



The place of Aristotle's golden mean in the moral education of a learner

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Abstract

This article examines the critical role of Aristotle's concept of the Golden Mean in the moral education of learners. Grounded in Aristotelian virtue ethics, the Golden Mean refers to the desirable middle ground between two extremes—deficiency and excess—in human behavior, thought, and action. Aristotle posited that virtues are not innate but are developed through habituation, practical reasoning, and sustained moral practice (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*). Moral education, broadly understood, refers to the processes through which individuals acquire moral virtues, dispositions, and capacities for ethical judgment. While traditional moral education often emphasizes rule-based learning, the Aristotelian approach emphasizes character formation, habituation of virtuous acts, and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). This article synthesizes philosophical literature and educational theory to argue that the Golden Mean provides a flexible, context-sensitive framework that supports the development of balanced moral judgment in learners. Such a framework advances moral education beyond rote moral instruction toward the cultivation of stable character, reasoned choice, and human flourishing. The article concludes with implications for contemporary moral education frameworks in formal school settings.

Keywords: Aristotle, golden mean, moral education, virtue ethics, character formation

Introduction

Moral education has been central to philosophical and pedagogical discourse for centuries. It concerns how individuals—beginning in early childhood and continuing throughout life—acquire capacities for moral judgment, virtuous conduct, and ethical reasoning. Aristotle's ethical system, articulated in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, remains one of the foundational philosophical frameworks for understanding moral development. At its core lies the concept of the Golden Mean (*mesotēs*), the principle that moral virtues are balanced states between extremes of excess and deficiency (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*).

In educational contexts, moral education involves both cognitive and character dimensions: learners must understand ethical principles and develop the dispositions necessary to embody those principles in real-world contexts. Contemporary educational theorists emphasize that moral education is not limited to teaching students what is right but includes enabling them to become moral agents through habitual virtuous action and practical judgment (Kuzior & Marszałek-Kotzur, 2022).

This article situates Aristotle's Golden Mean within theoretical and practical discussions of moral education. It outlines the Golden Mean as a cornerstone of Aristotelian virtue ethics, examines modern conceptions of moral education, and explores how an Aristotelian framework can enrich learners' moral formation. The premise is that moral education benefits from an approach that emphasizes balanced character development and contextual discernment of moral action—hallmarks of Aristotle's ethical philosophy.

Aristotle's Golden Mean

Aristotle's ethical philosophy is one of the earliest systematic approaches to moral reasoning in Western thought. It stands in contrast to deontological ethics (which emphasizes duty) and consequentialism (which reflects outcomes) by foregrounding virtue as the principal measure

of moral worth. Aristotle's idea of the golden mean posits that virtue is the most desirable middle ground between two extremes, vices, of excess and deficiency, and that it requires practical wisdom to find it in specific situations. Examples of such are courage as the mean between recklessness and cowardice, or generosity as the mean between extravagance and stinginess. The essence of the golden mean theory is to promote balance and excellence in life (Zhou 2021) [10]. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle posits that the highest human good (*eudaimonia*)—often translated as flourishing or well-being—is attained through the exercise of virtue over a complete life. Virtue (*aretē*) for Aristotle is a disposition to behave in ways that align with rational excellence—actions that realize human potential as a rational and social being (Qyvind 2015) [7].

A defining feature of Aristotle's virtue ethics is the Golden Mean doctrine: each moral virtue lies between two vices—one of excess and one of deficiency. For example, courage is the mean between recklessness (excess) and cowardice (deficiency); generosity is the balance between prodigality and stinginess (see GreekHistoryHub overview). The “mean” is not an abstract arithmetic midpoint but a contextual and situationally determined position that requires practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to discern appropriately (Philosophy Institute summaries).

Importantly, Aristotle's doctrine does not deliver rigid moral rules; rather, it delineates a structure of moral judgment in which individuals learn to moderate impulses and emotions through rational deliberation and repeated action. Virtue is formed through habituation: we become brave by repeatedly acting bravely, temperate by acting temperately, and just by acting justly. Aristotle himself asserts that moral virtue arises from practice and habit—not merely from intellectual instruction—underscoring the experiential dimension of moral formation.

In Aristotle's view, moral virtue is inherently relational and context-sensitive. What constitutes a balanced action for one individual may differ for another, depending on personal

circumstances and situational nuance (GreekHistoryHub virtue ethics overview). This situational relativity aligns Aristotle with educational approaches that recognize learners' diverse backgrounds and developmental trajectories.

Conceptualizing Moral Education

Moral education is also known as value education as it involves the teaching of ethics, morals and essential ideals such as honesty, empathy, and responsibility to help individuals distinguish right from wrong, develop positive attitudes, and contribute to society. Moral education has been integrated into the curricula of many schools and colleges with the aim to fostering character, personal growth and social well-being. Binny (2021) ^[3] defines moral education as the teaching and learning about the ideals that a society thinks is important. The aim is for learners not only to understand the values, but also to reflect them in their attitudes and behaviour and contribute to society through good citizenship and ethics.

As Barry Chazan (2022) ^[2] rightly observed, moral education is one of the most significant arenas of preoccupation of analytic educational philosophy as well as of daily educational practice, and has since then witnessed the development of significant theories of moral education in 20th century philosophy of education. The above observation is echoed in the views of Cheng, Wang and Wang (2021) ^[4]. According to these scholars, moral education comprises of all activities that purposefully and systematically exert influence on members of society in terms of politics, ideology and morality.

Moral education generally refers to the processes by which individuals acquire moral knowledge, develop character, and learn to apply ethical reasoning in life. It encompasses formal instructional methods, informal social learning, community norms, and internalized dispositions that guide ethical conduct. As educational research shows, moral education extends beyond cognitive understanding of ethical principles to include affective and behavioral dimensions—habit formation, empathy, and social responsibility.

Scholars note that moral education is most effective when it incorporates practice, reflection, and contextual judgment. Aristotle's model anticipates this orientation by suggesting that moral virtues become stable dispositions only through repeated engagement with virtuous action. Contemporary educational theorists reinforce this view, advocating pedagogical strategies that move students from theoretical awareness of moral principles to their embodied ethical practice in real-world settings.

Traditional moral education models often rely on rule-based frameworks—ethical codes, moral maxims, or prescriptive curricula. However, such approaches have limitations: they can fail to engage learners' moral agency, situational understanding, and emotional development. By contrast, virtue-centered approaches (including Aristotelian ethics) emphasize the development of moral character, with practical wisdom as the guiding faculty that enables learners to interpret and navigate moral complexity.

Several researchers argue that moral education must attend both to habituation and to discernment. Habituation involves repeated moral behaviors—forming stable dispositions—and discernment involves reasoning about ethical choices in varying contexts. Aristotle's Gold Mean integrates these aspects: habitual practice of virtuous acts within specific

situations gradually develops the learner's capacity for phronesis, or practical wisdom, which allows for sound moral judgment across diverse circumstances.

Although modern psychology sometimes challenges the primacy of character traits as stable predictors of behavior (e.g., situationist critiques), virtue ethics remains influential in moral education research precisely because it accounts for the interplay between reason, emotion, and social context. Educational curricula that draw on virtue ethics emphasize reflective practice, role modeling, community engagement, and ethical discourse—elements consistent with Aristotle's understanding of moral development.

Aristotle's Golden Mean and the Moral Education of a Learner

The integration of Aristotle's Golden Mean into moral education places the learner at the center of ethical development. In this framework, learners are not passive recipients of moral knowledge; rather, moral education is an active, reflective, and habitual process in which the learner gradually internalizes virtuous dispositions. This is because virtue is seen as a practical habit in Aristotle's ethical system. Aristotle's insistence that moral virtues arise through habituation aligns with contemporary theories asserting that character development requires iterative engagement with moral practice. Moral education, in this sense, involves structured opportunities for learners to engage in virtuous actions and reflect on them. For example, classroom activities that promote cooperative problem-solving, community service, or deliberative dialogue provide contexts in which learners can practice virtues such as fairness, courage, and temperance.

Habituation, in Aristotle's view, transforms moral knowledge into stable character traits. Learners learn to do ethically—not merely to know what is right. As Aristotle reminds us, one does not become just by hearing about justice but by doing just acts. Thus, moral education that emphasizes repeated virtuous action supports the formation of balanced character—a key objective of Aristotelian moral pedagogy.

A critical component of Aristotle's Golden Mean is practical wisdom (phronesis), the intellectual virtue that enables an agent to determine the appropriate mean in particular circumstances. Practical wisdom is not merely theoretical knowledge but the capacity to deliberate well about what is good and expedient in human affairs. In educational settings, this translates into teaching learners to engage in moral deliberation, weighing competing values, understanding context, and making morally informed choices. Thus, Learners develop phronesis by participating in ethical dialogues, encountering moral dilemmas, and receiving supportive feedback from teachers and peers. Such experiences cultivate reflective judgment and flexibility, enabling learners to discern balanced responses rather than rigidly apply abstract rules. The cultivation of practical wisdom is, therefore, a central aim of moral education informed by Aristotelian ethics.

It is worthy of note t this point that one of the strengths of applying the Golden Mean to moral education is its emphasis on context. Aristotle's notion of the mean is not universal or formulaic; it is relative to the individual and situation. What counts as virtuous moderation in one context may differ in another, requiring learners to understand nuance and exercise judgment. This rejects one-size-fits-all

moral prescriptions and encourages learners to become ethically adept across varied real-world situations. Indeed, contextualized moral learning encourages learners to consider not only abstract principles but the relational and situational dimensions of ethical action. In doing so, moral education becomes less about compliance and more about developing the internal capacity to judiciously navigate complex life scenarios.

Again, Aristotle's concept of virtue is ultimately tied to human flourishing (eudaimonia). Moral education, therefore, is not merely about correcting behavior or instilling compliance; it is about fostering the holistic development of learners so they can live fulfilling, socially responsible lives. By engaging with the Golden Mean, learners learn to balance personal interests with social responsibilities, emotional regulation with rational deliberation, and self-expression with communal harmony. In this sense, moral education informed by Aristotle's Golden Mean advances both individual and collective well-being. It encourages learners to reflect on the moral significance of their actions and to internalize virtues that contribute to personal excellence and social cohesion.

Conclusion

Aristotle's Golden Mean offers a robust, flexible, and context-sensitive framework for moral education. It emphasizes the cultivation of virtuous dispositions through habituation, practical wisdom (phronesis), and reflective judgment. In contrast to prescriptive moral instruction, an Aristotelian approach situates the learner as an active agent in moral formation, capable of discerning balanced courses of action across diverse contexts. Moral education, undergirded by Aristotelian virtue ethics, thus transcends rote learning of ethical rules and fosters holistic character development. It prepares learners not only to understand what constitutes virtue but to live it through repeated ethical practice and reflective engagement with moral complexity. As such, the Golden Mean remains a relevant and powerful guiding principle for contemporary educators seeking to cultivate ethically mature, balanced, and flourishing learners.

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