

## THE NARROW CONCEPTION OF TEMPERANCE

As opposed to the tendency of the broad conceptions to overstate and conflate temperance with virtue in general, narrow conceptions of temperance tend to restrict and collapse the role of temperance to restraining or controlling specific forms of human physical desires. Plato's initial effort to define a certain number of virtues working in concert with each other opened the way for the historical trend toward a more narrowly conceived virtue. Aristotle continued this trend and put the work of temperance largely in the domain of the physical sense of touch.

In contemporary treatments temperance is often confused with continence, resulting in a narrow conception that settles for control of desire without the ideal of personal harmony and balance inherent in original conceptions of the virtue. The temptation to conflate continence and temperance must be rejected. Additionally, contemporary accounts often limit the relevance of temperance by classifying it as solely a "self-regarding" virtue.<sup>1</sup> As a result, some philosophers fail to account for the social significance of this virtue. While it is correct to categorize temperance as a self-regarding virtue, it is shortsighted to conclude that it lacks relevance for moral deliberation involving other persons.

### I

#### *SELF-RESTRAINT AND SELF-CONTROL*

Two interpretations of temperance that are typically treated synonymously are self-control and self-restraint. There are important differences between these two concepts although these are not typically attended to. To restrain is "to check, to hold back, or prevent (a person or thing) *from* some course of action."<sup>2</sup> To portray temperance as self-restraint then is to argue that, if one is to be temperate, one must "hold back" or prevent any course of action that will allow for expression of a particular passion. There is some overlap in this definition with that of self-control and as a result the two terms are often used synonymously.

Self-control moves farther away from *apatheia* in the continuum toward some form of *metriopatheia*. While self-restraint is characterized as allowing the

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presence of—but strict suppression of—the passions, self-control moves away from strict restraint toward what I call “management” of the expression of passion. Control is defined as the ability to “exercise restraint or direction upon the free action of” some particular person or thing.<sup>3</sup> Control moves closer to the sense of managing emotion rather than suppressing it. Thus self-control can be understood as both “restraint” and “management.” To the extent that I favor the use of self-control to characterize temperance I do so only as it conceptually moves in the direction of managing the passions rather than restraining them.

Narrowly conceived, these two concepts limit the applicability of temperance to physical desires that may skew our psychological deliberative processes. In the face of that possibility temperance must act as a controller or restrainer of desires. In this understanding, desires are seen as an enemy and temperance becomes a defense force keeping the enemy at bay while the “man of reason” advances toward his goal. Viewing human desire as an opposing force to rationality is definitive of narrow conceptions of temperance.

### *Historical movement toward narrow conceptions*

Aristotle is chiefly responsible for the establishment of narrow conceptions of temperance. In his account, temperance is the virtue that finds the mean in relation to pleasures and pains.<sup>4</sup> These pleasures are limited by Aristotle to those of the body and do not include those of the soul. Aristotle further specifies which pleasures of the body he has in mind (*NE* 3.10.3). While the pleasures of the eye, of the ears, and of the nose are not the concern of temperance, those pleasures of “taste and touch” are (*NE* 3.10.8). Aristotle continues to narrow the realm of applicability by arguing that our enjoyment of things pleasant comes “solely through the sense of touch” (*NE* 3.10.9). Ultimately, Aristotle limits temperance to the pleasures that “lay in the sensation of contact” (*NE* 3.10.10).<sup>5</sup>

For Aristotle, touch is the most universal of the senses, since it is common to both animals and humans alike. Charles Young says Aristotle “means us to understand temperance as a virtue that relegates our relation to our animality.”<sup>6</sup> Young’s point highlights Aristotle’s concern that if our animality is not regulated by the virtue of temperance then rationality is threatened.

In an irrational being the appetite for pleasure is insatiable and indiscriminating, and the innate tendency is fostered by active gratification; indeed, if such gratification be great and intense it actually overpowers the reason. Hence our indulgences should be moderate and few, and never opposed

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to principle....Hence in the temperate man the appetitive element must be in harmony with principle (*NE* 3.12.7-9).

Because of Aristotle's notion that the experience of the temperate man will include a state of inner harmony in which the moral agent finds no conflict between principle and desire, there exists a clear distinction between those who have reached such a state (the temperate) and those who continue to strive toward it (the continent).

### *Temperance and continence in narrow conception*

One difficulty for narrow conceptions is distinguishing clearly between temperance and continence. In Aristotle's thought the temperate person does not experience passion as a threat to moral deliberation because there is no internal struggle between reason and passion. On the other hand, the continent person shows the same external behavior but is involved in an intense internal struggle.<sup>7</sup>

Aquinas puts it most succinctly: "Continence is compared to temperance, as the imperfect to the perfect" (*Summa Theologica* II-II 155.4 rep). Aquinas' conception posits temperance as more suited to the task of incorporating passion in the moral life. Temperance is concerned with moderating desire; continence is more narrowly concerned with resisting desires:

Continence has for its matter the desires for pleasures of touch, not as moderating them (this belongs to temperance which is in the concupiscible<sup>8</sup>), but its business with them is to resist them. For this reason it must be in another power, since resistance is of one thing against another (*ST* II-II 155.3 ad 1).<sup>9</sup>

Continence results in the same outward conduct as temperance, but according to Aristotle it is not truly a virtue. Aquinas was willing to class it as a virtue, albeit an "imperfect" one.

In an effort to shape a contemporary virtue that incorporates both continence and temperance, Albert Mele seeks to eliminate the difficulties by breaking down the distinction between the two. In his account, self-control is defined as a "mastery of any sort of motivation that competes" against our better judgment. He contends that anyone who develops the traits of temperance to a "noteworthy degree" should be understood as temperate and that temperate persons "occasionally have pertinent desires that do not hit the mark." To Mele, Aristotle's position on the distinction between continence (*enkrateia* or

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self-control) and temperance “seems excessively restrictive” and should be “relaxed.”<sup>10</sup> Recent literature on temperance moves in this direction in that it gives self-control a “much broader range of application.” The normative account of temperance I offer continues the Aristotelian distinctions and argues that there is no need to redefine temperance in relation to continence in order to accommodate Mele’s reluctance to accept the more rigorous stance of temperance in the moral life.

Jean Porter recognizes Mele’s intuition that continent people should be praised for their efforts but she does not agree with revising the distinctions between these two concepts.

Even though Aquinas holds that continence, and even more, incontinence are of less moral value than true temperance, he could nonetheless account for our widespread intuition that there is something praiseworthy about struggling to do the right thing when all one’s desires and fears are pulling in the opposite direction....Hence, the person of imperfect virtue, who struggles to do the right thing, has not yet achieved the ideal harmony of the fully virtuous person, but she is moving in that direction, and her struggles are themselves praiseworthy, precisely because they are directed toward a still better ideal of human excellence.<sup>11</sup>

Some praise should be given continent persons for their conduct, but to narrow the work of temperance, making it synonymous with continence, fails to capture the richness of temperance as a virtue in the moral life and does not serve to forward its relevance in moral deliberation. While the difference between continence and temperance is more like a continuum than a contrast, there remains a difference that is central for the response to the movements of passion. This difference revolves around the level of internal struggle present in each case. If the moral agent is faced with the force of passion while deliberating, the response to such passion will be different for the continent person whose internal struggle remains unresolved. The temperate person will readily be able to engage and incorporate such movements of passion because there is a habituated practice of doing so. But if one is continent the chance that including the movements of passion will result in a skewed moral judgment (a very real chance in the continent person) will occasion at least a pause if not a complete holding back of the effort to include the full experience of emotion.

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### *Self-control in the thought of Paul and the New Testament*

The apostle Paul is the most influential author for the portrayal of self-control in the NT. His conception of self-control (*enkrates*) has similarities to a narrow, physical temperance but his theological underpinnings present a unique and complex relationship with regard to how a Christian is to live in relation to human desires. In Paul's writings, *sophrosyne* retains its broad meaning but plays a comparatively minor role to *enkrates*. *Enkrateia*, although closely associated with *sophrosyne* in Paul and the NT, is not synonymous with it. In Paul's letters, when *enkrateia* occurs in relation to *sophrosyne* the context revolves around physical human desires (desires of the flesh [*sarx*]). Galatians, chapter five, sets out what appears to be a very sharp contrast between living according to the Spirit (*kata pneuma*) and living according to the flesh (*kata sarx*).<sup>12</sup>

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh [*epithumian sarkos*]. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other (Gal. 5.16-17).<sup>13</sup>

One might be tempted to draw a straight line connecting the Stoic presentation of the dualism and antagonism of passion and reason in the Pauline presentation of flesh and Spirit. But, Paul's reflection on the nature of one's response to human desire is not dependent upon Stoic conceptions.<sup>14</sup>

Paul argues that when one chooses Christ, the life of fleshly existence is changed. Christians "have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5.24) and now "live in the flesh...by faith in the Son of God" (Gal. 2.20).<sup>15</sup> Christians with a spiritual orientation will focus on the guidance of the Holy Spirit,<sup>16</sup> while those whose orientation is fleshly will focus on satisfying the desires of the flesh. The latter class remain "captive" to the desires of the flesh (Ro. 7.6) whereas the former class enjoy the "freedom" of the Gospel (Gal. 5.13). With this freedom the stark antagonism between flesh and spirit falls away and the believer lives a fleshly existence that is characterized by the "fruits of the Spirit" (Gal. 5.22, 23), and service to the other (Gal. 5.13).<sup>17</sup>

Although life in Christ allows for a new life in the flesh led by faith in God there always exists the possibility that one might willfully choose, as the Galatians did,<sup>18</sup> to return to the old life of flesh (Gal. 3.1-5). This ever-present reality<sup>19</sup> places a note of contrast for Christians who seek to live a moral life.<sup>20</sup> Life in the Spirit remains distinct from life in the flesh (Gal. 5.16-26). This distinction is not focused on living life rationally as opposed to being driven

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