

What Do You Take From The "Golden Mean" of Aristotle?

Post by "smoothiekiwi" of February 9, 2022 at 11:22 AM

Hi!

I've thought for some time about this topic. Aristotles argument, that virtue lies in the middle of two extremes, seems irrefutable to me... and actually applicable to almost every aspect in life. As far as I can judge, the best way is always the middle. If you don't workout at all, you'll have a bad health- if you work out too much, your life will be all about improving your health and nutrients. Both of these outcomes are bad; the truth is in between- workout to be healthy, but don't become obsessed with it. The same thing applies to work, finances, and I would even dare to say politics- a state which supports individual and entrepreneurial freedom, yet has boundaries which shouldn't be crossed (environment, workers safety, work time, pay etc.) seems fantastic to me.

I'm sure that Epicurus had heard of Aristotle and has read at least some of his works. Does he have to say anything on that?

Post by "Cassius" of February 9, 2022 at 12:16 PM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

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Great question SmoothieKiwi and something we ought to discuss at length.

I has been my view in trying to compare Epicurus to Aristotle that Aristotle's "golden mean" argument is not helpful in the least, and is an extension of his belief in categories that are artificial and built on abstack logic not tied to reality.

How does one know where the 'Extremes" are in order to interpolate a middle? To me what is too much, too little, and just right seems to me to be totally dependent on circumstances, and to imply that there is a "middle" that is always "just right" is probably something that muddies

rather than clarifies.

I think this is a good topic to develop because we do come across it a lot so I am very interested in hearing opinions. But my preliminary view has been and is so far that just like there are no "Absolutes" in a atomistic eternal infinite universe, there is also nothing particularly reliable about picking out arbitrary "extremes" or "middle."

We can all understand what is meant in general by too much, too little, and just right, but as far as being able to pin down extremes and a middle, it seems to me that those are also both matters that are totally dependent on circumstances and details, and not something that can be determined "as a rule" or "in general" or through any purely "logical" analysis.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of February 9, 2022 at 12:19 PM

And that's where the view of Aristotle- that you should look at virtuous people and their range of extremes- kicks in. I can't really explain it, how you determine the middle-, but I somehow feel it. Strange stuff.

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 9, 2022 at 12:20 PM

In general, Aristotle's *Golden Mean* privileges the space between the "extremes" of *pleasure* and *pain*.

Epicurus privileges *pleasure*.

Epicurus' *pursuit of pleasure* is distinguished from Aristotle's *pursuit of excellence*. Aristotle thought that an excellent person would necessarily enjoy happiness, whereas Epicurus recognized that an excellent person is *only* "happy" when enjoying the fruits of their excellence. *Excellence*, itself, is not the motivating goal. *Pleasure* is the goal.

The "Epicurean *Golden Mean*" (to use Aristotle's vocabulary) is always pleasure, **not** *courage*, or *temperance*, but *pleasure*.

Now, that's not to devalue the profitability of practicing moral virtue, it's simply a recognition that the *Golden Mean* is not really what motivates us, and that Aristotle is wrong in de-prioritizing pleasure. Both philosophers agreed on the importance of living moderately and avoiding excess. The issue of *pleasure* is where they disagree on ethics.

Post by “Cassius” of February 9, 2022 at 12:49 PM

I agree with Nate's application of the mean issue to pleasure.

However in addition to that I think there is something more, maybe though just because I have a superficial knowledge of how people talk about a "golden mean."

Superficially, I gather the golden mean is used as a rule of thumb (or logic) postulating that there are always two extremes, and that there is always a "best" that lies in an exact middle ground between the two.

I am sure that is oversimplifying the issue but I do gather that that is what a lot of people take the meaning to be.

And taken on that broad level, I don't think there is a way under the Epicuran view of nature that such a mechanism could function. As "golden mean" is frequently used, the result is a word game implying that it is generally possible to solve problems by looking for extremes, and (so to speak) adding them together and dividing by two. I don't think Epicurus would say that the world works that way in regard to pleasure or anything else either.

So I generally react negatively to "golden mean" analysis.

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 9, 2022 at 1:35 PM

The "golden mean" implies some kind of perfection, yet perfection is an artificial and abstract idea that doesn't exist in the real world "messiness" of humans. Humans are not mathematical equations.

[Quote from Nate](#)

Epicurus' pursuit of pleasure is distinguished from Aristotle's pursuit of excellence. Aristotle thought that an excellent person would necessarily enjoy happiness, whereas Epicurus recognized that an excellent person is only "happy" when enjoying the fruits of their excellence. Excellence, itself, is not the motivating goal. Pleasure is the goal.

There is something so liberating in Epicurus teaching, because being liberated from the "pursuit of excellence" opens one up to true freedom. But still one would wonder...do we still admire people in their pursuit of excellence?

What makes the world "messy" is that things are in flux, and exist in a state of continual change, though some things change so slowly we can't easily see the changes happening. And this messiness is also why we can't make absolute rules about things.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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So we have to instead function in an intuitive way, using our senses to re-access a given situation, prodded by the feeling of wanting what is enjoyable, and combined with a "prudent-calculus" as to what will lead to long-term well-being.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of February 9, 2022 at 3:02 PM

Wow, you answer really quick 😊

[Quote from Nate](#)

Epicurus' pursuit of pleasure is distinguished from Aristotle's pursuit of excellence. Aristotle thought that an excellent person would necessarily enjoy happiness, whereas Epicurus recognized that an excellent person is only "happy" when enjoying the fruits of their excellence. Excellence, itself, is not the motivating goal. Pleasure is the goal.

Good point, and one I agree to. Epicurus's stance was simply different from Aristotle's.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Yep, agree on that- Epicurus would disagree on that. How could in a world of atoms be a "perfect middle ground"?

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Humans are not mathematical equations

The Pythagoreans want to have a talk with you 😊

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

And this messiness is also is why we can't make absolute rules about things

Well, thats exactly the point Aristotle makes- that there's no absolute virtue, because everything is dependent on the context. A man who invites a woman to dance is brave; the same man who charges across the battlefield into machine gun fire is foolish... doesn't that mean that virtue is always dependent on the context?

And thanks to the answers and that you took the time to think about such a question 😊

Post by “Cassius” of February 9, 2022 at 6:11 PM

"Well, thats exactly the point Aristotle makes- that there's no absolute virtue, because everything is dependent on..."

Did you mean Aristotle there, or Epicurus?

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of February 11, 2022 at 3:34 PM

Aristotle... wasn't that this position?

Post by “Cassius” of February 11, 2022 at 3:55 PM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

Aristotle... wasn't that this position?

That's a good question that we will have to one day figure out. Do you have a reference that you were thinking of, or anything in particular?

The only thing that I am aware of that may be applicable is that supposedly Aristotle transferred Plato's "ideas" from an external existence in a realm beyond the reach of the senses to an "intrinsic" or "essentialist" existence inside the object under consideration (things that appear yellow have an essence of yellow in them).

But I could not provide you with a good cite to that either, so unfortunately I am not in position to clarify the question.

Post by "SimonC" of February 11, 2022 at 3:55 PM

Wasn't Aristotle's position something like courage is absolutely definitely a virtue and therefore good in itself, but to strike the balance between cowardice and recklessness you need *phronesis*.

Meanwhile Epicurus would say that courage is definitely good but not absolutely, only instrumentally, and the measure of its goodness is the pleasure it brings to your life.

Post by "Eikadistes" of February 11, 2022 at 4:24 PM

In Book II of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle identifies a number of virtues by name: "[Virtue] is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defects [...] With regard to feelings of fear and confidence **courage** is the mean; of the people who exceed, he who exceeds in fearlessness has no name (many of the states have no name), while the man who exceeds in confidence is rash, and he who exceeds in fear and falls short in confidence is a coward. With regard to pleasures and pains [...] the mean is **temperance**, the excess self-indulgence. [...] With regard to giving and taking of money the mean is **liberality**, the excess and the defect prodigality and meanness. [...] With regard to honour and dishonour the mean is **proper pride**, the excess is known as a sort of 'empty vanity', and the deficiency

is undue humility [...] With regard to anger also there is an excess, a deficiency, and a mean [...] let us call the mean **good temper**; [...] With regard to truth, then, the intermediate is a truthful sort of person and the mean may be called **truthfulness** [...] With regard to pleasantness in the giving of amusement the intermediate person is ready-witted and the disposition **ready wit** [...] With regard to the remaining kind of pleasantness, that which is exhibited in life in general, the man who is pleasant in the right way is friendly and the mean is **friendliness** [...] he who falls short or is not ashamed of anything at all is shameless, and the intermediate person is modest. **Righteous indignation** is a mean between envy and spite" (1107a - 1108b)

Temperance, Liberality, Proper Pride, Good Temper, Truthfulness, Ready Wit, Friendliness, and Righteous Indignation are **always** virtues for Aristotle, even if adherence to those virtues leads to evil consequences.

Post by "Don" of February 11, 2022 at 4:37 PM

[Quote from Nate](#)

Temperance, Liberality, Proper Pride, Good Temper, Truthfulness, Ready Wit, Friendliness, and Righteous Indignation are always virtues for Aristotle, even if adherence to those virtues leads to evil consequences

Ah! So, the Virtues *themselves* are the Mean per Aristotle! Thanks for that!

Post by "smoothiekiwi" of February 11, 2022 at 4:38 PM

[Quote from Nate](#)

Temperance, Liberality, Proper Pride, Good Temper, Truthfulness, Ready Wit, Friendliness, and Righteous Indignation are always virtues for Aristotle, even if adherence to those virtues leads to evil consequences.

That's the part of the theory I heavily disagree with- why pick these virtues, and not the other?

Even so, I don't find any fault in the idea that the virtue is the balance between two excesses; probably Epicurus would've agreed to that. So why not pleasure as well?

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 11, 2022 at 5:20 PM

Epicurus recognized pleasure as including both *katastematic* ("static", "stable") pleasures as well as *kinetic* ("active") pleasures. Aristotle (*as did most other ancient philosophers*) saw pleasure as an excited state that *deviates* from a preferable state of "balance". Within this context, Epicurus partially saw pleasure **as** the preferable state of "balance".

For Epicurus, virtue is an *instrument* to achieve the good. For Aristotle, virtue **is** the good. The good in Epicurean philosophy is not a balance between two excesses, but rather, **pleasure**, total absence of all forms of pain.

Post by “Cassius” of February 11, 2022 at 5:27 PM

"Even so, I don't find any fault in the idea that the virtue is the balance between two excesses; probably Epicurus would've agreed to that. So why not pleasure as well?"

I would say that this points out the problem and that Epicurus would not agree. Pleasure is a feeling that nature gives us as a canonical perception. We don't feel pain according to a set formula, and Aristotle is suggesting that there are extremes which can be identified prior to circumstances and experience, and these extremes give rise to the mean and therefore the optimum results. The problem is that these extremes are like Platonic ideals - they have no independent existence and to the extent we can estimate some kind of approximation, we do so based on the nature of the operation of the atoms and void involved, not on the basis of logical reasoning based on absolutes.

Someone can probably do better than that in piercing the issue but I am very appreciative of Nate finding that reference.

In all, I do think what we have here the difference between seeing virtue as something relative to the circumstances (the Epicurean perspective of identifying virtue by results that occur afterward), vs doing the reverse and trying to evaluate circumstances based on their adherence to some preset arbitrary standard of virtue that exists only in the human mind as a tool for prediction (the Atostotelian/Platonic perspective). Plato and Aristotle may look for their absolutes in different places, but in reality they are doing the same thing and Epicurus is in total opposition to both.

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 11, 2022 at 7:17 PM

I am trying to "unpack" Aristotle's perfectionistic and absolutist way of thinking, because I was raised in Christianity which has been a continued source of this kind of thinking (and may have left-over "brain-wiring" from that).

Modern English would use different words in some instances. I think what I find unnerving is the labeling and the use of judging which doesn't take into account the specific situation. Also, it doesn't take into account the "feeling" of things. For example: fear is judged as a defect, yet fear is a normal emotion which helps keep us alive, and we feel it very viscerally when our life is in danger. Yet, in marches the concept of "courage" to convince us that it is good to risk our lives for some abstract ideals that someone else has convinced us is correct. So these ideals can be used to manipulate people. I would like to suggest that an Epicurean would rarely need to force the virtue of courage, even when it is for the sake of pleasure, because they would very rarely take on something risky (but I may have differing beliefs on this than others here on the forum).

I made this table based on the *Nicomachean Ethics* source provided above by @Nate. I left some boxes empty due to not being listed in the source.

<u>Excess</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Defect</u>
confidence (rash)	courage	fear (coward)
self-indulgence	temperance	
prodigality	liberality	meanness
empty vanity	proper pride	undue humility
anger	good temper	
	truthfulness	
	ready wit	
	friendliness	
	modest	shameless
envy	righteous indignation	spite

Post by “Cassius” of February 11, 2022 at 7:34 PM

Thank you! I think producing a table like that is very helpful for illustrating that all these are "labels" for which would have to have some way of measuring and identifying them precisely in

order to use them.

Lacking that, they all reduce - to me - to nothing more than "too much" "just right" and "too little" - isn't that a nursery story of some kind about some bears?
<https://americanliterature.com/childrens-stor...the-three-bears>

"And then she went to the porridge of the Little Wee Bear, and tasted it, and that was neither too hot nor too cold, but just right, and she liked it so well that she ate it all up, every bit!"

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 11, 2022 at 7:58 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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"And then she went to the porridge of the Little Wee Bear, and tasted it, and that was neither too hot nor too cold, but just right, and she liked it so well that she ate it all up, every bit!"

I've been thinking of *Goldilocks* this entire time, [Cassius](#).

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of February 12, 2022 at 6:09 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

Within this context, Epicurus partially saw pleasure as the preferable state of "balance".

That's a good point! To be honest, I simply haven't looked at it that way. Obviously, that isn't applicable to every situation- but e.g. in the sphere of sport, pleasure is the sweet spot between „I'm gonna watch Netflix now“ and „I'm a workout machine!“ The maximum pleasure will be reached when I work out enough so that I'm healthy, but don't see sport as the only thing in life.

Thanks for the clarification!

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of February 12, 2022 at 7:53 AM

And I've also got another thought... and an obvious one as well.

We already know (from science) that our body possesses multiple happiness hormones. In order to feel ourselves truly happy, we have to "activate" them- and that means acting across different spheres! At least according to [this website](#). So in order to feel good, we have to work out (endorphins), social communication (endorphins and dopamine), going outside (serotonin), intimate connection (oxytocin), etc. If I truly want to feel happy, then I have to activate all of these hormones.

To be honest, that's what I've noticed myself: only sitting at my table and binging YouTube means that my reserve of dopamine will get depleted very quickly, and I won't have any happiness feeling at the end. In contrast, when I go for a walk with my dog, I feel pretty good after that- but it's not the same feeling as when I binge YouTube.

That's an obvious thought, but I haven't thought of happiness hormones at all! I simply forgot that we had different hormones for different stuff, and tried only to activate my dopamine reserve (which obviously failed). And that, in turn, led me to doubt Epicureanism. But the man was right in the end, although he couldn't know of happiness hormones and stuff.

Post by “Cassius” of February 12, 2022 at 10:42 AM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

stuff, and tried only to activate my dopamine reserve (which obviously failed). And that, in turn, led me to doubt Epicureanism.

I guess what you mean here is that you simply pursued whatever you found pleasing, without regard to ultimate consequences, so you were ignoring Epicurus' clear statement to look to the ultimate result?

If that's what you mean, then ultimately concluding Epicurus was right did not need to be tied to an understanding of dopamine or any other detailed science that was not available to him.

Do I misunderstand your reasoning and how you reached your conclusion?

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of February 12, 2022 at 12:28 PM

Well, you in some sense misunderstand it, but I can't really say why or when. Ill have to think about it...

Post by “Cassius” of February 12, 2022 at 1:30 PM

Well I am not sure we need to pursue it, but what I was trying to focus in on is why what you stated led you to doubt Epicureanism..... 😊

Post by “Don” of February 14, 2022 at 10:11 AM

At work today, but I'll have plenty to say later... That sounds way more ominous than it should btw. 😊

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of February 14, 2022 at 11:18 AM

Wow, a lot has happened in the last 24 hours... welp. Anyway, I had two thoughts when reading [Kalosyni](#) 's post:

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

- 1) "Epicureanism lite" - for people with less time or inclination to study
- 2) "Epicureanism engaged" - for people who want to put in serious study
- 3) "Epicurean guardians and guides" - for people who want to maintain the accuracy of the teachings and teach others

That's a good point- but are there enough interested people to divide them in groups?

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

This morning as I write this, I notice...Oh what a difference a solid good night of sleep makes! As well as a sunny morning with crystal blue skies! But there is still more than these simple pleasures to discover and cultivate in Epicureanism

Actually, I had this feeling just yesterday, when I went out and enjoyed the sunny nature (we're living right next to a park), the birds flying around, the nature vibrating and living... and at this moment, Taoism came to my mind, with its focus on calmness and simply enjoyment of the things around. But then I asked myself- would I be willing to sacrifice my friends, the moments of excitement and pleasure, for calm awe before Nature for the rest of my life? And, to be honest, probably not.

That's an issue I generally have with the contesting philosophies- they all have some wisdom behind, they all look at life in a certain light, and each way of thinking is correct in itself. But when applying it on a given situation, it shows its weakness. Stoicism is great when you're a POW and have to hold out- but in everyday life? Nope, thanks. Taoism is fantastic if you're a monk in a Himalayan monastery- but is it applicable when you're at a party with friends, where your calmness is out of place? Nope. Christianity is great when you're in a church, together with friends praying to God- but is it good when you're at home, thinking whether or not you will go to Hell? I wouldn't like that.

So far, Epicureanism is the only philosophy I see which has coherent answers to all of these problems- enjoy the parties, respect the Nature and enjoy the sunlight, but don't fear Hell, as there isn't any. Great stuff!

Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2022 at 8:52 AM

The "Summum Bonum" aspect of this thread has been moved here: [From The "Golden Mean" to the Summum Bonum - Proper Frames of Reference?](#)