

# THE VIRTUE OF HUMOUR



This Chapter is based upon the interpretation found in Curzer, H.J. (2012) *Aristotle and the Virtues*, OUP

## SECTION 1: VIRTUE KNOWLEDGE

- \* Find some examples of controversial cases where offensive humour has been used publicly.
- \* Is it ever morally wrong to use humour to offend and wound people?
- \* Both the comedian Frankie Boyle and Jeremy Clarkson have been involved in some high profile cases of this nature.
- \* Isn't it the job of the comedian to test the limits of taste and to challenge the unspeakable?

Use the following information to complete the Virtue Knowledge Template

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

*It is the mark of a tactful man to say and listen to such things as befit a good and well-bred man; there are some things that it befits such a man to say and to hear by way of jest.*

*Aristotle, NE, (1128a17-20)*

Those who have developed this virtue are able to speak and listen well. They say what is becoming, without inflicting pain on others, and they refuse to stand by and let tactless or hurtful jokes go unchallenged.

- \* They can differentiate between what is disrespectful and what is just a bit of harmless banter, or fun.
- \* They can take a joke, sometimes at their own expense, or at the expense of the things they value.
- \* They have good taste in humour and act such that those around them do, too.
- \* They are particularly skilled at fielding comments or jokes that are in bad taste.
- \* They will tolerate jokes that they are unwilling to tell, and know how to interact with those around them constructively and tactfully.
- \* When called to challenge the tactless and indiscreet, they are neither blunt nor sanctimonious – like the tactless and indiscreet.

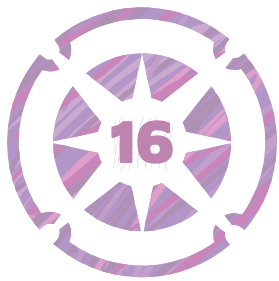
### 2. What are the benefits of acting out this virtue?

Practising this virtue oils the wheels of social intercourse; oiling the wheels of social intercourse can make for a more amiable and considerate life, where consideration is shown for others through the medium of speech.

What does being amusing bring to social intercourse?

- \* Being amusing, or allowing oneself to be amused, is a good vehicle towards promoting warmth of feeling. This is preferable to shaming, or offending others, or to being ashamed of, or embarrassed by, others.
- \* Being amusing raises the morale of those within a group. It can make light of heavy things, or penetrate to the truth of those that are too light, or too heavy.
- \* Being amusing in the right way and at the right time prevents ourselves or others from being hurt or pained by the criticism of others.





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

The virtue of humour can be practised in any situation where there are other people with whom you wish to promote an atmosphere of congeniality and sociability.

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

The desire to be sociable - to express and share friendly feelings with others through the medium of language - is highly suggestive of the need to practise the virtue of humour.

When we experience a desire to be amusing as a means to strengthening the bonds of social intercourse, or to mark out closeness with others, we need to practise this virtue.

### 5. Some Dilemmas to Check for Understanding

- \* Construct some scenarios that call for the virtue of humour. Use the preceding material to help.

## SECTION 2: VIRTUE REASONING

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

Use a dictionary to find definitions of the following terms:

- \* Buffoon
- \* Boorish
- \* Witty

*Those who carry humour to excess are thought to be vulgar buffoons, striving after humour at all costs, and aiming rather at raising a laugh than at saying what is becoming and at avoiding pain to the object of their fun; while those who can neither make a joke themselves nor put up with those who do are thought to be boorish and unpolished. But those who joke in a tasteful way are called ready witted... To the middle state belongs tact.*

*Aristotle, NE, (1128a4-17)*

**Some of us may tend towards buffoonery.** Buffoons tell distasteful and tactless jokes that are repellent. They intend to be offensive, crude and coarse. They embarrass, hurt and wound through language, or, more cringingly, through gesture. They have insufficient regard for the feelings and sensitivities of others.

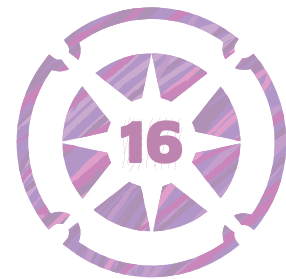
**Others, though, may tend towards boorishness.**

Boors are overly sensitive, overly worried about hurting the feelings of others. They exercise a repressive atmosphere on social occasions. When they are present, it is as if someone has pulled a funeral pall over the occasion. They refrain from telling jokes on certain occasions because they wrongly believe these jokes to be hateful. They can be overly cautious, or uptight about the sensibilities of others. They are marked by being excessively touchy and prickly with regard to themselves and on behalf of others. Those who tend towards boorishness are persistent fault finders. They have too much regard for their own feelings and the feelings of others. Boors take no delight in fun discourse.

*The boor, again, is useless for such social intercourse; for he contributes nothing and finds fault with everything. But relaxation and amusement are thought to be a necessary element in life.*

*Aristotle, NE, (1128b1-4)*





## 2. What are my options or choices for practising this virtue?

Here are some considerations that might help us to think through when and how to be amusing, with a view to promoting group cohesion, rather than freezing, or undermining it:

1. **Object:** what is the target, or object of the wit and how fitting is it?
2. **Strength/Amount:** what strength of feeling for those around me will the wit give expression to? Do I know the group well enough to be amusing in this sort of way? Am I in mixed company? What is right for the 'rugby lads', for instance, may not be appropriate for meeting one's girlfriend's parents for the first (or indeed, last) time.
3. **People:** who is my audience – who could I offend or alienate with this comment/joke?
4. **Occasion:** is this really a fitting occasion for this sort of joke/comment?

### Some further guidelines – according to a recent interpreter of Aristotle:<sup>1</sup>

A certain joke may be hurtful or offensive in some situations, and tasteful and tactful in others (relative to us); it is for the witty person to determine this. But who is the witty person? Here are some refinements:

*The jest is a sort of abuse, and there are things that lawgivers forbid us to abuse; and they should, perhaps, have forbidden us even to make a jest of such.*

Aristotle, NE, (1128a30-1)

- \* **Criterion 1:** Might the listeners find my comment hateful? If so, then this kind of humour is not called for.

This, for instance, would rule out elderly person jokes at the funeral of an elderly person. The listeners, and relatives in particular, would be right to find this hateful.

- \* **Criterion 2:** Acceptable jokes should not be told to people who do not recognise their acceptability.

Ethnic jokes seem to be acceptable between those of a shared ethnicity. Ensure that joker and butt are of the same socio-cultural, or ethno-religious background, if making jokes of this nature. This follows the principle that laughing at oneself is better than being laughed at.

- \* **Criterion 3:** Do not listen to hateful jokes and do not tell jokes that are hateful or could be perceived by your listeners to be hateful.

Avoid hearing or telling hateful jokes. Either: try to put a positive construction on the joke to help the joker out – if you feel it is worth it and will have a constructive effect; or, pass over the comment in silence (and with raised eyebrows); or, walk away; or, challenge, but gently.

Be unamused by indecent or improper language. How will you communicate this lack of amusement? A hard stare, perhaps?

Discuss the issue of censorship of comedians in the light of this criteria.

What do you think is within limits and what do you think is off-limits? Apply Aristotle's criteria set out above – where does it take us on this issue?

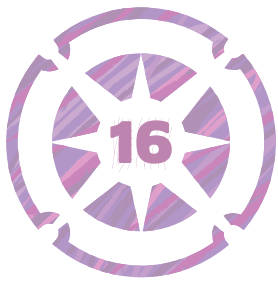
### Thinking Back:

Think back at times when you have been humorous.

- \* What do your jokes or comments say about the kind of person you are?
- \* What inferences might others make about you from them? Would they infer that you were witty, a buffoon, or a boor?  
Should we be concerned if we keep company with those who enjoy the following lines in comments, or joking?

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Curzer, H.J. (2012) Aristotle and the Virtues, pp. 177-179, (OUP)





Discuss:

- \* What do my pleasure and pain reactions to the jokes I tell and tolerate indicate about my character in spheres other than wit? Do they warn of possible problems of character?
- \* Do habitual sexist jokes suggest an unjust attitude towards those of an opposing sex?
- \* Do habitual religious jokes suggest a lack of warmth and understanding towards those with whom we disagree in religion?
- \* Do habitual jokes about issues connected with sex and sexuality or innuendo suggest that one is personally 'unsorted' with regard to the issue of chastity?
- \* Does habitual self-critical humour suggest low self-esteem or lack of self-confidence?
- \* Do habitual jokes about the disabled suggest a disdain towards the disabled?
- \* Does the habitual enjoyment of racist jokes suggest an unjust attitude towards those of other races?

### Thinking Forward:

- \* Would you be horrified if your teacher told jokes to you in the classroom, that you would probably only hear from your friends outside of the classroom? Why? Why not?
- \* What kinds of jokes would you consider to be off-limits for the class you are in? Why?
- \* Think through upcoming situations in which you will be humorous, or encounter the attempts at humour from others. Think through a situation that requires you to be:
  - \* Good humoured to promote the cohesion of the group
  - \* Responsive to the good humour of others
  - \* Responsive to the bad humour of others
- \* How will you give expression to your desire to promote the unity and cohesion of the groups of which you will be part? Use the Finding the Golden Mean Template to think this through, arriving at some clear attitudes, behaviours and 'actions'.

UNDERDOING IT	WIT & WARMTH	OVERDOING IT
Actions expressive of boorishness would, in my case, be:	Actions and words that would promote the unity of the group would include:  Actions that show that I take pleasure in witty comment include:  Actions that show that I am pained at bad humour, include:	Actions expressive of buffoonery would, in my case, be:





**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.**

## SECTION 3: VIRTUE PRACTICE

Think back to the situations in which you either had to show good humour, or to respond to the good and bad humour of others. Use the Examined Life Tool below to evaluate how well you are growing in the virtue of good humour!

STATES OF CHARACTER	ARE MY DESIRES, EMOTIONS, PLEASURES AND PAINS WITH REGARD TO PROMOTING WIT WITH WARMTH: [CAN I USE WIT TO PROMOTE WARMTH AND SOCIABILITY; CAN I REGISTER MY DISAPPROVAL FOR HUMOUR THAT IS IN BAD TASTE?]	ARE MY CHOICES AND DECISIONS ABOUT HOW TO ACT OUT THE VIRTUE OF WIT WITH WARMTH:	HOW WELL DID I CARRY OUT THE DECISION TO ACT WITH GREATER 'WIT WITH WARMTH'?  REMEMBER: DID I TAKE PLEASURE IN DOING THE RIGHT THING WELL?  WAS I PAINED BY DOING THE WRONG THING?
<b>VIRTUOUS: SPOT ON</b>	Rightly because...	Rightly because...	Rightly because...
<b>CONTINENT: GOT THERE THROUGH GRITTED TEETH</b>	Wrongly because...	Rightly because...	Rightly because...
<b>INCONTINENT: KNEW WHAT THE RIGHT THING TO DO WAS, BUT GOT CARRIED AWAY</b>	Wrongly because...	Rightly because...	Wrongly because...
<b>VICIOUS: I NEED A RETHINK HERE</b>	Wrongly because...	Wrongly because...	Wrongly because...

Make some resolutions about how and when to practise the virtue of good humour and continue to examine yourself in the light of it! Have fun!