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## COMPARISON OF THE “GOLDEN MEAN” IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ARISTOTLE AND CONFUCIUS

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was a Greek philosopher and a leading philosophical thinker of the classical period in ancient Greece whose philosophical ideas have had a profound influence on almost all forms of theoretical systems of knowledge in the West, and which remain the subject of contemporary philosophical discussion to this day [Wikipedia 2022a]. Confucius (551-479 BCE) was a Chinese philosopher, poet, and statesman of the Spring and Autumn Period, traditionally considered the paragon of Chinese sages, whose teachings and philosophy underpin East Asian culture and society and remain influential in China and East Asia today [Wikipedia 2022b; You, Rud, Hu 2018]. The ethics of Aristotle and Confucius both had the idea of the “golden mean”, and they both considered the “golden mean” (“middle way”) as a very important virtue. It is unusual that two philosophers, who did not intersect at all in the East and the West of the world, produced similar philosophical theories in almost the same period. Aristotle’s and Confucius’ doctrine of the middle ground is a product of history, which has profoundly influenced traditional culture and philosophical thinking in both China and the West, and has become a principle of conduct and a guide for behavior respected by many thinkers. This paper attempts to explore the similarities and differences between the “golden mean” of Aristotle and Confucius from a comparative perspective, and to grasp the meaning of “golden mean” through the comparison of the two. This is not only a reconceptualization of the history of Chinese and Western philosophical thought and a re-examination of traditional Chinese culture, but also a new philosophical inspiration for people in modern life.

**Keywords:** “golden mean”, Aristotle, Confucius, virtue

### 1. INSTRUCTION

Aristotle’s idea of the middle and Confucius’ “golden mean” have had a profound influence on China and the West as important spirits of traditional morality

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in ancient Greece and China. For example, they both disapproved of recklessness and cowardice, but favored the bravery in the middle. They show a high degree of consistency in their rational understanding, moral pursuit, ideological approaches and views. Their differences are mainly reflected in the fact that Aristotle's middle thought emphasizes empirical moralism and the pursuit of freedom and justice, while Confucius' middle thought focuses on a priori moralism and the pursuit of morality and harmony. This paper explores the intrinsic value of Chinese and Western middle-aged thought through a comparative study, which is not only a part of philosophical exploration, but also a theoretical reference for the sustainable development and progress of contemporary society.

## 2. "GOLDEN MEAN"

"The golden mean or golden middle way is the desirable middle between two extremes, one of excess and the other of deficiency. It appeared in Greek thought at least as early as the Delphic maxim *nothing in excess* and emphasized in later Aristotelian philosophy" [Wikipedia 2022c].

Socrates teaches that a man must know "how to choose the mean and avoid the extremes on either side, as far as possible" [New World Encyclopedia 2022a].

Confucius in *The Analects*, written through the Warring States period of Ancient China (c. 479 BC – 221 BC), taught excess is similar to deficiency. A way of living in the mean is the way of "Zhongyong" ("golden mean") [Littlejohn 2010].

## 3. THE "GOLDEN MEAN" OF CONFUCIUS

The "golden mean" is one of the important categories of pre-Qin Confucianism, an important idea that Confucius and Confucianism have been regarded as the essence of Confucianism and studied by successive generations of thinkers during the two thousand years of feudal dynasties. It is a kind of virtue, which belongs to the category of evaluation of moral behavior and is regarded as the highest virtue. It advocates that a gentleman should follow the "golden mean" to cultivate his body and realize the ideal of unifying the family, ruling the country and pacifying the world, and ultimately hoping for the unity of heaven and man and the commonwealth.

The phrase the "golden mean" appears in the Analects of Confucius, "Zi said: The middle way is virtue, and it is the best!".

"Zhong" means "in the center", "in the middle of the line", "in the virtue", no excess, no deficiency, harmony. "Yong is the usual; the middle is in fact a compromise and the usual thing". It is clear from the Analects that Confucius regarded the "golden mean" as the highest virtue and combined it with benevolence and

propriety. On the one hand, he regarded ritual as “middle”, and the execution of the middle and the use of the middle are dependent on ritual, and the execution of the middle means the execution of ritual. On the other hand, the concept of the middle is closely related to “ren”, and the relationship between “ren” and “ritual” is balanced by “the middle”, and it is proposed that to restrain oneself and restore ritual is ren, and the world will return to ren. The “return of the world to benevolence” implies the ideal of achieving the great governance of the world by the middle.

The middle is a kind of compromise and reconciliation, that is, not to be partial to either side of the opposing sides, so that the two sides remain balanced, and is therefore understood as the middle thought. For virtue, it is also regarded as the middle line, which means that human temperament, style and virtue are not biased to one side, and the two opposing sides hold each other in check and complement each other. Confucius revealed this state in the process of development, which is relative and temporary, and called it “the middle”. Confucius emphasized that the faster you go, the better.

The starting point and ultimate destination of Confucius’ middle-of-the-road thought is to create a harmonious society and world by taking the large system of everything based on human society and even the cosmic world as the base of development. The essence of the Middle Way is to think in terms of society, to take a holistic and comprehensive approach, which includes the moral subject itself.

The “golden mean” of Confucius’ thinking is the highest state of morality. It is the summation of the successful life experience of traditional society, especially that of the sages and gentlemen, and here the role of the exemplary ruler of a country is emphasized.

#### 4. THE “GOLDEN MEAN” OF ARISTOTLE

Aristotle pointed out that “the middle between two extremes” is the middle, and one of the core concepts of his Ethics is “virtue is the middle, as the highest good and the extreme beauty”. It has the following meanings.

- There should be limits to the passions and unlimited desires of life.
- The balance and harmonious proportions and relations formed by being in the middle.
- Moderation and appropriateness.
- The meaning of justice and fairness in the conflict of interests.

In Aristotle’s view, moral behavior is the conscious activity of achieving moral purpose. The moral goal, which is the purpose of the act, but how to achieve this goal is a matter of practical wisdom.

He argues that the distinctive features of practical wisdom are thought and choice. To think is to weigh the pros and cons to find the best means to achieve the set purpose, and to choose is the result of thinking, that is, to choose the best means

through thinking. The object of thought and choice is desirable, but the process is rational. Aristotle summarized this rational process of choice as “the middle”.

The “middle” is the “moderate” in relation to human behavior and emotions, and the best life is a moderate life. That is to say, to live according to the middle way. A moderate life requires the use of reason to manage one’s desires. Excess and deficiency are the characteristics of abomination; moderation is the characteristic of virtue. For example, speaking of feelings, Aristotle says, “Only the feelings that occur at the right time, to the right things, to the right people, under the right motives, and in the right way, are the moderate and best feelings, and such feelings are virtues” [Thomson 1955]. Aristotle’s idea of moderation and moral theory can be well understood in the following cases.

From Aristotle’s theory of virtue in fig. 1, we can see that Aristotle’s “middle” is the midpoint of a line, the impartiality in a finite field of values, e.g., bravery is the middle way between cowardice and recklessness, levity is the middle way between licentiousness and indecency, non-obsequiousness is the middle way between vanity and lowliness, wit is the middle way between comic and vulgarity, etc. Aristotle’s theory of virtue suggests that virtue is a skill, a way of life, this is something that can only really be learned through experience; virtue is a kind of knowledge, known as practical wisdom [Cooke, Carr 2014].

Aristotle’s idea of the middle is derived from the ethics of biology, psychology and philosophy, and statutes that the virtue of man is higher than the instinctive animal nature and different from the divine nature of perfection, the highest goodness in his middle thought is the fit between reason and desire.

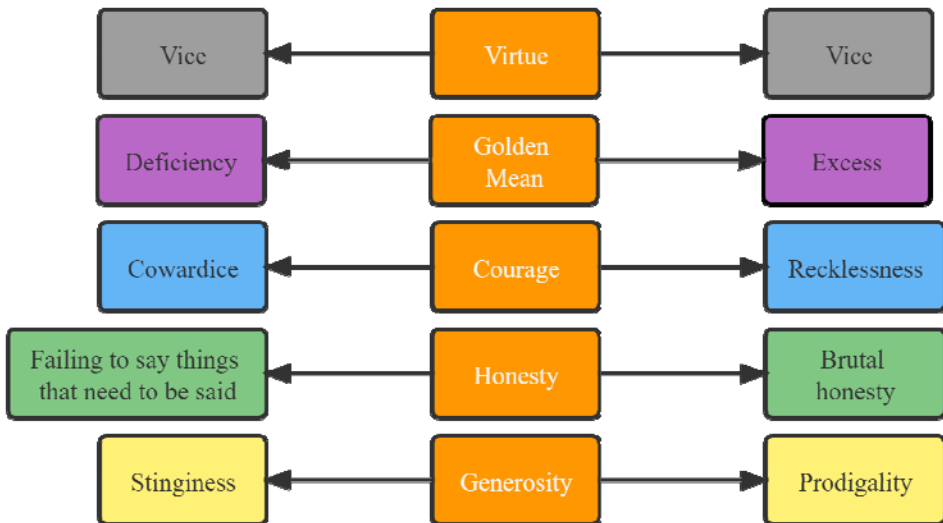


Fig. 1. Aristotle virtue theory [Curzer 2012]

- Unity of virtue and law, the “golden mean” implies the unity of virtue and norm.
- In democratic politics, the “golden mean” presupposes that the rule of the many is better than the rule of the individual.

## 5. THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Confucius and Aristotle lived in two different civilizations in the East and the West respectively. On the one hand, their similar backgrounds and lifestyles made them share the same or similar ideas, and the idea of the middle way is one of them; on the other hand, the differences in the lifestyles of the two peoples and their different life situations made their ideas of the middle way obviously different. Although the middle way is praised by both Aristotle and Confucius, the comparison shows that there are both similarities and differences between their ideas.

**The main similarities are as follows:**

**1. Both see the “golden mean” as the highest virtue; virtue theory is a common concern of Confucius and Aristotle.**

Confucius believed that the ultimate pursuit of life lies in the inner realization of the Way through the practice of life, and that virtue is part of morality. He considered “ritual” as a tool and means to achieve “virtue” and advocated the three virtues of “virtue,” “benevolence,” and “courage” and that a gentleman should live with virtue.

The core of Aristotle’s ethics is what virtues one needs and how to acquire them. According to Aristotle, the highest good and virtue is the middle way, the intermediate state of no-fault and no-failure in the purpose of human behavior and action. This middle way of behavior allows one to be successful and praised, while excess and deficiency are mistakes. Excess and deficiency are the characteristics of vice, while the middle way is the characteristic of virtue. Virtue is the middle way, which is the highest good and extreme right.

**2. The subject points to the same supreme virtue and emphasizes the subjectivity of virtue.**

Both believe that human beings have free will and the ability to choose and should be responsible for their own moral actions. Both realize that the “golden mean” is a unity of moral evaluation and moral behavior of the moral subject, and consider the “golden mean” as a kind of relative middle way [Yu 1998].

**3. The “golden mean” is a relative middle way, not a rigid middle way.**

Virtue as the middle is the moderate. The “golden mean” is not a way of going to extremes, but a way that is the best choice in a given situation. The “golden mean” is good, and evil are two extremes; a compromise evil is not good, nor is it middle.

**The different aspects are the following:**

**1. Differences in political practice: “rule of law” and “rule of morality”.**

Aristotle’s “golden mean” is reflected in the political expression of justice, relying on the law to seek social justice and a democratic society based on the rule of law.

Confucius believed that “moral rule” is based on “virtue” and “propriety”, and that “moral government” is the only way to achieve long-term social security.

**2. The difference between empirical moralism and a priori humanism.**

Aristotle’s “golden mean” is a customary morality, that is, it comes from customs and habits, but not from natural nature, so his “golden mean” is formed by nature. Therefore, in order to realize the supreme goodness of good virtue and the “golden mean”, people must pay attention to the role of habits and accumulate them in their daily behavior; Aristotle’s “golden mean” points out that innate nature and acquired habit are two important bases for the formation of virtue, the former provides a possibility for virtue, while the latter makes this possibility become a display. In short, “morality precedes nature and is formed by habit”.

Confucius, on the other hand, believed that the “golden mean”, as a kind of supreme virtue, is actually the prevalence and realization of “ren” in daily life, which is inherent in human beings and is inherent in them.

**3. Social orientation and individual orientation.**

Confucius’ “golden mean” is a conscious expression of benefiting others, not for oneself but for fulfilling one’s duties and obligations to society and realizing the morality of state and social life, while Aristotle’s “golden mean” is the freedom of individual will, pursuing a high degree of human autonomy and doing everything voluntarily.

According to Aristotle, the “golden mean” is a voluntary virtue, and only the voluntary behavior of the actor can be called a virtue, emphasizing the subjective initiative of freedom of will in the process of achieving the “golden mean”.

## 6. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Confucius’ middle ground and Aristotle’s middle ground are in different contexts and have differences, but they also have connections. The similarities and differences between them are mainly due to the general laws of human practice and development, as well as the natural environment, social and economic structures in which they live.

The Confucian Way of the “golden mean” of “too much is too little” and the Aristotelian Way of “moderation” both reflect the common understanding of the same period of thinkers on the dialectical development of things, which in ethics is reflected in the highest goodness of “virtue” and the avoidance of extremes.

By comparing the “golden mean” that emerged in the East and the West more than two thousand years ago, we can see that today’s social situation is the result of

the development of different social backgrounds and humanistic histories in the long history. As a modern person, when faced with good and evil, good and bad, gain and loss, how to recognize and promote the harmony of virtue and norms, so that society and humanity can progress in its balanced development process and realize virtue.

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## PORÓWNANIE „ZŁOTEGO ŚRODKA” W FILOZOFII ARYSTOTELESA I KONFUCJUSZA

### Streszczenie

Arystoteles (384-322 p.n.e.) był greckim filozofem i wiodącym myślicielem, którego koncepcje filozoficzne wywarły znaczący wpływ na niemal wszystkie formy systemów teoretycznych wiedzy na Zachodzie i pozostają przedmiotem współczesnych filozoficznych dyskusji do dziś [Wikipedia 2022a]. Konfucjusz (551-479 p.n.e.) był chińskim filozofem, poetą i politykiem Okresu Wiosen i Jesieni, tradycyjnie uznawanym za ideał chińskiego mędrca, którego nauczanie i filozofia leżą u podstaw kultury i społeczeństwa Azji Wschodniej oraz pozostają wpływowe w Chinach i Azji Wschodniej do dziś [Wikipedia 2022b; You, Rud, Hu 2018]. W etyce zarówno Arystotelesa, jak i Konfucjusza pojawiła się koncepcja „złotego środka” („złotego środka drogi”), który uznano za bardzo istotną cnotę. To niezwykle, że dwaj filozofowie, którzy nie mieli żadnej styczności na Wschodzie i Zachodzie, opracowali podobne teorie w niemal tym samym okresie. Doktryny Arystotelesa i Konfucjusza to wytwory historii, która istotnie wpłynęła na kulturę tradycyjną i myślenie filozoficzne zarówno w Chinach, jak i na Zachodzie i stała się zasadą postępowania oraz

wytyczną zachowania poważaną przez wielu myślicieli. Niniejsza publikacja próbuje eksplorować podobieństwa i różnice między „złotym środkiem” Arystotelesa i Konfucjusza z perspektywy porównawczej oraz uchwycić jego znaczenie przez porównanie obu teorii. Jest to nie tylko rekonceptualizacja chińskiej i zachodniej historii myśli filozoficznej, rewizja tradycyjnej kultury chińskiej, lecz także nowa inspiracja filozoficzna dla współcześnie żyjących.

**Słowa kluczowe:** „złoty środek”, Arystoteles, Konfucjusz, cnota