

## THE BROAD CONCEPTION OF TEMPERANCE

Broad conceptions of the work of temperance tend to portray it as a general psychological principle that affects every aspect of the moral life. These conceptions often conflate temperance with virtue in general. George Henrik von Wright, for instance, falls prey to this conflation when he argues for the notion that there is fundamentally just one virtue. He equates this one virtue to “so many forms of self-control.”<sup>1</sup> But despite this tendency, the fabric-like nature of virtue will illustrate the fact that the particular fibers of temperance are easily identified upon closer examination.

From Greek antiquity four distinct broad conceptions of temperance emerge. The first interpretive thread of broad conception is analyzed here under the heading “*sophrosyne*.” This Greek term that some view as untranslatable<sup>2</sup> is the most fundamental and important of the broad conceptions. As a cultural concept *sophrosyne* was applicable to the moral life in a broad sense. *Sophrosyne* became more specific and narrow in the system of virtues that Aristotle developed.

The second interpretive thread, “moderation,” focuses on the virtuous response to human passion. The Aristotelian doctrine of the mean holds a special significance to conceptions of moderation, and when confusion exists regarding this relationship, temperance typically becomes simply “moderation-in-all-things.”

The third interpretive thread examines the transition of the Greek *sophrosyne* to the Latin *temperantia*. *Temperantia* describes a mixture of the various elements of human psychology. This mixture is not simply all inclusive and indiscriminate, but is rather a “proper mixture.”

The notion of propriety moves toward the fourth and final broad conception, “social manner.” Social manner is found in accounts of temperance that assert the importance of the Latin *decorum* and the Greek *prepon*. Although Western society generally still values notions of propriety and decorum, these qualities are not typically recognized as having emerged from broad conceptions of temperance.

## CHAPTER ONE

### I

#### *SOPHROSYNE*

*Sophrosyne* in classical philosophy is most often understood as a certain “soundness of mind,” thus the tendency to focus on psychological aspects of unity and harmony of the person. This soundness of mind relates to the experience of pleasures and pains that pose a possible threat to such unity and harmony. *Sophrosyne* as soundness of mind is often equated with rationality, and occasionally opposition to this soundness was considered irrational.<sup>3</sup> But, while it is true that *sophrosyne* includes notions of rationality and irrationality, the original concept does not portray the passions as a foe to be conquered. Helen North’s summary of *sophrosyne* in Greek thought reflects its original conception.

At the deepest level, *sophrosyne* is related to the Greek tendency to interpret all kinds of experience—whatever moral, political, aesthetic, physical, or metaphysical—in terms of harmony and proportion. At a level more susceptible to historical analysis, it is an expression of the self-knowledge and self-control that the Greek *polis* demanded of its citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Plato’s effort to establish a certain variety of virtues is considered by Helen North the most “far-reaching contribution to the history of *sophrosyne*.”<sup>5</sup> The specification of the work of *sophrosyne* moved it out of consideration as the master virtue toward categorization as a virtue that monitors human desire. Plato presents *sophrosyne* in a “nonmetaphorical, almost scientific way,” identifying it with the “condition of orderly arrangement.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, *sophrosyne* arranges and monitors the parts of the whole so that the good sought by the person is assured.

As Plato specified the work of various virtues, he also delineated the “parts” of the human soul. With the ordering influence of *sophrosyne* comes a certain self-knowledge and health of the soul. For Plato, *sophrosyne* is never simply a virtue that deals with the appetitive part of the soul. There are two “principal signs of *sophrosyne*—the control of appetite by reason and the harmonious agreement within the soul that this control should be exercised.”<sup>7</sup> Although *sophrosyne* is never given prominence of place in Plato’s tetrad of principal virtues, without it the other virtues cannot operate. The person who is lacking

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*sophrosyne* is said to be in a state of *mania*. Martha Nussbaum writes in *The Fragility of Goodness*:

Consistently, in pre-*Phaedrus* dialogues, Plato has used ‘*mania*’ and related words to designate the state of soul in which the non-intellectual elements—appetites and emotions—are in control and lead or guide the intellectual part. Consistently, ...*mania* is contrasted with *sophrosyne*, the state of soul in which intellect rules securely over the other elements.<sup>8</sup>

Plato’s treatment of *sophrosyne* sets the stage for further work and despite his later tendency toward narrowing its realm,<sup>9</sup> subsequent conceptions of *sophrosyne* maintained all the connotations of the virtue in this formative period. Those who follow Plato, however, generally drift toward regarding it as a means of control over physical desires. Later philosophers develop important nuances as they specify the work of *sophrosyne*, but those who follow Plato do not, in North’s view, advance any original ideas. One exception to North’s evaluation lies in the work of Cicero as he interprets the Stoic Panaetius. In *De Officiis*, Cicero develops notions of temperance that revolve around the Greek *prepon* and the Latin *decorum*. Given Cicero’s unique perspective as a philosopher/politician, temperance takes on relevance for social manner.

Although Aristotle’s account of temperance is more narrowly conceived, he does recognize the broader aspects of the work of *sophrosyne*. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, *sophrosyne* is not simply control of physical desire, but has the function of protecting practical reason.

This also accounts for the word Temperance, which signifies ‘preserving prudence.’ And Temperance does in fact preserve our belief as to our own good; for pleasure and pain do not destroy or pervert all beliefs,...but only beliefs concerning action (6.5.5-6).<sup>10</sup>

Alasdair MacIntyre refers to Aristotle’s use of *sophrosyne* here as “an ingenious but false etymology.”<sup>11</sup> But despite the fact that he criticizes Aristotle’s use of *sophrosyne* in the passage above, MacIntyre rightfully notes that *sophrosyne* is integral to the work of *phronesis* in Aristotle. MacIntyre shows that Aristotle’s treatment of *sophrosyne* remains focused on pleasure and pain within the overall work of practical reason. As temperance responds

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to the movements of the irrational part of the soul it not only moderates passion but also incorporates it into the rational, moral life.<sup>12</sup>

Helen North summarizes the influence of Aristotle's work on *sophrosyne* in three particular areas. These include his division of moral and intellectual virtues, his doctrine of the mean, and his rigor for definition and specification of the virtues. North attributes this move toward a more narrow specification of the virtues to Aristotle's personal penchant for precision. Perhaps one can only speculate as to the reasons Aristotle continued Plato's more narrow conception of *sophrosyne*. Given Aristotle's delineation of the moral and intellectual virtues and the significance that *phronesis* holds, it does follow that *sophrosyne* would continue to be seen in a more narrow light and never regain the near status of master virtue that it held in its earlier conception. The result for later conceptions of *sophrosyne* is to move away from the broader conceptions toward narrower conceptions.

By the time encompassed by the New Testament (NT) both broad and narrow conceptions occur frequently. Although the NT does not include any books of a literary genre equivalent to that coming from Attic philosophy, its focus on character and its social milieu provided the occasion for advocating *sophrosyne*. The occurrence of *sophrosyne* in the NT shows continuity with the early Greek definition of "soundness of mind."

In Mark 5.15 *sophrosyne* is contrasted to a psychological condition that lacks any semblance of order or harmony. The demoniac described in Mark 5.1-20 is mentally deranged. Efforts to fetter him physically were no longer effective. He was in such turmoil that "he was always crying out and bruising himself with stones" (v.5).<sup>13</sup> After Jesus cast the "Legion" out of him, everyone else marveled that the man was now clothed and "in his right mind" (*sophronounta*, v. 15).<sup>14</sup> Helen North calls the use of *sophrosyne* in this story "an instance of the survival of the radical meaning of *sophrosyne*."<sup>15</sup>

A couple of Pauline passages denote broad conceptions of *sophrosyne* as pertaining to psychological balance. Acts 26.24-32 relates the account of Paul's interaction with Festus and Agrippa. During Paul's defense, Festus explodes in frustration at Paul, accusing him of being mad (*mania*). Paul counters, in verse twenty-five, saying that he is speaking words of truth and *sophrosyne*.

Romans 12.3 subtly highlights the broad notions of *sophrosyne*. Paul engages in a play on words with the root, *phron*, in which he encourages careful thinking about oneself. The Christian who is *sophron* is one whose thinking is

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marked by humility: “I bid every one among you not to think (*phron*) of himself more highly than he ought to think (*phron*), but to think (*phron*) with sober judgment (*sophron*), each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him.”

There are no illusions of grandeur in the unclouded mind of the Christian who is *sophron*. While Paul’s use of *sophron* here may or may not illustrate his awareness of the philosophical term *sophrosyne*, his usage is in accord with the notion of psychological balance at the core of the broad conception of this interpretive thread.

Two passages associate *sophrosyne* and the words *nepho* or *nephalios* typically translated as “sober.” Arndt and Gingrich define the verb, *nepho*, as sober in a figurative sense:<sup>16</sup> to “be free from every form of mental and spiritual drunkenness, from excess, passion, rashness, confusion, etc. to be *well-balanced*.”<sup>17</sup> First Peter 4.7 shows this usage: “The end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane (*sophrosyne*) and sober (*nepho*) for your prayers.” Used in this figurative sense, *nepho* further illustrates the focus of *sophrosyne* as referring to psychological balance as opposed to restraint of physical desires. The use of *nephalios*, on the other hand, is more narrowly associated with the consumption of alcohol.<sup>18</sup> Thus 1 Timothy 3.2 reads, “Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate (*nephalios*), sensible (*sophrono*), dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher.”<sup>19</sup> This passage, along with Titus 1.7-2.12, illustrates the difficulty of gleaned a coherent and consistent conception of temperance from the NT material.

Titus 1.7-2.12 shows the importance of *sophrosyne* in the formation of the character of Christian leaders. While this passage indicates how the understanding of *sophrosyne* was closely associated with more narrow conceptions of response to passion, it nonetheless retains a broad focus on psychological balance.

For a bishop...must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, **8** but hospitable, a lover of goodness, master of himself (*sophrona*), upright, holy, and self-controlled (*enkrates*);...**2.1** But as for you, teach what befits sound doctrine. **2** Bid the older men to be temperate (*nephalios*), serious, sensible (*sophronas*), sound in faith, in love, and steadfastness...**4** and so train the young women...**5** to be sensible (*sophronas*), chaste, domestic, kind...**6** Likewise urge the younger men to control themselves (*sophronein*). **7** Show yourself in all respects a

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0143-7>

Passionate Deliberation

Emotion, Temperance, and the Care Ethic in Clinical  
Moral Deliberation

Carr, M.F.

2001, IX, 184 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0143-7