The Ideas of the Mean before Aristotle

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The doctrine of the mean is said to be Aristotle’s unique notion. Does it mean that we fail to find the notion of the mean in Pre-Socratic philosophers, Socrates, and Plato? Since, the Greeks believed that mean was the key to becoming a better person, we can find in the works of Homer, Hesiod, Solon and the aphorisms of Seven Sages that the mean was praised as we were warned against excess and deficiency.

Homer is a well-known poet who stresses the Greek ideal of the mean as mixture and the measure of virtue; Zeus has an overriding presence in The Iliad, and although he is not always directly present, he is always in the mix. Honor, like fame, is a measure of aretē and the greatest of human tragedies is the denial of honor due to a great warrior. In Apollo’s temple at Delphi, the famous maxim is inscribed above its entrance: “Nothing Too Much (meden agan).” And Hesiod said that “The half is more than the whole” and “Due measure is the best” (Works and Days 202-18, 286-92, etc.). These statements warn us against arrogance and excess and write in praise of measured deed (metria erga), which is mathematical imagery (Works and Days 306). These ideas of the mean are more fully developed in the poem of Solon and the aphorisms of the Seven Sages, and the archaic fear of divine jealousy and of provoking the animosity of the gods by transgressing human limits, reinforces the morality of measure and moderation that runs like a recurrent theme through Greek tragic choruses and the pages of Herodotus. This concept shows that the condition of the good life and the model for the ideals of moderation and restraint are the serried rank of hoplite soldiers whose security and success depend upon their advancing and withdrawing in unison.
At the same point, then, we should not be surprised if we found a full-fledged theory of the mean before Aristotle; we remember that Pythagoreans offered three types of mean, an arithmetical mean, a geometric mean, and a harmonic mean; Heraclitus emphasized the importance of *logos* kindled in measures and extinguished in the mean; Democritus praised happiness through moderation as the mean for the balanced life; For Hippocrates, health occurs when certain qualities or powers are blended (*krasis*) in proper proportion as the mean to constitute a bodily state without excess or deficiency; Plato grappled with the idea of the mean as a proportion or a measurement to mix the two extreme elements in harmony in his ethics as well as in cosmology.

If these ideas of the mean clearly show us that there was the concept of mean before Aristotle, we must ascend from this circumstances to presuppose that Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean is the heritage of his predecessors. Because usually a philosopher would develop his or her doctrines through his or her predecessors, we easily assume that Aristotle also developed and systemized his theories through critics of his predecessors.

Thus, my goal of this paper will be twofold. First, I will catch tantalizing glimpses of such a theory before Aristotle, especially Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Democritus, Hippocrates, and Plato as the culmination of ancient Greek philosophy and representative of its essence, revealing the reason why they use the idea of the mean – what are the goals they try to consider through the ideas of the mean. Secondly, if Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean would lay down its basis for the ancient Greek’s tradition, then, what is Aristotle’s new contribution?

This will be an initiation into Aristotle’s ethics, having worked on their philosophies with extremely difficult and fascinating efforts. It will be also a dialogue between Aristotle and his predecessors, and therefore, contribute to how we can bring about understanding the similarities and differences between Aristotle and them. And, again, searching for the history of the ideas of the mean, in chronological order, shed light on an important aspect of the pre-Socratic philosophers and will help us to understand Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean, too.