

CRITICAL THINKING – HANDOUT 14 – THE GOLDEN MEAN FALLACY

“The fact that one is confronted with an individual who strongly argues that slavery is wrong and another who argues equally strongly that slavery is perfectly legitimate in no way suggests that the truth must be somewhere in the middle.”

–Susan T. Gardner, *Thinking Your Way to Freedom*¹

1. What is a Mean Position?

The term “mean” has a specific definition in a mathematical context (i.e. the arithmetical mean is the sum of a collection of numbers divided by the size of the set).

A **mean position** is any position that is a moderate position between two other extreme positions. It is understood as a middle-of-the-road position or compromise between two extreme views.

EXTREME POSITION	MEAN POSITION	EXTREME POSITION
Save all of your money	Save some of your money, spend the rest.	Spend all of your money.

In order for a position to be a mean position, it only needs to be more moderate than two identifiable extremes. As such, the mean position may still be extreme and what is a mean position in one context can be an extreme position in another.

EXTREME POSITION	MEAN POSITION	EXTREME POSITION
Save all of the whales	Save some of the whales, nuke the others.	Nuke the whales!

Notice how the mean position above is the extreme position below.

EXTREME POSITION	MEAN POSITION	EXTREME POSITION
Save all of the whales	Save most of the whales, kill (but don't nuke) the others.	Save some of the whales, nuke the others.

2. What is the Golden Mean Argument?

A golden mean argument (GMA) has the following structure:

STRUCTURE OF A GOLDEN MEAN ARGUMENT

- P1 **A** is a position (often characterized as extreme, problematic, or controversial).
- P2 **B** is a position (often characterized as extreme, problematic, or controversial).
- P3 **M** is the mean position between **A** and **B**.
- C Therefore, **M** is true.

¹ Susan T. Gardner (2009). *Thinking Your Way to Freedom: A Guide to Owning Your Own Practical Reasoning*. Temple University Press

GMA's contend that the *moderateness* of a position **M** counts as evidence for (or a reason in support of) **M** being true. That is, golden mean arguments contend that the *since M is a view that sits between two extremes A and B, that M is true.*

EXAMPLE #1 OF A GOLDEN MEAN ARGUMENT

- P1 Banning all recreational drugs is an extreme position.
- P2 Legalizing all recreational drugs is an extreme position.
- P3 A more moderate position is to legalize some drugs and keep others illegal.
- C The correct course of action is to legalize some drugs and keep others illegal.

Notice that the fact that P3 identifies a mean position between the two extreme positions identified in P1 and P2.

3. What is the Golden Mean Fallacy?

All GMA's are fallacious.

The **golden mean fallacy** is committed when one says (or assumes) that **M** is true (or likely) *because M is a mean between two extremes.*

There are two reasons why a GMA is fallacious:

*Reason #1: Even the most moderate position can be false since **how moderate a position is has no relation to whether that position is true or false (moderation does not make something true).***

Golden mean arguments assume that reality is partly determined by the degree to which a position is moderate. Thus, the more moderate a position is, the more likely it is to be the case. If this is the case, then we can determine which propositions are true by tallying up what people think about an issue and looking for the most moderate position.

But this is absurd because *reality is not determined by compromise.* It is independent of what you, or I, or anyone in particular thinks about it. It is not determined by simply averaging what everyone thinks about it.

EXAMPLE #2 OF A GOLDEN MEAN ARGUMENT

- P1 Setting off a large nuclear bomb in your backyard is safe.
- P2 Setting off a large nuclear bomb in your backyard is *not* safe.
- P3 A more moderate position is to that setting off a *small* nuclear bomb in your backyard is safe.
- C Setting off a *small* nuclear bomb in your backyard is safe.

Just because a position is a *mean position* is not a reason for it being true. In the example above, the extreme position P2 is true.

EXAMPLE #3 OF A GOLDEN MEAN ARGUMENT

- P1 Murder is not something you should do every day.
- P2 Murder is something you should do every day.

- P3 A more moderate position is that murder is something you should do on some days.
 C Murder is something you should do on some days.

Again, P3, although it is the mean, it is false.

Reason #2: If every GMA were true, then every proposition (except the most extreme) is true, including contradictions.

Recall that a position **P** may be extreme in one context but moderate in another. This feature of positions means that for any position **P**, we can create a GMA whose conclusion is ‘**P** is true’. This is problematic since one GMA can be created where **P** is the conclusion and another for **not-P** is the conclusion. But, **P** and **not-P** cannot both be true.

EXAMPLE #4 OF A GOLDEN MEAN ARGUMENT

- P1 You should eat two and only two watermelons a day.
 P2 You should not eat two and only two watermelons a day.
 P3 A more moderate position is that you should eat one and only one watermelon a day.
 C **You should eat one and only one watermelon a day.**

By varying the premises in the above argument, another GMA can be created whose conclusion is inconsistent with the conclusion above.

EXAMPLE #5 OF A GOLDEN MEAN ARGUMENT

- P1 You should eat 100 and only 100 watermelons a day.
 P2 You should not 100 and only 100 watermelons a day.
 P3 A more moderate position is that you should eat 50 and only watermelons a day.
 C **You should eat 50 and only 50 watermelons a day.**

It cannot be true that you should eat one and only one watermelon and fifty and only fifty watermelons a day.

4. Time to Get *Extreme!*

If a proposition **P** is not to be accepted simply because it is moderate, it might be tempting to say that we ought only to accept extreme positions. This too would be an error in reasoning. Keep in mind that while all GMAs are fallacious, this does not mean that all arguments for moderate positions are fallacious nor does it mean that all moderate views are false.

Some arguments for moderate positions are good, others are bad; some moderate positions are true, while others are false. But, to say that a moderate position is true (or you ought to believe it) *simply because it is moderate* is an error in reasoning. We accept moderate positions because we have positive reasons for rejecting alternatives and positive reasons for accepting what is identified as a more moderate position. And, these positive reasons have nothing to do with the fact that the position is *moderate*.

ARGUMENT FOR A MODERATE POSITION

- P1 Banning all recreational drugs is an extreme position that should be rejected because it

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- creates problems x, y, and z.
- P2 Legalizing all recreational drugs is an extreme position is an extreme position that should be rejected because it creates problems a, b, and c.
- P3 A more moderate position is to legalize some drugs and keep others illegal and this more moderate position is favorable *because* it avoids problems like a, b, c, as well as x, y, and z, and there are several positive reasons l, m, n in favor of this view.
- C Therefore, we should legalize some drugs and keep others illegal.

Note that in the above argument, we are not led to accept the conclusion *because* it is moderate but because (i) it avoids problems that beset the extreme position and (ii) there are some independent yet positive reasons in its favor.

Exercise Set #1

A. Create your own golden mean fallacy.

B. Identify whether the arguments below commit the Golden Mean Fallacy or is simply an argument for a moderate position.

1. Allowing complete immigration to the United States is an extreme position. Prohibiting all immigration to the United States is extreme too. A more moderate position would be to allow some immigration to the United States. Therefore, we should allow immigration to the United States.
2. Many democrats think that legalizing same-sex marriage is a good idea. But, republicans think that legalizing same-sex marriage is a bad idea. The way to truth is through compromise and so the right thing to do is to legalize gay marriage in some states and prohibit gay marriage in others.
3. Critics of abortion (pro-lifers) claim that abortion is morally wrong and should be illegal as abortion involves murdering a human person, it costs a lot of money, and it goes against many people's religious beliefs. Proponents of abortion (pro-choicers) claim that abortion is morally permissible and should be legal because a fetus is not a person, people should have the right to control what happens to their bodies, and a women should not be held responsible (financially or morally) for being raped. As you can see, both sides give strong reasons for their views and both sides have also given strong reasons why the other side is wrong. It must be the case that the truth of the matter is somewhere in between these two extremes.
4. Critics of abortion (pro-lifers) claim that abortion is morally wrong and should be illegal as abortion involves murdering a human person, it costs a lot of money, and it goes against many people's religious beliefs. Proponents of abortion (pro-choicers) claim that abortion is morally permissible and should be legal because a fetus is not a person, people should have the right to control what happens to their bodies, and a women should not be held responsible (financially or morally) for being raped. Here is a more moderate solution worth considering: how about abortion is both legal and moral in some states but illegal and immoral in others. This is a great compromise as it acknowledges that human fetuses are both persons and not persons, it allows for states with religious backgrounds against abortion to remain illegal, but states that are indifferent to become legal. It gives everyone a choice and allows the people who are against abortion to have somewhere to live where it is illegal. Therefore, we should make abortion legal in some states and illegal in others
5. Some say that we should send troops into North Korea with the intention of war, because they are a threat to the United States and we don't want to get nuked. Others think that we should keep our troops out of North Korea because they are all talk and we are far superior to them military-wise. A more moderate position would be to send a few troops to North Korea but not start a war. Let's send the troops to North Korea.
6. We should cut down all the rainforests because building on large plots of land is good for the world-economy. We should preserve all the rainforests because it is bad to kill the planet and it'll endanger species of forest-animals. A more moderate position would be to preserve some rainforests and cut the others down. Therefore, we should preserve some rainforests and cut the others down.
7. We should ban bull riding because it is torturing a bull and torturing bulls is bad. Bull-riding is a world-past-time and should stay a sport forever! A more moderate position would be to implement mechanical bull riding into rodeos because it keeps the sport of bull-riding alive and isn't torturing a bull. In addition, it could establish a minor-league system for rodeos because the mechanical bulls can be programmed for amateurs. This being said, the rodeo

industry will become huge without the torture of any animals! Therefore, we should implement mechanical bull riding into rodeos.

8. We should ban homeschooling because people don't get to interact with their friends. Everyone should be homeschooled because they can learn better on their own schedule. A more moderate position would be to allow people to choose whether they can be homeschooled or not. After all, homeschooling is still schooling! Therefore, we should allow people to choose whether they can be homeschooled or not.

9. Guns should be outlawed in all 50 states because there have been too many serial killers and school shootings in recent history. Guns should be made legal in all 50 states because people have amendment rights to bear arms and guns are used for hunting. A more moderate position would be to make guns legal for people who have a hunting license. This would keep guns in the hands of people who need them for hunting and reduce the risk of school shooters and serial killers getting their hands on guns. Therefore, we should accept the moderate position and make guns legal for people who own hunting licenses

4. Rotten Compromises: A Practical Consequence of GMAs

Golden mean arguments are persuasive for a couple reasons.

Reason #1: GMAs convince people by criticizing alternatives.

Calling a position "extreme" can mean several different things:

extreme₁: it is a position for which there exist strong reasons against

extreme₂: relative to other positions, it asserts or claims more

extreme₃: it is a controversial position

Golden mean arguments often rely on characterizing positions as extreme₁ by *criticizing* them. In so far as they do this, they offer you positive reasons for rejecting certain positions. But, just because a position is criticized or there are strong reasons against it, does not mean some unargued for moderate position is correct. That moderate position might also be problematic for similar or different reasons. Thus,

Reason #2: People are taught that compromise is a good thing.

From a very early age, you are taught to compromise, to get along with others, and to engage in collective sacrifice. If Liz and Jon both want a cupcake that belongs to neither, intuitively we think it is wrong if Liz simply eats it. She should share!

However, some compromises are rotten.

A ROTTEN COMPROMISE

1 Jon: You should come to the party!

2 Liz: No, I don't really want to. I feel sick.

3 Jon: Quit being so stubborn. You are my girlfriend and I don't want to go alone.

4 Liz: I know, I'm sorry, but I just don't feel like going to the party tonight. Maybe next week.

5 Jon: Okay, let's compromise. How about you come to the party for an hour. You don't have to drink or anything.

6 Liz: I really don't want to go. I might puke if I go.

7 Jon: You are the most stubborn person I've ever met. I don't know if I can be with someone who is so stubborn.

8 Liz: Are you breaking up with me?

Liz does not want to go to the party. Jon gives her reasons why she should go, but one of these reasons is that she should compromise. In doing this, Jon is telling her that because the position he adopts is in the middle ground, it is a reason for why she should go.

THE THREE-FIFTHS COMPROMISE OF 1787²

- 1 (I am *opposed* to slavery and so) I think that when determining voting rights & the distribution of taxes, we should only count the free inhabitants of each state, i.e., slaves *shouldn't* have voting rights.
- 2 (I *support* slavery and so) I think that when determining voting rights & the distribution of taxes, we should count slaves as well, i.e., slaves *should* have voting rights.
- 3 OK, let's compromise, all free individuals will have full representations and "all other Persons" (i.e., slaves) will count for three fifths of a person (except Native Americans).

When asked to compromise about **P**,

- (i) sometimes you are given reasons that support **P**, e.g. the evidence supports **P** or **P** would be a *better result* than if you did *not* compromise.
- (ii) other times you are encouraged to accept **P** simply because *you are told that you ought to compromise*

In considering whether or not you should compromise, it is instructive to ask the following questions:

- What reasons are given (explicitly or implicitly) for compromising?*
- What is the positive benefit of compromising?*
- What do I lose / gain if I compromise?*
- What consequences will result if I don't compromise?*

In asking these questions, you are asking for *positive* reasons for the moderate position and not accepting it *simply* because it is the mean between two other positions.

Exercise Set #2

Reconsider the case involving Liz and Jon and the cupcake that both want. If both Liz and Jon are in kindergarten, a teacher might tell them to compromise. If they ask why, the teacher might tell that because they ought to or because it is good. Are there any other reasons why Liz and Jon should compromise?

² "Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons." *U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 2*