Equalizing Extremes

to

Master the Mean

(by Chelsea Barlow)

Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle articulated the idea of an intermediate position between extremes in his work "The Doctrine of the Mean" (Pakaluk 108). It provides a structure to guide people towards a general point of equilibrium between two opposing sides (109). In her novel, *The Golden Mean*, Annabel Lyon portrays the life and thought processes of Aristotle in the context of extremes, and illustrates the philosopher's subsequent struggle to find balance at the personal and political levels. Through the exploration of aspects that are ‘"opposing extremes, but also versions of the same form'" (Lyon 197), it is shown that although extremes are inevitable, identifying a middle ground is possible because each extreme contains a component of the other. Although the elements of mentor versus student, intellect as opposed to emotion, and war against reconciliation represent polar opposites in the novel, hybridity is achieved when commonalities of the extremes fuse to form a teacher-student relationship focussed on mutual learning, psychological stability as a median between intelligence and passion, and positive peace as a way to end and prevent violence. The "Doctrine of the Mean" and hybrids of polarities apply to contemporary world issues, including the current crisis in Libya. Due to its complexity and universality, the mean can traverse international boundaries and have relevance in all aspects of life.

Teaching and learning begin as extremes, but through continual interpersonal relations, they converge to create a hybrid of mutual learning. Polarity exists between Aristotle and Alexander in the novel. The characters exemplify the stereotypical division of two common societal roles: mentor and student. As a teacher, the philosopher objectively imparts his knowledge onto the naive adolescent. For example, Aristotle teaches Alexander the anatomy of a chameleon when the two first meet (Lyon 6). As the discussion progresses into a lesson, Alexander becomes intrigued by the new information (8). The mentor's role is fulfilled because the student's interest is engaged, and his knowledge of the world is expanded (Sherwin 455). Aristotle further represents an extreme in the teacher-student relationship by viewing Alexander as a "human project . . . . [and] a test" (Lyon 88). This idea is in accordance with Jukes, McCain, and Crockett, who state that instructors concentrate on problems as a basis for the learning relationship (20). As well, Aristotle believes his purpose is to broaden Alexander's intellectual world by ‘"[making] him think in ways others don't'" (Lyon 99). By fulfilling his role, Aristotle not only teaches his student relevant skills, knowledge, and attitudes, but he also "addresses the individual abilities and interests" of his student to prepare Alexander for his future as a ruler (Jukes 16). On the opposite extreme, Alexander as the student satisfies the expectation that he will listen to his teacher's instruction without interruption (19). Aristotle and Alexander's educational relationship illustrates the impossibility to avoid extremes at the personal level.

Although the roles of teacher and student are separated by a power division in which Aristotle possesses the most authority, balance is achievable because both he and Alexander have the capacity to learn from one another. Hybridity of polar roles occurs when the mentor "[transitions] from teaching students to learning with students" (Jukes 18). For instance, before leaving for war, Alexander invites Aristotle to join the Macedonian expedition against Athens (Lyon 196). He intends to expand Aristotle's knowledge by introducing his mentor to new experiences. Equalization between mentor and student is further achieved when Alexander expands on Aristotle's notion of the mean. He states people are ‘"opposing extremes, but also versions of the same form,'" a concept that intrigues and perplexes Aristotle (197). With his new perspective, Aristotle compares and contrasts the people in his life, including his previous mentor, Illaeus, and his own father (197). In both instances, mentor and student are converging as peers. By "[letting] go of old ways of seeing" (Sherwin 455), Aristotle and Alexander learn from one another. New perspectives materialize and prejudices are reconsidered as unfamiliar ideas are introduced. Even though the division of power cannot be avoided, a middle ground can be attained when both the mentor and the student engage in mutual learning.

Intelligence and emotion are viewed as the objective and subjective components of the mind. Categorizing these aspects as distinct entities of the human mind is impossible because all thought processes are interconnected. Aristotle's struggle to conquer the psychological extremes of intellect and emotions conveys this interrelationship. Throughout his life, he suffered from bipolar disorder, a mood disorder characterized by extremely euphoric, manic episodes and periods of depression (Weiten 592). Fatigue, tension headaches, inability to focus, a short temper, temporary memory loss, and dullness are symptoms of Aristotle's depression (Lyon 155). During his manic episodes, Aristotle experiences excessive bursts of energy, exaggerated productivity, and vibrancy of color (156). The philosopher's mind, as recreated by Lyon, illustrates psychological extremes and the necessity of a balance to maintain mental stability. Intellect is the opposing extreme to emotion, and from the description of his emotional instability, it is clear that Aristotle could not determine a mean. In the novel, he is either consumed by emotional turmoil in the form of bipolar disorder, or he is solely concentrated on the pursuit of knowledge. Concentrating primarily on unbiased wisdom is an unhealthy extreme when emotions are not accounted for. Aristotle would never share his ideas with anyone until he had perfected his work (227). His extreme introversion weakened his emotional stability, increasing his bipolar tendencies. According to Aristotle, ‘"the best human life is that spent in pursuit of intellectual excellence"' (272). More emphasis is placed on intelligence, so the emotional deficit is reimbursed through exaggerated moods. When intellect and emotion are extremes, psychological instability ensues.

Psychological instability is prevented when intellect and emotion hybridize to form a mental equilibrium. Although he does not successfully live his life avoiding the extremes of emotion and intellect, Aristotle is aware that these elements share similarities. Aristotle's observations and insight lead to his conclusion that humans are capable of both sensation and rational thought (Lyon 207). It is impossible to completely separate intellectual and emotional components because both extremes are tainted by the other. According to Glen Koehn, "judgements of goodness are [not] expressions of feeling without cognitive content" (193). Koehn implies that intelligence and emotions are not divergent thought processes; they coexist to create a frame of mind in which feelings influence rational thinking, and reason prevents emotions from distorting

judgement. All thought processes are interrelated, so emotion and intellect can converge to create a hybrid of psychological stability. Aristotle's mood disorder and extreme intelligence disrupted his own internal balance, but his psychological excesses and unsteadiness resulted in a realization that intellect and emotion are interconnected.

On a scale evaluating world peace, war and reconciliation are located on opposite ends of the spectrum. Aristotle's character in the novel categorizes war and reconciliation as extremes when he applies the concept of the mean to the political level. As a philosopher, Aristotle views war as "a kind of science" in which an invader must kill the owner to acquire a specific resource (Lyon 42). When King Philip conquers territories, resources and taxes are expected as his reward for victory. In order to acquire his self-proclaimed prizes, he must annihilate his enemy's civilization (127-128). This evaluation demonstrates that each warring groups' goal is to debilitate the opposing side to gain political or economic power (Christensen 111). Ideally, war is an extreme that should be prevented, and according to Christensen, "the suffering and destruction of war are evils to be avoided" (130). Even in Aristotle's time, humans struggled to avoid the extreme of war.

The opposing extreme, reconciliation, is as undesirable as war to end violence when it is viewed as "negative peace" (Christensen 130). In this sense, reconciliation is temporary because social justice is still absent, and one or both feuding parties continue to harbour hostile feelings because specific goals were not satisfied (130). In the novel, Aristotle's feelings in the aftermath of war illustrate the tension of reconciliation. Phillip's army destroyed Aristotle's childhood home, Staigera, leaving him resentful of his king (Lyon 14). Another concept of reconciliation is accurately described by Toft as a "negotiated settlement" involving mutual agreement amongst the feuding groups to stop fighting and instead discuss opposing views and sources of conflict (150). Renewed violence is likely to occur following reconciliation because one side often feels cheated due to unfair division of resources and power. An example of unsuccessful reconciliation occurs when Pausanias murders King Philip for past grievances. Pausanias was insulted by Attalus, the King's father-in-law, so he visited Philip to seek justice. King Philip denied the request, but he promoted Pausanias to his personal bodyguard to appease him. Following his promotion, Pausanias was once again humiliated when he was raped by the other guards. Despite attempts to placate Pausanias, he still sought revenge (Lyon 260). Residual frustrations contain the potential to erupt into violence, so the extreme once again shifts towards war (Toft 28). Reconciliation, as an extreme, is similar to war in that it aims to stop violence, even though violence is inevitable. The political context of Aristotle's life develops a pretext for an effective strategy to prevent future conflict.

War and reconciliation are extremes with a common purpose to end hostilities amongst disputing groups, although the approaches for achieving that goal are different. The mean between the two extremes can be described as "positive peace," in which impartial justice sustains a peaceful social environment practicing nonviolence, mutual respect, and equality (Christenson 130-131). Lasting peace is difficult to establish because of insurmountable tension between the extremes of war and reconciliation. Two ways to achieve this balance are through education and diplomacy. Plato believed that "good character was the result of good education practices" (qtd. in Christenson 60). Aristotle's character in the novel emulates this philosophy through his belief that the government's main focus is children's education (Lyon 179).

Education provides enlightenment and understanding of differences. Violence is replaced with intelligence, and intellect cultivates diplomacy. Through diplomatic relations, a balance centred on positive peace can be discovered. In the novel, Philip identifies that war and resistance erupt when military force is used. On the other hand, diplomacy and continuation of peace persist under the influence of intelligence (44). This fact is supported through a discussion between Alexander and Aristotle. Alexander feels ‘"war is the greatest means to the greatest end,"' a statement refuted by Aristotle, who views ‘"diplomatic overtures . . . as the smartest means"' (186). Through education and diplomacy, violence and the potential for hostility can be avoided.

The philosophy of a golden mean continues to have relevance in the contemporary world. Despite the establishment of democracy in industrialized countries, or the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, violence persists due to conflicting paradigms, ideologies, and inequality. An example of the inability to avoid extremes is the civil war in Libya, which began on February 16, 2011. Violence erupted after forty-one years of human rights violations and repressed freedom of speech by Muammar Gadhafi's authoritarian government. Libyan protestors demanded justice, opportunity, political freedom, representative government, and protection of universal rights. To suppress the opposition and defend his power, Gadhafi is using military force to kill opponents and demonstrators. Government supporters are launching air strikes, using artillery and tanks, and combating rebel forces in battle to stifle the rebellion. Anti-government fighters are not yielding to the force wielded by the autocratic government (Pike). Extremes present in modern times convey the importance of establishing personal, emotional, and political balance in humanity. Although violence in Libya is one of many instabilities existing in the world, it is a reminder that diplomacy and human cooperation are necessary to actualize a peaceful balance in all aspects of life.

The mean is a general point between two extremes, and the civil war in Libya is an example of two extremist political positions. An oppressive dictatorship has controlled citizens' lives for over forty years, so Libya is unfamiliar with the political balance known as democracy. Absence of freedom in Libya is an extreme within the vortex of the authoritarian government that lead to rebellion. Opposition to the government recognizes that extreme measures are necessary to achieve a balance of power in Libya. Once the violence has dissipated and order has been re-established in Libya, democracy with a balance of government control and citizen participation can be organized.

Aristotle imagined a balance between two extremes as guidance for a person's life. The three aspects of mentor/student, intellectual/emotional, and war/reconciliation in *The Golden Mean* illustrate that avoidance of extremes is impossible, but no strict binary of extremes exists. One side is always tainted by the other, so a hybrid, or balance, of the extremes can emerge. The division of authority between Aristotle and Alexander in the context of mentor and student show polarity, but hybridity is conveyed through mutual learning. Secondly, Aristotle's extreme intelligence is a contrast to his emotional, bipolar tendencies. Even though he did not accomplish a balance between intellect and emotion, Aristotle's character in the novel realizes the interconnectivity between the two extremes to achieve psychological stability. Finally, war and reconciliation oppose one another. Balance in the form of positive peace is achievable through education and diplomacy because the underlying goal of both extremes is the end to violence.

Aristotle's idea of the mean transcends time and culture, and is relevant to the current crisis in Libya. Establishing a balance between opposing sides will resolve present and future global conflicts to make world peace a reality. Viewing polar opposites as ‘"opposing extremes, but also versions of the same form"' (Lyon 197) actualizes Aristotle's notion of the mean.

Works Cited

Christensen, Kit R. "Chapter 3: The Relevance of Human Nature." *Nonviolence, Peace, and Justice: A Philosophical Introduction.* Eds. Joel Buenting and Alex Sanger. Toronto, ON: Broadview Press, 2010. 60. Print.

Christensen, Kit R. "Chapter 5: War and Peace." *Nonviolence, Peace, and Justice: A Philosophical Introduction.* Eds. Joel Buenting and Alex Sanger. Toronto, ON: Broadview Press, 2010. 111-132. Print.

Jukes, Ian, McCain, Ted, & Crockett, Lee. "Education and the Role of the Educator in the Future." *Phi Delta Kappan.* 92.4 (January 2010): 15-21. *Teacher Reference Center.* Web. 22 March 2011.

Koehn, Glen. "Human Goodness and the Golden Mean." *Journal of Value Inquiry* 37.2 (2003): 179-194. *Philosopher's Index.* Web. 20 March 2011.

Lyon, Annabel. *The Golden Mean.* Toronto, ON: Vintage Canada, 2010. Print.

Pakaluk, Michael. "Character-Related Virtue (Nichomachean Ethics I.I3 and book 2)." *Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics: An Introduction.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 108-109. Print.

Pike, John. "Libya Civil War 2011". *Global Security.* N.p. 22 March 2011. Web. 22 March 2011.

Sherwin, Sarah. "Creating an Optimum Environment for Learning." *British Journal of School Nursing* 5.9 (November 2010): 455-456. *CINAHL Plus.* Web. 20 March 2011.

Toft, Monica Duffy. "Chapter 2: Civil War Termination in Perspective." *Securing the Peace: The Durable Settlement of Civil Wars.* Princetown, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. 28. Print.

Toft, Monica Duffy. "Chapter 9: Conclusion." *Securing the Peace: The Durable Settlement of Civil Wars.* Princetown, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. 150. Print.

Weiten, Wayne, and McCann, Doug. "Chapter 14: Psychological Disorders." *Psychology: Themes and Variations.* Eds. Anne Macdonald and Valerie Adams. Toronto, ON: Nelson, 2007. 592. Print.