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Aristotle's Concept of the Golden Mean: A Critical Analysis

ThankGod Bekweri Amadi¹, Ihejiofor Kingsley Ikenna²

1. PhD, Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria
 2. Independent Researcher, Research Parks Africa Academic Standard Ltd., Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria
- * Correspondence: thankgodamadi100@gmail.com

Abstract: Aristotle's theory of the golden mean is one of those ethical theories that have influenced humanity over the years. Worried by the general problem of ethics (the problem of human behaviour), especially after studying Socratic philosophy and the trial and death of Socrates, Aristotle sought to build an ethical system based on the conception of human nature. For him, philosophy committed a crime against humanity in the death of Socrates. Aristotle's ethical theory saw three main positions according to which human actions could be judged. They are defect, mean and excess. He located virtue or the good life in the 'mean', which he calls the intermediate position between the two vices of defect and excess. This paper, therefore, examines Aristotle's theory of the golden mean. It argues that his theory, at least, reaffirms the need for checks and balances in life (moderation). But just as the author saw the foregoing as a strength in Aristotle's theory, the paper also saw some defects in the golden mean theory. For the author, it is not vice for someone to exhibit courage at its apex. It is rather a proof of maturity and full development of the rational faculty. Hence, the paper reformulates or redirects the cursor in Aristotle's theory from what Aristotle calls the 'mean' to what the author calls the end. The paper concludes that there are three main positions as well: defect, mean, and end. Virtue lies in the end and not in the mean. The paper adopts the content-analytic method of study.

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1. Introduction

The role of Aristotle's philosophy in the steering of the central ship of philosophy can never be overemphasised. Indeed, he is one of the philosophers at the centre of philosophical discourses. That is to say, there is seldom any area of life about which Aristotle had nothing meaningful to say. This probably may account for Derrida's assertion:

"I think we need to read them again and again, and I feel that, however old I am, I am on the threshold of reading Plato and Aristotle. I love them, and I feel I have to start again and again and again". It is a task which is in front of me, before me" [1].

Derrida actually emphasised the importance of going back to Plato and Aristotle. No wonder it is often argued that "all philosophies are mere permutations of the views of Plato and Aristotle" [2]. This view is now popularly held amongst philosophers to the extent that it is gradually becoming another "Dogma" that will call the attention of another Quine to launch an onslaught on. But even if five different Quines decide to unleash their terror on this view, we still think they will make no progress, at least for now. Hence, Plato

and Aristotle are at the centre of the philosophical patrimony. Not to worry ourselves with all the strands of their philosophy, at least for now, we shall confine the ink of our pen to Aristotle's theory of the golden mean as advocated in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Beginning from the formation of society, human beings have always sought to legislate, arbitrate, diagnose as well as prescribe moral drugs for the well-being and survival of society. Although some of these drugs were wrongly prescribed and society's illness wrongly diagnosed, diagnosis and prescriptions have continued since we are still in search of man's problems and the drugs that will finally cure man and society of their array of moral vices. Indeed, it was the problem of how a human being should behave, how a society should be organized, and what constitutes the meaning of life that made Socrates to moot one of his famous maxims thus: "the unexamined life is not worth living". Socrates has "as his motto, the inscription written at the temple at Delphi: 'know thy self'" [3]. He was indeed trying to amend the rot in the society occasioned by what he calls "ignorance and vice." His disciple Plato, for his own part, did everything morally possible to formalize his master's teachings, especially after he saw the sin that society committed in the execution of his master. The best way to continue his master's teaching was to start a school which became the Academy where people were taught the science of human behavior. For Plato, morality consists in man's attempt at rediscovering his inner content through reason. Again, Aristotle, who is Plato's pupil, still in a bid to ensure an ordered society, advocated a thematic and scientific system of morality based on human nature. For Aristotle, "every art and every inquiry, and similarly, every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason, the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim" [4]. He argues for a life of moderation which, in his thinking, is the golden mean (the mean between two extremes). This philosophy has so influenced society to the extent that "act in moderation" has become a maxim of action. However, there are some excesses or extremes that must be encouraged. A good example is courage. It was because of the rejection of such virtues as courage and pride that Friedrich Nietzsche rejected traditional morality in favor of Nihilism.

One thing that is clear, is that Aristotle's golden mean theory has not comfortably resolved the general ethical concerns of humanity. It is also clear that many people, particularly scholars, were directly or indirectly influenced by Aristotle, hence, the entrenchment of the moral dictum "learn to live a moderate life." But what Aristotle calls the mean has no mathematical measurement. It fluctuates the collateral circumstances of each situation only to discover itself in nature and flexible reason [5].

This paper sets out to critique Aristotle's theory of the golden mean with a view to remedying its shortfalls and recalibrating it as an ethical model for resolving some of the ethical concerns that societies face today. Despite the Aristotelian advocacy for a moderated life between two extremes of vices, today's man still accedes to the extreme of excess, which can be seen in the uncontrollable accumulation of material wealth, food, alcohol drugs, etc. He also descends into deficiency – inadequate attention to education, etc. There are still such extremists as the "Boko Haram" who are not ready to seek the mean, even though we think that the mean should not apply, as it will still amount to a vice to engage in terrorism in moderation. The paper attempts to answer the following questions: How can we use Aristotle's theory of the golden mean as a catalyst for a better society? What are the shortcomings of Aristotle's theory? What is its relation to the ultimate goal of a happy life?

Aristotle's Golden Mean Theory as Virtue

The term golden mean is originally traced to the Latin poet Horace whose *Aurea Mediocritas* are described in odes 2.10.5 [6]. But today it is mainly associated with Aristotle's philosophy in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Primarily speaking, it represents the Aristotelian argument that virtue or the good life should be the balance between two extremes of vices. In effect, even after Horace, we can also find it in the present myth of Icarus, in a Doric

saying carved in the front of the temple at Delphi: "Nothing in Excess," as well as in the teachings of Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato. For a better understanding of the golden mean theory, we have to discuss the theory under the following sub-headings.

General Framework of Aristotle's Golden Mean

Aristotle tells us that there are two types of virtue, namely intellectual and moral virtues. The former, Aristotle argues, owes both at birth and in growth to teaching. That is, learning (both from our experiences and our academic trainings). The other – moral virtue – Aristotle says, is formed through habit. He maintains accordingly, "Neither by nature, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us, rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit" [7]. He further argues that there are things we may learn before doing and some acts that we learn by doing. For him, therefore, the same way men become builders by building, so also, they become just by doing just acts. However, since Aristotle's aim is not theoretical knowledge but moral goodness, he then turned to discuss virtue in the light of its conformity with the soul. He says there are three types of things in the soul, namely passion, faculties and states of character and virtue must conform to one of these. By passion he refers to appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, hatred, joy, etc. By faculties, he meant "the things in which we are capable of feeling, or becoming angry and all the things mentioned above" [7]. Now, since virtue is neither passion nor faculties, it must be a state of character. It follows, therefore, that virtue as a genus is a state of character. Now what is the virtue of man? This, according to Aristotle, is the state of character which makes a man good, happy or do his work with satisfaction. Put in Aristotelian language, we must not describe virtue as a state of character, but also say what sort of state it is. . . every virtue or excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done [7]. He maintains that in everything divisible, it is possible to take more, less or equal amount. And this is either in terms of the thing-itself or relative to us. But before we go on to discuss it as relative to us (since we wish to discuss it as our next sub-heading), the mean between more and less is equal, more is the excess which is a vice, less is a defect which also is a vice; the mean, therefore, becomes equal in this instance (golden mean) the equal becomes virtue or the good. Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice lying in the mean.

Golden Mean as Virtue Relative to Man

Aristotle, by the use of the word "intermediate," argues for the object, that which is "equidistant" from each of the extremes which is one and the same for all men. But there are also those things which are intermediate relative to each man, meaning that it is neither too much nor too little; it is neither one nor the same for all men. It follows, therefore, that universal and objective principles may apply differently, depending on the class of people and circumstances of application. Contrary to Plato who located the mean or virtue in the soul or form, Aristotle argues that the mean will vary from one individual to another. For example, in the case of a moral virtue such as courage, we may praise the courage of a young child who overcomes his terror of the water and sticks his face in the water, but we may not praise a professional lifeguard who does this. But the main problem with this theory is more or less epistemological. That is, how do we know the mean between two vices, since there is no mathematical formula, hedonistic calculus, and/or altruistic parameter for measuring the good? Aristotle himself says the golden mean is not an arithmetic or geometric measurement of the good life. He also admits that not every passion or action admits of the mean. We shall react to these Aristotelian postulations as we continue on this excursion, but, for now, let us turn to discuss the epistemology of the golden mean. That is, how can we know the golden mean or the good?

The Epistemology of the Golden Mean

The question of how to know the golden mean seems perennial, since it is not a centripetal approximation of the two extremes of excess and defect. For Aristotle, we know

it by that principle which the man of practical wisdom would determine [8]. Aristotle, here, tries to link moral virtue with intellectual virtue or practical wisdom [9]. Anybody who has moral virtue will know which goals are right for human life. But such an individual needs practical wisdom to know how to achieve the goals. It means, therefore, that a morally sound man is one who follows the dictates of reason, desires to do the right thing, has a well-formed state of character, values happiness as an end, and can plan how to achieve happiness or the mean [10]. Zeller [6], in arguing that “the quality of will may be called moral when it preserves the correct mean between excess and defect,” was actually emphasizing the marriage between intellectual virtue and moral virtue. Knowing virtue is more like knowing or learning how to sit well on a bicycle than like a mathematical measurement of the middle of two pillars. Aristotle goes further to say that he who aims at the intermediate must first depart from what is more contrary to it, as Calypso advises: “hold the ship out beyond that surf and spray.” Here, Aristotle introduces the idea of giving preference to the lesser evil. According to him, it is possible that the mean may not be an all-perfect one. He argues that “the man, however, who deviates little from goodness is not blamed, whether he do so in the direction of the more or of the less but only the man who deviates more widely; for he does not fail to be noticed.” Knowing the golden mean, therefore, becomes a relative/subjective appreciation of the balance of character, which is totally based on the individual’s experiences, culture, and state of consciousness. The golden mean, by this conceptualization, is not a state of affairs, neither is it a state of mathematical exactitude, but an individual’s rational state of experience, which does not have universal applicability. It is like the rational wheel that propels happiness. This rational wheel seeks to balance the wheel of life.

The Golden Mean as Gateway to Happiness

Aristotle started his *Nicomachean Ethics* by observing that every act, inquiry, action, and pursuit aims at some end and some ends are instrumental to other ends. Happiness is the ultimate end that is worthy of the pursuit of humans as rational beings. He defines happiness as an activity of the soul in conformity with reason. Happiness must be desired for its own sake, and not for any pleasure attached to it. Gurtler [7] argues that “Aristotle is proposing a choice, but defining the formal nature of happiness.” He defines happiness as an activity that accords with the specific nature of humanity; pleasure accompanies such activity but is not its chief aim [11]. Now, our goal here is not happiness qua happiness but happiness as a product of the golden mean. Simply put, there cannot be happiness without the golden mean, since it is only when one acts in accordance with right reason and locates virtue, which is the golden mean, that one can feel a sense of fulfillment.

Our Assessment

From our discussions so far of Aristotle’s theory of the golden mean, we find some strengths and some weaknesses. Perhaps the best place to start this excursion of positivity and negativity is to highlight some criticisms against virtue theory as presented by Rosalind Hursthouse in her paper “Virtue Theory and Abortion.” First, she mentions the underlisted objections as the most common of all the objections to the theory. But before we go ahead to mention them, let us say that virtue theory is a broader theory that accommodates the golden mean theory. We think this is necessary in order to enable our readers to have a fair understanding of the basis of our analysis of Hursthouse’s objections to the general framework of virtue ethics. Thus, no one will accuse us of being involved in a “category mistake.” Let us turn again to the objections, even though she tried to defend most of them (if not all). Some of them are:

- a. The concept of eudaimonia is hopelessly obscure.
- b. It does not show the disposition which are to act and feel, as well as react.
- c. It is concerned only with being and not with doing.
- d. It does not come up with any rule.
- e. It is committed to reductionism.

She goes ahead to present two more objections which she claims are more standard: one of them is that “We do not know which character fruits are the virtues or that this is open to much dispute, or particularly subject to the threat of moral skepticism or pluralism” [9]. Let us pretend to have presented the above criticisms to entertain our readers. Now, just as mentioned above about Aristotle’s comment that it is not all actions that have a mean (e.g., telling the truth, adultery, etc.). The question one may ask Aristotle, since he was able to identify that it is not the case that all actions and passions have a mean and he is advocating the theory of the mean, is: what did he do about it? I think strongly that this is one of the major shortcomings of the golden mean principle, since the theory originally appeared not to have been planned to solve the general problem of morality. Another point worthy of mention is the question of the nature of this reason that teaches or offers practical wisdom. Is it a reason that is located in virtue - golden mean or what? Since rational principles must be objective principles, Aristotle debases it by bringing in the notion of mean relative to us. Does it mean that any man can just choose any position as his own mean? I believe Aristotle will not grant it. He will rather say every man should choose the mean relative to him in accordance with right reasons. The problem here is that the content of this reason is not well explained, and even where it is explained properly, the fact that we act based on our relative mean ushers in conflict.

Another point we must mention is one regarding labeling the angle to the problem of morality. What we call cowardice as a defect or rashness as excess and courage as a mean; how did they gain their semantic and ontological status? Most times society has a way of labeling certain people’s behaviors as “deviant” (defect) and praising others (mean) without any proper rational principle guiding such judgments. We also see that this doctrine is not the best in all cases. For instance, if one is faced with the traditional moral problem of surrogate motherhood, supposing one wants to have a child; how would one apply this Aristotelian theory of the golden mean to have a child without facing the tribunal of moral jurists? What it means, therefore, is that by holding that position, Aristotle did not plan for some situations.

Now, let us mention that despite these criticisms, Aristotle’s theory can still stand to answer the present ethical prayers and, that is, if reformulated by way of renaming the theory golden end and placing the cursor at what Aristotle calls excess. By this we argue that ideal human action ought to, but should not, be instrumental to any other goal or happiness other than happiness for its own sake. As we have tried to show, Aristotle’s theory, at least, has some strength, and that is the fact that it ushers into human consciousness the need for checks and balances. But just as Kant tried to show in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, moderation in affections and passions, self-control, and sober reflection are far from being properly described as good without qualification. Kant speaks for himself:

“Moderation in affections and passions, self-control, and sober reflection are not only good in many respects: they may even seem to constitute part of the inner worth of a person. Yet they are far from being properly described as good without qualification (however unconditionally they have been commended by the ancients). For without the principle of a good will they may become exceedingly bad; and the very coolness of a scoundrel makes him, not merely more dangerous, but also immediately more abominable in our eyes than we should have taken him to be without it” [12].

In asserting our position, first we have to state, contrary to Aristotle, that every action admits of the golden end theory that we advocate. All the actions Aristotle said do not admit of the mean already have located themselves either as defects, mean, or ends- which we call good or virtue. Like we find in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, there are three kinds of disposition but unlike Aristotle, they are defect, mean, and end or good. Virtue lies in the end. Aristotle himself observes it but argues that since to hit the mean in the extremes is hard, we must locate it as a second best in the middle [13].

For us, of the three positions, the good lies in the end. Aristotle's position that not every action or every passion admits of a mean is here faulted by us. According to him, not all actions or passions admit of the mean because some have names that already imply badness, e.g., spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of adultery, theft, murder [14]. But our argument here was partly stated by Aristotle himself, for he attempted to adopt the thesis of the analytic school by saying that their names already imply that such action is bad. Our simple reply or, if you like, addition is that if the name already implies bad, it follows that such action should be located or judged as a defect, hence, vice. There are equally such other actions as truth-telling, which in themselves are each an end. People tell the truth not basically because of what they will gain from it but because it is good in itself. To further explain the point we have raised earlier – the fact that there are three positions, namely defect or vice, mean, and end or virtue – we have to state that the mean in this case does not necessarily mean a bad action but more like an intermediate. The mean could be viewed like the hypothetical imperative in Kant's ethics. That is, it may not be seen as a bad action just the same way it is not praiseworthy. Like in Kant, hypothetical imperatives declare a possible action to be practically necessary as a means to the attainment of something else that one wills (or that one may will) [10]. The action can or may be a means to some other ends. And by ends here we mean that which is the good-in-itself as well as that which every action aims at. What it means, therefore, is that the mean may be a condition sine qua non for the ultimate good, but may not be the good-in-itself. Virtue here lies in the end (purpose, essence, virtue or the good). The virtuous man is a wise man with foresight; one who refuses to exchange virtue for gold, naira, or any other pleasure [15].

2. Conclusion

Being perturbed by the moral issues in society, Aristotle articulated a scientific moral theory known as the golden mean or virtue theory. This theory (although Aristotle claims is not a mathematical approximation of the two extremes of defect and excess), is said to imply a mathematical approximation. Aristotle in his theory located virtue in the mean of two extremes which he calls defect and excess. He claims that happiness is the ultimate end of every action. Hence, locating the mean is instrumental to achieving happiness which is the ultimate goal of all human action. But he maintained that this mean is not a mathematical approximation of the two extremes of defect and excess. He also argues that there is a mean relative to the individual. This position makes it impossible for us to decipher the epistemology of the golden mean; hence every human being will act according to the mean relative to him or her. Following this individual relativity that has set in and the attendant problem, occasioned by the fact that the nature of reason is not well explicated, plus the fact that the theory seems not to have taken care of moral issues in general, we decided to examine the theory with a view to reformulating and updating it to meet current moral challenges. We refuted Aristotle's argument that virtue is in the mean between two extremes of defect and excess. This is mainly because, in our view or thinking, to be courageous to the extreme is not a defect but rather a full manifestation of the moral end of man's nature and reason. To act according to the theory of the mean may not be a bad action, at the same time, it could not be adjudged a morally good action. It is simply the mean between the good and the bad which, in most cases, plays out when reason and passion are developed equally, that no one can influence the other.

Our conclusion, therefore, is that the end of every action is the good or virtue which we here locate in the end of the three positions – defect, mean, and end. Virtue is not instrumental to any other end but an end in itself. By this reformulation, any moral issue can be placed on the tribunal of moral jurists and be determined either to be a defect (vice) means (hypothetical imperative), or an end (virtue). The epistemology of the good (end) is, therefore, established.

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