

THE VIRTUE OF SELF-MASTERY



This Chapter is based on the interpretation, concepts, tools and some of the examples set out in Curzer, H.J. (2012) *Aristotle and the Virtues*, pp. 65-82 OUP. It also draws upon Pieper, J. *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, Notre Dame.

SECTION 1: VIRTUE KNOWLEDGE

Use the information in points 1 to 5 below to complete the Virtue Knowledge Worksheet. There are some questions at the end of this Section to help with your understanding.

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

The self-controlled man craves for the things he ought, as he ought, and when he ought.

Aristotle, NE (1119b16-17)

‘Just as the virtue of courage strengthens us in the face of things that terrify, or are destructive, the virtue of self-mastery helps us to preserve our lives’¹. Those who can exercise the virtue of self-mastery particularly well, have an excellent relationship with all of life’s sensual pleasures, including food, drink and, in its proper context, sex. They are able to regulate their desires and appetites for life’s good things – all those things that preserve, propagate and fulfil our lives.

- * They have developed the habit of **self-preservation**. With this, they have a healthy attitude towards the goods and persons of the world, not seeking for control, possession or exploitation of goods or persons. They use what is necessary to preserve and enrich their lives, taking neither too much nor too little. They have set healthy and personally appropriate limits to both abstinence and indulgence. As importantly, the person who has cultivated self-mastery is never disdainful towards those less advanced in attaining such mastery.
- * They have developed the habit of **self-assertion**. With this, they are able to speak their mind and act for the good in ways that are firm, but gentle. They neither disparage themselves, nor have inferiority complexes. They are never arrogant, or overbearing, self-important, or given to lording it over others. They can temper all their negative emotions, such as anger, bitterness or vengeance, being firm, but gentle with those around them.

- * They can protect the pathway to genuine **self-fulfilment**. At its most developed, those who have this virtue can identify meaningful and worthwhile tasks and stick at them, getting the very most out of them over a long period of time. They can control the impulses to instant gratification; they can also overcome their own laziness towards pursuits that are, at times, challenging, but ultimately genuinely satisfying and worthwhile. This is particularly the case in the pursuit of knowledge: those who have cultivated habits of self-control stick at the pursuit of knowledge, without flitting from task to task, or giving up easily. They can manage their studies such that their innate curiosity is supported, strengthened, and satisfied, rather than getting easily distracted.

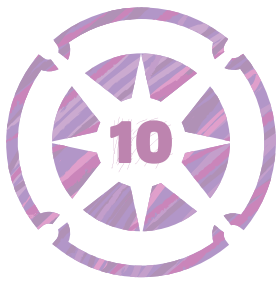
Those who can exercise greater self-mastery, can also regulate their desires for the pleasures that come from amusements, and stimulants, such as gambling, video games, shopping and recreational drugs. Excesses in these areas in particular can be unhealthy and unaffordable – they erode character, rather than build it. In fact, it is highly debatable whether items such as drugs or gambling can ever be right, and therefore, fall outside the scope of virtue – one cannot, for instance, take crack cocaine ‘in moderation’...

Indeed, as Aristotle would have it, the virtue of self-mastery covers, in particular:

The things that, being pleasant, make for health or good condition, the temperate person will desire moderately and as he should, and also other pleasant things if they are not hindrances to these ends, or contrary to what is noble, or beyond his means.

Aristotle, NE (1119a16-20)

¹ Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Aristotle’s NE



In sum, if we have strengthened this virtue we can:

- * control ourselves in areas where we find ourselves particularly attracted, such as in the fulfilment of sensual desires;
- * use our reason to control our sense appetites, preventing us from getting carried away, and thus retaining balance in relation to attraction to such goods – including the need to assert ourselves when we have to;
- * use our reason to control our aversion or disgust towards things that are good for us, and our pains at the absence of such pleasures.

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

The chief benefit of developing greater self-mastery, is that we get the fullest enjoyment possible out of food, drink, knowledge, and, when it becomes appropriate, sex. Going wrong in respect of this virtue means we either consume too much, or take on too little of life's basic necessities – and we squander our energies and efforts, or hasten our death. This is bad, because it is life denying, rather than life affirming.

The virtue of self-mastery also enables us to live lives of simplicity and freedom. It is neither cluttered by

unnecessary things, nor driven by over-powering, and ultimately destabilising, or destructive desires. It enables us to moderate our pleasures and enjoy the good things of existence, in a balanced and healthy way.

This virtue is the perfect antidote to the consumer age and an age that demands instant gratification. It liberates us from enslavements to things we think we want, but don't really need – and it curbs our laziness, our gluttony and our avarice.

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3. When might I have to practise this virtue?

- * Whenever you wish to preserve your life through eating and drinking
- * Whenever you desire to assert yourself in company with others
- * Whenever you wish to stick at tasks that are worthwhile, but challenging – like studying worthwhile issues!

4. Which emotions alert me to the need to practise this virtue?

When you recognise a desire for pleasurable things, such as food, drink, sex, amusement or knowledge. If these desires are so strong that you feel overpowered by them, then you need to practise the virtue of

self-mastery; or, if your desires towards these things disgust or pain you, then you need to practise the virtue of self-mastery.





5. Some Dilemmas: Checking for Understanding

- a. Look back at Question 1: What can those who have this virtue do particularly well? Come up with two examples for each aspect of Self-Mastery that illuminate how people might fail in virtue, in relation to self-preservation, self-assertion and self-fulfilment. One example should be a failure of 'deficiency', another example would be a failure of 'excess'.

For example:

- * Self-Preservation – Excess:
Joseph eats 3 large chocolate muffins a day.
 - * Self-Preservation - Deficiency:
Jenny refuses to eat any fruit or veg.
 - * Self-assertion – Excess:
 - * Self-assertion – Deficiency:
 - * Self-fulfilment – Excess:
 - * Self-fulfilment – Deficiency:
Jack is simply not interested in the world around him.
- b. Can you suggest remedies for each of the examples you have given above? How would you advise them to grow in the virtue of self-mastery?
- c. Match Aristotle's statements on Self-Mastery (1-4) with the examples below (a-d):

Aristotle's statements:

1. *The self-indulgent man is so called because he is pained more than he ought at not getting pleasant things (even his pain being caused by pleasure)*
2. *The temperate man is so called because he is not pained at the absence of what is pleasant and at his abstinence from it.*
3. *The self-indulgent man, then, craves, for all pleasant things or those that are most pleasant... hence he is pained both when he fails to get them and when he is craving for them (for appetite involves pain...)*
4. *The temperate man...neither enjoys the things that the self-indulgent man enjoys most – but rather dislikes*

them... nor does he feel pain or craving when they are absent, or does so only to a moderate degree.

Aristotle, NE (1118b30-1119a14)

Examples

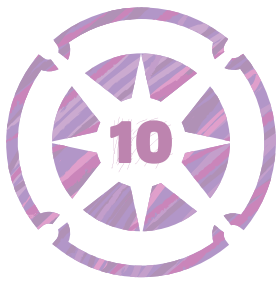
- a. He might say, for instance: *'My failure to have five large iced chocolate milkshakes today has ruined it!'*
- b. He might say, for instance: *'I have a minor twinge of regret at not being able to guzzle four delicious iced chocolate milkshakes today, but we had a wonderful day nonetheless on 1 chocolate milkshake'.*
- c. He might say, for instance: *'I really have to have this particular brand of iced chocolate milkshake, and my failure to get this will ruin the day and everyone else's fun. So there.'*
- d. He might say, for instance: *'Those iced chocolate milkshakes are so rich, really one is enough; in fact, to guzzle two in one day would be disgusting'.*

What about addictions and illnesses connected to food, drink, shopping, etc., such as anorexia, obesity and alcoholism?

Aristotle takes the view that for some, failures in self-mastery can be the result of pathological medical or mental issues, rather than moral failings. For these, he prescribes pity and therapy, rather than censure.

The broad hallmarks of those who may be in this bracket, with regard to self-control are those who:

1. Have particularly extreme desires for or aversions to objects that others desire only moderately, e.g. eating disorders and alcoholism could be covered by this, or;
2. Have desires for objects that differ from those desired by others, e.g. they may wish to eat humans, coal, or dirt, drink petrol, methylated spirits, or weed killer, or, desire to have sex with blood relatives, children, or animals. According to Aristotle, these lack discrimination, and should be seeking specialised help.



Here, for instance, is how he would analyse self-control in relation to alcoholic drink:

| THE ADDICT SAYS: | ARISTOTLE SAYS: |
|--|---|
| I take way too much (of the wrong things) | Then you need therapy and medical treatment |
| I take way too much (of the wrong things), but won't admit it | Admit the problem and cut back! |
| I take way too much and regret it! | Get a grip – and get a life! |
| I like to integrate my drinking into appropriate culinary, social, or relaxation moments, but I never do this to excess. | Well done! Keep up the good work! |

Discuss in pairs:

- * Drug addiction: illness or moral failing?
- * Cigarette addiction: illness or moral failing?
- * X-Box addiction: illness, or moral failing?
- * What's the chief difference between an illness and a 'moral failing'?
- * If addiction can be changed without medication, is it really an illness?

SECTION 2: VIRTUE REASONING

1. Identifying our basic dispositions and inclinations in relation to this virtue.

Task 1

Use this as a guide to evaluating the strength of your emotions with regard to food, drink, amusements and knowledge.

Think of an object which you really desire, which falls under the description of: food, drink, amusement/entertainment, knowledge, or thing. It could be as simple as eating a banana, or, it could be as problematic as your 4th pair of shoes.

Now, with that object in mind, ask yourself:

- a. What is the **strength of my desire** for the right objects, to the right amounts, on the right occasions? Could you give a number, 1 (low) to 10 (high) to reflect the strength of your desire?

- b. What is the **depth of my enjoyment** of, or delight in consuming or possessing this object? Could you give a number, 1 (low) to 10 (high) to reflect the strength of your desire?

How much delight do you take in the things that are appropriate objects for desire?

- * Are you governed by them?
- * In control of your desires for them?
- * Utterly pained by the thought of not having them?

Remember: enjoyment can be excessive if it leads to excessive desire or action. Enslaving ourselves to pleasure at all costs can blind us to other important issues, e.g. in the words of Aristotle, to 'beliefs about what is to be done'.





It is also important to note that to enjoy any wrong object at all is to enjoy it too much. So, if I enjoy space cakes, alcohol under the age of 18, or sex outside the context of permanence, then I have erred with regard to enjoyment. They are simply not objects that are fitting for that stage of my life, given its circumstances. Similarly, to drink weed-killer for pleasure is to err grossly.

Excessive enjoyment can lead us to consume unhealthy, unaffordable or degrading objects – objects not fitting for consumption, and therefore not within the remit of self-mastery. In fact, in respect to those objects, Aristotle would suggest that we seek therapy, before venturing further on the path to virtue!

- c. How **sharp is my pain** at not having my desires or cravings satisfied? If I said you couldn't have the object you desired, how disappointed would you be on a scale 1 (low disappointment) to 10 (high disappointment).

The self-controlled are not pained at an unsatisfied bodily desire; they may, however, be pained at food or drink that was distasteful, but their pain would only be to the right degree. For the self-indulgent, pain might lead to tantrums and mood swings; for the insensible (those indifferent to life's pleasures), they would take pain when they should be taking pleasure in food, drink, amusements, etc.

- 1. Record your reflections on this grid. Here is a worked example:

| OBJECT | PIZZA |
|------------------------------------|-------|
| Strength of desire | 4 |
| Depth of enjoyment | 8 |
| Sharpness of pain at not having it | 8 |

(You could use something like this as a guide to whether or not you should indulge in a pleasure).

- 2. Discuss your reflections with your partner. Try it with a few objects, or things and see if you can see a pattern. Where do you think you currently are in relation to the virtue of self-mastery, especially when it comes to things that give you genuine pleasure. These could include, for instance, sugary products, caffeine or fatty foods. Have a go and see what you can come up with!

THOUGHT BOX:
Ain't that a shame?
Is it, really?

What is 'shame'?

When do we experience it?

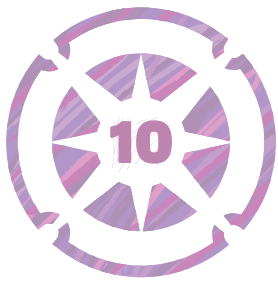
Why do we experience it?

What role, if any, does it play in growth in virtue?

Discuss your views on the piece below, saying whether you agree with it, or disagree with it. Remember to give reasons for your answers:

Sometimes we can be motivated to exercise greater self-control through a sense of shame at having eaten too much, drunk too much, or engaged in debauched behaviour. Shame is driven by a sense of personal disappointment at having knowingly done something ignoble. This can be dishonourable or disgraceful, especially when people find out! Shame can contribute a great deal to growth in the virtue of self-control: it instils in us a horror of what dishonours us. Its contrast is honour, which consists in a certain gracefulness and beauty of spirit: it contributes to self-control by involving repulsion to what is most disgraceful and unfitting for men; namely the pleasures of the non-rational animals.²

²Adapted from Curzer, Aristotle and the Virtues



2. Evaluating my options and choices for practicing this virtue

Choosing rightly is to choose in accord with reason, rather than with basic desire or instinct. This means that we make the sorts of choices that are becoming to us as human beings. 'Choosing rightly' means that we can do better than to act at the behest of our basic instincts or impulses. Someone who avoids taking pleasure in what is needed to survive is situated in the 'insensible' camp. 'Insensible' means that we are unresponsive to the pleasures of those things we should rightly be taking pleasure in. The person, for example who is bored by food, could be insensible. The other excess, or extreme, is that of self-indulgence. Those who are self-indulgent desire pleasure without great need for it. Sometimes, they ruin their bodies in the process.

The golden mean of self-mastery is relative to us: what is right for a jockey to eat, will differ from a prop forward in rugby; what is right for a 6 foot male to eat, aged 80, will differ from a 5ft female aged 14, and so on. Here are some initial considerations to becoming more self-controlled:

- * How much do I really need the object of my desire to live? I may want it, but do I really need it?
- * Will that which I desire hinder my health or welfare? Do I desire and enjoy all sensual pleasures, except those that are unhealthy, unaffordable, or degrading?
- * Do I desire the right things to the right amount?

Here are some more refined considerations:

1. What is, or are the objects of desire?

- * How many different sorts of things do you desire?

- * Do you desire too many, or too few?
- * Are they the right sorts of things to desire, or should they be 'off-limits' to you, for fear that they may be unhealthy, unaffordable, degrading or destructive?

2. What is the strength of desire for the object?

- * Notice, this is not about amounts of the object, but about amounts of desire for the object. So, desiring large amounts of pizza, should be covered, by #1 above; but having a strong desire for pizza, such that I would gobble up a 36" piece single-handedly could put me wrong with regard to strength of desire.
- * What lengths am I prepared to go to in order to get the object of my desire? Inconvenience myself, or others? Spend more than I can reasonably afford? Make myself go broke? Steal?

3. What is the amount of enjoyment taken in the object?

- * Can I see beyond this enjoyment, or am I totally enslaved to wallowing in its pleasures?

4. What is the occasion, or circumstance for the satisfaction of the desire?

- * Is it appropriate to satisfy my desire now?

5. What is the amount of pain experienced through non-satisfaction of the desire?

- * How pained am I at the thought at not having my desires gratified?





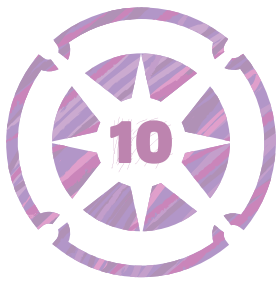
Task 2

Below are some situations. See if you can break down each scenario and explain where and how each individual is failing in the virtue of self-mastery: objects; strength of desire; depth of enjoyment; occasions; feelings at non-satisfaction of desire. The first one has been done for you.

- A. Zeta loves to eat dressed crab when she goes to the coast. She is at the coast. Despite its being on the menu, the restaurant has run out of crab. Her sulk about this ruins everyone else’s meal.³
- B. Yeni is a very busy person. She sees food primarily as functional fuel. Her husband has cooked her a lovely dinner for their evening together. She wolfs it down, rushing through it to get to the pudding. She even complained about how it had been cooked – without any real basis for complaint. When challenged, she said she was not that bothered about food.
- C. Terry loves to impress his customers when he takes them out. He buys very expensive bottles of wine for them – wine which his business cannot really afford. One evening, he takes his customers out. There are a range of options to suit differing price brackets on the wine menu. Again, he opts for the most ostentatious wine to regale his customers with. That said, they all enjoyed it.
- D. Wayne loves to binge drink at parties. He thinks it makes him more entertaining. (It doesn’t).
- E. Suzi is always on a faddish diet, with a view to losing weight as quickly as possible. She is currently on one and has to eat crabsticks all of the time. She loathes crabsticks, but thinks it’s worth it to be slimmer for her holiday. Her boyfriend agrees with her. He encourages her to persevere, even though her BMI is already perfectly balanced.
- F. Now, think up your own scenarios and pass them round to each other –the more imaginative the better! Remember, it needn’t be food, but also other things covered by the virtue of self-mastery.

| SCENARIO ONE | THINGS/ OBJECTS | STRENGTH OF DESIRE | DEPTH OF ENJOYMENT | OCCASION, OR CIRCUMSTANCE | PAIN, OR DISAPPOINTMENT AT NON-SATISFACTION OF DESIRE |
|--------------|----------------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| A | Crab – a fitting thing to desire | Right to desire it– especially on a night out! | Right amount of enjoyment in it – potentially | Right to want to eat it when dining out with friends, especially at the coast. | Wrong to be pained excessively at the lack of it. |
| B | | | | | |
| C | | | | | |

³ Zeta has failed in the extent of her pain at not having what she wants!



Task 3:

Think ahead towards the coming week. Either, think of all the situations in which you will have to use the virtue of self-mastery; or, work through the examples that have been given.

In relation to what things, or objects, could you exercise the virtue of self-control more fully?

Write down way in which you need to exercise self-control for each of the following categories:

- * **Self-preservation** in relation to food, drink and all the things necessary to live
- * **Self-assertion** in relation to making your presence felt, without being either a 'doormat' that gets walked over, or being overbearing, that seeks to dominate and impose yourself unfittingly on others.
- * **Self-fulfilment** in relation to all of the things that either provides pleasurable amusement, or entertainment, or that might distract you from worthwhile pursuits – including your studies!

Example:

- * **Self-preservation:** Having to eat my 'five a day' – especially when Mum puts them in my dinner.
- * **Self-assertion:** Making sure I have my say in group work this week.
- * **Self-fulfilment:** Making sure that I limit the amount of time I spend playing on the X-Box; making sure that I spend the right amount of time in the pursuit of knowledge by doing my homework.

Now, for each of the above examples, or your examples, use the second part of the Virtue Reasoning Tool over the page to find the Golden Mean for you!

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.

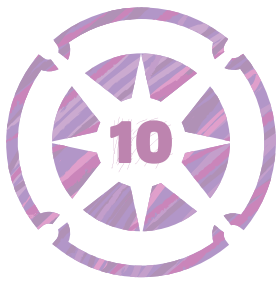
I know how to practise the appropriate virtues to express the moral point of this activity.





| FINDING THE GOLDEN MEAN | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
| | UNDERDOING IT | THE GOLDEN MEAN | OVERDOING IT |
| | Which emotions, desires, and actions would be expressive of underdoing it in relation to self-preservation, assertion, or fulfilment? | Which emotions, desires and actions would be spot on, in giving expression to the virtue(s) required to handle this situation? | Which emotions, desires, and actions would be expressive of overdoing it in relation to self-preservation, assertion, or fulfilment? |
| CHARACTERISTICS | Insensible, or unfeeling; mechanical; deficient | Self-controlled: desiring the right sort of thing, to the right amount, and enjoying it to the right depth, on the right occasion, and pained to the right degree at non-enjoyment of it. | Self-indulgent, or excessive |
| OBJECTS OF DESIRE | What will it look like for me to have fewer things than I actually need? If I... | What will it look like if I want the right things? Give examples. | What will it look like to have more things than I really need? If I... |
| STRENGTH OF DESIRE FOR THAT PARTICULAR OBJECT | How will my behaviour be expressive of too little desire for those things? | How will my behaviour of the right amount of desire for each thing? | How will my behaviour be expressive of too much desire for those things? |
| AMOUNT OF ENJOYMENT TAKEN IN THE OBJECT | How will my behaviour be expressive of too little enjoyment? | How will my behaviour be expressive of the right amount of enjoyment in the thing? | How will my behaviour be expressive of enslavement to the objects? |
| OCCASION, OR CIRCUMSTANCE FOR THE SATISFACTION OF THE DESIRE | What would be the wrong occasion to enjoy the things I had highlighted? | Right occasion? | N/A |
| AMOUNT OF PAIN EXPERIENCED THROUGH THE NON-SATISFACTION OF THE DESIRE | How would my behaviour be expressive of too little pain at not missing good and tasty things? | Twinge of regret at missing out/having slightly too much. | How would my behaviour be expressive of too much pain at missing good things? |





SECTION 3: VIRTUE PRACTICE

Task 1

Look back at the actions you identified as representing 'the Golden Mean' of Self-Mastery for you. Did you hit the mean? Or did you overdo, or underdo it in significant respects?

Discuss how it went with your partner.

Now, use the grid below, to evaluate how you performed in each of the categories of self-preservation, self-assertion and self-fulfilment.

| STATES OF CHARACTER | ARE MY DESIRES AND PLEASURES: | ARE MY CHOICES AND DECISIONS ABOUT HOW TO ACT OUT THE VIRTUE OF SELF-CONTROL: | HOW WELL DID I CARRY OUT THE DECISION TO ACT WITH GREATER SELF-CONTROL |
|---|-------------------------------|---|--|
| VIRTUOUS: SPOT ON | Right | Right | Right |
| CONTINENT: GOT THERE THROUGH GRITTED TEETH | Wrong | Right | Right |
| INCONTINENT: KNEW WHAT THE RIGHT THING TO DO WAS, BUT GOT CARRIED AWAY | Wrong | Right | Wrong |
| I NEED TO RE-COMMIT TO THINKING THROUGH AND GROWING IN THE LIFE OF VIRTUE | Wrong | Wrong | Wrong |

Which areas do you need to work on in relation to the virtue of self-mastery? Think again in relation to:

- * Self-Preservation
- * Self-Assertion
- * Self-Fulfilment

Which upcoming situations will call for you to continue practising the virtue of self-mastery?

How will you go about it? Use the Virtue Reasoning Guidelines and Virtue Practice Table to continue working on your growth in the virtue of self-mastery.

