

## Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6.8-14 Comments on Moderation in All Things

[The mathematical term "mean" used by Aristotle in several places to reflect *moderation* or *middle of the road* has been changed to help the text read more easily.  
– Dr. Baker]

[8] In the same way then an expert in any art avoids excess and deficiency, and seeks and adopts the *mean* — the middle of the road that is not of the thing but relative to us. [9] If therefore the way in which every art or science performs its work well is by looking to **moderation** and applying that as a standard to its productions (hence the common remark about a perfect work of art, that you could not take from it nor add to it — meaning that **excess and deficiency destroy perfection**, while adherence to **moderation** preserves it) — if then, as we say, good craftsmen look to the **moderation** as they work, and if virtue, like nature, is more accurate and better than any form of art, it will follow that virtue has the quality of hitting the *mean*.

[This seems to be the seedbed for Stoicism, which followed Aristotle under another teacher named Zeno around 300BCE.

- "Oh, he is very stoic." What does that usually mean?

- Showing too much emotion is bad; not showing any emotion is bad.

- What else does this remind you of?

Here are a few things to think about:

1. In his treatise on *Meteorology* II.3, Aristotle briefly mentions the Dead Sea: ["...there is a lake in Palestine, such that if you bind a man or beast and throw it in it floats and does not sink..."]

2. There are several proverbs that sound similar to what we are reading here:

*If you find honey, eat just enough - too much of it, and you will vomit.* 25:17

*A man without self-control is like a city whose walls are broken down.* 25:28

*Do not hang around with drunkards or gluttons, for they will come to poverty* 23:20

*Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man...* 21:17

Do any of you disagree with this view of moderation?  
- Is moderation a good thing?

[10] I refer to moral virtue, for this is concerned with emotions and actions, in which one can have excess or deficiency or moderation.

For example, one can be frightened or bold, feel desire or anger or pity, and experience pleasure and pain in general, either too much or too little, and in both cases wrongly;

[11] whereas to feel these feelings at the right time, on the right occasion, towards the right people, for the right purpose and in the right manner, is to feel the best amount of them, which is the *mean* amount—and the best amount is of course the mark of virtue. [12] And similarly there can be excess, deficiency, and the due mean in actions. Now feelings and actions are the objects with which virtue is concerned;

[The philosophical life is not just thinking about things that are beyond our reach – for almost all philosophers, virtue is the goal.

The prisoner who has been released from the dark cave...and seen the outside world – what does Plato say is his/her mission?]

and in feelings and actions excess and deficiency are errors, while the moderate amount is praised, and constitutes success; and to be praised and to be successful are both marks of virtue. [13] Virtue, therefore is a moderate state in the sense that it is able to hit the *mean*. [14] Again, error is multiform (for evil is a form of the unlimited, as in the old Pythagorean imagery, and good of the limited), whereas success is possible in one way only (which is why it is easy to fail and difficult to succeed –easy to miss the target and difficult to hit it); so this is another reason why excess and deficiency are a mark of vice, and observance of the *mean* a mark of virtue:

Goodness is simple, badness manifold [obvious and of various kinds].

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0054%3Abook%3D2%3Achapter%3D6>