

STRIKING A BALANCE: THE GOLDEN MEAN OF HAPPINESS IN ARISTOTLE'S PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into Aristotle's philosophy on happiness and virtue, with a particular focus on the concept of the golden mean. Aristotle's ethical framework emphasizes finding a balance between extremes to cultivate virtuous behavior and achieve happiness. We explore how Aristotle's insights into balance, moderation, and virtuous conduct offer valuable guidance for leading fulfilling lives in contemporary society. Through an analysis of key principles and examples from Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, we uncover the timeless relevance of the golden mean in fostering personal and societal well-being.

KEYWORDS: *Golden Mean, Happiness, Virtue, Balance, Ethics, Philosophy, Well-Being, Moderation, Societal Impact*

INTRODUCTION

Aristotle, one of the most influential philosophers in history, delved deeply into the nature of human happiness and virtue. Central to his ethical framework is the concept of the golden mean, which emphasizes finding a balance between extremes in order to cultivate virtuous behavior and ultimately achieve happiness. In this article, we explore Aristotle's philosophy on happiness and virtue, focusing particularly on the significance of the golden mean. By understanding Aristotle's insights into the importance of balance, moderation, and virtuous conduct, we can gain valuable perspectives on how to lead fulfilling and meaningful lives in today's complex world.

Aristotle's concept of the golden mean, outlined in his Nicomachean Ethics, revolves around achieving virtue by finding a balance between two extremes or vices. He argues that virtues are the key to attaining happiness, which is the ultimate goal of human existence. The golden mean is not a strict numerical midpoint but rather a situational balance, with courage as an example between cowardice and recklessness. Aristotle emphasizes that achieving this balance requires continual moral improvement and discernment. It applies specifically to virtues, not vices, and involves acting at the right time, for the right reason, toward the right person, and with the right intensity.

The golden mean, championed by Aristotle among other ancient philosophers, emphasizes the importance of balance and virtue in achieving happiness. Despite its presence in the teachings of Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato, it is often overlooked in modern society. Instead, contemporary culture tends toward extremes of excess or deficiency, seen in the pursuit of material wealth, indulgence in substances, and neglect of education and intellectual pursuits. This neglect of balance and virtue may contribute to societal issues and individual dissatisfaction.

The Golden Mean, according to Aristotle, aids individuals in cultivating good character and making virtuous behavior second nature. Aristotle viewed the good life as one lived through the exercise of reason, with virtue being a practice of intellectual reasoning. However, he did not advocate virtue solely for its own sake as ethical. Modern virtue ethicists argue that a good ethical theory is necessarily imprecise, unlike deontology and utilitarianism, which offer precise rules. These differing ethical theories compete in providing frameworks for moral decision-making.

The Principle of Golden Mean, introduced by Aristotle around 2,500 years ago, defines the desirable middle ground between two extremes of excess and deficiency. It advocates for moderation and balance in all actions and activities. In practical terms, this concept can be applied to various aspects of daily life, such as a student's approach to exams. Failing to take the exam leads to failure, while completing it on time typically results in good grades. Conversely, leaving the exam early usually leads to lower grades. The principle underscores the importance of finding balance and avoiding extremes in decision-making and behavior.

Aristotle's ethical work is among the earliest in Western philosophy, focusing on virtues as fundamental to leading a good life. Central to his teachings is the concept of the Golden Mean, which emphasizes finding a balanced middle ground between extremes. Aristotle underscores the application of this principle, known as the golden rule, across all aspects of life, highlighting its importance in ethical decision-making and behavior.

Buddha summarized the Golden Mean as the Middle Way, a moderate path between extreme self-denial and sensual, materialistic self-indulgence.

The Bible says "Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes."

Islam is called the Middle Way, because it emphasizes moderation rather than rigid monasticism or its extreme opposites, greed and acquisitiveness

THEORY OF GOLDEN MEAN

The ideal of virtuous conduct and a happy life, according to Aristotle, involves avoiding extremes and finding balance. This principle, known as the Golden Mean, suggests that expressing extremes, whether positive or negative, is undesirable. Instead, choosing the middle ground fosters composure and emotional stability, particularly during challenging times. Examples such as balancing accessibility in the workplace and maintaining a moderate level of social interaction illustrate this concept. Overall, adhering to the Golden Mean promotes virtuous behavior and contributes to societal well-being, serving as a fundamental principle for leading a contented and fulfilled life.

According to Aristotle, each moral virtue represents a mean between extremes of action or feeling, avoiding both excess and deficiency. This mean is relative to the individual, varying based on personal circumstances and characteristics. For example, the amount of food considered moderate for an athlete differs from that for a non-athlete. Achieving this mean in morality, akin to creating artwork, necessitates neither underdoing nor overdoing. Virtues, seen as good habits or dispositions, are cultivated through practice and specific actions. Good judgment involves finding this mean, requiring both general knowledge and particular experience. Particular wisdom, an intellectual virtue governing deliberation and action, is crucial for discerning and acting upon this mean effectively.

VIRTUE

Virtue, according to Aristotle, is a settled and purposive disposition wherein virtuous actions are chosen knowingly and for their own sake. There are two types of virtues: intellectual and moral, learned respectively through instruction and habitual practice. Virtue is cultivated through practical experience rather than theoretical contemplation, as circumstances vary, and there are no absolute rules of conduct. Moral virtue involves finding a mean between the extremes of deficiency and excess, specific to each situation, with actions like murder or adultery lacking a virtuous mean. An appropriate attitude toward pleasure and pain is crucial for moral virtue, with temperance exemplifying pleasure in moderation. Aristotle identifies three criteria for distinguishing virtuous individuals: awareness of right behavior, deliberate choice of virtuous actions for their own sake, and consistent manifestation of virtuous disposition. "Virtue" translates the Greek word "arete," implying excellence, both moral and intellectual, which is demonstrated through living in accordance with various virtues.

Aristotle describes virtue as a disposition, distinct from emotions, faculties, and activities. Happiness, for Aristotle, is not a mere emotional state but an ongoing activity or way of life. Virtue, on the other hand, is a state of being, the disposition to act in a way that leads to a happy life. While possessing virtue is essential for happiness, it doesn't guarantee it; one must also act according to virtuous disposition. Aristotle's list of virtues reflects the values of a properly raised Athenian, making it culturally specific. His Doctrine of the Mean suggests that every virtue lies between the extremes of excess and deficiency, although determining this mean is not strictly formulaic, varying for different individuals. Virtue, according to Aristotle, is learned through habit rather than reasoning, allowing virtuous individuals to naturally choose the correct behavior in any situation without relying on rules or maxims.

Aristotle evaluates actions based on whether they are voluntary, involuntary, or nonvoluntary. Involuntary actions are performed under compulsion, causing pain, while nonvoluntary actions are done in ignorance without recognition or suffering. Ignorance may excuse specific cases but not general behavior. Moral goodness is best measured by choice, as choices are always made voluntarily. Deliberation precedes choice, focusing on means over which we have control. Good character leads to choices aimed at the true good, while those lacking virtue may pursue only apparent goods. Virtue and vice are within human power as they relate to voluntary and deliberate choices. Rewards and punishments are based on voluntary actions. Bad habits formed by those behaving badly are not an excuse for their actions. Aristotle examines courage as the first particular virtue, defining it as the appropriate attitude toward fear, involving confidence in facing fear rather than fearlessness. Excess fearfulness is cowardice, while deficiency is rashness.

According to Aristotle, "happiness" is the ultimate purpose of human existence, not merely pleasure or virtue, but the exercise of virtue itself. It is a lifelong goal rather than a fleeting state, representing the perfection of human nature. Happiness depends on the rational exercise of one's reason, acquiring a moral character through virtues such as courage, generosity, justice, friendship, and citizenship. These virtues involve finding a balance between excess and deficiency. Intellectual contemplation is essential for achieving happiness, as it allows the ultimate realization of our rational capacities.

In the age of the internet, where choice and comparison are prevalent, it's crucial not to compare your actual self to hypothetical versions or drown in a sea of "what ifs." Avoid cluttering your mind with thoughts of parallel universes where different decisions were made. Instead, focus on the present and embrace the path you've chosen. Comparing yourself to alternative versions only leads to unnecessary stress and dissatisfaction. "Comparison is the thief of joy", said

Theodore Roosevelt (Rob Moore, I am Worth More, London: John Murray, 2019,p.223). Embrace your present reality and accept your imperfections, as dwelling on regrets only hinders your ability to move forward. Focus on improving your life from the present moment rather than lamenting past decisions. Being human means making mistakes and accepting them, without dreading the future. Accepting yourself as you are makes it easier to find happiness and celebrate the success of others without feeling inadequate.

Aristotle's conception of happiness is unique yet closely related to traditional ideas. While some equate happiness with virtue, Aristotle refines this by asserting that happiness consists of virtuous activity rather than virtue itself. He emphasizes that true happiness surpasses mere accumulation of pleasant experiences; it requires sustained engagement in constructive activities aligned with our goals. Achieving happiness involves conscious analysis of our goals and conduct, practicing virtue ethics, and ultimately "living well."

Aristotle posits that living well involves engaging in lifelong activities that actualize the virtues of the rational soul, requiring effective nurturing of intellectual and physical capacities and striving to become the best possible version of oneself. Through deliberate practice, virtuous behavior becomes habitual, contributing to personal and communal happiness. Additionally, Aristotle acknowledges the importance of possessing external goods such as friends, wealth, and power for overall happiness. Lack of these advantages can diminish one's virtuous activity and jeopardize happiness. While good fortune plays a role, individuals also bear responsibility for acquiring and exercising virtues, although support from parents and fellow citizens is crucial in this pursuit.

Aristotle emphasizes the importance of education in achieving success and happiness in life, highlighting that making others happier also contributes to one's own happiness. He asserts that the purpose of life is to attain success, flourishing, and happiness, which are facilitated through virtuous behavior. Aristotle defines virtue as a learned disposition to reason and act in a certain way, where disposition refers to a tendency or characteristic that consistently guides one's actions. For example, a friendly person is someone who regularly behaves in a friendly manner.

Aristotle's study of the Golden Mean offers a successful explanation for improving human society by outlining conditions for happiness from a philosophical perspective. In addition to virtues like controlling emotions and supporting the Golden Mean, factors such as wealth, pleasure, and relationships with family, friends, peers, and pets contribute to happiness. Upholding proper behavior regardless of circumstances, time, or place is crucial. Aristotle underscores the importance of education in refining individuals and cultivating virtuous character to achieve happiness, the ultimate goal of life.

Aristotle's philosophical framework, centered on the Golden Mean, provides a democratic approach to societal issues, emphasizing the importance of virtues for individual happiness. While Aristotle didn't explicitly highlight love as a condition for happiness, he did acknowledge the significance of caring for women, despite the societal context of his time, which included a slave-owning system and unequal treatment of women. Overall, Aristotle's emphasis on acquiring virtues underscores the essential task for individuals to attain happiness in society.

In his work "Politics," Aristotle suggests that only the independently wealthy can fully experience the good life, which he equates with happiness or eudaimonia. He emphasizes the importance of a high standard of living in enabling true success and happiness, viewing it as an expression of all virtues. Aristotle values understanding as a form of judgment in practical matters, aiding in determining equity. He criticizes the culture of instant gratification prevalent in modern

society, advocating for making choices with a focus on long-term goals to achieve complete virtue and ultimately, happiness. Pleasures of the moment alone will not lead to lasting fulfillment.

In modern society, overcoming pride and arrogance and seeking guidance from nature is essential, as we all depend on it for our existence. Instead of fixating on heavenly ideals, we should embrace our role in the world and appreciate the beauty of life and death, which gives it meaning. Recognizing the golden mean, as advocated by Aristotle, is crucial, as it is evident in nature and beneficial to our well-being. Happiness is not a result of success; rather, being happy leads to greater success in various aspects of life. Happy individuals maintain better relationships, possess stronger social support, and are more generous and satisfied with their interactions with others. Happiness is closely linked to maintaining fulfilling relationships with friends and family.

Happy people tend to be more creative, productive, and open to new experiences, as positive thinking fosters the ability to devise creative solutions. They also enjoy better physical health and resilience, bouncing back from challenges more effectively. Happiness involves making the most of good times and coping with adversity, ultimately leading to a fulfilling life. Additionally, happy individuals are more prosocial, exhibiting a greater inclination to help others through volunteering, community service, and charitable acts. Overall, happiness contributes to enhanced creativity, health, resilience, and altruism, enriching both individual lives and communities.

Happiness extends beyond fleeting moods and emotions; it encompasses overall well-being, productivity, and kindness. While negative emotions like fear and anger serve protective functions, positive emotions like enjoyment and hope foster connections and resilience. Striving for happiness doesn't mean denying negative emotions; it acknowledges the full spectrum of human experiences, including adversity and the natural occurrence of negative feelings. Accepting and managing these emotions is integral to leading a fulfilling life.

Happiness is about being able to make the most of the good times – but also to cope effectively with the inevitable bad times, in order to experience the best possible life overall. Or, in the words of the biochemist turned Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard: “Happiness is a deep sense of flourishing, not a mere pleasurable feeling or fleeting emotion but an optimal state of being”(Pattabiraman Krishnamoorthy, *The Secret to reach success effortlessly*, e-book : Kindle edition, 2020,p.83).

Research indicates that happiness leads to various benefits in performance, health, relationships, and societal well-being. Contrary to the notion that success brings happiness, studies suggest that happiness could be the key to success. However, despite increasing wealth, society hasn't become happier, with mental health issues now a significant social challenge. Policymakers are recognizing the importance of prioritizing human well-being and happiness in measures of progress. Thus, the pursuit of happiness is crucial for improving individual lives and creating a more productive, healthy, and cohesive society. This evaluation of Aristotle's golden mean underscores the significance of happiness as a moral value in one's life.

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