

THE GOLDEN MEAN IN ARISTOTLE'S *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*

Each moral virtue is a mean or lies between extremes of pleasure or of action -- doing or feeling too much or too little. The absolute mean is different from the mean as it is relative to the individual. For example, the intermediate between two pounds and ten pounds of food is (absolutely) six pounds, but the mean relative to the individual will be different for the athlete than it is for the non-athlete. Morality, like artwork, requires that one neither under-do nor over-do. One must hit upon the right course (steering between too much and too little). This requires practice. Virtues are good habits or dispositions to do the right thing developed by means of particular virtuous acts. Means themselves do not admit of excess and deficiency (one cannot have too much courage, etc.).

Good judgment requires that one find the mean between extremes. In order to do that, one must have both general knowledge and particular experience. Practical wisdom is the intellectual virtue (intellectual virtues are higher than moral virtues), which governs deliberation and action. Here are some examples of the golden mean taken from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book II):

VICE (DEFECT)	VIRTUE (MEAN)	VICE (EXCESS)
Cowardice (too little confidence)	Courage	Rashness (too much confidence)
Foolhardiness (too little fear)	Courage	Cowardice (too much fear)
Insensibility (too little pleasure)	Temperance	Self-indulgence (too much pleasure)
Meanness or Stinginess (too little giving)	Liberality	Prodigality or Wastefulness (too much giving)
Stinginess (in giving out large sums of money)	Magnificence	Tastelessness and Vulgarity (giving out large sums)
Undue Humility (too little honor)	Proper Pride	Empty Vanity (too much honor)
Inirascibility (too little anger)	Good Temper	Irascible (too much anger)
Shamelessness (too little shame)	Modesty	Bashfulness (too much shame)
Surliness	Friendliness	Flattery