

1st Place

2012 4 Way Test
Essay Winners

Our world—society as we know it—twines around a pillar of philosophy. What is philosophy? Philosophy encompasses the world; it *is* the world, in essence. The world is reality, and reality is naught but ideas. Ideas are the brainchild of imagination, which is a cousin of philosophy. Reality is an ancient wooden bridge stretched across a never-ending void.

As the bridge extends through time, which is an autonomous force, it decays, weakened by our society. It weeps, sputtering and pleading, but without avail—we ignore its cries. If we strip civilization to its core, its spine, we find this crumbling bridge—the wreckage and ruins of man. In order to bandage the world, we assumedly require purity, the most innocent and purposeful tenets. Cleanness and neatness are required to heal any wound.

The central component, the bastion of virtuousness, is truth. *Is it* the truth? Is the *world* the truth? As my legs, mere corporeal extensions of my mind, drag me through time, I ponder the truth. As my feet strike the ground—concrete—upon exiting a bus (such a trivial artifact, arguably) my eyes catch glimpse of a small bird fluttering through the air. ‘Lo and behold,’ whispers my heart, ‘surely you have caught sight of the truth. Surely, such a delicate symbol of simplistic beauty is the truth.’

I release a sigh of contemplation as I stroll through the cool air, lost in introspection. Am I the truth? Do I display my inner self as brilliantly as a diamond projects its iridescent beauty? Or do I lurk beneath a crow-feathered cloak of tangled lies? My inner consciousness performs several pirouettes as an epiphany strikes me. The truth was the latter of the two, as paradoxical as that may seem—the truth is a lie.

It flowed upon me, as smoothly as dusk, that if I live under the autocracy of lies, and I am human, that lies must compose *every* human. I wonder what I have wrought at the hand of my deception, my facade. Mankind is prone to conformity, so subconsciously the mind will meld into lies, shrouding individuality in an ill-fitting masquerade. We form ourselves into jigsaw pieces, carved crudely to fit into the larger puzzle of established society. If only we could embrace the truth in our frail arms, we could bring greater fairness to the world, and shine a stream of light through the haze that blankets the land.

Fairness—the word strikes a gong in the back of my mind, reverberating through my bones. Am I—one of countless epitomes of humanity—fair to all? No. Two simple letters; a simple syllable answers the question. As I hunch against the breeze, hurrying across the street, my mind wanders back to the bus on which I rode mere minutes before. A certain odor tickles my brain, seducing memories to surge forward, producing a vivid image of a certain man whose reek filled the entire bus. His friendly smile was drowned out by his tangled hair, tattered clothing, and overpowering stench. A homeless man.

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Is life fair to this man? Some soul-hardened people would claim he brought it upon himself. However, if the world—*people*—showed the truth, if they were fair to everyone, perhaps he would not be in such a position. Maybe landslides would not have obliterated his path. Yet, still, we are not fair to him. Every person within close vicinity of his suffocating stench fled to the far end of the vehicle (not without reason to do so—my nostril hairs were threatening to abandon ship), yet none seemed to show significant empathy. Probably, they would soon forget and continue with the flow of their lives. How is this fair?

Is it fair for a man to cringe beneath lashes of injustice, infirm and starving, while a neighbor is content, plump, and well-off? Humanity paints the world on a canvas, and said canvas is weaved of such schemes. Goodwill is a color often absent on our palette. Bigotry, anger, and jealousy more often appeal to our pseudo-artistic eye.

Shorn of intention, I slow my pace, lowering my gaze to the grey ground. An elegant streak of ants rolls across the sidewalk, coexisting and cooperating with a strict perfection. Seemingly, these small creatures exist in wonderful unison—bonded friendships and loyalty only interrupted by exterior forces. Unlike humans—we destroy ourselves. If only we could collaborate, and frost the world in friendship and respect. Theoretically, this would stimulate fairness, which would in turn bring truth from its grave.

My mind swirls with erratic thoughts and coagulated emotions, sloshing about my skull like lethargic waves. I proceed past the frolicking branches of saddened trees that grieve for humanity, and I wonder again about my actions, regarding the amount of cognitive empathy with which I infuse them. Numbly, I realize that I follow a river of selfishness—typical of mankind. My actions are not beneficial to all concerned, for the most part. Though it pricks my spirit to admit it, my actions revolve around me—the focal point of my reality.

The fabled philosophy of the “Four-Way Test” is applicable to all aspects of life, and all strands of reality pertinent to us. Is it the truth? It *should* be, but humanity refuses to drink when led to water. We circumvent the truth. Is it fair to everyone? Not even remotely, yet we can *try* wholeheartedly to amend this. Will it build goodwill and better friendships? Only on occasions, when we manage to overcome the negative emotions that dwell within us. Will it be beneficial to all concerned? Not usually, first we must find a bubble of selflessness within ourselves.

Human and hypocrite are nearly interchangeable words. I myself fail to meet the unfolded philosophy. Now though, after this bout of reverie, I will strive to honor the “Four-Way Test”. Only the hindering arms of a grave will rout my efforts.

2nd Place

I was pondering the most common question asked of me, "Why did you chose to spend your senior year studying in Belgium?" The Rotary handbook says, "You are here to immerse yourself in another culture, learn a new language, and become a citizen of the world!" I could rephrase that into first person, translate into French, and repeat it to every person who asked. But it wouldn't be the whole truth. The real reason I decided to come is my impatience: impatience to travel, impatience to learn another language, and impatience for independence. Thinking back over my senior year I realize I have changed more than any other year of my life, and, more than ever before, I have learned to appreciate my family, my community and my friends. I am attending public school in Brussels, Belgium through Rotary International Youth Exchange. It has not been an easy year; in fact, it has probably been the hardest but the most amazing year of my life. There have been many situations in which I have had to make difficult decisions on my own: situations that I have inadvertently used the Rotary Four-way Test.

Is it the truth? My first host family was difficult to live with; my mother was controlling and required that I provide, three days in advance, the names, addresses, phone numbers of any and every student that I might want to go out to lunch with after school on Wednesdays (Belgium's early release day) as well as the address and phone number of the restaurant we might choose. The same rules applied to going to someone's home on the weekends. It was daunting and discouraging, but I am proud to say I never lied to her. I often ate at home on Wednesdays and many weekend parties passed by without me in attendance. But growing up I was taught that if you told the truth, without intent of malice, it was easier in the end. I was allowed to switch families early due to my host mom's inflexibility, so *honestly* it was best in the end.

Is it fair to all concerned? I have learned that fairness unfortunately does not always apply. People cheat and are often rewarded; people are dishonest and many times are not found out. I would like to think that the cheaters feel badly about their accomplishments, and the liars are consumed with guilt. They are not. I have friends that have cheated their way through high school and happily accept first choice colleges and the scholarships they are offered. I have to be content with myself; I feel good about my accomplishments because I have earned them. Is it always fair? No, but I hope that fairness eventually wins out.

Will it build good will and better friendships? My year in Belgium has taught me how much I value my friends in the U.S. as well as the ones I am meeting here. Forging friendships with students from countries all over the world has given me a deeper understanding and tolerance of others. Building friendships with Belgian students from my school and with the other exchange students from around the

world is the biggest step I can take towards becoming Rotary's "citizen of the world."

Will it be beneficial to all concerned? Even more than fairness to all, few things are beneficial to all concerned. However, returning to the belief that if one is honest and makes decisions without malice, things will be as fair and beneficial as possible. I have experienced many situations this year that are neither fair nor beneficial, but without exception I have grown stronger by working through them. I am proud of that I have chosen to embrace an honest and fair approach in dealing with people and situations.

I appreciate the opportunity to experience Belgian traditions and become part of the country. Living abroad has also given me a distinct identity with the United States, and I think about the difference between pride and spirit. Europeans are proud of their culture and strive to maintain their traditions. People from the United States have an undeniable spirit; we are taught that all our goals are obtainable with effort, honesty and fairness. I am proud of that American spirit which enabled me to come to Belgium this year, and through this adventure I hope to fulfill my quest of becoming a global citizen. While I have not consciously been utilizing the Rotary "four way test", the questions asked are useful in making the right decisions through this year and on to college.

3rd Place

Fairness in Truth

In the same year our country endured the horrors of the 9/11 attacks, my dad chose a life of drugs and alcohol, lost in a state of mental illness. As a result, my childhood years have been filled with traumatizing heartache as he chose to live in a self-destructive environment. Facing an enormous amount of grief and fear, and having to revisit those feelings every time my dad would demand my attention, I was often terrified by what he might do next. At times, when humility and despair would overwhelm me, it was tempting to feel sorry for myself and let the throbbing pain of my dad's tragedy depress me. With the fair and balanced love and logic of family and friends, along with the character building guidance I received participating in several community service projects, I have learned to pursue a path personified by honesty, empathy, and forgiveness. I have discovered that these are key qualities in building goodwill and friendship. These are the qualities I want to define who I am and what I do.

From ten very active years in the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO), I experienced all the aspects of a team work mentality. AYSO stresses the use of positive reinforcement and I saw it really work as I began to come out of my shell. Much to my surprise, I even became a role model for some of the other girls. No one knew anything about my dad. I kept that to myself because I did not want sympathy or special treatment. When I was twelve years old, my soccer team was given the opportunity to represent California at the national level. Traveling to Chicago for a week of games, we placed in the top ten of the country for our age group. I know it was ultimately due to our dedication and commitment to each other. This encourages me to aspire to a life style of working together with people in a positive and honorable way.

I also grew up raising service dogs for the blind through the Guide Dogs of America organization. Raising a puppy according to the high standards set by the guide dog school is something that benefits everyone involved. As a puppy raiser, I developed leadership skills that built my confidence as we did presentations in schools, libraries, and at public events. All of these experiences helped to transform me. No longer timid, I can walk into a room of complete strangers with confidence where once there was paralyzing fear. I can look for the good in another human being and seek to encourage it without judging them for their shortcomings. Using the positive reinforcement skills learned on the soccer field and from training dogs, I enjoy encouraging others to excel and not shirk from responsibility.

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I see the wisdom of the questions in the Rotarian's 4-way test. Facing the truth, being fair and beneficial to all, and building goodwill are the things I have been trying to do as I grow up. Upon finishing my senior year in high school, I plan to attend Cuesta College and transfer to a state university, working towards a teaching credential or a nursing degree. I am looking forward to further sharpening my leadership skills by attending this year's Rotary Youth Leadership Awards (RYLA) convention in Ojai. I have heard many promising and upstanding things about RYLA and am excited to attend and learn all I possibly can.