

# AN INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE: GOOD SENSE



## SECTION 1: VIRTUE KNOWLEDGE GOOD SENSE

The virtue of 'good sense' forms part of every other virtue. It moulds, informs and transforms our basic desires, emotions, instincts and impulses into morally good decisions. These decisions strengthen our virtues and tackle our vices. 'Good sense' is like a lighthouse, which illuminates what we have to do to realise or practise the virtues. It is a moral compass that steers us towards the more virtuous decisions, and away from the less virtuous ones. It takes a lifetime of practise, experience and reflection to calibrate this compass correctly.

Developing and acting with 'good sense' gives us freedom – being thoughtful and vigilant about what we are doing, why we are doing it and what we hope to achieve for ourselves and others through doing it. On this reading, to be 'free', means to have the freedom that the practiced musician, artist, or sportsman enjoys: they have all the basic and advanced movements, quite literally at their fingers, and are able to weave them together almost intuitively, like second nature, as they respond to the demands of a situation. This is what 'good sense' does – it pulls together and balances out all the necessary virtues to cope with what the situation demands.

Living with 'good sense' sets out the ways and means of realising the good in the down to earth, concrete realities of any given situation. When it is well practised, it enables suppleness in the face of the complexities of the ethical life. It is the essence of a life well-lived.

### 1. What can those who have this virtue do particularly well?

The person who lives with good sense is able to order their lives well.

- \* They know what the point and purpose of human life is (to flourish as a human being, rather than to wither; to build character, rather than to erode or destroy it).
- \* Those with 'good sense' know how to suit their actions to that very goal. All that the person with good sense does, will turn out well.
- \* To live with good sense is to be able to direct all human action to the goal of human flourishing, or happiness.

Good sense directs emotions and actions to their proper goal, or end. This direction is first of all a work of reason and moral intuition, or perception. It requires:

- \* Foresight to realise what is and is not required to do this. This foresight is based upon a remembrance of past experience and a correct estimate of the present conditions and circumstances. It enables us to direct our actions to their goal, thoughtfully.

Perhaps the best way to think of 'good sense' is to think through what 'bad sense' might look like. It is bad sense, for example, to live unfairly, or exploitatively, to live and act with cowardice, or rashness, or to live an overly indulgent lifestyle. Acting in such ways will not count as flourishing as a human, neither will it make us genuinely happy.

Those with good sense are able to decide or determine which act or acts will attain the goal of human flourishing in any situation. The chief act of this virtue is to command.

#### Task 1

- \* Put the above definition of 'good sense' into your own words.
- \* When have you had to act with 'good sense'? Discuss.
- \* Think of a person from real life, or literature who you think has demonstrated particularly 'bad sense'. Explain your answer in a short paragraph.



## 2. What are the benefits of acting out this virtue?

As we develop the habit of acting well, we will develop the habits of thinking well, or of perceiving what is required, or demanded by the situation and the circumstances we are in.

Without good sense we will target goals that fail to satisfy, or find ourselves trapped in unbecoming desires and satisfactions. Without 'good sense' there is no virtue. Living without 'good sense' can make us timorous, small-minded and rather selfish about our own selves and anxieties, not to mention foolish. It is 'bad sense' to be unfair, cowardly or overly indulgent!

## 3. When might I have to practise this virtue?

Whenever we are called to practise any virtue at all, the virtue of good sense will form part of that other virtue. It assists us in perceiving what kind of response the situation calls for, and how to reconcile the virtues, if and when they collide, or point towards contradictory actions. It forms the deliberation and evaluation part of every other virtue.

For example:

- \* Adam borrows £50 from Baruch. The virtue of justice demands that each person gets what they deserve. Justice demands, therefore, that Baruch reimburses Adam to the tune of £50.

But how and when shall it be paid back?

- \* If Adam lacked good sense, then he would never pay it back. He would simply not have the foresight or resolution to set aside the appropriate funds. Instead, he might delay the reimbursement until he had inherited some money, or go for an easy gain by gambling at the races.

Living with 'good sense' enables us to live vigorously and decisively, with vitality and a touch of moral nobility.

### Task 2

- \* Define 'timorous'.
- \* Talk about a person who you think has displayed particularly noble moral qualities. Explain what those qualities were, and how they acted with good sense.

- \* If Adam lacked good sense, he may also pressurise himself to pay it back too quickly, on terms that were personally disadvantageous.
- \* Alternatively, if he had good sense, then Adam would be able to reimburse according to his ability, and as soon as possible, to an agreed timeframe. He may, for instance, deposit £5 a week in a bank, with a view to paying the loan back as soon as possible. And, having determined that this is the just thing to do (which indeed it is), he would see his actions through until Baruch is reimbursed. It is also worth mentioning that Adam would have had the 'good sense' only to borrow what he could afford to pay back, and for things that were worth having.

### Task 3

- \* Show how 'good sense' can be used to help Adam decide whether he should borrow the money in the first place. What sorts of things will he need to consider?





## 4. Which desires or emotions may be alerting me to practise this virtue?

Every desire, emotion, or passion is an invitation to practise 'good sense'. It is good sense that moulds, transforms, and educates the emotions towards morally right actions.

For Example:

My emotions, instincts, impulses and desires tell me that:

- \* **I am angry because** I sense unfairness is at work here. But, I want to be a fair person, giving each what they deserve; I don't want to be harsh and cruel in doing this, neither do I want to be a 'push over'. Acting with good sense will transform my anger into fairness, guiding me in how to be fair in the situation.
- \* **I am afraid because** I sense danger is at work here. But I want to be a brave person, overcoming internal and external obstacles to being a fair person; I want to overcome my fears and do the right thing, without being reckless. I don't want to be a coward, neither do I want to be foolhardy, or rash. Acting with good sense will transform my fear, guiding me to choose the ways and things I have to do to be brave in whatever situation I am in.
- \* **I am craving because** I sense my appetites for food, knowledge, things (e.g. shoes or video games) and pleasure need fulfilling. But I want to live with self-control – I don't want to consume more than my share, or use others as ends to my own pleasure, neither do I want to starve to death. Acting with good sense will transform my instinctual cravings, guiding me to choose the ways and things that will lead me to strengthen self-control in whatever situation I am in.

- \* It helps us to weigh up the situation, the activity that is required in the situation and transform this into a decision that we can carry out to realise the good of human flourishing. Good sense guides and educates our emotions towards the roads that lead to this flourishing, to the building up of character, rather than the undermining of it.

### Task 4

- \* Choose one of the emotions (anger, fear, craving) listed above, or another emotion that you have experienced. Explain how practising the virtue of 'good sense' led you to act reasonably, educating your emotions. How did the situation turn out for you?

### Task 5

- \* Think of a situation when you have acted with 'bad sense'. Explain it to yourself in a short piece of writing.
  - \* What was the situation?
  - \* What did you do, or say?
  - \* What should you have said, or done to have improved the situation?



## SECTION 2: VIRTUE REASONING

### 1. What are my basic dispositions and inclinations in relation to this virtue?

#### Task 1

Which of the following best sums up your 'bent' in relation to 'good sense'? Check any words you don't understand.

- \* Am I **too hesitant**? Am I paralysed in my decision making, and in acting out the more virtuous action in my situations? Even if I am thorough in informing my decisions, and weighing them up in detail, am I too slow to act in a way that I conclude to be right?
- \* Am I **too impulsive**, or rash in my decision making. Do I act out what I hastily conclude would be the more virtuous action in situations? Do I neglect to

inform my position adequately, or jump to hasty conclusions about what needs to be done?

- \* Am I inclined to be **impressionable**, and easily influenced by others?
- \* Am I inclined to be **pertinacious**, or stubborn, doggedly sticking to my own views, even in the face of wiser advice?

Look back at the situation you defined in Section 1: Task 5 above. You had to identify a situation when you showed 'bad sense'.

Which of the above inclinations listed above best sums up the way in which you showed 'bad sense'? Were you hesitant, impulsive, impressionable, or stubborn?

### 2. How do I practise this virtue?

The virtue of good sense forms a part of every other virtue. Without good sense, there is no intentional virtue. These three stages form a part of reflection on every other virtue, and you will see these integrated in the subsequent Worksheets on this course.

#### Step 1: Deliberate:

**Inform the decision:** What information do you need in order to make a fuller, better informed decision?

- \* **By drawing upon your memory:** What kind of experience can I draw upon when approaching this problem? Which mistakes do I need to learn from? Which situations are similar? What have been my past patterns of behaviour when confronted with such situations? How has my past experience prepared, or shaped me to act virtuously in this situation?
- \* **By drawing upon your understanding:** What sorts of things need to be done?

- \* **By aiming high, and aspiring to be a fully flourishing human being:** What kind of person do I want to be in this situation? What standards of character do I wish to live up to? Which qualities of character do I want to develop? How can I use this situation as an opportunity to develop those qualities? How can I realise the good in this situation?
- \* **By learning:** How do I apply this knowledge to the present situation?

#### Step 2: Evaluate:

**Judge the relative merits, or ways of realising the good/moral virtue/human flourishing in the situation:** What weight will you give the differing elements of a situation and why? What are the relative merits of the different ways in which the virtue can be expressed, or practised?

- \* **Be thoughtful and sensitive:** What are the morally





relevant features of the situation? What is of value in the situation, and what is not of value? What kind of virtuous response is the situation calling for?

- \* **Be aware and look around:** How am I to give expression in this situation to being the kind of person I aspire to be – a just, brave and self-controlled one?
- \* **Be educable:** From whom do I need to take advice? Who will help my understanding of this situation? Can I admit that I don't 'know-it-all', and that I need some help here?
- \* **Be far-sighted:** Can I cut a path through this thicket of issues that will lead me to being the kind of person I aspire to be, living more virtuously? In what way shall I act to attain the goals that reason suggests? How will my actions serve my personal good? How will my actions serve the common good? How will my actions serve any other good, e.g. the good of my friends, my family, my school, my classmates, my team?

### Step 3: Decide and Do:

**Resolve and Command:** What will I do, how and when?

- \* How can I adapt my actions to the attainment of the goal of life – human flourishing – what is the right human action to realise this?
- \* What are the present conditions and circumstances that will impact upon my decision, both in terms of opportunities and constraints?
- \* Where do I need to act with restraint, or caution?
- \* Where do I need to act with complete freedom, unhindered?
- \* What is my resolution, or decision?
- \* How will I go about acting out my thoughts, evaluations and aspirations?

This is summarised below:

<b>Deliberations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* How have your past experiences helped you to think about this situation?</li> <li>* How can you apply the 'lessons of life' to this situation?</li> <li>* What kind of person do you hope to become in this situation?</li> </ul>
<b>Evaluation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* What are the morally relevant features of the situation and how have you weighted them?</li> <li>* To whom have you looked for advice, and/or inspiration, and why?</li> <li>* What might the implications of your decision be, both positively and negatively?</li> </ul>
<b>Decision/ Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* How will you give expression to the kind of person you hope to become in this situation? What will you do?</li> </ul>



## SECTION 3: VIRTUE PRACTICE

Should we encounter difficulties in the life of virtue, perhaps the best place to start looking to fix the problem may be examining ourselves in relation to the virtue of 'good sense'. Below is a more detailed guide that sets out how to do this. It helps us to reflect on the quality of our thinking about how best to handle situations that call for a moral response.

Are we inclined to be too hesitant, or too rash, for instance? If too hesitant, then we need to work to tighter deadlines; if too rash, then we need to plan our decision making more thoughtfully.

### Task 1

Look back at the scenario where you evaluated yourself as having acted with 'bad sense'. Work through each of the stages in the table on the next page, of deliberation, evaluation and deciding and doing. Show how you could have acted with 'good sense' in that situation. Use the white column as a prompt to your thoughts.

See how the principles set out in the table are worked out below.

#### Scenario:

A man living in England is offered a better job in Egypt. Should he accept or refuse?

- \* His wife has bad asthma, and the climate in England is much better for asthmatics than in Egypt.
- \* His wife's health is more important than the size of his income.

- \* But he is concerned that his employers will be disappointed with him and, that if he doesn't take this opportunity, they will withhold further opportunities from him.

#### What would we advise?

- \* Seek advice from someone
- \* Use foresight to evaluate the exact degree of danger to his wife
- \* Use foresight to evaluate the exact degree of danger to his career if he refuses to go
- \* If he refuses to go, can he give reasons that his employers might respect?
- \* He must be cautious not to endanger his whole future by his refusal, or through the way in which he refuses.

#### Outcome:

- \* He refuses to go to Egypt
- \* He explains his decision so well to his employers that he retains their respect

As you work through the succeeding resources, be sure to think through the quality of the thinking you do before you practise a virtue.

Use the information in this Chapter to:

- \* Think carefully about the situations that confront you
- \* Think about the quality of your thoughts

### A GOOD SENSE CHECKLIST

**I understand the moral point and purpose called for by the activity – I know which virtues the situation, or activity is calling me to practise and promote.**

**I understand how to balance out, or prioritise the clashing virtues.**

**I understand how to apply the guidelines I have learnt from experience and reflection.**

**I understand how my actions will be perceived by others.**

**I can specify what my emotions are alerting me to do.**

**I know how to practise the appropriate virtues to express the moral point of this activity.**





	<b>DEFICIENCIES ANXIOUS ABOUT ONE'S JUDGEMENT - TOO TIMID</b>	<b>GOOD SENSE</b>	<b>EXCESSES OVER-CONFIDENCE IN ONE'S JUDGEMENT</b>
<b>DELIBERATION</b> How are you going about your deliberations about what to do in this situation?	<b>HESITATION</b> Dishonest to oneself by omitting relevant details about the past (normally to adopt a 'can't do' stance).	Drawing upon experience Honest engagement with the past – not as we hoped it would be; not falsifying, retouching, displacing, discolouring, omitting, or accenting different aspects of it. Stillness and thoughtfulness	<b>RUSHING INTO DECISIONS</b> Superficial levels of thought Dishonest about oneself by adding in details about the past, or colouring it unduly for specific purposes (normally to adopt a 'I can do anything stance').
<b>EVALUATION OF THE PARTICULARS OF THE SITUATION</b> How much thought are you putting into weighing up the morally relevant features of the situation?	<b>CLOSED-MINDEDNESS; MORAL BLINDNESS; NEGLIGENCE</b> Unable to distinguish good advice from bad advice Setting one's sights too low – on pleasure, wealth, status and power	Open-mindedness to the range of possibilities Able to take advice – especially from friends Quick-wittedness – grasping a situation swiftly Clear-sighted objectivity in unexpected circumstances Foresight: evaluating whether a particular action will lead to the realisation of the goal – regardless of the elements of risk and uncertainty.	<b>'KNOW-IT-ALL' – OVER-CONFIDENT</b> Unable to take advice Cunning – using false ways to good goals; or, good ways to false goals. Insidiousness; guile; craft Unable to see how actions fail to contribute to a life of flourishing; insufficiently interested in the proper goals of human activity to take the means to live with good sense.
<b>DECIDE AND DO</b> How swift are you in enacting your resolutions?	<b>IRRESOLUTENESS</b> Fickleness; indecisiveness Overly anxious Overly hesitant – waiting for certainties that will never be; inconclusiveness, or a day-dreamer, never acting on aspirations. Remissness Unable to take a well-founded risk to act virtuously in a situation that calls for it. Demanding a level of certainty from ethical decision making that is simply impossible.	Application of thought into action – nimble-mindedness Deciding for the good, avoiding the pitfalls of injustice, cowardice and intemperance. Energetic promptness Swift performance Alertness Prepared to take a calculated risk, understanding that there are few certainties in ethical decision making: motive/ action/consequence	<b>RANDOM ACTION; FLITTING ABOUT</b> Clinging to false certainties Too rushed, slapdash and risky in action Impulsive and impatient; Acting with utter disregard to the risks of the situation.