

4-9-2007 Aristotle's Golden Mean

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2 JOSH CENTOR: Welcome to "Mondays With Myles". Well,
3 as you may know, Dr. Brand is an old philosophy professor. So
4 I'm going to take a stab at discussing the discipline a little
5 bit with him this morning.

6 I've heard you talk about Aristotle's golden mean a
7 couple of times now. Can you give me some feedback on that
8 concept?

9 DR. MYLES BRAND: Thank you, Josh. Personally, I'm
10 not sure how happy I am with the "old philosophy". If you
11 mean former, that's not true. You know, I still hold the rank
12 of professor of philosophy.

13 JOSH CENTOR: Absolutely.

14 DR. MYLES BRAND: And I have for a long time. When
15 Aristotle was writing in his most famous book on ethics
16 school, the Nicomachean Ethics, he focused on something that's
17 called the golden mean. And what the golden mean is is a way
18 to define virtue or what's good, on the basis of being a mean
19 or of space in between two extremes.

20 So for example, courage is a virtue. It's virtuous to
21 be courageous, but it's a mean or it sits between being a
22 coward on the one side and being disregarding your own safety
23 or anyone else's safety could be over the top, so to speak.
24 So courage is how do you bring into proportion the desire to
25 be over the top, to take chances, to be too risky, versus

1 being really afraid to take any risks of being a coward? And
2 so the golden mean is how do you find that balance between the
3 extremes?

4 Now, how does that apply to sports? Well, I think it
5 applies directly to intercollegiate athletics. Let's look,
6 for example, about commercialism, which is an issue we always
7 talk about with respect to athletics.

8 Too much we turn into a pro sport. We're looking like
9 a pro sport. We're acting like a pro sport. That's over the
10 top for us. But on the other hand, we do need the revenue to
11 be able to support student athletes, to make sure that our
12 colleges and universities are maximizing the amount of money
13 they can use for the academic purposes, and minimizing the
14 subsidy. So those are the two extremes. No commercialism on
15 one side and too much on the other. And the golden mean,
16 Aristotle's golden mean is that balance in between. How do we
17 make sure that there's a right amount of commercialism, so it
18 still looks like, feels like, and is amateur sports, but we
19 are respectful of the need to raise revenue, as we are on the
20 rest of the university and for other reasons, but on the other
21 hand, we don't go overboard?

22 It isn't anything goes. And that would be an example
23 of balance. It's an argument against taking an extreme view.
24 For example, some people would say that student athletes
25 shouldn't participate except in the season. Others say that

1 they should be practicing 40, 60 hours a week. It doesn't
2 matter how much year round. But both of those are extremes.
3 What's the right amount of participation and practice
4 opportunities for our student athletes? We've come to the
5 conclusion about 20 hours a week. Some think it's too much;
6 some think it's too little. But what's the right balance?

7 So I always think of Aristotle's golden mean as what's
8 the right balance between the two extremes?

9 JOSH CENTOR: It seems like it could be a guiding
10 principle for much more than intercollegiate athletics. You
11 could probably apply it to all sorts of different things in
12 life.

13 DR. MYLES BRAND: Definitely so. And Aristotle
14 thought it as one of the key bases of his theories, his
15 ethical theories. So yes, you can apply that to life. And
16 you know, getting a balance between extremes, trying to find
17 out what's the virtuous path between what we might call two
18 vices of extremes, that strikes me not only in life, but also
19 just in the restricted area of intercollegiate athletics, a
20 way to think about all of these issues.

21 JOSH CENTOR: We have a diverse body of institutions
22 in the NCAA. We have your high profile Division I
23 institutions, and then your smaller Division III schools.
24 Does the golden mean apply the same way to those programs?

25 DR. MYLES BRAND: That's a good question. You have to

1 think about the golden mean as a set of principles, and
2 there's no one point that fits all. So one way to think about
3 it is think of a long continuum, and the first third of
4 continuum is a vice, too little; the last third of the
5 continuum is a vice, too much; and then you've got about a
6 third in the middle.

7 And where you fit in that third, on that continuum,
8 depends upon local contextual questions -- whether it's
9 Division I, Division III -- how important that is within the
10 overall mission of the institution -- lots of differences.
11 But as you move from the center of that one-third of the mean,
12 towards either end, towards the margins, then you're shading
13 into having gone back to the commercialism example, too much
14 commercialism or too little to help support.

15 So where the mean is is context dependent, as long as
16 it's within that part of continuum.

17 JOSH CENTOR: Where does Aristotle rank among your
18 favorite philosophers? Who are some of your favorite
19 philosophers?

20 DR. MYLES BRAND: That's an interesting question. I
21 like to read the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, and,
22 of course, Plato's teacher, Socrates.

23 But I also like contemporary philosophers. One of my
24 personal heroes is a man named Bertrand Russell, who was a
25 philosopher mostly for the early part of the 20th century, one

1 of the giants of Anglo-American philosophy. He worked on the
2 foundations of mathematics, and frankly in every area of
3 philosophy. And at the same time, he was an enthusiast about
4 certain key courses. For example, he was one of the early
5 promoters and inventors of what we call the "open school for
6 young children". He was a conscientious objector. He was an
7 anti-bomb person around World War II. He wrote great history
8 and won a Noble Prize, indeed, in literature. So quite an
9 influential philosopher and he's one that I like to read too.

10 JOSH CENTOR: John Locke believed that authority
11 derived solely from consent of the governed. How do you think
12 John Locke would feel about our member-driven structure here
13 at the NCAA?

14 DR. MYLES BRAND: Well, John Locke, of course, is one
15 of the fundamental thinkers in shaping the American democratic
16 process, and indeed democracies, as we all think about it.
17 And we've all seen the growth of membership-driven democratic
18 organizations.

19 I think John Locke would be quite pleased with it.
20 That would be the way he would say that we have to govern
21 ourselves. You know, democracy can be sloppy sometimes and
22 difficult to manage. But when push comes to shove, it's the
23 best system in trying to get agreement among large groups of
24 people to do something that's productive and increase the
25 utility for each of them.

1 JOSH CENTOR: Well, I've enjoyed my conversation with
2 the veteran philosopher. And thank you for taking the time
3 this morning.

4 DR. MYLES BRAND: It's been good, Josh.

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