

THE VIRTUE OF GENEROSITY



This Chapter is based upon the interpretation set out in Curzer, H.J. (2012) *Aristotle and the Virtues*, pp. 83-108

SECTION 1: VIRTUE KNOWLEDGE

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

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

Those who have strengthened the virtue of generosity have developed habits of **giving for the benefit of others**, and are able to take, or receive from others, with a view to passing such goods on to those who need them. The giving is motivated by the needs of others, rather than the needs of oneself (such as the need to impress one's magnificence upon others). Gifts are given properly and thoughtfully, and money is spent wisely. The sorts of things that are given include:

- * things
- * time
- * effort
- * encouragement
- * money

Those with the virtue of generosity are also able to **receive** gifts properly. This is done by taking from people in ways that are to the benefit of the givers. Interestingly, those with this virtue are able to earn and receive money properly – that is from engaging in worthwhile and fruitful work, rather than work that is immoral or degrading. From the goods received, whether money or things, those with this virtue are able to earmark money and goods sufficient for their own necessities; they use the surplus for the benefit of others.

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

Those who are generous are able to build and sustain good friendships. They give help and receive it graciously. Those who are generous also enjoy the experience of being generous, of helping others,

They also have the right attitude and/or desires towards wealth and/or other people. They steward their resources well, such that they are able to live a fully virtuous life, having enough for themselves and to help others. The generous are those who are able to spend money well on others rather than themselves – it has nothing to do with shopping on behalf of oneself, or of hoarding on behalf of oneself.

But it is not just money and goods that is covered by this virtue. Those who are generous, give of their time, their effort and their resources, all with a view to helping others. They engage with others fully and seek nothing in return. When they have received from others, either time, effort or resources, they are grateful for what they have received and know how to express and show this gratitude.

The generous are able to give to the right people (those who will benefit), at the right time, but give in a way that is fine and noble, and not because they seek something personally out of it. There is no 'fine print' on the gifts of the generous – they seek nothing in return. Whenever the generous receive, they know how to show gratitude for what they have received. They also take pleasure in the delight that others take when receiving gifts from them.

simply because it is in helping others that we grow in maturity. This does not mean that giving generously is about satisfying one's ego, though! It is simply good to give, and bad to be selfish.



3. When might I have to practise this virtue?

The generous man, like other virtuous men, will give for the sake of the noble, and rightly.

(1120a24-5) NE, Aristotle

We need to practise this virtue whenever we see someone in need and we have the things that may help to supply that need. It could be offering time, assistance, money or resources. We may, for instance, spend our surplus money on buying a gift for a friend rather than treating ourselves: this would be a generous act. We may also, give of our time to listen to, or assist others.

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

Those with this virtue can balance out the desire to acquire money, goods, time and help from others, with the desire to give such things to others and to be of use to them. We need to practise this virtue when we experience the following desires or emotions:

- * the desire to acquire time, money, resources, assistance or things. (the generous wish to receive

But how much should I give? Aristotle has some guidelines to help here:

The term 'generosity' is used relatively to a man's substance; for generosity resides not in the multitude of the gifts but in the state of the giver, and this is relative to the giver's substance. There is therefore nothing to prevent the man who gives less from being the more liberal man, if he has less to give.

(1120b7-11) NE, Aristotle

these things in order to use them for a virtuous life and to pass on from their surplus to others, for their benefit);

- * the desire to disperse time, money, resources, assistance, things

Note in particular the emotions connected to the Virtue of Compassion set out above.

5. Some Dilemmas: Checking for Understanding

Which is the more virtuous – evaluate in the light of:

- * how much does the recipient need and deserve it
- * how much is being given relative to the substance of the giver
- * when is the gift being given
- * what is being given

Giving to the homeless:¹

- * Giving a tiny amount of one's surplus?
- * Giving a tiny amount of one's surplus, to the deserving needy, whenever one sees them?
- * Giving an amount of money appropriate to one's circumstances to the deserving needy, not directly, but on a planned basis, to a charity that helps the homeless.

- * Giving an amount of money appropriate to one's circumstances on a planned basis; also, helping to collect donations intended for the homeless.
- * Giving an amount of money appropriate to one's circumstances, but doing it in a showy and ostentatious manner to get a bit of glory from onlookers.
- * Any other variations on giving to the homeless you can think of.

Generous Giving? Discuss:

- * I skip a meal to give money to a man begging on the street. I later discover that the person I had given the money to has spent it on drink and drugs.

¹ Adapted from Curzer, Aristotle and the Virtues





- * I bequeath some money to my children, only to find that they drink and gamble it away, rather than using it wisely to build their life on more solid foundations.

Discuss:

- * How virtuous is it to give an item that one takes to be worthless?

- * How virtuous is it to be indifferent to the worthiness and happiness of the recipients when offering a gift to them?
- * How virtuous is it to calculate the potential benefits to the recipient's position against the potential losses of my position?

SECTION 2: VIRTUE REASONING

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

Draw a horizontal line on a piece of paper. At one extreme, put the word 'Selfish'; at the other extreme put the word 'Wasteful'. Mark out a mid-point on your line and call that 'Generous'. Read through each of the

different statements below and plot where you think you are in relation to the statement about generosity. Discuss your findings with your partner.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SELFISHNESS WITH MY TIME, MONEY AND RESOURCES:	CHARACTERISTICS OF WASTEFULNESS WITH MY TIME, MONEY AND RESOURCES:
I desire time, money and resources simply to benefit myself, rather than others.	I have an excessive desire to give things to others.
I desire to help others, but only to the point where giving begins to cost me personally.	I have a desire to give excessively of my time, effort and resources.
I desire to possess wealth, time and things well beyond what is necessary, to sustain a virtuous life.	I desire to benefit all of the right people and some of the wrong with my time, efforts and resources.
	I desire to give to others much more than they need.
	I am anxious to benefit others, even when those others are not desperately needy.
	I often over-compensate others for things given (do I lack self-confidence?)
	I give when it is appropriate to give; but I also give when it is inappropriate to give.

Other Considerations:

There seem to be many kinds of meanness. For it consists in two things, deficiency in giving and excess in taking, and is not found complete in all cases, but is sometimes divided: some men go to excess in taking, others fall short in giving.

Aristotle, NE, (1121b17-21)

Discuss how accurate the following statements are about you. Think through some examples that can highlight your actions. Discuss the issues they raise as a whole class.

- * I treat the giving and taking of time, money, resources and things as a means to virtuous action





- * I think I have the correct attitude towards wealth.
- * I think I have the correct attitudes towards other people, viewing my surplus goods as a means to benefiting them, if they are in need of such goods and **deserving?**

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

According to Aristotle, the generous person receives gifts from the generosity of others, with a view to supplying their own necessities and for passing any surplus on to those who will benefit from it.

Here are some initial guidelines for practising generosity, adapted from Curzer, Aristotle's Virtues:

1. Give a meaningful and useful amount to those who will use it wisely, rather than those who will squander it.
2. Be careful not to spend so much that you impoverish yourself at the expense of enriching

For whichever category you identify yourself as being in, you need to think of ways of giving expression to the opposing category in your life. This will pull you naturally towards the centre-point that is right for you. Discuss ways in which you might do this.

another – be especially wary of spending too much on inappropriate pleasures, especially those connected with the virtue of self-mastery.

3. Graciously accept what others wish to give, but be clear as to whether they can actually spare it.
4. Never exploit, steal from, or degrade others with a view to personal gain.

Use this part of the Virtue Reasoning Tool to think through situations when you have been called to be more generous, and ways and situations in which you can develop greater generosity:

DELIBERATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * How have your past experiences helped you think about situations that have called for greater generosity? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * think through situations * think through emotions * think through reasons * How can you apply the 'lessons of life' and principles you have learned in this section to situations that call for generosity? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * What have you learned about acting well and thinking well, and how can you do this in particular situations? * How will you act more generously, avoiding the extremes of selfishness, or wastefulness?
EVALUATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * What are the morally relevant features of the situations you can foresee that call for generosity and how have you weighted them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Of what (or whom) do you need to be aware, or sensitive to? * Which features are in competition? * Which features contradict? * How will you reconcile these tensions? * To whom have you looked for advice, and/or inspiration, and why? Are they good sources? * What might the implications of your decision be, both positively and negatively?





ACTS THAT WOULD BE SELFISH FOR ME:	ACTS THAT SHOW GENEROSITY:	ACTS THAT WOULD BE WASTEFUL FOR ME:
<p>I take too much from others and give too little.</p>	<p>I am generous with my things and in receipt of the things of others, using them to benefit others.</p>	<p>I give too much and take too little [do I lack confidence]?</p>
<p>What I have has come from sordid trades: these trades exploit, enslave, degrade or steal from others [to my financial advantage].</p>		<p>I have exhausted my substance through giving.</p>
<p>I overcharge people.</p> <p>I don't pay my fair share of my taxes.</p> <p>I take advantage of relationships to exploit others.</p> <p>I steal from others.</p> <p>I enslave them to drink or drugs, giving them quick pleasure fixes for my own personal gain.</p> <p>I am prepared to be considered selfish by decent people – as long as I am rich, I really don't care.</p>	<p>I have bonus schemes for employees</p> <p>I do what I can on a planned basis for the needy, sometimes at a personal cost</p> <p>I support my friends and family with time, money, resources and goods.</p>	<p>I have been indiscriminate in my giving, making rich those who really deserve to be poor; giving nothing to those who have decent characters; giving too much to flatterers and flunkies, or to those who provide me with [base] pleasures.</p>
<p>Not taking enough pleasure in seeing others delight in the things they have received; or, taking too much pain in handing over the things that others need.</p>	<p>Pleased by: seeing others delight in the goods they have received/been given.</p>	<p>Insensitive to the pain that is caused by unwise giving.</p>
	<p>Pained by: the fear of shortage, should I be in need.</p>	
	<p>Pained by: possibility of ingratitude on behalf of the recipient of the gift.</p>	
	<p>Pained by: the risk of seeing others waste the good gifts they have received from their hard earned efforts.</p>	
	<p>Pained by: spending that is neither fine nor noble.</p>	



Use the following to identify how you can enact generosity over the coming days. Use this to crystallise some resolutions about to whom you will be generous, and how:

HOW TO GIVE MORE GENEROUSLY:	HOW TO RECEIVE IN A SPIRIT OF GENEROSITY:
People: to whom should I give? (Will they benefit from the gift?)	People: From whom am I taking and are they really in a position to give?
Amount: What is the worth of that which I am giving? How will it benefit the recipient?	Amount: What is the worth of that which I am taking, and can the beneficiary really spare this?
Occasion: When should I give?	Occasion: When is the right time to take possession of such gifts?
Object: What should I give? Will it be of use to them?	Object: What should I receive, or accept?

What will you do over the coming weeks to practise the virtue of generosity?

Identify three **Acts of Generosity** for the coming week. Complete the following:

- I will give my time to _____
by _____.
- I will give my _____
to _____
because _____.
- I will give my assistance to someone when _____
_____.

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

Go back to the acts of generosity you identified as being possible to carry out.

ACT OF GENEROSITY	HOW RIGHT WERE YOUR DESIRES, PLEASURES AND PAINS?	HOW WISE WERE YOUR CHOICES? DID YOU TAKE/GIVE THE RIGHT THING TO/FROM THE RIGHT PERSON, IN THE RIGHT AMOUNT, AT THE RIGHT TIME AND IN THE RIGHT WAY?	GENEROUS ACT OUTCOME FOR ME/THEM, E.G. DID IT HELP THEM; WHAT DID IT COST ME?
1. I GAVE MY TIME TO SOMEONE BY...			
2. I GAVE A GIFT TO SOMEONE...			
3. I GAVE MY ASSISTANCE TO SOMEONE BY...			

Which of the following statements best sums up how your planned acts of generosity turned out, from a 'virtue perspective':

Stage 1: I was thoughtless of others in my giving and receiving, and/or I am not really interested in giving or receiving from my surplus.

Stage 2: I know that giving is the right thing to do when I can, but I don't give in line with reason: I'm either thoughtless about what, to whom, how much and when to give, and/or I'd rather have my surplus entirely for myself.

Stage 3: I know that giving is the right thing to do,

when I can; I give and receive, but sometimes I really have to force myself to do it.

Stage 4: I know that giving is the right thing to do when I can; I give and receive gladly of my time, efforts, resources, money and things to those whom I know need and will benefit from it. I take genuine pleasure in seeing them delight in what they have received; and, it would pain me to see them misuse such gifts.

Now plan three ways in which you can continue to practise acting out generosity. Think again of the headings of time, effort, encouragement, money, resources and things.