

THE VIRTUE OF TRUTHFULNESS



This Chapter is based upon the interpretation set out by Curzer, H.J. (2012) *Aristotle and the Virtues*, pp. 195-219 (OUP)

*To thine own self be true, and it must follow,
as night the day,
that thou canst not then be false to any man.*
William Shakespeare

SECTION 1: VIRTUE KNOWLEDGE

Use the following information to complete the Virtue Knowledge Template

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

What point is Aristotle trying to make in the following statement?:

For the man who loves truth, and is truthful where nothing is at stake, will still more be truthful where something is at stake; he will avoid falsehood as something base, seeing that he avoided it even for its own sake.

Those who have strengthened the virtue of truthfulness are able to present themselves in line with the truth about who they are. Whatever reputation they have in the eyes of others, corresponds with who they really are: what they are in public, is who and what they are in private. Their accomplishments,

achievements and commitments all correspond with the underlying reality.

- * When they make commitments, or promises, they live up to them.
- * When asked about accomplishments, they give accurate accounts.
- * They are well aware of their personal positives and negatives, and strengths and weaknesses, and successes and failures.
- * They do not construct masks to hide who they really are, but are able to create accurate pictures of themselves, portraying themselves correctly. They do not mislead others about themselves.

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

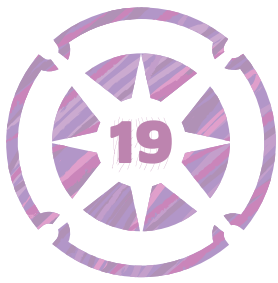
Acting truthfully guarantees social relations: we are who we say we are. This enables stability; it also enables us to think through how and where we need to improve as people. Truthful people grow in virtue much quicker than those who struggle to be truthful

about who they really are. It is also worth thinking through what human relationships would look like were they to be based on us presenting ourselves in a false light: hypocrisy, deceit, lying and the breaking of promises would all dissolve social bonds.

3. When might I have to practise this virtue?

All social occasions call for truthfulness, as too do situations that call for a representation, or account of who we really are and what we have really accomplished. It is important to remember that the

virtue of truthfulness must cluster with other virtues, such as kindness, fairness and gentleness. Whilst we all wish to be truthful, we do not wish to be rude, cutting or hurtful.



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

The virtue of truthfulness governs the desires we have for honour and respect, and the desire to avoid dishonouring or disrespecting others. It concerns our dignity, and the dignity of others. We also desire to be known and perceived for who we really are, presenting ourselves accurately to others – warts

and all – when appropriate. We wish for others to be truthful towards us, as this strengthens and stabilises relationships. Truthful communication (not necessarily rude, or harmful, or unjust) is the basis of strong relations. It enables us to know with whom and with what we are dealing.

5. Some Dilemmas: Checking for Understanding

Think up two dilemmas you have encountered that called for truthfulness.

- * What were the ideals you wanted to live up to?
- * How did you show your commitment to these ideals?

- * What did you accomplish?
- * What challenges or temptations did you face?
- * How did you handle them?

SECTION 2: VIRTUE REASONING

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

How do you present yourself in the course of socialising with others?

Discuss:

- * Are you unfailingly honest?
- * Are you dishonest at times?
- * Do you set out deliberately to deceive others as to who you really are?
- * Do you live up to the reputations that you have, keeping the promises you have made?
- * What are the advantages and disadvantages of acting truthfully?
- * How much does your practice of truthfulness depend on the circumstances in which you are operating, upon whom you are dealing with, when and what advantage do you hope to take out of the situation?

Take a clear piece of paper. Turn it horizontally. Draw a horizontal line across the middle of the page. At the extreme left put: **Underplaying the Truth About Me**; at the extreme right put **Overplaying the Truth About Me**. In the middle, mark out 'Truthfulness'.

Read the statements. How like you are they – plot them on the line?

- I am inclined to 'talk myself up' to win applause. (If this is like you, then plot a point somewhere to the right of the mid-point; if this is unlike you, then plot a point somewhere to the left of the mid-point onwards.)
- I am inclined to talk myself down to avoid attention from others, whether negative or positive. (If this is like you, then plot a point somewhere to the left of the mid-point; if this is unlike you, then plot a point somewhere to the right of the midpoint onwards).





- c. I present myself as I really am, giving as accurate a picture as is required by the situation? (N.B. you certainly DON'T have to disclose everything about yourself to others – just those points that are relevant to the situation at hand. Sensationalised, or salacious tabloid confessions, for instance, are not called for by the virtue of 'truthfulness'). If you tend to overplay, go to the right; if you tend to minimise, go to the left.
- d. I live a life that reflects how I present myself to others, acting in a way that coheres with these commitments, goals, values and loyalties. Plot the point as in c, above.
- e. I avoid engaging in projects that give expression to my values, rather than undertaking them.

- f. I proceed according to hypocrisy, rather than according to my stated principles – I often say one thing and do another?
- g. I betray my stated allegiances, or promises I have made in public.

The virtue of truthfulness is hedged in by the excess of boasting and the deficiency of false modesty.

According to Aristotle:

The boastful man, then, is thought to be apt to claim the things that bring repute, when he has not got them, or to claim more of them than he has, and the mock-modest man on the other hand to disclaim what he has or belittle it, while the man who observes the mean is one who calls a thing by its own name...

Aristotle, NE, (1127a20-3)

Do you agree with Aristotle on this point?

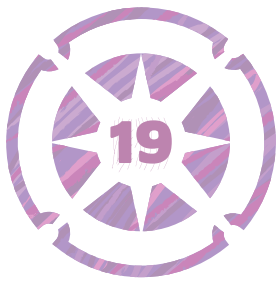
Why? Why not?

2. Identifying the Golden Mean of Truthfulness

Design a presentation for the class that:

- * Identifies a person, past or present, in literature or reality, who, on the basis of the known facts, you think exemplifies the virtue of truthfulness.

- * Identifies a person, past, or present, in literature or reality, who, on the basis of the known facts, you think fails in the virtue of truthfulness. Explain how you think they are failing.
- * Use the Golden Mean Tool overleaf to explain why their actions showed the virtue of truthfulness.



	UNDER-DOING IT	THE GOLDEN MEAN	OVERDOING IT
WHAT ARE THEIR REAL MOTIVES?	Does the person in question go to excessive lengths to avoid being the centre of attention, or to avoid attracting attention to themselves? If so, how?	Is the person in question motivated by love of truth, understood as accurate self-presentation in speech and action?	Does the person in question love to give a better impression of themselves, talking up their achievements, accentuating them, and, at times misleading others with regard to them? Does the person in question wish to be honoured for things they have not really achieved, but people think they have? Does the person in question wish to be famous and celebrated, with a view to acquiring wealth and status? Is the person in question really just doing this to attain wealth? What is your evidence?
EMOTION	Even when this person has played a part in something, are they excessively concerned with minimising the part that they have played, probably for fear of the new responsibilities and commitments it may demand of them?	Does this person desire accuracy in self presentation, to be known for who they really are, and what they have really achieved? Do they work to ensure that their image corresponds to reality? Are they horrified at the thought of welching on, or breaking commitments that they have agreed upon with others?	Is this person really not bothered about deceiving others – after all, everybody does it, don't they?
ACTION	Is this person inclined to understatements and false modesty in their words and deeds, not pushing themselves as well as they can, for fear of attention, perhaps?	Does this person take moderate efforts to present themselves accurately to others?	Is this person inclined to overstatements, and do they fail to live up to commitments that they have made, however minor, or major?

3. Some Dilemmas: Checking for Understanding:

Use the Virtue Reasoning Guidelines set out in this section to work out:

- * What the right thing to do is
 - * What going wrong might look like
1. You are at a dinner party, hosted by a good friend. Your friend is an inexperienced cook. The food he has cooked was poorly put together, reflecting his inexperience. He asks you what you thought of the dinner.

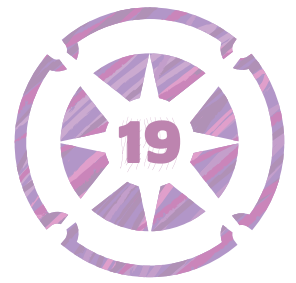
How do you respond and why?

2. You have been invited to dinner at a friend's house. Your friend's mother is an appalling cook. The food she has cooked reflects this. In all seriousness, she asks you what you thought of the meal.

Will your response differ from that in Scenario #1?

3. How would you advise the following to practise the virtue of truthfulness:
 - a. Agatha plagiarises her coursework to get better grades. She thinks better grades will get her a





better job; a better job, she thinks, will get her more money. With this money she can buy things that show she is successful. She is shrewd enough to do this carefully and cleverly, without being found out.

- b. Bernadette exaggerates about her achievements on her UCAS Personal Statement. She does this to try to get into her chosen universities. She claims to have read books she hasn't read; she argues that she intends to read them before her interview.
- c. Chris talks down his achievements in class, for fear of intimidating others, or attracting negative attention to himself, on account of his achievements (he'll get bullied).

- d. As student representative, Dennis must attend his School Council meetings. One lunchtime, he couldn't be bothered to attend the meeting that had been planned for some time; he couldn't be bothered because he'd rather play football – after all it was a sunny day. Dennis had campaigned to be the Student Rep, and had made promises to serve and represent the interests of the form.

When the teacher asked him how the student council meeting went, he lied about having attended.

Would it have made a difference if Dennis had told the truth about his absence and the reasons for it? Where would Dennis stand in relation to the virtue of truthfulness on that scenario?

4. Some Good Sense Guidelines for Practising the Virtue of Truthfulness:

Those who have a developed sense of truthfulness can:

- * Present themselves in line with what they have accomplished
- * Accomplish the ideals to which they are committed
- * Live up to their commitments

Remember: you do not need to, neither can you be called upon to divulge everything about your values, projects and relationships – the virtue of truthfulness must sit alongside the other virtues, especially that of friendliness and civility and tact and discretion.

As you grow in virtue you will have a more sensitive and refined understanding as to what the situation is requiring of you. At this stage though, be very wary of revealing:

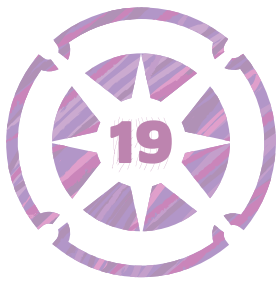
- * Your faults, vulnerabilities, or jealousies
- * Views about others that they may find offensive or harmful

(Do continue to deal with, them, if you suffer from such human passions!). **Acting** in line with our values and commitments will reveal more about us than

anything we may say – virtue is what we do when nobody else is looking! Also, we shouldn't bother too much about 'fitting-in' – be truthful to ourselves, making sure we stick to any commitments we make, the more serious, then the more important.

To guide you in thinking through how and when to live more truthfully, think through how you give expression to the following questions in your life. Write a short piece that addresses each of the points.

1. To which values are you committed?
 - * What do you consider right and wrong, good or bad? Why?
 - * What makes you so sure it is right or wrong, good or bad?
 - * Are these values fundamental and important? Or, are they relatively trivial?
 - * Are they really worth the sacrifice?
 - * And how do they fit into leading a flourishing life with others?



- * Are these values really worthwhile? What makes you so sure?
- 2. Which projects give best expressions to these values?
 - * What are your personal objectives: how far do you stick at them, even in the face of failure and setback?
 - * Is there a disconnection between your identified values and how you give expression to them?
 - * Do you, for instance, say what you mean, and mean what you say? Do you hold fast to your important commitments, despite being lured off them by threats and temptations?
- 3. How do your relationships fit in with this?
 - * Do you stick by lovers, friends, families, organisations, and nations?

- * Or, are you prepared to betray ideals, goals, others? Can you discern tensions and conflicts between your commitments?
- * How might these be reconciled, or balanced out?

Finding the Golden Mean:

How will you act more truthfully in the coming weeks? Think of a moral project that:

- a. you can commit to;
- b. gives expression to your values;
- c. shapes your relationships;

It can be as small as deciding to be more helpful at home in the garden with Mum or Dad, or as large as improving the quality of water in Africa (in fact, the smaller, the better, but do not be afraid to let your imagination and aspirations roam – be careful, though, it must be personally practical).

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.

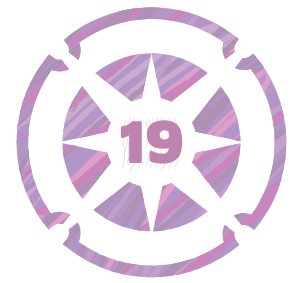
I understand how to apply the guidelines I have learnt from experience and reflection.

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 moral project you defined for yourself. Now examine how well you are practising the virtue of truthfulness in the light of that project. Are your values, commitments and relationships all adding up to present an accurate picture of yourself; or are they out of kilter? If so, what needs to be done about it? How did it go for you?

STATES OF CHARACTER	ARE MY DESIRES AND PLEASURES:	ARE MY CHOICES AND DECISIONS ABOUT HOW TO ACT OUT THE VIRTUE OF TRUTHFULNESS:	HOW WELL DID I CARRY OUT THE DECISION TO ACT WITH GREATER TRUTHFULNESS, AS EXPRESSED IN MY MORAL PROJECT:
VIRTUOUS: SPOT ON	Right: I simply desire to be known for who I really am, and what I have genuinely achieved.	Right: My values, projects and commitments all cohere – and are fine, noble and genuinely worthwhile. (I can make a solid, rational case for their worth).	Right: I took pleasure in presenting myself (thoughts, words, deeds) accurately, neither understating nor overstating who I really am – even though I may have disadvantaged myself. My motives in doing this were simply to be truthful. I was able to divulge information about myself that was relevant to the situation, neither more nor less.
CONTINENT: GOT THERE THROUGH GRITTED TEETH	Wrong: I desire to understate and downplay who I am, (for fear of what may be asked of me); or, I overstate who I am and what I have achieved, desiring to be honoured and respected, or to have the wealth or status that accrues to those with such a reputation.	Right: My values, projects and commitments all cohere – and are fine, noble and genuinely worthwhile.	Right: I took pleasure in presenting myself accurately, neither understating nor overstating who I really am. My motives in doing this were simply to be truthful. I was able to divulge information about myself that was relevant to the situation, neither more nor less.
INCONTINENT: KNEW WHAT THE RIGHT THING TO DO WAS, BUT GOT CARRIED AWAY	Wrong: I desire to understate and downplay who I am, (for fear of what may be asked of me); or, I overstate who I am and what I have achieved, desiring to be honoured and respected, or to have the wealth or status that accrues to those with such a reputation.	Right: My values, projects and commitments all cohere – and are fine, noble and genuinely worthwhile.	Wrong: I still understate or overstate my accomplishments, in relation to reality, for various motives.
UNWISE: I NEED A RETHINK HERE	Wrong: I desire to understate and downplay who I am, (for fear of what may be asked of me); or, I overstate who I am and what I have achieved, desiring to be honoured and respected, or to have the wealth or status that accrues to those with such a reputation.	Wrong: My values, projects and commitments do not cohere, neither do they build character; in fact, they may even erode character.	Wrong: I still understate or overstate my accomplishments, in relation to reality, for various motives.

Which aspects on the **Know Thyself: Truthfulness Tool** do you need to work on and why?

Think forward to an upcoming situation that is going to call for you to practise the virtue of truthfulness.

Make some resolutions about how you will practise the virtue of truthfulness. Examine yourself in the light of those resolutions.