

Textauszug zur Vorbereitung auf den Workshop  
„Achtsamkeit und ethische Urteilsbildung“

**Ethische Prinzipien – Beispiel 1:**

**Aristotle's Mean: "Moral virtue is a middle state determined by practical wisdom."**

From Aristotle's predecessor, Plato, the Greeks inherited the four cardinal virtues: temperance, justice, courage, and wisdom. Of these virtues, temperance was the capstone, the virtue through which the others flowed. When doing his ethics, Aristotle emphasized moderation, or temperance, and sharpened it. Just as intellectual life is reasoning well, moderation is living well. In Aristotle's philosophy, justice is a mean lying between indifference and the selfish indulgence of insisting on personal interests. Courage is a mean between cowardice and temerity. Wisdom is a middle state between stultifying caution and unreflective spontaneity.

Propriety is stressed rather than sheer duty or love. As a biologist, Aristotle notes that both too much food and too little spoil health. Whereas many ethical theories focus on behavior, Aristotle emphasizes character rather than conduct per se. Outer behavior, in his view, reflects our inner disposition. Virtuous persons have developed habits in terms of temperance; in order for them to flourish as human beings, the path they walk is that of equilibrium and harmony.

In Aristotle's own words, the principle is this: "Moral virtue is a fixed quality of the will, consisting essentially in a middle state, as determined by the standard that a person of practical wisdom would apply." Practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is moral discernment, a knowledge of the proper ends of conduct and the means of attaining them. Practical wisdom is distinguished in Aristotle's teaching from both theoretical knowledge and technical skill. Humans who are not fanatics or eccentrics, but of harmonious character, develop their proportion and balance through everyday habit, guided by reason:

Over a career of moral growth ... [we develop] acuity in our perceptions and a disposition to reason wisely .... [We acquire] states of emotional maturity and character traits that dispose us toward the virtuous mark in our choices .... The wise person within whom there are well-integrated traits of character is the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong.

Aristotle challenges those of practical wisdom to apply this discernment "to individual facts" by locating "the mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect." And the basic principle of the middle state applies to several diverse areas. In journalism, the sensational is derided, and the virtues of balance, fairness, and equal time are recognized. When faced with a decision of whether to prohibit all raising of tobacco or to allow unregulated promotion, the Federal Trade Commission operated in a middle state—they banned cigarette ads from television and placed warning labels on cigarette packages. Recommendations about liquor advertising fall between the extremes of not advertising at all and no restrictions on it whatsoever. The legitimate claims of two legally appropriate entities must be negotiated, Aristotle would contend. Regarding violence in cinema, sensationalist violence on the one hand, and bloodless romanticism on the other, are both rejected. Aesthetic realism is the pathway in between. The middle-state mean is the fairest and most reasonable option for honorably resolving disputes between labor and management, between school board and striking teachers, and between Palestinian and Israeli politicians. Generally speaking, in extremely complicated situations with layers of ambiguity and uncertainty, Aristotle's principle has the most intelligent appeal. [...]

However, some issues are not amenable to a center. A balanced diet positioned between famine and gluttony is undoubtedly wise, but occasionally our bodies require drastic surgery also. There were slaves in Greece; Aristotle opted for treating them well and fairly but not for the radical change of releasing

them altogether. In considering action regarding a hostile editor, a reporter cannot say: "If one extreme is to murder him, I will merely pummel him senseless in a back alley." In the same way, bank robbers cannot justify themselves by operating at night so that customers will not be hurt and by taking only \$10,000 instead of \$100,000.

As the *Nicomachean Ethics* makes clear, not every action or every emotion admits of a middle state. The very names of some of them suggest wickedness. For instance, spite, shamelessness, envy, and, among actions, adultery, theft, and murder; all these and similar emotions and actions are blamed as being intrinsically wicked and not merely when practiced to excess or insufficiently. Consequently, it is not possible ever to feel or commit them rightly; they are always wrong. Extreme oppression demands extreme resistance. Fascism needs opposition. Suicide bombing requires protest.

It bears repeating that Aristotle was not advocating a bland, weak-minded consensus or the proverbial middle-of-the-road compromise. The mean is not isolated action reduced to political wheeling-and-dealing or bureaucratic fixing. We say of an artistic masterpiece, "Nothing can be added or subtracted without spoiling it." This is Aristotle's intent with the middle state as well. Although the word mean has a mathematical flavor and a sense of average, a precise equal distance from two extremes is not intended. Aristotle speaks of the "mean relative to us," that is, to the individual's status, particular situation, and strong and weak points. Thus, if we are generally prone to one extreme, we ought to lean toward another this time. Affirmative-action programs can be justified as appropriate in that they help correct a prior imbalance in hiring. The mean is not only the right quantity, but also, as Aristotle puts it, "the middle course occurs at the right time, toward the right people, for the right motives, and in the right manner." This is the best course and is the mark of goodness. The distance depends on the nature of the agents as determined by the weight of the moral case before them. Consider the Greek love of aesthetic proportion in sculpture. The mean in throwing a javelin is four-fifths of the distance to the end, and in hammering a nail, nine-tenths from the end.