

It's The Golden Mean, Not the Golden Median

I used to think that Aristotle's idea of the Golden Mean was bullshit, likely because I encountered the idea from people who weren't Aristotle.

To some of the people who articulated the line of thinking to me, the idea of the Golden Mean was sort of a tepid middle ground between opposing principles.

- Don't be too conservative or too liberal
- Don't be too self-controlled or too free
- Don't be too assertive or too loving

As one journalism course site puts it:

Moral behavior is the mean between two extremes – at one end is excess, at the other deficiency. Find a moderate position between those two extremes, and you will be acting morally.

This is unhelpful at best. Virtuous behavior doesn't exist halfway between the two extremes of **murder vs. non-murder**, or **slavery vs. non-slavery**. In most major decisions, we wouldn't rely on that (likely flawed, but I'm no Aristotle scholar) expression of the Aristotelian rule. The way this is expressed, it's much more of a golden median (a midpoint in a data set) than a mean.

It's much more helpful to understand things in terms of actual arithmetic means. In a set of numbers, it's the most distinct extreme examples that will most shape the (non-weighted) average or mean. You do end up with a number that is average – at or around the median – but the way it's actually arrived at is through a consideration of the whole set and not just the midpoints.

In the same way, we should determine virtuous action and become virtuous persons not by ignoring the extremes (the “golden median approach”) but in incorporating them in a dynamic balance.

Should you be conservative or liberal? The golden medians would tell you to be a moderate, on the fence or in the middle. I would tell you to combine the best of both perspectives in ways no one would expect. Include and transcend the content of liberalism and conservatism.

Should you be self-controlled or free? The golden medians would tell you to give yourself

some choice, but not too much. I would tell you that to be fully self-controlled requires being fully free, and vice versa. You must be both, to the **nth** degree.

Should you be assertive or loving? The golden medians would tell you to be somewhere in between – not too loving but also not too assertive. I would tell you to be as assertive and as loving as you can be, at the same time.

Yes, these are paradoxes. But the dichotomies between the two extremes are generally false. And to accept them as real (and thus of requiring the tepid Golden Median compromise) is a failure.

To accept the two extremes and incorporate them is the real challenge. If you do that successfully, you will transcend both, and you'll find a third way of being that includes both extremes without compromising them. In other words, you'll have found the mean.

Most mystical traditions (and, of course, the Jedi) know that Being is underlaid with a dynamic balance (and battle of opposites). The Taoists represent that state of Being with black and white symbols called Yin and Yang, which are constantly clashing and flowing into each other.

To the Taoists, the ideal is not the gray of fusion or the gray of median. As psychologist and Being-popularizer Jordan Peterson puts it:

For the Taoists, meaning is to be found on the border between the ever-entwined pair [of the Yin and Yang]. To walk that border is to stay on the path of life, the divine Way.

– 12 Rules of Life: An Antidote to Chaos, by Jordan Peterson

I like to think that's what Aristotle meant. After all, being hot *and* cold, is much better than being tepid. I would much rather go all the way into the various ways of being – and find dynamic balance there – than hold back for some imagined static zone of comfort in the middle.