

## A NORMATIVE ACCOUNT OF TEMPERANCE

### I

#### *TEMPERANCE IN THE VIRTUE THEORIES OF ARISTOTLE AND AQUINAS*

An analysis of temperance must acknowledge that desire is intimately involved with pleasure.<sup>1</sup> For both Aristotle and Aquinas there are two realms from which pleasure arises; either the intellect or the sensate aspects of existence. While their detailed account of human nature analyzes these “parts” in a way that gives the impression they are distinct and separate, in fact, there is a very close relationship between these pleasure faculties.

For Aristotle the domain of temperance is the irrational part of the soul (*Nicomachean Ethics* 3.10.1), the pleasures of which revolve around the sensate bodily functions of taking nutrition and engaging in procreation. This class of pleasure is called necessary pleasure (*NE* 7.4.2).<sup>2</sup> In response to the “pleasures and pains...and corresponding desires” of the sensitive appetite temperance is displayed (*NE* 7.7.1). When Aristotle begins to catalog the particular virtues in *NE*, Book Two, he says: “In respect of pleasures and pains—not all of them, and to a less degree in respect of pains...the observance of the mean is Temperance, the excess Profligacy” (*NE* 2.7.3).

Pleasure remains the central concern of temperance regardless of how Aristotle narrows its focus to specific pleasures. It is significant that pleasure is also the central concern of virtue in general.

On this account therefore pleasure and pain are necessarily our main concern, since to feel pleasure and pain rightly or wrongly has a great effect on conduct....For this reason also therefore pleasure and pain are necessarily the main concern both of virtue and of political science, since he who comports himself towards them rightly will be good, and he who does so wrongly, bad. We may then take it as established that virtue has to do with pleasures and pains (*NE* 2.3.8-11).

### CHAPTER THREE

As does Aristotle, Aquinas connects the work of temperance specifically to pleasure. Temperance concerns pleasure common to humans and animals (*Summa Theologica* II-II 141.8 ad 1).<sup>3</sup> Aquinas takes some subtle departures from Aristotle that serve to broaden the relevant pleasures and thereby the realm of temperance. Temperance, in Aquinas' account, cannot be solely limited to pleasures of touch. In *ST* II-II 141.4, the first objection offers the challenge that temperance is also about pleasures not associated with touch. In response, Aquinas counters: "Wherefore it belongs chiefly and properly to temperance to moderate desires and pleasures of touch, and secondarily other pleasures" (*ST* II-II 141.4 ad 1). These other pleasures, those of the intellect, also stand in need of temperance. Thus Aquinas opens the way for conceptions of temperance to be applied to the intellectual pleasures.

Aristotelian and Thomistic psychology delineated two areas of human appetite. Lower or sensitive appetites are those of the physical realm. Higher or intellectual appetites are those of the psychological realm.<sup>4</sup> Present-day knowledge of human psychology has evolved toward a more explicit recognition of the integrated nature of the sensitive and intellectual appetites. I think one is hard pressed to argue that either of them intended to deny this holism in their efforts to delineate the distinctiveness of the "parts" of the human person. For instance, in *NE* 1.13.9-11 Aristotle notes but does not take the time to examine closely the notion that these parts "though distinguishable in thought as two" might really be "inseparable in reality." Although a full examination of this aspect of Aristotelian and Thomistic psychology cannot be entertained here, a normative account of temperance must recognize both the distinctness of these parts, as well as the wholeness of, the human person. To reaffirm temperance as pertaining solely to the sensitive part maintains an unnecessary dualism.<sup>5</sup> Temperance is relevant to the integrated work of both sensitive and intellectual realms of human psychology.

Despite the problems associated with their understanding of human psychology, Aristotelian and Thomistic accounts of temperance remain relevant in modern psychology. Within the work of both authors I find passages that recognize the blending of the sensitive and intellectual parts. In addition, there are also passages that show an appreciation for temperance in relation to the intellectual appetite. After a brief summary of the sensitive appetite and physical temperance I will examine Aristotle's and Aquinas' accounts of the intellectual appetite for broader conceptions of psychological temperance.

The work of temperance in the sensitive appetite aims at producing a human response to appetites that are common to humans and animals. It is a virtue

## NORMATIVE ACCOUNT OF TEMPERANCE

designed to help keep the overall goals of the agent protected from the forces of our animality. There is little or no concern to incorporate these desires into the moral life.

The Aristotelian/Thomistic division of sensitive and intellective appetite is important here. Anthony Kenny delineates the differences succinctly.

Because a human being is an animal and not a pure intelligence, there are in human beings two different appetitive powers, corresponding to the difference between sensory awareness and intellectual understanding....The sensory appetite is the capacity for those desires and revulsions which humans and animals have in common; the intellectual appetite, which is more commonly called 'the will', is the capacity for the kind of wanting that, in this work at least is peculiar to language-users.<sup>6</sup>

Physical temperance within this strict dichotomy is the work of a moral virtue on the sense appetites of eating, drinking, and sexual activity. According to Aristotle, the intellectual appetite does not need a virtue to restrain it since its movements do not pose a threat to reason. Aquinas recognizes, however, that there are desires in the intellectual appetite which also need the work of temperance. When writing on concupiscence Aquinas argues that "properly speaking, desire may be not only in the lower, but also in the higher appetite" (*ST* I-II 30.1 ad 2).<sup>7</sup> If temperance toward the sensitive appetite aims at producing a human response to appetites that are common to both humans and animals, to what end is the practice of temperance in the intellective appetite?

In the intellective appetite temperance aims at producing a moral response to appetites that are uniquely human. Psychological temperance insists, perhaps in contradiction to Aristotle,<sup>8</sup> that there are occasions when our intellectual desires need the work of temperance. This work is not to restrain intellectual desires, rather it serves to manage and incorporate them into our moral deliberation. A normative account of temperance will include both psychological and physical temperance since these two realms of the human person are so intricately related.

Aquinas improves upon Aristotle's account of intellectual desire in two ways. First, he more thoroughly treats the relation between sensitive and intellective appetite. The lower appetite often follows the movement of the higher appetite:

### CHAPTER THREE

When the higher part of the soul is intensely moved to anything, the lower part also follows that movement; and thus the passion that results in consequence, in the sensitive appetite, is a sign of the intensity of the will, and so indicates greater moral goodness (*ST I-II* 24.3 ad 1).<sup>9</sup>

Second, he recognizes the need for temperance in the intellective appetite. There are a number of areas within Aquinas' treatment of human psychology and temperance that move toward the conception of psychological temperance. In his account of temperance Aquinas refers to the sin of pride in the "first man" (*ST II-II* 163). Article One poses the objection (#1) that desire for knowledge cannot be "inordinate." Aquinas disagrees. In his response, he writes of an "inordinate desire for excellence" (*ST II-II* 163.1 ad 3).

The question of whether the intellectual appetite (or will)<sup>10</sup> needs a virtue is directly addressed by Aquinas in *ST I-II* 56.6. Aquinas writes here that in one sense, "if man's will is confronted with a good that exceeds its capacity...then does the will need virtue." The virtues needed here are those that consider the affections toward God or one's neighbor. Temperance and fortitude are not listed as necessary here because they are self-regarding virtues and Thomas does not note their relevance in relation to others. But as can easily be argued, and Nancy Sherman reminds us, "virtuous agents conceive of their well-being as including the well-being of others."<sup>11</sup>

Thus temperance retains relevance to intellectual desire on two levels. It is an essential part of a self-management of psychological desire and its practice has profound effect on how one relates with others. Without the management temperance provides the self, one is unable to will or direct love toward the other. This is something Paul Ramsey failed to recognize in his call for a rejection of temperance in an *agapeistic* ethic. Love for neighbor is impossible without the management temperance provides for the impulse to love.

In his treatment of temperance itself, responding to the challenge that temperance is about more than simply the "pleasures of touch" (*ST II-II* 144.4 arg 4), Aquinas reaffirms Aristotle's position that intellectual pleasures do not need control. However, he is compelled to qualify his answer. Spiritual pleasures "strictly speaking" do not need control but, when one spiritual pleasure becomes excessive in relation to another, temperance is needed "accidentally."

## NORMATIVE ACCOUNT OF TEMPERANCE

We may also reply that spiritual pleasures, strictly speaking, are in accordance with reason, wherefore they need no control, save accidentally, in so far as one spiritual pleasure is a hindrance to another greater and more binding (*ST II-II* 141.4 ad 4).

Aquinas places humility under the part of temperance called modesty (*ST II-II* 160-169). Modesty attends to weaker passions that still need moderation (*ST II-II* 160.1). Humility itself “restrains the appetite from aiming at great things against right reason” (*ST II-II* 161.1 ad 3). In this account of humility, he explicitly refers to the restraint needed for the operations of the mind, “lest it tend to high things immoderately” (*ST II-II* 161.1).

While the formal treatment of temperance places its work in the sensitive appetite, on one occasion Aquinas refers to its practice among angels who have no sensitive appetite at all.

Temperance, in so far as it is a human virtue, resides in the concupiscible part, and fortitude in the irascible. But they do not exist in the angels in this manner....But temperance is predicated of them according as in moderation they display their will in conformity with the Divine will (*ST I* 59.4 ad 3).<sup>12</sup>

The most striking reference in support of psychological temperance is in Aquinas’ account of studiousness, which he considers a part of temperance as it pertains to knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge. Studiousness is to moderate the soul’s desire for knowledge.

Now just as in respect of his corporeal nature man naturally desires the pleasures of food and sex, so, in respect of his soul, he naturally desires to know something; thus the Philosopher observes at the beginning of his *Metaphysics* (i.1); *All men have a natural desire for knowledge*. The moderation of this desire pertains to the virtue of studiousness; wherefore it follows that studiousness is a potential part of temperance, as a subordinate virtue annexed to a principal virtue (*ST II-II* 166.2)<sup>13</sup> (emphasis original)

Immediately following studiousness Aquinas treats curiosity (*ST II-II* 167). In this part of temperance he speaks of an inordinate desire for the learning of

<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