De differentiis*, Pletho attacks a wide range of Aristotelian doctrines. As to ethics, he engages two central Aristotelian positions, his doctrine of the mean and his claim that pleasure plays a part in *eudaimonia*. I shall focus on the first point only and pay attention to the value of Pletho's arguments but only minimally concern myself with the question of his sources. As the scholarly work on Byzantine approaches to Aristotle's ethics is still in important respects in its initial stages, it is reasonable to focus on a limited issue and examine a few arguments in some detail.<sup>4</sup> Pletho's text deserves more attention than it has hitherto received, and even if my approach is mainly critical I hope nevertheless that this paper will contribute to the study of this extraordinary philosopher—if in no other way, then perhaps as a worthy candidate of refutation.

The criticism of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean should be assessed with a view to Pletho's overall motivation for reinterpreting Plato and Aristotle. The aim of *De differentiis* is twofold: Pletho wants to vindicate Plato against Aristotle, and he wants to correct those of his western contemporaries who maintain the superiority of Aristotle (321.17–22). This approach was bold, given the overwhelming prestige of Aristotle among westerners, and it earns Pletho an important position in the history of philosophy for two main reasons. First, he denies what Neoplatonic interpreters of Plato and Aristotle had maintained for centuries, that the two philosophers were in all

<sup>3</sup> *De differentiis* was edited by Bernadette Lagarde in 1973 from Pletho's autograph; references will be to page and line numbers in this edition: B. Lagarde, "Le 'De Differentiis' de Pléthon d'après l'autographe de la Marcienne," *Byzantion* 43 (1973) 312–343.

<sup>4</sup> See Benakis, in *Medieval Greek Commentaries* 63–69, for the status of this area of research.

important respects in harmony.<sup>5</sup> This was a decisive step in the history of Platonism and the interpretation of Plato's philosophy. Second, his interpretation of Aristotle was probably intended to liberate Aristotle's philosophy from the dominant Scholastic and theological tradition forcefully present in the Latin west and also making itself felt in Byzantine circles (not least in the work of his antagonist Scholarios). In the history of the Aristotelian tradition, then, Pletho is important because of his attempt to breach the unity of Christianity and Aristotelianism as found in both east and west.<sup>6</sup> What Pletho wants with his *De differentiis* is to set down new standards for the interpretation of Plato and Aristotle. He was more successful in vindicating Plato<sup>7</sup> than in establishing new rules of engagement for the approach to Aristotle, even though it seems generally agreed today that *De differentiis* had no tangible effect on the Latin west until twenty years after its publication.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it would be absurd to deny Pletho's impact on the approach to both philosophers and his importance in the history of philosophy. In what follows, I want to take seriously the idea that Pletho sought new standards for the interpretation of Aristotle, by raising two questions: what is the intrinsic value of his arguments against Aristotle's doctrine of virtue, and what is useful in his criticism of Aristotle?

We are in the fortunate position that Pletho quite clearly indicates by what standards he wants his arguments against Aristotle to be judged. At the end of his criticism of Aristotelian ethics, he says that he has not sought to give a full account of the flaws in Aristotle's ethical doctrines. Rather, he has focused

<sup>5</sup> See L. P. Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca/London 2005), for a general account of the harmonizing approach of the Neoplatonic commentators and ch. 8 for ethics specifically.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. B. Tambrun, *Pléthon. Le retour de Platon* (Paris 2006) 57–58.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance I* (Leiden 1991) 197. Tambrun, *Pléthon* 241–259, shows to what extent Ficino used Pletho in several of his writings (without explicitly acknowledging his debt).

<sup>8</sup> Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance I* 207–208.

on the major deficiencies and those that make clear where Aristotle differs from Plato and how much he is inferior to a Platonic position on ethics (329.40–330.6). This focus on a few major doctrines probably explains why Pletho does not develop further some remarks scattered about the *De differentiis* that would be relevant to moral philosophy.<sup>9</sup> At any rate, he does not claim to be exhaustive in his criticism, which should be kept in mind in examining his arguments. The attack on the doctrine of the mean is conducted through two main arguments, followed by some elucidation and brief remarks about the Platonic position of Pletho himself:

- (1) The definition of the mean is unclear. Aristotle seems to define the mean quantitatively (328.7–31).
- (2) A morally wicked agent might, on Aristotle's account of virtue, be half-wicked (or half-good) and the absolutely wicked agent will be in a mean position just like the morally good agent (328.31–329.8).

The following examination of Pletho's arguments faces the difficulty of formulating standards of interpretation which are not entirely anachronistic. In my own criticism, I have sought a balance between Pletho's motivation for writing *De differentiis* and the quality of his specific arguments against Aristotle. My claim will not be that Pletho is a worse interpreter of Aristotle than his contemporaries. Quite to the contrary, Scholarios is also selective in his reading and occasionally advances bad arguments (see below). However, Pletho seems to endorse one general rule of interpretation and criticism which we would acknowledge today as well. He states it in the passage quoted at the heading of this paper: it could be paraphrased to the effect that the interpreter must *understand* what he is criticizing in order to criticize it in the right way. I have sought to apply this standard to Pletho's arguments and to my own examination of them.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. remarks concerning the immortality of the soul (327.28–33) or determinism (333.19–31).

*Pletho's first criticism.* The doctrine of the mean is unclear according to Pletho, because the mean could be defined in a number of ways (qualitatively or quantitatively). Aristotle, he thinks, is not clear on this issue. But his position can be made clear by considering some remarks in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.7. The passage to which Pletho refers at 328.7–14 (with some insignificant misquotation) is this:<sup>10</sup>

τῶν δ' ὑπερβαλλόντων ὁ μὲν τῇ ἀφοβίᾳ ἀνώνυμος ... εἴη δ' ἂν τις μαινόμενος ἢ ἀνάλητος, εἰ μὴδὲν φοβοῖτο, μῆτε σεισμὸν μῆτε κύματα, καθάπερ φασὶ τοὺς Κελτοὺς·

The man who is in an excessive state by lacking fear has no name ... but would be a sort of mad or insensate person, if he didn't fear anything, neither earthquake nor the rough sea, as they say the Celts do not.

Pletho claims that Aristotle here seems to distinguish between “the tolerable” (τὰ θαρραλέα) and “the intolerable” (τὰ δεινά) not qualitatively but by greater and lesser degree and thus quantitatively: φαίνεται γὰρ ἐκ τούτου οὐ τῷ ποιῶ τά τε θαρραλέα καὶ δεινὰ διαιρῶν, ἀλλὰ μέγεθει τὲ καὶ σμικρότητι, καὶ ὅλως τῷ ποσῷ (328.14–16). So his charge against Aristotle is that he fails to define morally good or bad objects qualitatively, which is how “the Platonists” would define moral objects. What matters, so Pletho (328.16–20), is whether something is wicked (αἰσχρός) or not (οὐκ αἰσχρός). This is the basis for his further attacks on Aristotle's doctrine of the mean.

When Pletho charges Aristotle with quantifying the mean, it is possible that he levels an objection against the Aristotelian position which was well known among Byzantine philosophers, some of whom discussed whether there could be degrees of virtue (perfect and imperfect virtue).<sup>11</sup> This discussion might

<sup>10</sup> *Eth.Nic.* 3.7, 1115b24–28. All translations from Greek are my own.

<sup>11</sup> The question of degrees of virtue was discussed by Aspasius in his commentary to the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Peripatetic view was that the virtues in themselves allow no degrees, whereas those participating in them, i.e. individual agents, might be said to be more or less virtuous: see K.

well suggest that the mean is determined quantitatively. However, it is difficult to see how Pletho can justify this charge on the basis of the passage quoted. On the face of it, Aristotle seems to be talking about exceptional cases, cases where no degrees of fear are relevant, for no fear at all is experienced (so the quantity of fear is irrelevant). Of course there is something wrong with a moral agent who does not respond to very threatening situations. He or she would either be vicious owing to an extreme lack of fear or would simply hold a position beyond good and evil (like the heroically virtuous), and in this respect be similar to a beast or perhaps to some very barbaric or utterly insane person.<sup>12</sup> But Pletho's charge assumes that Aristotle is talking about some individual who is perpetually afraid that an earthquake will occur at some point in his life. This thought is obviously ridiculous and Pletho has no problem showing that it would be nonsense to entertain this sort of fear (328.22–28). But this is not what Aristotle claims in the passage. The Celts or the madmen are brought in as exceptional cases; perhaps this is also why their “vice” has no name in ordinary language. What Aristotle points out here is merely that an agent who experiences no fear when exposed to an earthquake or a tsunami would be more or less inhuman and in this respect beyond ethical consideration.

Pletho can only level the charge of quantifying the mean, in my view, if he has misunderstood Aristotle's doctrine of the mean or if he consciously ignores what Aristotle actually says. For in one of Aristotle's most famous accounts of virtue as a mean disposition, it is entirely clear that virtue can have no degrees (*Eth.Nic.* 2.6, 1106b36–1107a8):

ἔστιν ἄρα ἡ ἀρετὴ ἕξις προαιρετικὴ, ἐν μεσότητι οὐσα τῇ πρὸς ἡμᾶς, ὠρισμένη λόγῳ καὶ ᾧ ἂν ὁ φρόνιμος ὀρίσειεν. μεσότης δὲ

Ierodiakonou, “Aspasius on Perfect and Imperfect Virtues,” in A. Alberti and R. Sharples (eds.), *Aspasius: The Earliest Extant Commentary on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berlin 1999) 160–161.

<sup>12</sup> See *Eth.Nic.* 7.1, 1145a15–33.

δύο κακιῶν, τῆς μὲν καθ' ὑπερβολὴν τῆς δὲ κατ' ἔλλειψιν· καὶ ἔτι τῶ τὰς μὲν ἐλλείπειν τὰς δ' ὑπερβάλλειν τοῦ δέοντος ἔν τε τοῖς πάθεσι καὶ ἐν ταῖς πράξεσι, τὴν δ' ἀρετὴν τὸ μέσον καὶ εὐρίσκειν καὶ αἰρεῖσθαι. διὸ κατὰ μὲν τὴν οὐσίαν καὶ τὸν λόγον τὸν τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι λέγοντα μεσότης ἐστὶν ἡ ἀρετή, κατὰ δὲ τὸ ἄριστον καὶ τὸ εὖ ἀκρότης.

Virtue, then, is a state concerned with choice, being in a mean position which is a mean relative to us, and has been determined by reason and by how the *phronimos* would determine it. It is a mean between two vices, the one as regards excess the other as regards deficiency. Further, it is a mean because in affections and actions some [vices] fall short and others exceed what ought [sc. to be experienced or done], whereas virtue both finds and chooses the mean. For this reason virtue is a mean according to its essence, that is, according to the definition that states what it is to be virtue, whereas virtue is an extreme in terms of the best, that is, the good.

There are certainly many obscure points in this passage and I shall not venture to go into them in detail here.<sup>13</sup> Obviously the quantity of the passion in question here cannot be irrelevant to the doctrine of the mean. Aristotle refers to excess and deficiency, and so Pletho is right to the extent that quantity must play some role in Aristotelian ethics. However, it is quite clear from the concluding remarks that virtue does not come in degrees and thus that the mean should not be defined quantitatively. Definitionally virtue is a mean, but in terms of value it is an extreme, and thus there is only one way to hit the mean, but indefinitely many ways to fall short of it (so 1106b27–34). Even though Pletho does not refer to this passage, it is highly unlikely that he did not know it. After all, the passage contains the classic and most direct formulation of the doctrine he is here objecting to. Furthermore, the passage is discussed (in more or less detail) by a number of Byzantine commentators

<sup>13</sup> For brief discussion and references to the more recent literature see C. C. W. Taylor, *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Books II–IV* (Oxford 2006) 107–112.

whom he must have read.<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, their discussions are superficial and do not really address the problem Pletho wants to answer (what defines the mean in Aristotle's doctrine of virtue). But at least one of them, the anonymous compilation probably from the twelfth century, discusses different ways of interpreting the mean.<sup>15</sup> Pletho either misrepresents, ignores, or misunderstands Aristotle here.

If Pletho's first criticism of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is somewhat lacking in fairness, the reply to it by Scholarios is not particularly clearheaded either. Scholarios points out that not all affections or actions allow a mean—there is no mean way to commit adultery, for example—and thus, he continues, virtue does not in every case represent a mean.<sup>16</sup> This is not only a *non sequitur* (it does not follow from the assertion “not all actions and affections allow a mean” that not all virtues are constituted as a mean), it also, and this is more serious, questions Aristotle's doctrine of virtue. On the whole, the impression one gets from witnessing this part of the controversy is that none of the partisans were particularly interested in a careful interpretation of Aristotle.

In keeping with Pletho's own demand, that the critic must understand the position he refutes, the reply to this first criticism would be, I think, that the quantity of, say, fear is not morally irrelevant in Aristotle's account of virtue. But the intensity of the feeling involved is only one aspect of a very complex situation. The most important, by far, is the way an agent responds to the feeling in question. The response involves

<sup>14</sup> Aspasius *In Eth.Nic.*, CAG XIX.1 48.12–26; Anon. *In Eth.Nic.*, CAG XX 133.7–134.21; Pachymeres *Philosophia. Liber XI Ethica Nicomachea (Comm.Arist. Byz.* 3 [Athens 2005]) 25.15–23. The commentary by Constantine Paleokappa (?) formerly ascribed to Heliodorus (CAG XIX.2) does not discuss the passage directly.

<sup>15</sup> Anon. *In Eth.Nic.*, CAG XX.134.4–21. J. Barnes, “An Introduction to Aspasius,” in *Aspasius* 13–14, gives a brief survey of this commentary.

<sup>16</sup> Scholarios *Contra Plethonem* ed. Petit IV 87.10–15. Cf. *Eth.Nic.* 2.6, 1107a8–17.

right reason and it involves the individual character and circumstances of the agent (the mean is a mean in relation *to us*, that is, it differs from person to person). So even if the quantity of the feeling or passion in question is not morally irrelevant, it is certainly not morally decisive in Aristotle's account of virtue as Pletho assumes.

In conclusion of his first criticism, Pletho argues in detail that earthquakes are morally indifferent and so fall outside morally relevant categories such as "the wicked" (*τὸ αἰσχρόν*). Thus, what matters is that the soul respond appropriately to the right kinds of objects, and as an earthquake is not morally wicked, it should have no bearing on a doctrine of virtue (328.20–31). The implied conclusion here seems to be that Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is irrelevant with respect to judging someone's character.<sup>17</sup> However, for his argument to carry this devastating consequence, Pletho should establish that Aristotle actually believes that earthquakes and similar phenomena are morally important. In this Pletho is not successful. The reason for his failure is, as stated already, that Aristotle brings in the agent who lacks fear solely as an exception and a phenomenon which is marginal to the doctrine of the mean. After all, such an agent would have to be a madman or a Celt. Further, he is perfectly aware that moral philosophy concerns itself with things that are in our power to do something about (*τὰ ἐφ' ἡμῶν*).<sup>18</sup> What Pletho does in his first criticism is to seize on a point of minor importance as if it were of major consequence.

*Pletho's second criticism.* The second charge against Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, that there will be half-wicked agents and that the absolutely wicked will be in a mean position, appears to be Pletho's own invention.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> I wish to thank Börje Bydén for pointing this out to me.

<sup>18</sup> *Eth.Nic.* 3.8, 1114b26–31; cf. 3.4, 1111b29–30. Today, obviously, it is possible to do something about earthquakes; but this is beside the point here.

<sup>19</sup> See G. Karamanolis, "Plethon and Scholarios on Aristotle," in K. Ierodiakonou (ed.), *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources* (Oxford 2002) 267.

Pletho levels two arguments against Aristotle in this second criticism. The first is concerned with half-wicked agents. He reasons as follows: Aristotle claims that *κακία* is an extreme, but the agent who desires everything, both what he ought to desire and what he ought not to desire, will not be wicked in desiring what he ought (but in desiring what he ought not). On the other hand, the agent who rejects everything (both what he ought to reject and what he ought not to reject) will not be wicked when he rejects what ought to be rejected. These agents, rather, will be half-wicked (*De diff.* 328.37–329.3). This argument is supposed to embarrass the doctrine of the mean, since the half-wicked will be both in a mean and in an extreme position at the same time. Scholarios replies by asking how it should be possible to desire, for example, what is temperate and intemperate at the same time.<sup>20</sup> Thus, he seems to point out that Pletho's argument presupposes that it is possible to desire everything (which, if it were possible, would seem to lead to complete passivity, since there would be no reason or other motivation for preferring X over Y). But in his reply to Scholarios Pletho clarifies his position: what Pletho meant was that it is indeed possible to desire what ought to be desired and desire what ought not to be desired given that these are not at the same time mutually exclusive, which will be the case when they are direct opposites (as in Scholarios' objection). Pletho also adduces an example: Scholarios himself might at the same time love arguments or reasoning (which is a feature of the temperate man) and love empty fame (which is in no way fitting for temperance).<sup>21</sup> In this case, Pletho seems to think,

<sup>20</sup> Scholarios *C. Pleth.* 87.23–29.

<sup>21</sup> *C. Schol.* 29.27–33 ed. Maltese: ἡμεῖς γὰρ πάντων, ὧν τὲ χρὴ καὶ ὧν οὐ χρὴ, ἐπιθυμητικὸν τινα ὑποτιθέμεθα, ἀλλ' οὐχ ἅμα ὧν οὐκ ἐγχωρεῖ· οὐκ ἐγχωρεῖ δὲ τῶν ἀντικρυς ἐναντίων ἅμα ἐπιθυμῆν· ἐπεὶ τῶν γε ἐναντίας ἔξεσι προσηκόντων ἔσθ' ὅτε καὶ ἐγχωρεῖ, οὐκ αὐτῶν ἀλλήλοις ἐναντίων ὄντων. ὡσπερ που καὶ σὺ ἅμα μὲν λόγων ἴσως ἐρᾷς, σωφρονικοῦ πράγματος, ἅμα δὲ δόξης κενῆς, ὑβριστικοῦ τε καὶ ἀπειροκάλου χρήματος, σωφροσύνη

Scholarios would be half-wicked because he would hold a mean and an extreme position at the same time.

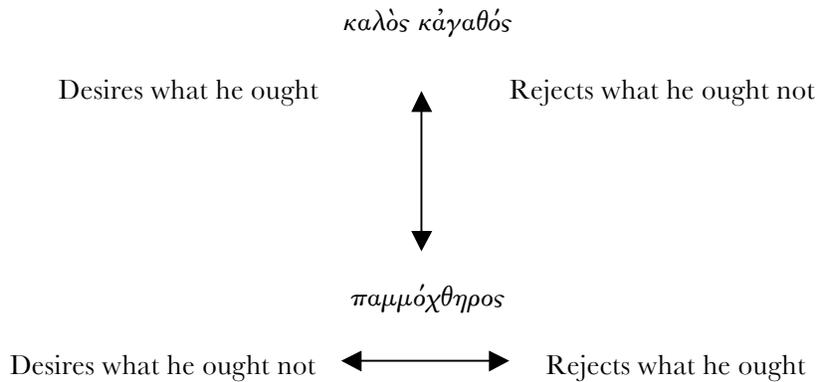
The response to this reformulation of the charge would be that temperate acts or feelings must result from a firm character, i.e. from temperance, if they are to count as virtuous (*Eth.Nic.* 2.4, 1105a28–33). If an agent desires at the same time what is temperate and what is intemperate he or she will not be virtuous (temperate) and not be semi-virtuous or half-wicked but non-virtuous (note that “non-virtuous” does not mean “absolutely wicked” in Aristotle’s ethics, as will be brought out more clearly below). The reason is that such desires reveal the actions and passions of this agent to result from an unsettled state of character (moral unreliability). So even in its second formulation, Pletho’s argument about half-wicked agents has no bearing on Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean.

Pletho’s second argument introduces the absolutely wicked and the absolutely good moral agents. He wants to establish the claim that the absolutely wicked agent will occupy a mean position no less than the absolutely good agent (apparently because he is the opposite of “good,” and the opposite of what is in a middle position must itself be in a middle position?). This would mean that the absolutely wicked would hold both a mean and an extreme position. Such an outcome would, of course, be devastating to the doctrine of the mean according to which only virtue is in a mean position and the vices are always excessive or deficient in relation to a mean. Indeed, it would make the doctrine of the mean irrelevant for a theory of virtue. If I understand Pletho’s argument correctly, he makes two claims: (a) the absolutely wicked is in a mean and an extreme position because he the opposite of the good; (b) the absolutely wicked is in a mean position between what ought to be desired and what ought to be rejected (so he is both in a mean and in

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<sup>1</sup>τὲ ἡκίστα προσήκοντος. I follow the somewhat unusual diacritics of the text found in Maltese’s edition.

an extreme position).<sup>22</sup> His argument could be given as the following figure. The vertical line of opposition represents (a), the horizontal line of opposition represents (b):



The vertical line brings the absolutely wicked into a mean position in relation to the absolutely good (but he actually should hold an extreme position on Aristotle's account of virtue), the horizontal line brings him into a mean position in relation to his own desires and rejections (but he should be, again, in an extreme position).

However, even if the vertical line of opposition (a) is logically conceivable, though it is hard to think of good instances of the claim that the opposite of something in a mean position must itself be in a mean position, this line of opposition has no relevance for Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. If the opposite of the courageous was to be in a mean position between too much and too little fear, the absurd consequence would follow that the opposite of the courageous was the courageous or the opposite of the good was the good. But, first, this is not the conclusion that Pletho wants to establish and, second, this result simply does not follow from Aristotle's doctrine. Thus, on the

<sup>22</sup> 329.3–8; see also 328.31–37.

first point (a) I have to admit that it is not entirely clear what Pletho's argument really is.

In the horizontal line of opposition (b), on the other hand, Pletho establishes a clearly false relation of opposition between desire and rejection. If, like the absolutely wicked agent, I desire what I ought not, say to flee in battle and desert my friends in order to save myself, and I reject what I ought, namely to stand firm and fight, then there is no opposition between my desires and rejections. Nothing in this situation implies that my fleeing brings me into a mean position: this action would be excessive, and thus morally reproachable given the circumstances. In the end, I, like the *παμμόχθηρος*, would occupy an opposite position to the *καλὸς κάγαθός* not by being in a mean position but by holding an extreme position. Note also that there is also no real opposition in the desires and rejections of the absolutely good.

Finally, as noted by Scholarios (*C. Pleth.* 87.38–88.6), the absolutely good or the absolutely wicked are, if not impossible, then very rare phenomena. This questions the relevance of bringing them into the argument here as Pletho does. The second criticism, then, has no relevance for Aristotle's doctrine of the mean.

*Conclusion.* The arguments briefly sketched and criticized above constitute Pletho's attacks on the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean. It would be fair to ask whether Pletho has met the standards that guided this attack on Aristotle. What he wanted was to show (1) the difference between Plato and Aristotle, to do so by considering (2) the major Aristotelian positions, and (3) to show that Aristotle falls rather short of Plato in these. Since Pletho's criticism operates on the supposition that Aristotelian virtues are defined quantitatively (and not as they should be qualitatively) and since this is not Aristotle's position, Pletho can hardly be said to have established successfully the difference between Plato and Aristotle in ethical matters (1). But it is undeniable that he has placed his finger on a very central Aristotelian doctrine (similarly his criticism of pleasure and *eudaimonia*, which concludes his treatment of ethics, marks a

major disputed issue in Aristotle). So he is successful in meeting this specific aim (2). Has he shown Aristotle's inferiority to Plato (3)? A full answer to this question would demand giving some standards for "inferiority" and "compatibility" between two philosophers. But this aside, it would be curious to claim that Pletho succeeds in his last intention, if, as I have argued, he misunderstands Aristotle and so attacks a position which is unaristotelian.

So what is useful in Pletho's criticism of Aristotle's virtues? First of all, Pletho's attack on Aristotle is useful for the student of the history of philosophy because it reveals his motivation, viz. to destroy the unholy alliance of Christian orthodoxy and Aristotelianism. His arguments actually introduce the possibility of a non-theological interpretation of Aristotle. This makes him unique in the cultural context of the late Byzantine realm. But furthermore Pletho raises at least one important issue concerning Aristotelian ethics. This is the question whether, if a moral agent is not virtuous, he or she should be considered morally wicked and thus whether on Aristotle's view a moral agent is either absolutely virtuous or absolutely wicked? This sort of moral dualism is forcefully opposed by Pletho (*C. Schol.* 30.8–11). An account of virtue with room for only two types of agents would seem to be extremely rigid and to be unable to account for most agents, unless, of course, we should simply declare all non-virtuous agents absolutely morally wicked. But Aristotle's doctrine of virtue is fully equipped to meet such a position of moral dualism (see *Nic.Eth.* 7.1–4). "Non-virtuous" covers more ground than simply "absolutely wicked"—for example, "continent" or "incontinent." So, to sum up on a note which is dissonant with Pletho's intentions in (but perhaps rather in keeping with the spirit of) his own *De differentiis*, I suggest that his criticism of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is useful because it recommends this doctrine as an attractive model of virtue. Pletho's arguments invite a consideration of this piece of Aristotelian moral philosophy, and such a consideration makes clear, first, that Aristotle can answer all the objections raised against his doctrine by Pletho and,

second, that Aristotle's position is an attractive and well-argued model for how to account for virtue without falling prey to moral dualism.<sup>23</sup>

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