Getting It Right:
Aristotle's "Golden Mean" as
Theory Deterioration[1]

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❑*Journalism and media ethics texts commonly invoke Aristotle's Golden Mean as a principal ethical theory that models such journalistic values as balance, fairness, and proportion. Working from Aristotle's text, this article argues that the Golden Mean model, as widely understood and applied to media ethics, seriously belies Aristotle's intent. It also shortchanges the reality of our moral agency and epistemic responsibility. A more authentic rendering of Aristotle's theory of acting rightly, moreover, has profound implications for communication ethicists and media practitioners.*

In media ethics texts, it has become commonplace to mention or summarize Aristotle's concept of virtue as one of five or six major paradigms in the history of moral speculation that can be used by journalists. Typically, reference is made to Aristotle's Golden Mean, and the accompanying description identifies this mode of goodness as a sort of middle ground or juste milieu between two extremes of excess and defect. Accounts generally disavow a simplistic linear midpoint. Even so, they centralize the notion of a mean or in-between point as capturing the essential structure of virtuous conduct. Thus, using Aristotle's own primary example, writers commonly depict courage as a value that lies between an excess of fear (cowardice) and an insufficiency of fear or wariness (foolhardiness). The ethically appropriate thing to do or feel, then, is depicted as maneuvering between these two extremes. This model is then invoked as an informative theoretical guide for thinking journalists.

At first glance, this concept seems to offer compelling clarity and a manageable kind of wisdom that should not take too long to acquire. Disavowals and qualifications notwithstanding, however, the Golden Mean model puts the cart before the horse. At best, it is little more than a half-truth that does considerable disservice because it eclipses a much deeper message about moral worth and moral agency. All of this, moreover, has profound implications for how modern communicators and media practitioners see themselves as moral agents.

Aristotelian Virtue

When modern accounts touch on the classical concept of virtue or moral character, writers invariably invoke Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the midpoint notion is often linked to contemporary journalistic values such as fairness, balance, and moderation in coverage:

> In his great treatise, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, he [Aristotle] presents his concept of the golden mean, which shows great concern for proper balance, for moderation. He proposes that ethical or right behavior is the balance or "mean" between thinking and acting in extreme ways. Moral excellence is a rough mid-point or mean between two kinds of badness—one of excess and the other of defect . . . . Some of the extremes constantly face journalists and need to be reconciled with the golden mean . . . . For Aristotle, such cases would not be either/or situations but rather a search for the proper balance. (Merrill, 1997, pp. 32–33)

The same kinds of attribution are made in other recent works on media ethics, for example, by Limburg (1994) and Day (1991), respectively:

> Seeking the best possible position between two opposing or clashing values, which ethicists call the *golden mean,* was expressed centuries ago by Aristotle . . . . Thus, virtue is the appropriate location between two extremes. Aristotle admitted, however, to some values or virtues that did not lend themselves to compromise. (Limburg, 1994, p. 33)

> Aristotle's moral philosophy is sometimes referred to as *virtue ethics* and is based on the theory of the golden mean. He believed that virtue lay between the extremes of excess and deficiency, or overdoing and "underdoing." For example, courage is the middle ground between cowardice and foolhardiness. Pride is the mean between vanity and humility. In contemporary journalism, such concepts as balance and fairness represent the golden mean. (Day, 1991, p. 49)

Even introductory communication texts introduce undergraduate freshman to this easy-to-picture notion of the Golden Mean:

> The Greek philosopher Aristotle . . . devised the golden mean as a basis for moral decision making . . . . Modern journalistic balance and fairness are founded on this principle . . . . While minute-for-minute equality in broadcasting can be a flawed application of the golden mean, Aristotle's principle is valuable to media people when making moral decisions, as long as they do not abdicate their power of reason to embrace formulaic tit-for-tat measurable equality . . . . It takes a sharp mind to sort through issues of balance and fairness. (Vivian & Peter, 1997, pp. 370–371)

In fairness, we need to add that these and other accounts frequently include important qualifications that help bring the concept of the Golden Mean a little closer to what Aristotle intended (although he never used the expression). Thus, accounts often point out that there are some actions for Aristotle (e.g., adultery, treason, theft) and feelings or inner states (e.g.,

envy, shamelessness) that are always wrong in themselves and admit of no mean or moderation. Also, most authors point out that the mean should not be construed simply as some geometrically equidistant point between extremes, rather, that it may or does vary between individuals.

Even so, in the accounts cited previously and in other widely used texts in which the same kinds of qualifications are made (Christians, Rotzoll, & Fackler, 1995; Gordon, Kittross, & Reuss, 1996; Johannesen, 1996; Patterson & Wilkins, 1997), the image of virtue as an "intermediate point" or "middle ground" between two extremes prevails. Virtue is something we steer towards by avoiding the shoals of excess or defect (Schulman, 1986–1987, p. 28). Limburg (1994) epitomized the worst features of this viewpoint (in the passage quoted previously) when he used the term "compromise" to characterize the function of virtue. In all this, the sense towards which we are repeatedly nudged is not so much that we choose our acts for their own goodness or merit but that we act as we do to skirt the extremes. Virtuous behavior is essentially avoidance.

Logically, readings such as these give a misplaced conceptual priority to the extremes themselves because virtue is heavily determined by its relation to the extremes. It is not that the concepts of median, mean, and the extremes have no place at all in Aristotle's theory. They do, and Aristotle obviously believed they have instructive value. However, Aristotle used a number of other criteria and features such as praise and blame (Monan, 1968, p. 99) or pleasure and pain to explain and round out his conception of moral goodness without necessarily intending to centralize or prioritize any one of them as principal determinants. In the Golden Mean conception, however, the extremes emerge as conceptually prior to the mean because they become the primary (and in the more truncated accounts, the only) determinants of median goodness: One arrives at the midpoint by first perceiving or envisaging extremes, avoiding them and negotiating a passage between them. This, however, reverses what Aristotle had in mind when he talked about virtue in terms of excellence and rightness. The Golden Mean interpretation also encourages us to hold a shriveled version of moral agency and responsibility, one that is very much at odds with what Aristotle had in mind. More often than not, too, current accounts stress the middling aspect of virtuous activity but fail to acknowledge the imprint left by such behavior and its formative influence on subsequent moral experience

In this respect, the scholarship of Gauthier (1963, pp. 64–70) and of Gauthier and Jolif (1958–1959, pp. 142-151) is especially instructive. Gauthier remarked that Aristotle's language of mean or midpoint is really a *metaphor*. The language of the mean (*meson, mesotes, metrion, ison*) was widely used in the mathematical and medical literature of the times whenever writers sought to designate the values of harmony and proportion between competing qualities or extremes. Plato (Aristotle,

1972) appropriated the same kind of language in the *Philebus*, when he specified moral goodness in terms of measure, limit, and harmonization of opposites. Indeed, the widespread use of the notion of the mean in the literature of Aristotle's day generally reflects the ancient Greek metaphysical mindset that saw value in form, limit, and structure but defect in what is indefinite, incomplete, or undefined. The Aristotelian extremes of too much or too little are versions of those sorts of defect and indefiniteness. Cowardice, for example, is a defect because it is a degree of fear on which a limit or constraint has not been placed.

Even so, Aristotle's own understanding and theory went much beyond the lingering quantitative connotations of the mean by underscoring the qualitatively and distinctively ethical features of the virtuous mean. Indeed, the fact that midpoint language was both inadequate and misleading is evident in Aristotle's haste to add that the mean is not some kind of geometrical or linear measure but is always a property or quality of action that must be understood in relation to the individual's informed choice (Gauthier, 1958–1959, 6, 1106a32–1106b7[2]; Aristotle, 1962, p. 42). The virtuous act is a mean or mid-point more by logical consequence than by intent: When we do not hit the intended mark as envisaged in an acute moral judgment, we slip off sideways, as it were, into excess or defect. We should not, however, conclude from Aristotle's metaphorical language that unwanted consequences or extremes are the primary determinant of virtue. On the contrary, the right act—chosen because it is the right thing—is primary and central; the extremes are logically secondary. Aristotle was no relativist on this score: The extremes are measured by the right thing to do, not the other way around.

These points have been stressed repeatedly by Aristotle in Books II and III of the *Nicomachean Ethics* whenever he described the central features of virtue. First, he tells us, virtue consists in doing or experiencing the *right* thing:

> But to experience all this at the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner—that is the median and the best course, the course that is a mark of virtue. (Aristotle, 1956, II, 6; 1106b21-24, Aristotle, 1962, p. 43).

For example, when Aristotle defined courage, probably the most apparent instantiation of virtue, he wrote: "[Courage] chooses and endures what it does because it is noble to do so or base to refuse" (Aristotle, 1962, p. 71). The point about doing the right and noble thing is made repeatedly in Chapters 7 and 8 of Book III (Aristotle, 1962, pp. 70–75). The same point is reinforced through Aristotle's language of duty and obligation (Gauthier, 1963, pp. 66–70). The right thing to do—say, an act of justice—takes on the character of an imperative or duty precisely because of its quality of rightness, and that quality of rightness, for Aristotle, was no less real than

the physical dimensions of the overt behavior itself.

Secondly, the quality of virtuousness is very much a function of wise and correct discernment, and the way in which Aristotle brought this out is to underscore the defining role of "right reason" (the rule of reason or rational principle) and wisdom. Sound ethical perception and reasoning, for Aristotle, were constitutive of the virtuous act:

> We may thus conclude that virtue or excellence is a characteristic involving choice, and that it consists in observing the mean relative to us, *a mean which is defined by a rational principle, such as a man of practical wisdom would use to determine it* [italics added]. (Aristotle, 1962, p. 43)

Throughout Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle repeatedly underscored his point that we become virtuous by performing virtuous acts. We become just by doing just acts. However, that same quality of goodness in the things we do is ultimately grounded in our perception or judgment about what is the right thing to do. The center of gravity in virtuous acts, then, lies within the phenomenological space of intent and choice: It is the informed choice of a morally developed person whose cognitive apparatus and emotional status are in good working order, hence, the importance in Aristotle's system of moral savvy or *phronesis*. Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, an extended disquisition on moral wisdom and intelligence, is very much an elaboration of the point that Aristotle makes in the very first sentence of that chapter: "*and the median is what right reason dictates* [italics added]" (Aristotle, 1962, p. 146). Commenting on this phenomenology of virtue in Aristotle, Monan (1968) observed:

> The mean itself is thus reducible to the moral notion of what one ought, to one's obligation. But what one ought to do is measured in terms of the right rule . . . That norm, the appearance of irreducible value, is given in the process itself of knowing, and hence can be recognized by the *phronimos* [wise person] alone. (pp. 100–101, 152)

It would be unwise to conclude that the goodness of virtue is "subjective." This modern term with its overt contrast to extramental reality would be anachronistic. On the contrary, Aristotle's concept of moral expertise is very much oriented to a realistic discernment of the individual's goods and needs, a discernment grounded in the realities of practice, experience, and in being connected with the wider social order.

In sum, Aristotle constantly situated the virtuous act (or inner emotional state) not as something middling, let alone as a compromise between two competing evils, but rather as reason-based behavior that is right in itself, something we choose for its own sake, something that inherently owns the quality of moral excellence. Although he continued to use the metaphorical language of the median or medium because it is something entailed in acting well, his deeper aim is to situate virtue in

the superlative language of the best (*ariston*) and as its own kind of extreme (*akrotes*): "Hence, in respect of its essence and the definition of its essential nature, virtue is a mean, but in regard to goodness and excellence it is an extreme" (Aristotle, 1956, II, 6, 1107a 7–9; Aristotle, 1962, p. 44; see Gauthier & Jolif, 1958–1959, p. 150).

Structurally, then, the value of the mean derives not from its midpoint distancing but from a wisdom-enhanced judgment and selection. To appreciate the phenomenology of virtue, moreover, also helps us to understand the deep-structured agency and responsibility of the moral actor. In moral agents, agency means more than doing the externally just and courageous thing: It extends no less radically into the work of ethical discernment and judgment. It includes, over a career of moral growth, the development of acuity in our perceptions and a disposition to reason wisely, and it includes, too, our performing well in this or that particular episode of moral reasoning and judgment. It involves, that is, an understanding of moral concepts, our grasp of general moral principles or guidelines, and our perception and reasoning in the here and now about what should be done (*prakton agathon*). This complex skein of cognitive determinants becomes the blueprint that, through our choices, we translate into behavioral and emotional events (i.e., helping a friend; capping one's anger, or moderating one's desire).

This elaborate epistemic enterprise—the moral psychology of choice, as it were—is aided by wisdom (*phronesis*) acquired as the imprint of experience, as well as by the other virtues that aid and enhance the work of reason. It involves, that is, acquired states of emotional maturity and character traits that dispose us towards the virtuous mark in our choices. The more experienced and wise we become, the more sure-footed we become both in our reasoning and in our physical behavior. This is why Aristotle placed such a premium on *phronesis*. This, too, is why the wise person (*phronimos*) within whom there are well–integrated traits of character is the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong:

> In other words, acts are called just and self-controlled when they are the kinds of acts which a just or self-controlled man would perform; but the just and self-controlled man is not he who performs these acts, but he who also performs them in the way just and self-controlled men do. (Aristotle, 1956, II, 4, 1105a29–b32; Aristotle, 1962, p. 39)

The Journalist as Epistemically Responsible

It seems more than likely that the Golden Mean conception is prompted in part by a conflict-driven view of ethical reasoning. In such a conception, the journalist is characteristically pictured as confronted by a quandary, a starkly etched choice in which the possible rights and wrongs themselves are heavily construed (sometimes in quasi-absolutist fashion) as the correct or morally wrong thing to do. The implied

metaimperative underlying all such particular deliberations is to come up with the right answer, the right thing to do. Moreover, although the larger context is overtly ethical, the tenor of these conflict-driven deliberations is heavily rationalistic and almost exclusively epistemic because the elements of moral character and moral development are either ignored or muted. Conflict-driven ethics, typified by textbook case studies, is generally particular in its focus on situations and relatively atomistic in applying its energies to resolving a dilemma. The so-called Golden Mean, structured as it is by dichotomous extremes, appears as a convenient strategy within this answer-driven mindset.

A more authentic rendering of Aristotle's mean, on the other hand, situates right choice as something issuing from a character-grounded vision of what ought be done, a selection that is constituted by the wisdom-enhanced judgment of a morally developed actor. Agency such as this is marked by an organic connectedness between the developed parts of the agent's character and by congruency between those acquired traits and one's behavior. It is also marked by agreement between the agent's feelings and his behavior: The virtuous agent takes pleasure in doing the right thing and dislikes and avoids evil. *Congruent* behavior within a career of character and emotional development, rather than isolated answers to textbook-style conflicts, defines the Aristotelian moral enterprise. Another way to say this is that, for Aristotle, moral experience was typified by increasingly virtuosic mastery rooted in experience, emotional maturity, and grounded vision.

MacIntyre (1981, pp. 172–189) supplied an important insight when he remarked that virtues do not exist as unattached talents, unrelated to our community life and careers. Rather, they are exercised within *practices*, that is, within patterns of our life's work and social behavior, such that they enhance those selfsame practices and their standards. A virtue, he wrote, is a quality that "tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such as goods" (p. 178). MacIntyre's refinements have profound implications for journalism and media ethics in general. When the journalist undertakes ethical choices, those selfsame work practices and standards that define his role as reporter, commentator, or editor are enhanced (or diminished, in the case of unethical choices). Fair, honest, and courageous reporting that reflects complex social realities and also respects the vulnerabilities of others is more likely to result in a story that is superior to any lacking those same qualities. On this, journalism reviews and media texts offer manifold testimony.

Classical virtue ethics, then, are very much a portrait of the successful moral agent, a blueprint, if you will, of the well-managed moral life within one's community and professional life. Unlike conflict-driven ethics, however, it neither promises nor attempts to supply immediate short-term

solutions to ethical dilemmas. Rather, it supplies a long-range theory about what is entailed by a good life in which a person's principled conduct can also or is likely to redound to the enhancement of his professional life and its practices. Such a portrait will not directly indicate to the photojournalist what to do with his camera in the context of schoolyard shootings, and it will not instruct an editor whether, or just where in the newspaper, to place photographs of schoolyard victims and their families. The same is true with accounts of the sexual or criminal indiscretions of political and community leaders. Only a combination of sound ethical judgment and wise editorial vision can do that. An authentic rendering of Aristotle's theory of virtue can supply us with only the broadest of indications about fair play and constraint in, say, broadcasting images of others in positions more vulnerable than our own; this is also true for investigative reporting in general. This is because Aristotle's virtue theory is essentially a theoretical discourse about developing an assortment of ethical skills—second natures, as it were—that can be incorporated into our life. Unlike conflict-driven ethics, it is not a series of a how-to case studies that we then try to apply as a template to new situations and dilemmas.

In this respect, of course, virtue theory is admittedly a much broader and less immediately directive account than midrange strategies such as Rawls's (1971) veil of ignorance. (Rawls's veil of ignorance enjoins agents to picture themselves in an "original position," hypothetically stripped of all social distinctions, in which they must decide how to act and choose without knowing where they will emerge later in terms of social status or position.) On the other hand, virtue theory is certainly no less instructive (and, of course, interpretable) than other major architectonics such as, say, Utilitarianism or Kant's highly formalistic Categorical Imperative. For all that, however, it is still the most enduring theoretical account of moral worth and one that dovetails with so much of what we believe about moral character and responsibility.

Refocusing Aristotle's virtuous mean in terms of doing the right thing or "getting it right" takes us well beyond the flawed paraphrase of Golden Mean. It is also of more than mere antiquarian interest because it has direct and profound implications for media practitioners of all stripes. Whether working to provide an accurate report, fair commentary on the day's events, editing video coverage, or digitally altering a photograph, journalists and editors are ineluctably involved in making choices about what others will see or hear. The moral coloring of these choices may not always be evident: It may be eclipsed by any number of editorial restraints and purposes, or as in the case of privacy violations, say, it may only become apparent in the later accumulation of harmful consequences. Nonetheless, ethical or unethical choices are being made ineluctably because some kinds of ethical standards are being assumed, owned, and applied—or eschewed. The values at stake will also be what

MacIntrye (1981) called "those goods which are internal to practices" (p. 178): such things as the accuracy of a representation, a reporter's degree of truthfulness or fairness, or an editor's courage in choosing to include or drop certain items. When Hertsgaard (1989), for example, characterized the U.S. press in such terms as "an unwitting accomplice of a White House public relations apparatus," as "political eunuchs," or as revealing a "false adversarial style" instead of serving as a "check on abuses of power" (pp. 30–33), he was looking with a conscience into the very soul of journalistic practices and diagnosing ethical absences. When media critic Robert McChesney complained that media conglomerates want "a depoliticized citizenry that has given up belief that things could ever be different" (Conologue, 1997, p. D2), he was depicting a wholesale moral malaise in world news systems. When Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) lamented the progressive demobilization of the U.S. voting public because of negative political advertising, they too were diagnosing a measurable weakening of moral agency and pristine democratic values. When media critic Janet Malcolm (1989) indicted the work of every journalist as "morally indefensible" (p. 38), she castigated the moral shoddiness in all journalists—and we, in turn, should balk at her own universalizing as being an unethical swipe because it is so recklessly and grossly fallacious.

As any of these examples suggests, however, we cannot afford to overlook or deny what Glasser and Ettema (1989) identified as the "intimate . . . connection between the press and the moral order" (p. 18). We also need to recognize that intimate connection is enhanced by the epistemic centrality that the press commands in society. The press is our information apparatus: It observes and records events, metabolizes this data, and then provides (or fails to provide) context, interpretation, and commentary for our world. Certainly, it does something more than simply record what is. On the contrary, it works—and is supposed to work— within the perspective of what we need and ought to know. In analogous fashion and writ large, the media recapitulate the individual's perception and moral judgment about what is being done and what needs to be done. Unavoidably, the journalist plays a constitutive role in that process of moral formulation and expression:

> Journalists themselves must articulate the moral order by showing that transgressions are, in fact, transgressions. While they stop short of making moral judgments, if such judgments are understood to be unequivocal and carefully justified pronouncements of right and wrong (in order to help maintain the necessary fiction of disengagement), they do locate, select, and interpret the standards that can be used by the public to make such judgments. This objectification of moral standards, we conclude, is the special contribution of investigative journalists to the ongoing cultural process by which morality is not only reinforced but also defined and refined through new and ever-changing conditions. (Glasser & Ettema,

1989, pp. 2–3)

There is an immediate and intimate connection between the professional's communicative performance and the moral character of those performances. Even when a high-profile media practitioner such as *Harper's* Lewis Lapham (1989) insouciantly remarks "Nor can I think of any apparent connection between journalism and ethics" (p. 77), it is just not evident that we have anything like a compelling counterargument to Glasser and Ettema (1989). Rather, it seems not unlikely that, somewhere along the line, Lapham neglected to give serious attention to the nature and extent of the moral enterprise or to media ethics, or maybe he was just exposed to bad ethical theory.

The so-called Golden Mean, I submit, is a bad paraphrase and even worse ethical theory. First, it shortchanges the intent and deeper message of Aristotle. Second, it supplies a distorted version of classical virtue theory that it then presents as an essential truth about acting well. Third, it distracts us from recognizing the drama and the fine-grained moral responsibility we need to exercise in our everyday and professional life. Steering between evils we know beforehand is all well and good because, admittedly, that is part of what we do, but that still does not get us to the mother lode of understanding what it means to do the right thing and avoid wrongs and the personal history of moral involvement that this entails. It also does not capture the epistemic responsibility that lies at the very heart of acting well or ill, and the ways in which this responsibility rests on acquired skills of thinking well. What we really need are some 24-karat concepts and well–articulated principles about what counts as moral worth and rightness. Aristotle did supply us with a remarkably integrated theoretical overview of much of this. Seeing just why the Golden Mean falls short may also, at the same time, help us in communication studies to promote a more adequate theoretical framework of what the moral life is and to help others to appreciate the deeper ethical significance of what they choose and do within their media professions.

As communication ethicists, we have an enduring obligation to clear out some of the conceptual underbrush in our own yard. A decade ago, Schulman (1986–1987) wrote: "Media values will remain in a muddle until journalists and scholars combine to define the accepted moral precepts upon which journalistic judgments can be based" (p. 24). To Schulman's "values" and "precepts," we also need to add theoretical adequacy and authenticity.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Fifth National Communication Ethics Conference, Gull Lake, MI, June 1998.
2. To accommodate critical Aristotelian citations, a modified citing system is used in this article. These citations are in the standard, critical-edition page-reference system, analagous to the standardized biblical reference system.

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