



Between Bound and Extremum: A Mathematical Reading of *Odyssey* 15.69-71

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Abstract

Odyssey 15.69-71 has Menelaus advise Telemachus that a host who loves or hates a guest to excess is worse than one who observes αἴσιμα (*aisima*; 'due measure'), a word usually rendered as measure, balance or moderation. Read against the vocabulary of modern optimisation, the passage can look like an early statement of an optimisation principle: two extremes excluded, something better in between. We argue that this resemblance is misleading. The Greek text describes a tolerance interval, a set of acceptable conduct with no criterion for ranking one acceptable choice above another, rather than an interior extremum, a unique optimal point which, for a differentiable objective, is marked by a vanishing derivative. Aristotle's doctrine of the mean occupies an intermediate position. It introduces a selection criterion, the judgement of the φρόνιμος (*phronimos*; 'person of practical wisdom'), while explicitly declining to express that criterion mathematically. A survey of thirty-four published English translations of the passage shows the same conflation recurring in practice. Three translators, writing between 1665 and 1932, render

αἴσιμα as 'the Golden Mean' or 'the happy mean', importing the vocabulary of the later doctrine of the mean into a much earlier text. We conclude that distinguishing a qualitative bound from a quantitative extremum clarifies both the ancient text and a confusion about balance and moderation that persists in ordinary language today.

Keywords: Homeric ethics, Aristotelian mean, mathematical optimisation, classical translation reception.

1 Introduction

νεμεσσωμαι δὲ καὶ ἄλλω ἀνδρὶ ξεινοδόκῳ, ὅς κ' ἔξοχα μὲν φιλέησιν, ἔξοχα δ' ἐχθαίρῃσιν· ἀμείνω δ' αἴσιμα πάντα. (*Odyssey* 15.69-71)

Nay, I should blame another, who, as host, loves overmuch or hates overmuch; better is due measure in all things. (trans. A. T. Murray [1])¹

¹English quotations from the *Odyssey* follow A. T. Murray's 1919 translation [1], chosen for three reasons: it is the translation most commonly paired with the Greek text in classical scholarship; it was designed for fidelity rather than literary effect, which suits the aims of this reading; and, being in the public domain, it can be quoted in full. Dimock's 1995 revision left this passage unchanged. Where a particular translator's choice is discussed for its own sake, as with the renderings of Pope [2], Ogilby [3] and T. E. Lawrence [4] ('the Golden Mean' or 'the happy mean'), this is stated explicitly and attributed to the individual translator.



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In Book Fifteen of the *Odyssey*, Menelaus gives Telemachus a piece of advice on hospitality that sounds, on first hearing, almost like a mathematical proposition. Two extremes are excluded, excessive love and excessive hatred, and something in between is judged better. A reader familiar with the language of optimisation will recognise the pattern at once: two extremes and a better middle, much like a function with a minimum.

We argue that this reading is misleading. The question is partly philological (what the passage meant for its original audience) and partly conceptual: what must a description contain before it can be called an optimisation principle, and which of these elements are absent from the *Odyssey*?

The argument proceeds in three stages. First, we show that the vocabulary of the passage, the word αἶσιμα, rooted in αἶσα (*aisa*; ‘fated share’), describes something closer to a set of acceptable solutions (a tolerance interval) than to a single optimal point. Second, we show how Aristotle, in his analysis of ethical virtue, goes further by introducing a selection criterion, φρόνησις (*phronēsis*; ‘practical wisdom’), while explicitly refusing to formalise it mathematically, even though he knows and elsewhere uses the language of proportion. Third, we state precisely what an interior extremum is and show why the distance between it and the αἶσιμα of the *Odyssey* is a difference in kind rather than in degree.

We do not claim that the *Odyssey* ‘foreshadows’ or ‘prefigures’ the mathematical concept of the extremum. The claim is narrower. Comparing the three stages (the Homeric bound, Aristotelian judgement and the mathematical extremum) makes visible a distinction that is still routinely blurred: the difference between saying ‘avoid extremes’ and saying ‘there exists one precise optimal point’.

2 The Passage and the Language of Measure

The key word, αἶσιμα, derives from αἶσα, one’s fated share, the portion allotted to a person. The etymology already offers a first clue: this is not a term of calculation but a term of proportion to something predetermined, such as social custom, institution or what is fitting.

We located thirty-four named English translations of the passage (see Appendix); the survey covers every rendering we were able to obtain but does not claim to be exhaustive. One of them, Hobbes’s [5], does not render this gnomic statement at all and

turns instead to a related but different theme (when a guest ought to depart). Of the remaining thirty-three, thirty-one collapse the sense into a singular abstract noun: ‘measure’ (e.g. Butcher & Lang [6]; Powell [7]; Shewring [8]), ‘balance’ (Fagles [9]; Wilson [10]; McCrorie [11]), ‘moderation’ (Butler [12]; Rouse [13]; Rieu & Rieu [14]; Green [15]; Rees [16]), ‘due measure’ (Murray [1], unchanged in Dimock’s revision; Lombardo [17]; Bryant [18]), or ‘good sense’ (Palmer [19]). Only two translations, Mandelbaum’s [20] and Cook’s [21], resist this collapse, rendering the passage as ‘all things are best when done without excess’ and ‘all things are better when in measure’ respectively. Both keep ‘all things’ as the grammatical subject, which is closer to the plural structure of the original. These are, however, two exceptions out of thirty-three, and neither translator gives a rationale for the choice, so it would be unwise to place much interpretive weight on it; it may reflect stylistic preference as much as a considered position on the grammar.

More strikingly, three translators introduce terms taken from the later tradition of the mean. Ogilby [3], the earliest of the three, renders the passage as ‘the Golden Mean’; Pope [2] likewise has ‘the golden mean’; and T. E. Lawrence [4] has ‘the happy mean’. The ‘golden’ label itself goes back to Horace’s *aurea mediocritas* (*Odes* 2.10.5) and became attached to Aristotle’s doctrine only in the later tradition; either way it is a post-Homeric concept. That the slippage already appears in the seventeenth century, and recurs in the eighteenth and twentieth, shows that it is not a recent translational fashion. The translation tradition itself thus reproduces, within the target text, the confusion between an archaic tolerance bound and a later philosophical concept that this essay sets out to clarify.

Note, too, the structure of the passage: two symmetric extremes, loving overmuch and hating overmuch, followed by a comparative statement, ἀμείνω δ’ αἶσιμα πάντα (*ameinō d’ aisima panta*; ‘better are all the fitting things’). The plural carries weight. The text does not say ‘better is the fitting point’ (singular, implying one specific point) but ‘better are all the fitting things’, a formulation that, grammatically at least, describes a category of acceptable actions rather than a single optimal point.

This grammatical observation, minor in itself, will serve as our first piece of evidence in Section 5.3: the text, in its own phrasing, speaks of a set of acceptable

things, not a single best point.

3 The Aristotelian Mean: Arithmetic versus ‘Relative to Us’

Before comparing the αἵσιμα of the *Odyssey* with anything mathematical, we need to see how Greek thought itself took a further step, in Aristotle [22].

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book II, 1106a26–1106b28), Aristotle introduces the language of the arithmetic mean only to reject it as a model for ethical virtue. His example (1106b1–7) is instructive. If ten pounds of food are too much for a person and two too little, the arithmetic mean is six, equidistant from both extremes. Yet a trainer will not necessarily prescribe six, because that amount may be too little for Milo the wrestler and too much for a beginner. The right amount depends on who is eating, not on a fixed formula.

Virtue, Aristotle says, is a mean πρὸς ἡμᾶς (*pros hēmas*; ‘relative to us’). The criterion is not arithmetical but a matter of judgement: what the φρόνιμος, the person of practical wisdom, would choose in the given circumstances.

Aristotle does not avoid the mathematical language of proportion in general. In Book V, on justice, he uses both arithmetic and geometric proportion with precision: distributive justice (how honours and offices are shared) follows geometric proportion (1131a10–b24), while corrective justice (compensation for wrongdoing) follows arithmetic proportion (1131b25–1132b20); see the commentary on Book V in [22]. His refusal to mathematise the ethical mean is therefore not due to ignorance or inability; it is a deliberate philosophical choice.

This places Aristotle between the text of the *Odyssey* and the full mathematical extremum. The *Odyssey* gives only a tolerance bound, with no criterion for choosing within it. Aristotle introduces a criterion (φρόνησις) that could, at least in principle, yield a specific point for a specific individual, yet he refuses to express it as a formula, function or proportion. The mathematical extremum, as defined in Section 4, requires full formalisation: a function, a domain and an optimality condition.

This three-tier scale (tolerance bound, individualised judgement, formal extremum) is the axis of the central argument in Section 5.

4 What an Interior Extremum Actually Is

The term ‘extremum’ is often used loosely, and this looseness is what permits its confusion with the αἵσιμα of the *Odyssey*.

4.1 The Definition

Let $f(x)$ be a real-valued function defined on an interval I . A point x^* is an interior extremum (a local minimum or maximum) if (1) x^* lies in the interior of I , not at its boundary, and (2) $f(x^*)$ is no larger (for a minimum) or no smaller (for a maximum) than the values of f at all points in some neighbourhood of x^* . If, in addition, f is differentiable at x^* , then necessarily $f'(x^*) = 0$ (Fermat’s theorem): the slope of the function vanishes there. The condition is necessary but not sufficient, since $f(x) = x^3$ has $f'(0) = 0$ without an extremum at 0.

The derivative condition is the conceptually important one. An extremum is not simply ‘a good point’; for a differentiable function it is a point at which the function momentarily stops changing. In a sufficiently small neighbourhood of a strict minimum x^* , f is larger on either side, and exactly at x^* it neither increases nor decreases.

4.2 A Familiar Example: The Median

The median connects the mathematical concept to something familiar from statistics. For observations $x_1, \dots, x_n$, the median minimises the sum of absolute deviations:

$$m = \arg \min_{x \in \mathbb{R}} \sum_{i=1}^n |x_i - x|. \quad (1)$$

In this example, $f(x) = \sum_{i=1}^n |x_i - x|$ on $I = \mathbb{R}$, so that (1) says that m minimises f . When n is odd, the median is the unique minimiser of f . It is not ‘somewhere in the middle, roughly’; it is a precise point, computed exactly from the data, and moving away from it in either direction increases the sum of deviations. This property, one point rather than an interval at which something is minimised, is what the word ‘extremum’ asserts. The example also shows that the vanishing-derivative condition is not universal: f has a corner at the median and is not differentiable there, so optimality is expressed by the subgradient condition that zero lies in $\partial f(m)$. Moreover, when n is even, every point between the two middle observations attains the same minimum, so the minimiser is an interval and the conventional ‘median’ is a tie-breaking choice within it. Even in elementary statistics, then,

uniqueness of the optimum is a property that has to be established, not assumed.

4.3 The Counterpoint: The Feasible Region

Compare this with a structure of entirely different logic: a feasible region, or tolerance interval. Here there is no function to minimise, only a constraint of the form $a \leq x \leq b$.

Anything within this interval is, by definition, acceptable. Nothing distinguishes any two points $x_1, x_2 \in [a, b]$; both satisfy the constraint equally well. There is no derivative to set to zero, because there is no function to differentiate, only a proposition that is true or false: x lies within the interval or it does not.

4.4 Why the Distinction Is Not Merely Technical

It might be objected that both formulations simply say ‘avoid extremes’. They do not, because the two structures have different logical properties. A minimiser of a strictly convex function, if one exists, is unique: we ask ‘which is the best point?’ and there is one answer. A tolerance interval makes no claim to uniqueness: we ask ‘which points are acceptable?’ and the answer is a whole set, with no ranking within it.

This contrast (a unique optimal point versus a set of equally acceptable points) is the tool we use in the next section to show that the passage from the *Odyssey*, whatever its resemblance to the language of optimisation, describes the second structure rather than the first.

5 Tolerance Bound versus Extremum: The Critical Distinction

Saying ‘do not be either too hospitable or too hostile’ sounds equivalent to saying ‘there exists an optimal amount of hospitality’. The two statements are not equivalent, and the difference is worth setting out carefully.

5.1 The Hospitality Example

Suppose we try to translate Menelaus’s advice into mathematical language. Let $\delta(t)$ denote a guest’s discomfort as a function of the length of stay t . If t is too small (the guest is sent away prematurely), discomfort is high; if t is too large (the guest is kept against his will), discomfort is again high; somewhere in between, it is low.

This is the shape of a function with an interior minimum: it descends, reaches a low point and rises again, like a valley. If we really had such a function, we

could ask which t^* minimises $\delta(t)$, set the derivative to zero and, provided δ is strictly convex, find a single well-defined point.

The *Odyssey* gives us none of this. It does not say how many days are right, nor does it offer a way to compute the number for this guest, this season and this relationship. It says only: do not overdo it in either direction. That describes a tolerance interval, ‘anything between these two extremes is acceptable’, without saying whether one point within it is better than another.

If the $\delta(t)$ we imagined really were a valley, Menelaus would have to tell us where the floor lies. He does not; he gives us only the two walls.

5.2 An Everyday Example

Consider, outside the *Odyssey*, the temperature of a room.

If someone says ‘do not make the room too hot or too cold’, they give a tolerance interval, say between 18°C and 24°C. Within this interval all temperatures are equally acceptable; 21°C is not the right one as opposed to 20°C or 22°C, provided the bounds are respected.

This differs from saying that there is a precise setpoint that minimises the total cost of operating the room, where the cost combines the energy used for heating or cooling with a penalty for the occupants’ discomfort. In this second formulation there is a specific, computable optimum, say 21.3°C, that arises from an actual cost function. It is not simply ‘somewhere in the middle’; it is the minimum of a particular curve.

The first case (tolerance interval) is what everyday common sense offers: ‘do not overdo it’. The second (extremum) is what a building engineer can offer after measuring the actual costs at each temperature.

5.3 Why the Confusion Is So Easy and So Widespread

Everyday language uses the same words for both cases: ‘balance’, ‘measure’, ‘the right amount’. This creates the impression that wherever extremes are avoided, a unique optimal point must lie beneath, as if ‘do not overdo it’ always concealed ‘there is one precise right answer’. That is an additional claim, not a logical consequence. A tolerance interval can be flat along its whole length, with no point better than the rest.

The text of the *Odyssey*, we argue, stays at the first level. The plural αἴσιμα πάντα noted in Section 2 points the same way: what is commended is a class of fitting acts, not a single fitting act. Aristotle goes a step further by introducing a criterion, the φρόνιμος or ὀρθὸς λόγος (*orthos logos*; ‘right reason’), that could in principle select one point within the interval as better for a given individual. Even so, he refuses to formalise it: he offers no function, no derivative and no precise point. The interior extremum in its full mathematical sense is a much later development, foreign to both texts.

6 Why This Distinction Matters Today

Beyond philological interest, there are at least two reasons why it matters whether the passage describes a tolerance bound or an extremum, one historical and one practical.

The historical reason is that the transition from a qualitative bound to a quantitative extremum is neither self-evident nor inevitable. It is a specific conceptual achievement that took centuries and required specific tools, above all the infinitesimal calculus, which arrived long after Aristotle. Locating the *Odyssey* and Aristotle on this scale shows how gradual that achievement was.

The practical reason is that the word ‘tolerance’ has a precise technical meaning elsewhere. In mechanical engineering, a dimension may be specified as (10 ± 0.05) mm. Any part within that interval passes quality control, and no value inside it counts as better than another: the inspector asks only a yes-or-no question. A design engineer, by contrast, may look for the dimension that minimises cost or wear, an optimisation problem that may have a unique interior extremum. Engineering practice keeps the two questions apart: a part that passes tolerance is good enough, not the best possible. Everyday talk of ‘balance’, in diet, work or politics, often fails to keep them apart, moving from a tolerance bound to a claimed optimal point without anyone having computed the relevant cost function.

The value of the phrase in the *Odyssey* lies in its candour about this bound. It does not claim a precision it lacks. It tells us not to exceed the bounds and stops there, without the further, often unwarranted, claim that a single correct point lies between them.

7 Conclusion

We began by asking whether Menelaus’s advice to Telemachus resembles an optimisation principle. In

the strict mathematical sense it does not, but the failure of the analogy is instructive.

Three stages separate the *Odyssey*’s ‘do not overdo it’ from the modern ‘find the x^* at which $f'(x^*) = 0$ ’. The *Odyssey* offers a tolerance bound: a category of acceptable conduct with no criterion for ranking one acceptable choice above another. Aristotle offers a criterion, the judgement of the φρόνιμος, capable in principle of selecting a single point within that category, yet he deliberately declines to express it as a formula. Only the mathematical extremum, arriving many centuries later with the calculus, supplies both a criterion and, under suitable conditions such as strict convexity, a guarantee of uniqueness. Each stage adds something the previous one lacked; none contains the next in embryo.

That the slide from the first stage towards something resembling the third is a real tendency, not a hypothetical risk, is shown by the translation history examined in Section 2. Three translators, Ogilby in 1665 [3], Pope in 1725–1726 [2] and T. E. Lawrence in 1932 [4], independently reached for ‘the Golden Mean’ or ‘the happy mean’ to render a passage that says nothing of the kind. If careful translators working from the Greek repeatedly import a later philosophical vocabulary into an earlier text, the distinction drawn here is not hair-splitting; it marks an error that is likely wherever the language of measure is used loosely.

Seeing these intermediate steps clearly does not diminish the archaic text. The *Odyssey* does not need to anticipate Aristotle, still less the calculus, to do real ethical work. It draws a boundary and leaves what lies inside it to custom, circumstance and the host’s own sense of what is fitting. That restraint, saying only as much as the words warrant, is itself a kind of due measure.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this work, the author drafted the manuscript in his native language (Greek) and used ChatGPT and Claude to assist with the translation into English. The same tools were also used to improve the grammatical accuracy, syntax and fluency of the English text. The author subsequently reviewed, revised and edited the content to ensure academic rigour and accuracy, and takes full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable.

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Appendix: Classification of the Thirty-Four Translations Surveyed

Section 2 surveys thirty-four named English translations of *Odyssey* 15.69-71 (see References), comprising all the published or freely available renderings we were able to obtain. Rather than repeat their bibliographic entries, this appendix groups them by how each renders the closing clause, αἴσιμα πάντα, which is the classification underlying the argument of Section 2.

A. Collapse to a singular abstract noun (31 of 34).

Bryant [18]; Buckley [23]; Butcher & Lang [6]; Butler [12]; Chapman [24]; Cowper [25]; Fagles [9]; Fitzgerald [26]; Green [15]; Hammond [27]; Johnston [28]; Jordan [29]; Kline [30]; Lattimore [31]; Lawrence [4]; Lombardo [17]; McCrorie [11]; Mendelsohn [32]; Merrill [33]; Morris [34]; Murray / Dimock [1]; Ogilby [3]; Palmer [19]; Pope [2]; Powell [7]; Rees [16]; Rieu & Rieu [14]; Rouse [13]; Shewring [8]; Verity [35]; Wilson [10].

B. Preserve 'all things' as grammatical subject (2 of 34).

Mandelbaum [20]; Cook [21]. See Section 2 for the caution against over-reading so small a group as evidence of deliberate grammatical intent.

C. Explicit importation of later 'mean' vocabulary (3 of 34; subset of A).

Ogilby [3] ('the Golden Mean'); Pope [2] ('the golden mean'); Lawrence [4] ('the happy mean'). Discussed in Sections 2 and 7 as evidence that the conflation addressed in this essay is a recurring feature of the translation tradition.

D. Does not render this passage (1 of 34).

Hobbes [5], whose translation turns at this point to a related but distinct theme (the propriety of hurrying or detaining a departing guest) rather than the maxim on excessive love and hatred.



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