

The Virtue and Practice of Moderation

Felix Ayemere AIROBOMAN

*Department of Philosophy, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria
+234(0)8073169897. E-mail: felix.airoboman@uniben.edu*

Abstract

This work is about the contemporary relevance of the ancient philosophical concept of moderation. The work attempts a sparing conceptual analysis of the concept of moderation. It inquires critically into the conceptions which some ancient philosophers, such as Aristotle and Epicurus, have on it and how they raised it to the status of a virtue. While the work agrees with Aristotle on his doctrine of moderation, it dissents from his requirement for being virtuous for its stringency, which makes it excessively difficult, if not impossible to be virtuous in the moral sphere. The work then X-rays Epicurus' position that one is only able to achieve the goal of life through pleasure which results from moderation. Thereafter, it attempts an extension and application of the concept to both theory and practice with specific references to politics and dispensation of justice and holds that to be virtuous in these regards is to avoid extremes and tow the line of moderation. It concludes by highlighting succinctly the relevance of moderate living and moderate use of material possession. Finally, it opines that the ability to apply moderation appropriately to concrete issues is a virtue – a demonstration of moral wisdom.

Key Words: Moderation, Moral Wisdom, Practice, Virtue.

Introduction

The concept of moderation is not alien in philosophy. Although philosophers, from the Medieval to the Contemporary periods, hardly talk of it as a philosophical concept, some philosophers of antiquity were engrossed with the philosophical rumination on the concept. In fact, they raised it to the status of a virtue. This work is an attempt to renew energy with the concept. However, it is impossible to exposit the concept of moderation in all its aspects of human discourses and activities here. For this reason, it is only a sparing treatment of the concept that will be made; but this is to be done without compromising reason and logic. The task here is to ask and answer, among others, what moderation is, what it is concerned with, how and with what it can be applied and by extension, what it is not concerned with, and how and with what it cannot be applied. Its examination shall be extended to both theory and practice. The study adopts the philosophical methods of conceptual and critical analyses.

Moderation as a Concept

Moderation as a philosophical concept may be conceived differently. Nevertheless, these different conceptions have a common denominator of 'avoiding extremes'. Moderation is the process of eliminating, avoiding or lessening extremes. It is a way of life which emphasizes perfect amounts of everything; that is: not indulging in too much or too little, but instead striking a balance or locating a mean between two vices of excess and defect. In other words, it is the avoidance of extremes in actions or opinions or, mediation between extremes. Moderation is also a principle of life. In ancient Greece, the temple of Apollo at Delphi bore the inscription *Meden Agan* (μηδὲν ἄγαν), which means: 'Nothing in excess'. From this inscription, doing something "in moderation" means not doing it in excess.

In Taoist philosophy, moderation is considered as a key part of one's personal development and religion. It is also considered as one of the three jewels of Taoist thought. On this view, there is nothing that cannot be moderated. Everything including one's actions, desires and even thoughts can be moderated. It is believed that by moderation one achieves a more natural state, faces less resistance in life and recognizes one's limits. As a principle of Taoist philosophy, moderation is a lifelong process, which attempts to moderate oneself in all he does since there is no specific goal and since there is no specific guide one can use. It is thus an ongoing internal process. (Wikipedia, 2007). One of the barriers to moderation is the human propensity to label entities good or bad in absolute terms rather than weighing them as a part of a complex whole.

From this brief exposition, one can ask: “is moderation actually possible in everything as the Taoists would want us to believe?” This question and many more will be answered in what follows.

Conceptions of Moderation by some Philosophers

As mentioned at the beginning, the concept of moderation, among others, attracted the attention of some philosophers and some philosophical schools of antiquity. These philosophers and philosophical schools include Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Confucius, Buddha, stoicism and scepticism. Here, attention will be limited to considering the positions of Aristotle and Epicurus in understanding the ancient involvement in the concept.

Aristotle

For Aristotle, moderation leads to the achievement of the highest good. Thus, “Fundamentally, and in every situation we call anything good when it performs well its characteristic functions.... Our approval or disapproval of anything may be said to express our view of what it is and what it is meant to be” (Tsanoff, 1981: 335). For him, man's highest good is “the good by which all others are judged, in man's fundamental activity, in the realization of his distinctive capacity” (Tsanoff, 1981: 335). The attainment of this highest good must be the product of rationality. To be able to act rationally, we must avoid extremes and maintain a balance. According,

Our reason has to contend with irrational desires and impulses which do not know due measure, and even when our better insight shows us the right course, we need practice to follow it reliably.... In any situation we are apt to err through excess or through deficiency. Between these counter vices of too much and too little is the virtue of just enough, the rational or golden mean (Tsanoff, 1981: 335).

Aristotle raises *moderation* to the status of a virtue. In explaining moral virtues, Aristotle analyzes human personality into three elements – passions, faculties and states of character:

These elements are not in themselves blameworthy or praiseworthy.... Experience shows that the states of character which enables a person to fulfill his or her proper function aim at an intermediary point between the opposing extremes of excess and deficiency. The morally virtuous person, then, always chooses to act according to the “golden mean”, but ... the mean is not the same for all individuals (Denise, 1996: 39).

In buttressing the fact that the mean is not always the same for all individuals, Aristotle noted that “[i]n everything that is continuous and divisible, it is possible to take more, less, or an equal amount, and that either in terms of the thing itself or relatively to us; and that equal is an intermediate between excess and defect”. By an intermediate with the object is meant “that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all men. For instance if ten is many and two is few, six is the intermediate, taken in terms of the object, for it exceeds and is exceeded by an equal amount” (Sahakian, 1974: 39). This is arithmetical. But the intermediate relative to us is not to be taken in this manner. For example, if N5000.00 is too much for a meal for a particular person at a time, and if N20 is too little, it does not follow that N2510.00 is the moderate or intermediate amount because it exceeds and is exceeded by an equal amount of N2490.00. N2510.00 may still be too much for a meal based on the prevailing economic circumstances. Mean as it means here is not necessarily an arithmetical average, but striking a balance of just enough in the continuum, that is, in a line of too much and too little. Sufficient amount for food for the individual here may depend on a number of factors: the cost of food, the age of the individual, the stomach capacity, the type of job the person does, his or her health conditions and some other variable factors.

Again, if for example, it is too much to have sex forty-nine times a month and too little to have sex once a month, it does not follow that the mean should be twenty-five times in the continuum. This is because twenty-five times may still be an excess. It does not also mean that

once is too little. To find the mean of just enough will depend on age, interest, state of health, the honest desire of spouse, and state of life. State of life is considered because, the Eunuch by his state is not able and the celibate by his or her vocation cannot because, even engaging in it once will make him or her vicious. In avoiding excess and defect, we seek the intermediate and choose it; but this intermediate is not in the object but it is relative to us. It is important to note that there are instances where there can be no excess and defect or lack. For example, in matters of truth and honesty, there is no excess, just as there is no defect or lack in issues of corruption and adultery. This means, there can be no excess of truth and honesty just as there can be no defect in the deficiency of corruption and adultery. In these instances, such acts do not constitute vices but virtues.

Aristotle also connects moderation with happiness. He conceives of moderation as a criterion of happiness. He is of the view that the state of happiness of the individual results from a life governed by reason, moderation, and the actualization of potentialities. If moderation is a criterion of happiness, then it must be a virtue because whatever conduces to happiness must be virtuous.

While Plato defines virtue in terms of excellence, Aristotle defines it in terms of habitual moderation. No wonder then that for Aristotle virtue consists in the means between two vices – excess and defect. Put simply, moral virtue is moderation between two vices or extremes, excess and defect. This mean is prescribed by right reason. Or as Aristotle puts it, the mean is defined as what “right reason prescribes” (Sahakian, 1974: 56). “Virtue then is a state of deliberate moral purpose consisting in a mean that is relative to us, the mean being determined by reason” (Sahakian, 1974: 56). Now, how do we find the mean? “To find the mean... consists in doing the right thing, to the right person, at the right time, in the right way, for the right purpose, and to the right extent” (Sahakian, 1974: 56-57). According to Aristotle, to locate this mean is sometimes difficult. This is why it is not easy to be virtuous. He puts it that:

it is so hard to be virtuous; for it is always hard to find the mean in anything, e.g. ...anybody can get angry ...anybody can give or spend money, but to give it to the right persons, to give the right amount of it and to give it at the right time and for the right cause and in the right way, this is not what anybody can do, nor is it easy. This is the reason why it is rare and laudable and noble to do well (Sahakian, 1974: 57; Aristotle, 1990: 2.9).

While one will agree with Aristotle on the doctrine and necessity of moderation, but his requirement for being virtuous is contestable because it is too stringent. It will make it excessively difficult, if not impossible to be virtuous in moral sphere as he rightly noted.

Since it is difficult to locate the mean in our actions, to be virtuous in moderation therefore is a Herculean task. But in Aristotle's conception to act rightly is to do as he requires. Now what is right act? The right act is a single or isolated instance of moderation. It is the performance of the right thing, to the right person, in the right way, to the right extent, for the right purpose, at the right time, and so on. A single right act does not constitute virtue. Rather, “Virtue is a personality characteristic that results from the regular practice of the right act until it becomes a habit of the individual” (Sahakian, 1974: 58). What this means is that virtue or vice is not the result of a single act, but a disposition, or a regular practice of the act. This implies that it is habit that makes the individual virtuous or vicious. By extension of argument, moral virtue does not consist in inactions but in avoiding evils and doing good in one's actions; it consists in right acts that come from moderation.

Teleology, which is cardinal to the entire philosophy of Aristotle, is also extended by Aristotle to the good life or morality of moderation. Before anything is judged good or bad, right or wrong, first and foremost the purpose it is meant to serve must be known. Its goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness, depends on its conformity or otherwise with this purpose. This suggests that what is good or right in one situation may be bad or wrong in another. This is

because one thing may serve different purposes at different times. We shall now pause to attend to the views of Epicurus.

Epicurus

The focal point of Epicurus' ethics is peace of mind and absence of pain. For him, it is moderation that can lead to the attainment of good, undisturbed life. How? According to Epicurus, the good life consists in maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. This maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain "does not mean dedicating our lives to the more obvious physical pleasures such as those afforded by food, drink, and sex. Rather, Epicurus taught that the good life is a life of moderation devoted to health and peace of mind, for he assumes that the pleasure of tranquility and serenity were the greatest pleasures available" (Barcalow, 1994: 74). From this analysis, it is obvious that although he prescribes pleasure as the standard of morality, it is not sensual pleasure but mental and intellectual pleasure. To achieve this mental pleasure, one must be detached from excessive material propensity and be content with little possessions. This is because the accumulation of material wealth increases the sources of mental disturbance. This mental disturbance robs one of peace of mind and eventually happiness which are not only essential prelude but are also central to mental pleasure.

In the opinion of Epicurus, the pleasure we need to pursue is maximum durable pleasure, which consists in health of body and tranquility of the soul:

Epicurean hedonism would not then result in libertinism and excess, but in a calm and tranquil life; for a man is unhappy either from fear or from unlimited and vain desires, and if he but bridle these he may secure for himself the blessings of reason. The wise man will not multiply his needs since that is to multiply sources of pain; he will rather reduce his needs to the minimum (Copleston, 1962: 152).

To avoid multiplication of sources of pain is to reduce one's need to the minimum, that is, to locate a moderate point in the continuum of excess needs and defect of needs; in other words, the satisfaction of the basic necessity of life. Even with respect to asceticism, the Epicureans teach moderation. Frederick Copleston puts it that "... the Epicureans ethic leads to a moderate asceticism, self-control and independence" (Copleston, 1962: 152). Buddha (Omoregbe, 2004: 62-63) actually exemplified this in his search for enlightenment. Extreme austere life did not achieve for him this enlightenment, instead, he achieved it in moderation, hence his philosophy of the midway as prelude to enlightenment.

It is only through pleasure which results from moderation that one is able to achieve the goal of life, which is freedom from disturbance and its consequent life of blessedness. Thus, "Epicurus believed that the best way of life for a human being is a life focused on maintaining health and tranquility... [M]aximum pleasure and minimum pain come from a life of moderation, over indulgence in the pleasure of the senses have painful consequences" (Barcalow, 1994: 75). In other words, "To accustom one's self therefore, to simple and inexpensive habits is a great ingredient in perfecting of health, and make a man free from hesitation with respect to the necessary uses of life" (Copleston, 1962: 152-153). It is evident from the above that for Epicurus, moderation leads to perfect health condition. It makes a man to appreciate the necessary use of life, that is: not to refrain from satisfying the basic necessity or comfort of life.

Epicurus sees the need to choosing and living a life of moderation. He prefers this life of moderation because if the desire for physical pleasure is not controlled or subjected to moderation, it becomes insatiable. Insatiable desires lead to frustration and pain-mental disturbance. Since insatiability leads to mental qualms, one should be satisfied with moderate possessions; "The wealth demanded by nature is both limited and easily procured; that demanded by idle imaginings stretches on to infinity" (Epicurus, fragment xv; Oates, 1940: 36; Barcalow, 1994: 75). Since human wants cannot be satisfied because when present wants are satisfied more wants arise, the best thing to do is to focus on acquiring and satisfying basic

necessities rather than luxury. The satisfaction of basic necessities does not require much work as the acquisition of luxuries requires.

Although pleasure is necessary for the good life, “[e]normous quantities of pleasure are unnecessary for the good life; continence followed by moderate satisfaction will suffice; danger lurks beyond moderation” (Sahakian, 1974: 25-26). To live a pleasant life is to be free from anxiety and possess the sweetness of mental serenity. For Epicurus, mental pleasure is superior to sensual or material pleasures. Even when we possess the greatest of human needs, this possession and anything that is associated with unlimited desires cannot end the disturbance of the soul, nor can it create true joy. Hence one should only try to satisfy the necessary desires. This is what will make a man independent in all things because, “in reference to what is enough for nature every possession is riches, but in reference to unlimited desires even the greatest wealth is not riches but poverty” (Epicurus, 1926; Albert, 1969: 73). What produces the good life is within the reach of all humans. This is the keeping of desires at minimum.

From the preceding paragraphs, it is clear that Epicurus does not suggest or prescribe elimination of desires. Desires should not be eliminated completely nor should they be allowed to develop fully. This is because some desires are natural and thus necessary while others are artificial and thus unnecessary. The artificial desires are not only unnecessary to health and tranquility or peaceful, happy and pleasurable living, they are destructive to them. The natural desires are the desires that must be fulfilled to preserve bodily health and mental peace. The satisfaction of these desires, in addition to the freedom from pain leads to happiness, the goal of life.

Like Aristotle, Epicurus raises moderation to the status of virtue. According to him, virtue is a condition of tranquility of the soul. In his conception, virtue leads to pleasure and happiness: “Virtue such as simplicity, moderation, temperance and cheerfulness, are much more conducive to pleasure and happiness than unbridled luxury, feverish ambition and so on” (Copleston, 1962: 153). Elsewhere, it is put this way: “the hallmark of virtue is tranquility, the more desirable virtues being cheerfulness, simplicity, and moderation” (Sahakian, 1974: 26). Thus, Epicurus connects moderation with virtue, and their aftermath pleasure, happiness and mental serenity.

Even the Sceptics and the Stoics recommend moderation to enable one achieve happiness and a life free from the disturbances of the world. This is a common denominator which runs through the thoughts of various philosophers and philosophical schools involved in moderation in antiquity. Having made some representations about the views of some philosophers about moderation, attention will now be devoted to how and why moderation should be put into concrete use in daily living.

Moderation in Practice

The task here is to examine how the applications of moderation can improve human wellbeing through some fields of human discourses. Focus will be restricted to the fields of politics and dispensation of justice.

Politics

Just as moderation is a personal virtue, so also it is a political virtue. But some people among which are moralists and religionists disapproved of the desires for political power. This is probably because power is often misconceived to corrupt. But if human society must continue, if people must be organized, if people must cooperate and cohabit, if there are alignments in human needs and interests, and if there are conflicts in these human interests, then the exercise of power is inevitable. It is true and thus undeniable that some “people do attempt to have power over others viciously and irresponsibly. Such ambitions for power are tempered in cunningness and the achievement of its ends. Yet there can also be a will to power that allows one to recognize the claims of others, and to have a sense of oneself as a person among

persons” (Casey, 1990: 141). Therefore, we need to appropriate the good side of it, cultivate its virtues, jettison the vices and discard the associated filths.

Some people are able to identify problems including social and political problems, and have sincere desire to solving these identified problems. But they are constrained because they do not have the political power to do so. To be able to do so is to first and foremost have the zeal or desire for political power. The desire for power itself is not bad; it is the inordinate and insatiable desire for it that is despicable. A will to power is not and should not be conceived as intrinsically evil. John Casey opines that “[i]t is central to all human beings... .. It can certainly be a human strength, going with imaginations and greatness of mind, and not something contemptible. It cannot be simply ruled out as human excellence” (Casey, 1990: 141). He added that as a matter of fact, ambition and love of power “are not contemptible... and childish dispositions, even if they are dangerous and disturbing. In a public setting they may not even appear repulsive” (Casey, 1990: 142). It is the inordinate desire for it that is repulsive and contemptible. If properly and moderately sought and used, it constitutes virtue because, there must be exercise of power by some to ensure social stability and harmony in human engagements.

People abstain from politics because in their thinking, they want to be just, honest, moral, respectable and so on. Apolitical disposition or the suppression of desire for political power is not a virtue. Rather it is political inaction. In this case, virtue consists not in political inaction, but in seeking political power with fairness, and using it appropriately when acquired. It consists in actions properly directed. A man cannot truly be considered honest, just, good, clement, moral, noble, generous, and so on, until he overcomes the vices of dishonesty, injustice, evil, cruelty, immorality, ignoble, miserliness and so on, respectively. He must also have positive disposition towards these values and constant habit of displaying them. The summary is that a man is not virtuous unless he overcomes vices. This is why apolitical disposition cannot be morally justified in a political community; since if everybody in a political community is apolitical, such a community will be in disarray: chaotic, barbaric, anarchistic, orderless, conflictual, insecure, and in short, will relapse into the Hobbesian state of nature characterized with continual fear, and danger of violent death; and where life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short (Hobbes, 1963: 143; Hobbes, 1968: 186). These are the reasons for thinking not only of the blemish, burden and inconveniences of political engagement but also of the danger of insecurity, chaos and anarchy of political failure due to apolitical alternative and attitude.

For those with genuine intentions to be able to address social and political problems in the contemporary world, they need not only be politically minded; they must be politically involved. But the message is that those who are interested in governance and want authority entrusted to them must be moderate in their desire for power. Excessive desire will make them unjust in the engagement, and then malicious enough to blackmailing or eliminating their opponents. This is a vice of excess. To completely lack the desire is another vice, and in this case, of deficiency.

The point is that all men need to have desire for political power. But this desire must be moderate. It is not only wrong to hold that politics is a dirty game but it is also improper to suppress ambition for political power. Political game seems dirty because it is played by dirty men and in a dirty manner; and because clean men extricate themselves from the game. Edmund Burke will agree with this claim because he once said that the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. When those with honest intentions exclude themselves, then those with dishonest intentions takeover and become the masters and lords of the game. Because good men abstain, evil men become actors; and so evil triumphs by the activities of evil actors.

Since one can only give out what he has, good people by virtue of their goodness cultivate virtues. Conversely, evil people, by virtue of their malicious inclinations cultivate vices. They

justify their illegitimacy as legitimate with inappropriate, malevolent political ideologies. Then apathy, disloyalty, insecurity, lack of trust, malice and all forms of socio-political insurgences ensue as inevitable outcomes, and the government is battered. These further precipitate deception, oppression and exploitation, and their consequent, infrastructural collapse. As a result, sorrow, hunger, poverty and deprivation manifest in the midst of abundance, just as evil, wickedness and injustices thrive. Then perturbing questions arise: why do good men suffer? Why do evil men triumph? One of the answers to these questions is that at the initial stage of setting the political stage, virtuous men exempt themselves.

If we must have a good political and social structure, good men must be politically involved. Aristotle once said that “man is a political animal”. To suppress this political tendency is to act contrary to human nature. But ambition for political power must be moderate or else, the seekers become unjust like the unjust villain. When abdicated by good people, gangsters hijack political power and become political actors to determine negatively the destiny of the many. These are probably why Milan Kundera puts it that: “extremism means borders beyond which life ends, and a passion for extremism, in art and in politics, is a veiled longing for death” (Kundera, 2012). This is a clear warning for danger of taking extreme, including political extreme. If, as Aristotle once said, ‘man is a political animal’, why must men suppress the political desire that is innate in them? We need to embrace politics, but with moderation, and be just with it. Political wisdom consists in the exercise of power with justice. With moderation or political wisdom, political engagement becomes a virtue.

Dispensation of Justice

In the dispensation of justice, punishment and reward should be appropriate to the nature and degree of offences and good deeds respectively. For example, cruelty, which is the desire to make people suffer should not be the focal point of law otherwise people will suffer unjustly in a manner beyond the degree and nature of offence they commit. This will be injustice in the dispensation of justice. Again, although clemency, that is, the disposition or inclination to be merciful, lenient, forgiving, or compassionate is not intrinsically a vice, it need not be over extended, or else it becomes a vice. Punishment should, and must be appropriate and proportionate to the offence committed. Those who dispense justice should not for the sake of clemency ignore the efficacy and deterrent effect of a just punishment. If clemency is to be upheld in all situations, then murderers, arsonists, assassins, kidnappers or hostage takers and perpetrators of other acts on the same and different rungs of crimes will not be punished appropriately or reprimanded commensurately. This will throw society into disarray. Social harmony will be in jeopardy. Consequently, social malady will thrive because perpetrators will take solace in, and undue advantage of, clemency. If offenders are not punished according to the degree and nature of their offences, we should not expect honesty, accountability, transparency, docility, efficacy and the like in public and private life in corrupt and morally bankrupt societies. In punishment there should be a just measure. In the dispensation of justice, therefore, justice consists in moderation or wisdom. As George MacDonald (2012) puts it, “Moderation is the basis of justice”. And in Plato's thinking justice results from moderation: “Justice is right distribution of emphasis in valuation and choice, giving each aspect or interest of our nature its due recognition, without neglect and without excess” (Tsanoff, 1981: 334). The preceding views show clearly that moderation is cardinal in the discourse and practical dispensation of justice.

The Relevance of Moderate Living

This work will be concluded by highlighting succinctly the relevance of moderate use of material possession. The habit of moderation can be beneficial in concrete living. Since the world is dynamic, and since the conditions of human life in it are also dynamic, then one should not expect constancy in them. These may have informed the thoughts of Charles Omoro Okpei when he argues that “[t]he stupor of good fortune may not last forever. When the tide of such short-lived fortune ebbs, one is forced to return to square one....Many cannot avoid the style of living which their bonus cannot sustain for long” (Okpei, 1999: 88). Hence there is always the need to strike a balance by saving for the rainy day. It is the wisdom of moderation that will

enable the state or individual to keep excesses, without squander, in time of abundance, like Pharaoh, through Joseph (Genesis, Chapter 41) before the episodic famine in Egypt.

The individual or nation that is not moderate in spending, or that is not able to articulate its values and needs in time of abundance and ensures it saves for rainy day to avoid impoverishment in future, but instead becomes prodigal is “like the river which flows very fast during the rains and so leaves its bed dry after the rains, because it has poured all the water it got from the rain into the sea” (Okpei, 1999: 88). These classes of people or nations find themselves later in confusion, regret, hardship, and penury, among others. Living a moderate life involves a life style that is not beyond one's ways or means. As claimed by Aristotle in his *Politics*, “the correct use of material property involves both temperance and liberality” (Stocker, 1990: 133). This liberality is a mean or moderation between miserliness and extravagancy. Hence liberality can be conceived as a virtue. The ability to apply moderation appropriately to concrete issues is a virtue – a practical demonstration of moral wisdom.

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