

THE VIRTUE OF GOOD TEMPER



This Chapter is based upon the interpretation of Curzer, H.J. (2012) Aristotle and the Virtues, pp. 143-165 (OUP)

SECTION 1: VIRTUE KNOWLEDGE

Use Questions 1 to 5 below to help to complete the Virtue Knowledge Template

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

Use a dictionary to build your glossary of any adjectives, or terms you don't understand.

Those who have cultivated the virtue of good temper are able to cope with snubs, slights and rudeness in all their forms and even more serious injustices that have been suffered and are in need of retaliation or redress. The amiable can cope with all expressions of dishonour or disrespect. They react constructively to slights and put downs of themselves and their friends. They can also handle those who tend towards churlishness, bragging, and buffoonery, as well as to those who are cowardly, niggardly and spiteful.

Those who are advanced in the virtue feel anger appropriately, to the right degree and carry out acts that arise from it rightly. This virtue helps us to use our anger fruitfully in situations where it has been provoked, and we have been dishonoured, or disrespected. Those with this virtue make the right choices about how angry to be and how severely to retaliate in response to insults and injustice.

Aristotle gives a full account of the virtue here:

The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought when he ought, and as long as he ought is praised. This will be the good tempered man, then, since good temper is praised

Aristotle, NE, (1125b31-1126a27)

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

Those who have cultivated this virtue take delight in:

- * Restoring their rights, having suffered injustices of harsh or ignorant treatment at the hands of others.
- * Restoring their own, or somebody else's honour when it has been infringed upon. They can redress injustices and rectify difficult situations with a suave and deft touch.

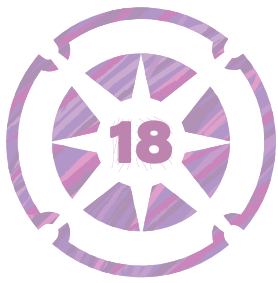
- * Challenging the harms that can arise from being too malleable, letting oneself be walked over, or treated roughly, for fear of confrontation. This ensures that they circumvent personal frustrations at not having been more constructive in their challenges.

3. When might I have to practise this virtue?

Whenever we feel that we have been unfairly deprived of our honour or the respect that is rightfully due to us, we need to practise the virtue of good temper. We may, for instance, be good tempered by nature, but, it is when we are tested by (psychologically) rough treatment at the hands of others, that we need to practise this virtue.

The situations in which one must exert oneself to claim respect are the situations in which one has been treated with disrespect or dishonour. It is particularly when we have to encounter churlish, critical, or contentious individuals that we need to develop and practise our good temper.





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

The virtue of good temper governs:

- * Our anger
- * Our desire for honour
- * Our desire to be respected and well-treated by others

Anger is perhaps the best indication that we need to practise the virtue of good-temperedness. As Aristotle has it:

Anger may be defined as a desire accompanied by pain, for a conspicuous retaliation for a conspicuous slight at the hands of men who have no call to slight oneself or one's friends... Now slighting is the actively entertained opinion of something as obviously of no importance
(Rhet. 1378a30-b12).

There are three kinds of slighting – contempt, spite, insolence. Contempt is one kind of slighting: you feel contempt for what you consider unimportant. Spite is another kind; it is a thwarting of another man's wishes, not to get something yourself but to prevent his getting it... Insolence is also a form of slighting, since it consists in doing and saying things that cause shame to the victim, not in order that anything may happen to yourself, or because anything has happened to yourself, but simply for the pleasure involved
(Rhet. 1378b14-25).

Anger should be directed at those who treat us less well than they treat everybody else; it is another mark of contempt that they should think we do not deserve what everyone else deserves

(Rhet 1379b32-3).

So, if our anger is provoked by the following rough treatments...

- * **Contempt** – we have been overlooked, or treated as if we are of no significance, at all - unjustly, in our view; we may, for instance, have been treated unfairly.
- * **Spite** - we have been prevented from receiving certain goods, or recognition to which we were entitled, or deserved; we may, for instance have had our property, or our person dishonoured, or disrespected.
- * **Insolence** – we have been on the receiving end of actions, or comments that have left us feeling ashamed, or embarrassed;

...then, we need to think through how we will practise the virtue of becoming better tempered.

Here is how Robert C. Roberts defines the related emotions in his excellent *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*, Robert C. Roberts (2003), CUP:

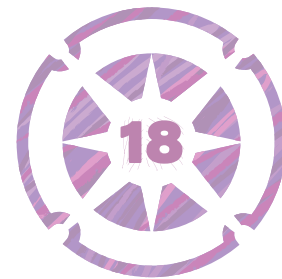
Hatred: *X is evil and worthy of damage, suffering and destruction; may X be damaged, hurt, or destroyed.*

Disgust, Repugnance: *X is repulsive and worthy to be shunned; may it depart from me.*

Contempt: *P is markedly inferior and unworthy in X important ways, yet he (it) obtrudes, pretending to equal status and worth; may he (it) be put in his (its) place.*

Also, do note in particular the emotions discussed in relation to the Virtue of Friendliness and Civility above.





5. Some Dilemmas to Check Understanding

Use the information in the Virtue Knowledge Section to construct 3 scenarios that illuminate situations where the virtue of good temper is required. One has been done for you as an example.

- * Being treated with contempt: *Felicity did not receive the recognition she felt was due to her from her team mates. Nobody thought her contribution to the team was important, despite it being very important in point of fact. She finds out that her friends have made unkind remarks about her performance in a game on Facebook.*
- * Being treated with spite:
- * Being on the receiving end of insolence:
- * Any other scenario where you think that the virtue of good temperedness is required:

Discuss how Mother Teresa exemplified the virtue of good temper in this situation:

One day, Mother Teresa was asking a baker for some bread to feed the hungry children in her orphanage. The baker was furious with her request. Not only did he turn her down, but he spat at her. In response to this, Mother Teresa calmly reached deep into her pocket, took out her handkerchief, wiped the spit off and said

“That was for me, now what about some bread for my poor children.”

“No matter who says what, you should accept it with a smile and do your own work.”

Mother Teresa

SECTION 2: VIRTUE REASONING

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

Those who are not angry at the things they should be are thought to be unwise, and so are those who are not angry in the right way, at the right time, or with the right persons...

The excess can be manifested in all the points for one can be angry with the wrong persons, at the wrong things, more than is right, too quickly, or too long; yet all are not found in the same person...

Now **hot-tempered** people get angry quickly and with the wrong persons and at the wrong things and **Choleric** people are quick-tempered and ready to be angry with everything on every occasion; whence their name.

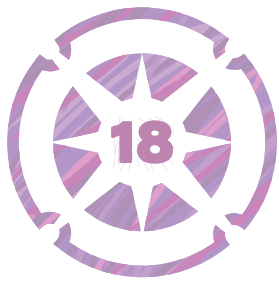
Sulky people are hard to appease, and retain their anger long...

We call **bad-tempered** those who are angry at the wrong things, more than is right, and longer, and cannot be appeased until they inflict vengeance or punishment.

Consider:

- * How do you respond when you have been treated with verbal contempt, verbal spite, or verbal insolence?
 - * Have you ‘seen red’, or lost control?
 - * Have you struck out at others verbally, and lashed them with acidic and cutting remarks?
 - * Have you seethed with resentment, sulked, and generally been in bad spirits?
 - * Which of the character inclinations (hot-tempered, choleric, sulky, bad-tempered) do you identify with most? Be honest!
1. **Occasion:** when do I get angry – when do I respond to the provocation?
 2. **Object:** about what do I get angry – what’s provoking me?





3. **People:** with whom do I get angry – who is provoking me, and what is the relationship with that person; how much control did the person have over the deed?
4. **Duration:** how long do I stay angry – how long after the provocation am I still angry?
5. **Strength/Amount:** how angry do I get – is my response to the provocation proportionate, or disproportionate?

Think of real-life situations in which you have experienced anger, especially if you can link your anger to being on the receiving end of verbal provocation. It must be:

- * Recent
- * Real (especially if you have brothers and sisters)!

Which of the following best describes how you handled the situation?

	OCCASIONS	OBJECTS	PEOPLE	DURATION	AMOUNT/ STRENGTH
I AM HOT-TEMPERED	I got angry without necessarily being provoked	I directed my anger towards the wrong things	I directed my anger at the wrong people	I stayed angry for the right amount of time.	I got too angry
I AM CHOLERIC	I got angry without necessarily being provoked	I directed my anger towards the wrong things	I directed my anger at the right people	I stayed angry for the right amount of time.	I got angry to the right degree – I was not dominated by it
I AM SULKY	I got angry when I was provoked	I got angry about the right things	I got angry at the right people	I stayed angry for too long – I sulked!	I got angry to the right degree – I care about the situation.
I AM BAD-TEMPERED	I got angry when I was provoked	I directed my anger towards the wrong things	I directed my anger at the right people	I stayed angry for too long – I sulk!	I got too angry

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

For each of the above manifestations of anger, can you suggest remedies, that can tackle the different kinds of anger?

How best should we manage and use our anger in situations where we have encountered verbal provocation?

For example:

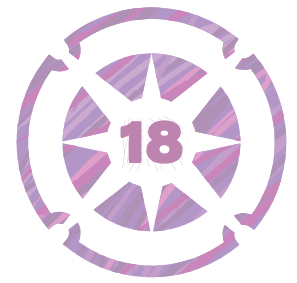
- * **I am given to being too hot tempered** – then you should cool it by...
- * **I am given to being too choleric, or prickly** – then you should unwind yourself by...

* **I am given to being too sulky** – then you should ‘MOVE ON, friend!’ by...

* **I am given to being bad-tempered** – then you should get a grip by...

Each of us must make choices about how angry to be and how severely to retaliate in response to insults and injustices. Using our anger wisely and temperately enables us to restore what we have lost, and to shed the wrongdoers of what they have illegitimately gained. The pre-injustice situation should be restored.





Here are some **guidelines** to help us think through our anger, and how we might become better tempered:

- * Will the act of restoration compensate me for my losses, and punish the wrongdoers equal to their gains?
- * Will it restore my honour, and/or take honour from the wrongdoers?
- * How much honour have I lost, and how much has the wrongdoer gained as a result of the insult?

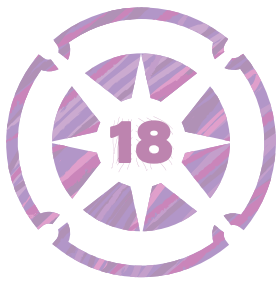
Here are some **further thoughts** on how the virtue of good temper can inform and sculpt our anger constructively:

1. What is the slight, injury or injustice that I perceive?
2. Have I perceived the situation correctly?
 - * Has there been wrongdoing?
 - * What do those whom I trust say?
3. Is there a gap between how I expect and deserve to be treated and how I have actually been treated?
 - * Do I have a legitimate expectation to better treatment?
4. Was it an intentional, deliberate insult, or merely a misunderstanding, or a mistake?
 - * How can I be sure?
 - * Am I right to be angry?
 - * Was the wrong that was done involuntary or unintentional, or out of character for the person involved?
 - * Has the wrongdoer suffered worse things than they deserve?
 - * Is the wrongdoer in pain?
 - * Or, if I am not angry, am I right to be indifferent?
5. How much honour have I lost, and how much has the wrongdoer gained by an act of insult or injustice?
6. Am I really angry about this issue, or is this just an occasion to vent a deeper sense of anger about other, non-related issues?
 - * Are my emotions clouding my reasoning and judgement unduly?

- * Am I just in a bad mood – did I just ‘get out of bed ‘the wrong way’?
7. Can my anger do something constructive about the situation?
 8. If yes to the above, then what will I do to restore or redress this situation?
 - * Can I calibrate a ‘matching act’ that is proportionate to my loss of honour?
 - * What is necessary to ensure that the wrongdoer does not get away with it?
 9. How will I let my anger mobilise me to prevent this situation from occurring again?
 10. How did I feel about having vented my anger?
 - * Did I feel a positive sense of reinforcement of the emotions that led to such acts, such that they could recur in similar situations?
 - * Did I feel a sense of paralysis; have I failed to defend myself or my friends out of fear of inertia or inability, having repressed, or stifled my anger? I am too afraid to confront my own cowardice, laziness or ineptness or lack of confidence; do I seek to smother this with a calm, non-confrontational outlook that is little more than an ego defence mechanism – a shirking of the hard work required to restore what is due to me?
 11. Am I getting better at noticing when redress is called for?
 - * Am I getting better at judging what sort of redress is appropriate and at determining how to redress successfully?
 12. If I fail to redress, will I lose my sense of self-respect, and fall into the trap of rationalising inaction by saying no wrong has been committed?

Think back to your real life situations when you have experienced anger, perhaps as a result of verbal provocation. Now work through Questions 1-12 above, reflecting on the situation.

Write down your reflections, ensuring you cover bases 1-12.



Envisage a situation or scenario when you may encounter verbal provocations in the near future. Be as precise as you can about the situation. Include:

- * Who is doing the provoking?
- * Why this matters/doesn't matter?
- * What form the provocation is likely to take: is it contempt, spite or insolence (look back at the Virtue Knowledge Section for guidance on these)?
- * What is the occasion, or circumstances of the provocation?

Use the Golden Mean Reflection to think through how you want to practise responding, and handling your anger in the situation(s) you identified above. For each of the boxes, give examples of the kinds of attitudes or behaviours that would exemplify the statements. This should help you to see what it looks like to act in a mean that is relative to you!

Remember to think through ways of challenging, handling and best using your basic dispositions when on the receiving end of verbal provocation.

INDIFFERENT	GOOD TEMPERED	IRASCIBLE
Actions that show that I am not really bothered about things that I should be bothered about will express themselves in the following ways:	What will be a constructive and diplomatic act in this situation, that will restore the honour of others/my honour?	Actions that will show that I am too oversensitive and too prickly, seeing offence and insult where none is intended will include:
	How can I avoid getting angry when it would be inappropriate to do so?	Actions that show that I am given to over-reaction will include:
Actions that show that I am too indulgent, or too soft on those who have been 'out of order' will express themselves in the following ways:	How can I make good use of my anger to mobilise myself to do something constructive and worthwhile about the situation?	Actions that show that I am too harsh and unforgiving of others will include:

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

Reflect back on the situation that you identified as calling for you to practise the virtue of friendliness and civility. How did it go for you?

STATES OF CHARACTER	ARE MY DESIRES AND EMOTIONS:	ARE MY CHOICES AND DECISIONS ABOUT HOW TO ACT OUT THE VIRTUE OF GOOD TEMPER:	HOW WELL DID I CARRY OUT THE DECISION TO ACT WITH GREATER SELF-CONTROL
VIRTUOUS: SPOT ON	Right: I was angry to the right degree, neither being too insensitive or oversensitive.	Right: I did not over-react, neither was I a push-over.	Right: I restored the honour that I, or a friend had lost, without causing a rumpus.
CONTINENT: GOT THERE THROUGH GRITTED TEETH	Wrong: I got too angry, and took this out on others for longer than I'd prefer; or, I was too indifferent to the situation.	Right: I did not over-react, neither was I a push-over.	Right: I restored the honour that I, or a friend had lost, without causing a rumpus.
INCONTINENT: KNEW WHAT THE RIGHT THING TO DO WAS, BUT GOT CARRIED AWAY	Wrong: I got too angry, and took this out on others for longer than I'd prefer; or, I was too indifferent to the situation.	Right: I did not over-react, neither was I a push-over.	Wrong: I let my anger carry me away and I overdid it; or, I wasn't angry enough, was too soft and got walked over.
UNWISE: I NEED A RETHINK HERE	Wrong: I got too angry, and took this out on others for longer than I'd prefer; or, I was too indifferent to the situation.	Wrong: I saw red, over-reacted; or, I failed to get mobilised by the injustice of the situation, and sought to 'tune out' instead. I gave up the struggle.	Wrong: I let my anger carry me away and I overdid it; or, I wasn't angry enough, was too soft and got walked over.

Think forward

which aspects of the virtue of good temper do you need to work on? What will you do to continue practising this?