

The Virtue of Temperance

- I. Introduction: Temperance is the virtue by which we habitually resist the urges or desires that pull away from actions that we know by reason should be done. There are many such desires, so the virtue of temperance actually covers a wide variety of desires and actions.
- II. The things temperance deals with and the urges/passions involved
 - A. The things dealt with
 1. Temperance governs our action with regard to good things that we find attractive and desirable: food, drink, sex, knowledge, play, wealth, etc.
 2. All these are truly good things (they contribute to our perfection as human beings) and it is right that we are attracted them and pursue them and enjoy them.
 3. Temperance gives us the ability to deal with these thing in a moderate way, which means in accord with what reasons tells us (e.g., eat food in a way that is healthy) without letting the attractiveness of the thing govern our actions (e.g., eat until we don't feel like eating any more).
 - B. The passions or emotions involved in the virtue of Temperance
 1. Desire: the basic urge for a good (when it is not yet possessed); there are many such desires of various sorts:
 - a. Desires for eating, drinking, sex (the big three).
 - b. Many others: desire to know, desire for honor, desire for wealth, desire to avenge injustice and to right wrongs (anger), desire to play games, etc.
 2. Delight/pleasure: the emotional response to actually possessing the good.
 3. Most desires are actually good in themselves (e.g., the desire to eat). But when they are excessive they tend to “drag” the person around lead him away from doing what he should. Uncontrolled urges/passion can enslave a person (extreme case is addiction).
 4. The temperant person habitually moderates his desires so that they are not excessive and do not dominate him. He is able to govern his actions according to what reason says is the right thing (e.g., eat without going to excess; having sexual relations with his wife, but not other women, playing games as need to relax, but not more).
- III. Basic structure of the virtue and its opposed vices
 - A. There is something a person should do which he sees by his reason (e.g. eat healthy; marital fidelity)
 - B. The person experiences urges or desires toward some other attractive good that will pull him away from doing what he should (e.g., Big Macs; his pretty young secretary).

- C. Temperance is the virtue by which a person habitually controls the urges or desires that will pull him away from the good of reason (i.e., what reason recognizes should be done). The temperant person habitually has his desires under control (i.e., he has moderate desires) and he indulges them according to reason: the ones he should, when he should, in the way he should, and to the degree he should.
 - D. The person who is temperance is thus able to do (freely choose) what reason requires without being pulled away (Another example: a person knows he should be doing his work right now but has an urge to check the scores or check out the news).
 - E. As in all virtues, there is also need for a judgment (of prudence) as whether a desire should be satisfied here and now or not. This is the thinking side of the virtue. How much a passion/emotion/urge should be satisfied depends on many circumstances, and it requires a judgment or reason to determine it (e.g., how much to eat for breakfast on a given day will depend on what we are going to do that day).
 - F. Implied here is that the person has *higher ideals* which give him a measure for how much he should indulge any given passion. For example, it is because a person is committed to the ideal of marital fidelity that he curbs his sensual desires toward women other than his wife; it is because a man is committed to many serious goods (personal, family, societal, God) that he limits the time spent on play to what is necessary for his rest. In general, to be interiorly free for dedication to higher goods (God, knowledge, beauty, friends, the common good, etc.), one should have moderate desires that are not interfering with the pursuit of these higher goods (think of all the damage done by politicians who indulge their sexual desires illicitly). A person without higher ideals will find it hard to understand why he should curb his desires for bodily goods like eating and sex.
- IV. The vices opposed to temperance
- A. By way of excess: the desire is too strong so that it dominates. This is by far the most common vice.
 - 1. Big three: gluttony (eating), drunkenness (drink), luxury/unchastity (sex).
 - 2. Others: curiosity (excessive desire to know), anger/rage (too much anger), pride (too much love of honor), greed (excessive desire for wealth).
 - B. By way of deficiency: the desires are too weak, something like anorexia. This is not too common.
 - C. In the case of vice a person loses his judgment of what is the right thing and takes indulgence of the desire as the highest good and so thinks the more indulgence the better (e.g. a glutton who, in extreme cases, uses the vomitorium). More commonly a person knows what the right thing is, but is unable to resist the desire or urge when it comes: this is moral incontinence. This is the state of most dieters.
- V. Examples of specific virtues included under the general umbrella of temperance (the same basic structure found in difference subject matter or urges):

- A. Desire for food/eating: *abstinence* (vs. gluttony) [these are terms used by St. Thomas]
- B. Desire for drink: *sobriety* (vs. drunkenness)
- C. Desire for revenge: *meekness* (vs. anger)
- D. Desire to know: *studiosity* (vs. curiosity)
- E. Desire for money/wealth: *generosity* (vs. greed and stinginess)
- F. Desire for play: *Eutrapelia* (vs. unnamed vice of desiring too much play).

VI. Importance of temperance (why it is a cardinal virtue)

- A. Lack of temperance can result in a person committing grave injustices (grave sins).
 1. A man who is unfaithful to his wife (think of all the harm that resulted from the intemperance of Henry VIII).
 2. A woman may not control her eating and become less attractive to her husband; this can cause problems for the marriage.
 3. Many people are intemperate in regard to alcohol and consequently do not live up to their professional and family responsibilities.
 4. Someone who is too attracted to play (golf, football, etc.) can neglect important obligations toward his wife and children and others around him.
- B. Without temperance you are unable to accomplish many important goals and goods that require sustained concentrated effort
 1. Most larger projects in life and in professional life require that a person be able to concentrate without getting distracted.
 2. For example, it is quite common in the academic world that a person is not be able to finish his Ph.D. dissertation, simply because he cannot force himself to sit and do it but keeps getting distracted by many other things.
- C. Most fundamentally, a person who is dominated by passions and urges will not be able to devote himself to higher goods of God, family, friends and the common good.

VII. How the virtue is inculcated/gained

- A. The affective/passionate aspect
 1. As with other moral virtues, a person come to experience the right amount of desire for the right things at the right times, etc., through habituation. Habituation to the virtue occurs by repeatedly choosing to do what you should in the face of desires to do something else.

2. For teaching young persons to acquire the virtue of temperance they cannot be allowed to indulge every desire as it comes along; they need to learn, through the reason of another person, to moderate their desires and indulge them in accord with reason (e.g., eat what is healthy). This means that they will often have to deny a desire completely (e.g., the urge to hit someone in anger) or postpone its indulgence: e.g, eating at meal times and not just whenever they feel like it; doing their work/chores, homework when they should and putting off playing to later; going to bed when they should and not staying up for TV, reading, games, music, etc..
3. Parents and teachers should regulate the indulgence of urges in their children/students. Things like eating between meals, eating too much sweets, watching too much TV or playing too much video games (or any video games), not going to bed because they desire to play, read, watch TV, etc. In effect, parents need to supply the rule of reason until they can do it for themselves. Obviously, the children need to make some choices for themselves if they are to learn, so failures will occur as part of the learning process.
4. For those who have problems with temperance, it is very often necessary to get *help from other people* in order to acquire the virtue. On one's own, the good resolutions will tend not to stand up to the presence of the desire (e.g., dieters who "cheat" when faced with food they like). This is why there are twelve-step programs for extreme cases of intemperance (sometimes referred to as addictions). Or programs that automatically show another person every site you visit: this helps people who want to avoid looking at pornography on-line.

B. The cognitive aspect

1. A person needs to learn:
 - a. That he should indulge desires in a reasonable way; that doing what is good and worthwhile will always mean denying oneself indulgence of desire (like an Olympic athlete); that a mature man is not pulled around by his desires, but rather dominates them (e.g., he can go without eating when that is required).
 - b. That these desires are good and the problem is indulging them in the wrong way. They should not think that desires are wrong or that pleasure is wrong. The key is moderation according to reason.
 - c. How to size up difficulties realistically (many people, especially cowards, over-estimate the difficulties).
2. How a person learns these ideas:
 - a. Example (especially parents)
 - b. Literature: stories, history, movies, etc. in which the connection between temperance and achieving higher goods is manifested.

- c. Living within an fixed order is very helpful: i.e., things like a house schedule, times for doing chores, homework, etc. that require a person to do what he ought regardless of the urges or desires he may have at the moment.
- d. Having children earn money for their own spending as early as possible; the tasks/jobs they will have to earn money will force them to achieve a task and forgo the indulgence of many urges in order to do so.
- e. Not allowing (or at least discouraging) very excessive indulgences like all-day snacking, hours and hours of listening to music, hours and hours of video games, watching sports, etc.

C. Higher ideals

1. Since one moderates his desires because their indulgence would prevent him from pursuing a higher ideal, it is necessary that children have such ideals. They need to see love of God, marital fidelity, contribution to society, etc. as important goods, the achievement of which requires moderating many desires (as an Olympic athlete moderates many desires for the sake of winning a gold medal). Proper literature is very important for the inculcation of higher ideals.
2. Children need to come to see the connection between moderating their desires and achievement of higher goods.