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Aquinas on Virtue

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PART I

Defining Virtue

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CHAPTER 1

Defining Temperance Causally

Suggested reading: *Summa Theologiae* I.II 61.2;
II.II 141, 143, 155, 166

Let us begin with an analysis of temperance. The purpose is to construct a causal account of temperance that begins from the one found in the *Summa Theologiae*. The interpretation of Aquinas to be built on later is not argued in depth here but is left for later chapters, when the more controversial claims will be justified. The reader is therefore asked temporarily to take on trust what is yet to be established, especially the claim that causal virtue theory analyzes each virtue into seven elements (matter, mode, target, subject, overall end, agent, and exemplar) and relates them in certain characteristic ways. How might this causal framework, in dialogue with contemporary accounts, enable the analysis of a specific virtue?

The choice of temperance may puzzle. Many associate temperance with a moralistic puritanism. A survey of over a million people interested in character development found that of the six “core virtues” recognized by positive psychology (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence), the least endorsed is temperance.¹ Is it plausible still to see temperance as a cardinal virtue, or even as a virtue at all?

The classical argument for temperance’s cardinality or principality rests on perennial features of human nature, such as the need to limit superficial or momentary attractions for deeper and more-enduring goods.² While this rationale retains its original force, today there are other equally compelling arguments. Psychological research indicates that good self-control is positively correlated with better interpersonal relationships, better adjustment, and even better grades.³ In a consumerist society, temperance is needed to moderate the impulse toward consumption.⁴ Understood as “moderation for the sake of eco-justice,” it has an important place in an environmental virtue ethic.⁵ High rates of addiction and compulsion in relation to drugs, food, and digital media, as

well as the hectic pace of modern life, all signal the urgent need for the simplifying and balancing influence of temperance. What, then, may a causal analysis contribute to the burgeoning discussion of this perennial yet timely virtue?

MODE

A natural place to begin the analysis of a virtue is its name. This is where Aquinas begins (II.II 141.1c). He holds that the name of a virtue expresses its *mode* (I.II 61.4). The mode of a virtue is its characteristic manner of achieving the good at stake in some specific field of human life. It is the most formal element of any moral virtue and therefore its primary defining feature, which is precisely why it is normally expressed by the virtue's name. Does the name "temperance," then, indicate the virtue's mode? Immediately we run into difficulties.

"Temperance" has a lot of baggage. As Louke van Wensveen says, the term is "riddled with negative connotations, such as small-mindedness, prudishness, preachiness, missionary zeal, and especially lack of joy."⁶ One reason for this unhappy set of associations is the enduring legacy of the temperance movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which advocated enforced abstinence from alcohol. Temperance, therefore, tends to convey an outmoded, repressive ideal.

However, ethicists are increasingly aware of how virtue terms, detached from the ancient ethical traditions in which they were forged, today are often mere shadows of their former selves. Temperance is not unique: prudence, magnanimity, humility, and, above all, charity, have similarly "dwindled miserably," to use Josef Pieper's apt description.⁷ These terms once had richer meanings.

Is etymology, or the original meaning, a surer guide than current usage? Not always. Sometimes a virtue has been badly named. The original Greek word for what we call temperance is *sophrosyne*, which in its root meaning conveys a positive soundness of mind. The Stoics employed various Latin translations that have migrated into English as "sobriety," "chastity," "moderation," "continence," and "temperance." What is striking is that, in contrast to the affirming Greek word, they all "imply restriction or denial."⁸

Aquinas similarly characterizes the mode of temperance in negative terms, such as "moderation," "retraction," or "restraint." Moderation sounds the least restrictive, yet Aquinas adds that the moderation of temperance is achieved precisely through restraint (II.II 141.2). As he explains, "Temperance is a certain disposition of the soul that imposes the limit on any passions or operations, lest they be carried beyond what is due" (I.II 61.4).⁹ In his accounting of temperance's mode as restraint, has Aquinas been misled by a virtue vocabulary saddled with a Stoic suspicion of passion?

When he discusses the virtue of studiousness (*studiositas*) as the well-ordered desire for knowledge, Aquinas does recognize the fallibility of arguing directly from a virtue's name to its mode (II.II 166). He insists that studiousness is related to temperance, which suggests to him that its mode is restraint. But Aquinas also notes that its name suggests a positive mode that is contrary to the mode of restraint since the "studious" person is eager to know (166.2 arg 3). Aquinas's solution is to distinguish a twofold mode in studiousness: a strengthening of the purpose to learn (that is, a conquering of sluggishness) and restraint (curbing vain curiosity). The latter mode, he claims, is more essential to studiousness than the former (ad 3). Aquinas here concedes, then, that an argument from a virtue's name, at least to its primary mode, does not work in all cases. He also acknowledges that a virtue associated with temperance may possess a more complex and more positive mode than restraint. Why not, therefore, apply a similar twofold mode for the specific virtue of temperance itself, of rightly ordered intensification as well as restraint?

Concern about the negativity of restraint and restriction has led today's advocates of temperance to reinterpret what we are calling the "mode" of temperance not as restraint but as integration. Mark Carr argues that the "work of temperance" is the inclusion of emotion in the moral life.¹⁰ Van Wensveen submits that temperance involves not "militaristic mastery" of our appetites but rather "creative channeling," or "the inventive redirection and transformation of ordinary desires."¹¹ She advocates an ethic of "*formed spontaneity*" rather than one founded on restraint.¹² This strategy of redefinition is attractive in that it avoids canonizing a repressive moral ideal; however, at the same time something may be lost because the definition of the cardinal virtue of temperance then seems to shirk what has always been seen as its primary work—namely, voluntary self-limitation. Defining a virtue is a complex business. How do we adjudicate these issues?

The Mode Fits the Matter

Aquinas has a second, more-compelling method for establishing a virtue's mode that is not so reliant on semantics. A crucial principle is that the mode of a virtue is congruent with its "matter," or the interior and exterior acts (and, by extension, their objects) with which that virtue is especially concerned. A virtue's mode is what, when applied to the matter, makes it virtuous and reasonable. Just as a craftsman works in a different manner when using the diverse matters of wax, wood, or clay, and just as the methods of the sciences differ according to their specific subject-matters, so the mode of each virtue differs according to its proper matter.

Aquinas employs this principle of mode-matter correlation when determining the mode of temperance, as contrasted with the mode of fortitude:

For it is necessary to place the order of reason in the matter of passions due to their resistance to reason, which is twofold. First, insofar as passion impels to something contrary to reason, and thus it is necessary that passion be restrained, and from this is named temperance. Second, insofar as passion withdraws from that which reason dictates, just as fear of dangers or of toils, and thus it is necessary that man be strengthened in that which is of reason, lest he recede [from it]; and from this is named fortitude. (I.II 61.2; see also 62.3–4; II.II 141.3)¹³

The argument employs analogies from physical motion. The primary mode of temperance is a *restraint from attraction*, whereas the primary mode of fortitude is an *impulse against a retraction*. Different passions have characteristic ways of becoming disordered and distracting from what is reasonable and good. Passions of sensible attraction, when not correctly moderated, tend to seduce one toward something against the good of reason, such as adultery or drunkenness. Passions of retraction in the face of danger or hardship have a contrasting tendency to move a person into evading what is reasonable. Whereas a mode of restraint is necessary to resist the magnetic pull of the emotionally attractive, in contrast, a mode of strengthening is needed to overcome the tendency to avoid the emotionally repulsive.

It could be objected that excess is not the only way attraction can go wrong. All moral virtues (with the possible exception of justice) lie in the mean between a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency. The vice of deficiency opposed to the virtue of temperance is “insensibility,” which fails to take a healthy pleasure in things (II.II 142.1). Yet the desires for food and sex are biologically based impulses that exhibit extraordinary power and tend to overrun their bounds. People tend to go wrong by intemperance rather than by insensibility, so the primary mode of temperance must be one of restraint.

Here the doubts about whether temperance is a virtue, or whether its mode involves restraint, should surely be laid to rest. It is a true good to cultivate a simplicity in our desires for material goods, food, drink, sex, entertainment, and so on. Insatiable, excessive, or misdirected appetite is disordered, as manifested in the many prevalent self- and other-destructive addictions and compulsions; virtue places limits on these desires in order to preserve certain lasting goods.

How do we resolve the worry that restraint is a negative and repressive ideal? Aquinas is once more of help. The question is not whether we need restraint, but what kind of restraint we need. First, temperate restraint is *positive* in that it involves only meaningful limitation: a “no” for a greater “yes.” Aquinas

notes, “Pure negation is not the act of any virtue, but only that which is done for a reasonable purpose” (147.1 ad 3).¹⁴ Paradoxically, it could be argued that temperate desire is, in the long term, more passionate and more pleasurable than the continually indulged appetite that becomes apathy and disaffection. Temperance preserves and channels the vital energies of the human person. Pieper offers a compelling image: The “boundaries” recognized by temperance are like a river’s banks, which do not merely defend against dissipation and the destructive flood but also channel the stream with force to its destination.¹⁵

Second, even if at times an element of suspicion of passion characterizes Aquinas’s mind-set, he cannot fairly be accused of operating solely out of a paradigm of domination in his account of the restraint and self-mastery involved in temperance. Aquinas does not advocate the elimination of passion, only its right ordering. Temperate restraint, then, is *nonrepressive* and informs desire rather than extinguishing it (155.4c, ad 3).

Third, Aquinas distinguishes strongly between the restraint of temperance and that of continence or self-control (155.4 ad 1). The mode of self-control is to restrain by *resisting* desires; the mode of temperance is to restrain by *moderating* desires. The restraint embodied in temperance is therefore primarily *nonagonistic* in that it does not strain against disordered desire, since in the temperate person this does not arise, at least for the most part.

While this positive, nonrepressive, and nonagonistic restraint does characterize temperance, the mode of temperance cannot consist *solely* in restraint. The argument is quite simple: since temperance is a virtue, one cannot be too temperate, but one can be too restrained (as Aquinas admits by talking of the vice of “insensibility”). Therefore temperance cannot consist only in restraint. Just as fortitude strengthens the mind against fear and also moderates daring so that it does not lead to rashness, the cardinal virtue of temperance limits passionate attractions and also encourages a healthy appetite and delight in pleasant things. Carr and Van Wensveen are right to point out that one of the challenges posed by temperance is the positive integration and right ordering of our appetites and desires, something with which Aquinas himself would heartily agree (155.4c). The mode of temperance, therefore, operates in the mean between two poles: between restraint/limitation and positive redirection/integration.

Should we exchange the word “temperance,” with its negative connotations, for a more satisfactory term, as some suggest? In his most considered analysis, Aquinas goes back to the word’s etymology. As he says, *temperantia* “in its very name implies a certain moderation or proper mixture [*temperies*]” (141.1).¹⁶ Moderation is the keynote of temperance, achieved by “mixing” the appetite with reason so that one’s desires become reasonable.¹⁷ If “moderation” is thought to be still too negative, an alternative English term that preserves

the core Latin etymology is “modulation.” Modulation, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, is “the action of treating, regulating, or varying something so as to achieve due measure and proportion.” The definition also mentions that modulation can refer to “the action or process of passing from one key to another in the course of a piece of music.” The musical metaphor is helpful: even the ancients associated temperance with musical harmony. The mode of temperance, then, is *the harmonious modulation of attraction* that is accomplished sometimes by restraint and sometimes by the positive redirection and integration of desire.

Aquinas oversimplifies temperance’s mode, at times identifying it too exclusively with its more negative pole. Yet the argument has been a confirmation of his causal method. Form is correlative to matter, and so the mode of a virtue is what is proportionate to its sphere of concern. Since temperance is the virtue that concerns the powerful attractions of the human psyche that tend to overrun their bounds, the mode of temperance lies in a modulation by which these desires are simplified, limited, and integrated positively into the moral life. While Aquinas’s conclusion concerning the mode of temperance may fall short, his method does not.

MATTER

To inquire into the matter of temperance is to ask: What field or sphere of life does temperance concern? Any answer must face the difficulty of reconciling wide applicability with rich content. It is a logical principle that the greater a term’s scope, the less is its content. Temperance is needed in any domain of life in which we experience strong emotional attractions with the potential to distract from, or undermine, the human good. This is a wide field indeed. Aquinas recognizes that temperance has been applied to the matters of food, drink, sex, wealth, clothing, curiosity, anger, and even play (II.II 143). Advocates of temperance are therefore faced with a dilemma. Either one limits the scope of temperance to the spheres of food, drink, and sex (following Aristotle), or one talks about temperance in almost any sphere of life whatsoever. Either temperance is specific and “thick,” lacking relevance beyond a narrow sphere, or it has wide applicability and becomes abstract, vague, and “thin.”¹⁸

Aquinas’s principle of matter-mode correlation offers an elegant solution. If we define temperance’s matter generically as powerful emotional attraction, then its mode is also to be defined generically as the modulation of that attraction. In this case temperance is what Aquinas terms a “general virtue,” one

that is not restricted to any narrow domain but is required in every morally virtuous act (I.II 61.3). However, if we specify the matter more closely, then a more specific mode will be required as well, one that is congruent to this more determinate matter. In this case temperance is not one, but many virtues. Temperate drinking, for example, differs from temperate eating, since drink and food present different challenges to the good of reason and therefore need to be modulated differently. Thus temperance refers not so much to a single specific virtue as to a set of related virtues.

The analysis of temperance into matter and form (mode), then, reconciles wide applicability with rich content. On the one hand temperance does indeed apply to numerous different matters; on the other it does not dissolve in intolerable vagueness, because the particular difficulties of achieving the respective good in each of these matters will give rise to distinctively specific modes.

Are all temperances equal? Aquinas distinguishes between temperance as a “principal” or “cardinal” virtue and the other “secondary” virtues associated with it (II.II 143). The former is the archetypal temperance: it concerns the matter that it is most necessary and most difficult to modulate—namely, the bodily appetites and pleasures of touch. “Touch” (*tactus*) for Aquinas refers not just to contact with the skin but more generally to how the body feels. Touch is therefore involved in the feelings of hunger and thirst, warmth and cold, pleasure and pain, the sense of bodily movement, and so on.¹⁹ In this way it makes sense to say that temperance is about the craving for the pleasures of touch, especially the pleasures of food, intoxicating substances, and sex: wanting to feel good in one’s body.

The cardinal virtue of temperance for Aquinas is divided into four species: abstinence (regarding food), sobriety (regarding drink), chastity (regarding sex), and *puditia*, or what today we would call modesty (regarding the touches, hugs, kisses, and so on, that can have a sexual tendency) (II.II 143). While the modern ear may recoil at the decidedly negative ring of these traditional virtue terms, it remains that the virtues themselves, whose task it is to strike the right balance in these spheres, are themselves necessary.

Aquinas offers two arguments for thinking bodily appetites require a principal virtue for their modulation. First, these appetites have the greatest power to undermine good of reason, due to the way they can possess a person (141.3–5). Second, we share these appetites with nonrational animals, which suggests that they are the kind of appetite furthest from reason and therefore the most difficult to modulate rationally (141.7 arg 1, ad 1). This is not to say that there is not a specifically human way of desiring and enjoying food, drink, or sex that “mixes” reason with appetite, only that the task of finding a human way of desiring, enjoying, and refraining from these pleasures in a manner fitting for

a rational animal is all the more challenging.²⁰ Hence this set of appetites and pleasures constitutes the sphere of the *principal* virtue of temperance.

Aquinas improves on Aristotle because, drawing on Cicero and other later sources, he is able to acknowledge a number of other temperances. Aquinas calls the latter the “potential parts” of temperance since they share in the potency of the principal temperance: they observe the same generic mode that principal temperance imposes, but they are applied specifically to other matters that have less difficulty (II.II 143). Aquinas lists here virtues such as gentleness (which modulates anger), clemency (which moderates strictness), and an ancient virtue named modesty (*modestia*). Under the latter Aquinas includes the virtues of humility and studiousness as well as other intriguing virtues such as simplicity in material requirements and appropriate playfulness.

Aquinas’s classificatory scheme of principal and secondary temperances succeeds in providing a structure within which to place these virtues. At the same time, there are loose ends. For example, it is questionable whether the key Christian virtue of humility should be seen as secondary to temperance; it is also unclear whether it should be conceived primarily as a kind of modulation (e.g., of the desire to excel). Aquinas seems aware of these difficulties and acknowledges that, at least in some respects, humility is more important even than the cardinal virtue of temperance since it disposes a person to receive other gifts from God (including growth in the virtues) (161.4–5). Furthermore, he recognizes that humility is about more than modulation of an appetite to excel. For example, he notes that humility originates in reverence for God and is measured by a realistic self-knowledge (161.6). Humility, then, is not merely a kind of secondary temperance.

As with any classificatory scheme, anomalies exist. The basic insight, however, remains helpful: there are analogical resemblances between different kinds of temperance because all share the generic mode of modulation, although each specifies this mode differently in regard to its respective matter. Within this family grouping the cardinal virtue of temperance remains archetypal and applies modulation where it is needed most.

SUBJECT

Temperance often appears unattractive because it is seen as suppressing or repressing natural desires, or a kind of quashing of the spontaneity of a wholesome human life. Aquinas offers an attractive alternative to this kill-joy temperance that avoids repressive rationalism without swinging to the other extreme of indiscriminate acceptance of appetite. The key is the contrast between temperance and the semi-virtue of continence or self-control.

Temperance versus Continence

Self-control, or continence (*continentia*), etymologically has to do with self-containment or self-possession. Continence “contains” disordered appetites that otherwise would spill out and lead to disordered actions. Continence is therefore “that through which someone resists disordered concupiscences, which in him are vehement” (155.2 arg 2).²¹ It follows that continence is not a virtue in the strict sense but rather is “something mixed” (*quaedam mixta*) (152.2c). Just as a teacher who successfully controls a rowdy class is not yet the kind of teacher whose class is not rowdy in the first place, so continence participates in virtue in strengthening reason against the distracting power of the passions but falls short of the kind of temperance that is not subject to vehement disordered passion.

How, then, does a causal analysis distinguish self-control from the full-blown virtue of temperance? Aquinas says that continence “agrees with temperance both in matter, because it is about pleasures of touch; and in mode, because it lies in a certain restraint” (143 ad 1).²² One key difference between temperance and continence, however, lies in the *subject* of these two habits. A virtue’s subject (*subiectum*) in Aquinas’s terminology is the capacity that virtue perfects. The intellect is the subject of intellectual virtues, as it is disposed to making true and well-reasoned judgments through intellectual virtues; justice orients a person to desire the good of others, so its subject is the will. What, then, are the respective subjects of temperance and continence? Since temperance rectifies the passions of sensible attraction, its subject must be the “concupiscible appetite,” or the power of the soul in which these passions reside. However, continence has a different subject since it controls vehement, disordered concupiscences, which simply do not arise in the temperate person (155.3). Rather, the subject of continence must be the will, since that is how the continent and the incontinent (the weak-willed) differ: the former choose not to follow the vehement evil desires they suffer, whereas the latter, overcome by their appetites, choose to do so.

It follows that temperance and continence differ in mode as well as in their respective subjects, despite Aquinas’s initial statement to the contrary (143 ad 1): “Continence has as matter the concupiscences of the pleasures of touch, not as that which it moderates, which belongs to temperance, which is in the concupiscible, but it is about them as resisting them” (155.2 ad 1).²³ In other words, the mode of temperance is to restrain *by moderating* concupiscences; the mode of continence is to restrain *by resisting* concupiscences.

There exists, therefore, a clear contrast between temperance and continence in the way they order the “sensitive appetite,” which is the locus of the passions in the soul: “The rational good flourishes more in the temperate one,

in whom even the sensitive appetite itself is subject to reason and, as it were, tamed by reason, than in the one who is containing himself, in whom the sensitive appetite strongly resists reason by its crooked desires” (155.4c).²⁴ Continen-
 tence restrains strong disordered appetites. As a kind of *imperfect* temperance (156.4), continence is marked by effort rather than by the ease and delight that characterizes the exercise of true virtue.²⁵ The restraint of temperance is, in contrast, not the resistance of desire but rather an interior ordering of desire itself. In the temperate person there is a concord of passion and reason that is lacking in the internally conflicted, continent person. As Paul Van Tongeren puts it, “Virtue is not a force opposed to an evil, dangerous and guilty desire; virtue is simply well formed desire itself.”²⁶ Temperance is nothing other than well-ordered *eros*.

Temperance and Control

While he distinguishes the continence that contains unruly desires from the temperance that modulates them, Aquinas does not say that temperance involves no form of control at all. In his view the passions become virtuous when they are “obedient” to the rule of reason (I.II 56.4). To claim that the passions should be made subordinate to reason is likely to be seen as the reflection of an outmoded medieval hierarchical mind-set. This impression is reinforced by various patriarchal metaphors and similes Aquinas uses to express how the sensitive appetite should be subordinated to reason. For example, he claims that just as a boy needs to be disciplined by the rod, so the appetites need to be curbed by reason (II.II 142.2c).

Other strands of Aquinas’s thought support a more positive interpretation. Aquinas says that reason rules over the passions with a “political” rather than “despotic” authority, so that the passions are like freemen who have in some respects their own will (I 81.3 ad 2). Reason, we might say, should be “authoritative” rather than “authoritarian” in relation to the passions. Indeed, in this view a tyrannical control of the passions would be a form of over-control that suppresses the legitimate role of passion in the moral life. The function of moral virtue is not to render the sensitive appetite otiose or idle but rather to dispose it to exercise its proper acts well (I.II 59.5c).

Aquinas’s distinction between political and tyrannical authority offers a helpful way of understanding the control involved in temperance. The hierarchy of a parent to a child, a teacher to a student, or reason to passion, is not a bad thing. What matters is the *kind* of hierarchy. The aim of reason’s political authority over the passions is not to eliminate them; it is to enable them to play their proper role in virtuous human action. For Aquinas this is possible because

the passions possess a participative rationality. Passion is potentially intelligent and therefore potentially virtuous.

The solution to an excessively controlling concept of temperance is not to fall into the opposite extreme by taking the advocacy of unfettered passion too far. A romanticism that elevates passion without acknowledging its destructive potential is as undesirable as a rationalism that suppresses passion. The ideal of self-mastery associated with temperance remains legitimate as long as this mastery is purified of its excessively paternalistic connotations. However, to reject such authority as irretrievably repressive is to pave the way for a different kind of tyrannical domination, that of bodily and emotional cravings over the mind and the will. Those who act purely on untutored emotion are not true agents. They are driven by something half-alien and do not act themselves but are acted on by something “other” (*non agunt seipsas, sed ab aliis aguntur*) (cf. I.II 93.5c).

Is there evidence that the political authority of reason over passion ascribed to temperance is possible? Rosalind Hursthouse points to the cultural variations in what is enjoyable and disgusting, even in regard to the appetites for food or sex.²⁷ This indicates that our appetites are not merely given but are somewhat plastic and capable of being formed by judgments about what is good and right and honorable versus what is bad and wrong and shameful. For the temperate person, when an initially attractive object is *seen as* falling under a certain description, such as “consumer product negatively impacting the environment,” the desire for it vanishes.²⁸ Reason can inform the passions.

The harmony between reason and passion in temperance helps explain why one of the marks of temperance is a kind of inner peace. However, Aquinas does not advocate a “no friction” view of temperance, as though a temperate person would never have to struggle to overcome certain attractions. It is true that *violent* disordered passions are absent from the life of moral virtue (*On the Virtues* 1.10 ad 14). However, due to the origin of many of our appetites in the body, and because of our fallen nature, even the virtuous will experience a certain degree of chaos in her passions. Sometimes, then, temperance, like continence, will have to put up some resistance, for “there always remains the struggle of the flesh against the spirit, even after moral virtue” (*On the Virtues* 1.10 ad 14).²⁹ The temperate person keeps “a firmness of mind against the force of pleasures” (I.II 61.4 ad 1).³⁰

Aquinas gets the balance just right. He is realistic in acknowledging that even the temperate person at times will have to exert effort to not give in to irrational passions. Yet the primary work of temperance is not containment and is still less suppression; it is the integration and right ordering of the desires of attraction rooted in the human body and capacity for emotion. Temperance is indeed a “formed spontaneity.”

TARGET AND END

What is the end of temperance? The common view, that the point of being temperate is to preserve physical health, is highly reductionist. To habitually eat, drink, or have sex purely according to health reasons is not a sign of virtue but of a disordered attachment to health. To interpret temperance merely as the body's servant is to fail to respect the human and spiritual dimensions of temperance.

Also problematic is the tendency to see temperance as a purely self-regarding virtue. Aquinas falls into this trap sometimes, as when he says that temperance “ordains to the proper good of the agent” (I.II 56.6 ad 1; cf. ad 3).³¹ He divides moral virtues into self-regarding virtues about passions (including temperance and fortitude) and other-regarding virtues about exterior operations (justice and its allied virtues) (60.2). Underlying this division is the questionable premise that passion, unlike the will, is necessarily oriented toward one's own perceived good rather than the good of others. This assumption is subverted by Aquinas's own understanding that passion can listen to and participate in reason. It is also undermined by his acknowledgment that some of the passion-modifying virtues do concern the other's good. For instance, liberality (or generosity with wealth) can moderate a person's emotional attachment to money (II.II 117.3 ad 3). Yet this virtue “is [directed] principally towards another, like justice” (117.5c).³² Mercy, which is certainly about the passions (30.3 ad 4), is also other-regarding: “Mercy is compassion for another's distress, and so properly mercy is [directed] towards another” (30.1 ad 2).³³ Why, then, cannot temperance have a relational, other-directed aspect?

Jean Porter repeats Aquinas's unfortunate dichotomy between relational justice and self-regarding fortitude and temperance. But she makes a qualification: temperance “is characterized by desiring what is good *for oneself* in the way of food, drink, and (to some degree) sexual pleasure.”³⁴ The hesitation is significant. While sexual intercourse can be beneficial or harmful for the agent, such activity also concerns the good or harm of the sexual partner and also potential offspring. Temperance therefore concerns a moral matter that asks to be directed to another's good as well as to one's own. What is more, when we notice that eating and drinking together are near-universal practices of human family and friendship, we are compelled to acknowledge that virtue regarding food and drink is not purely self-regarding either. The mistake is to forget that while we share with nonrational animals the impulses to food, drink, or sex, in humans these same impulses take on a specifically human and relational form. The goods at stake in the matter of *human* eating, drinking, sexual activity, and so on are not purely those of the agent.

If it is implausible to see temperance as nonrelational or, even worse, as serving only the temperate person's physical health, how are we to articulate

a fuller understanding of this virtue's end? Fortunately, other strands of Aquinas's thought undermine the idea that any virtue, even as fleshy a virtue as temperance, can be purely concerned with servicing bodily need.

Aquinas distinguishes two ends of a moral virtue such as temperance. To clarify this he compares the virtue of temperance with a builder (II.II 141.6 ad 1). The builder's intention in building a house is to gain the money with which he can support himself and his family; the purpose of the activity of building, however, is to produce a house. So we need to distinguish the agent's *overall end* from the action's proximate end or *target*. Obviously the two are linked: the builder cannot attain his living unless prepared to put in the hard work of building the house. By analogy, Aquinas suggests that temperance has both an overall end and a more proximate target in its use of pleasant things.

Aquinas states, "The end and rule of temperance itself is beatitude, but the end and rule of what it uses is the need of human life" (141.6c and ad 1).³⁵ As a virtue of the soul, temperance is concerned with something higher than purely physical well-being. It shares with all the moral virtues beatitude as the overall end; its more proximate target, which is specific to temperance, is *what we need to live*.

This view of the target of temperance may seem unduly ascetic, bodily, and self-regarding. Is nothing enjoyable allowed beyond strict bodily necessity? Aquinas is aware of the objection, and he replies by defining the "need of life" generously (141.6 arg 2, ad 2). There is a difference, he explains, between the absolute need an organism has for what enables it to survive and its relative need for that without which it cannot live *fittingly*. Only the latter is the measure of temperance. Note, however, that while Aquinas repudiates excessive asceticism, he does propose an asceticism: necessity, albeit interpreted generously, is the rule—need, not want (141.6).

What, then, is needed to live a fitting human life? What we need certainly goes beyond the bare necessities of physical survival and health. One may take things, Aquinas argues, that are not necessary for the body, so long as they are not impediments to health or fitness and they are used in the right way. Indeed, the temperate person uses these harmless pleasures "moderately, according to place and time and what is fitting towards those with whom one associates" (ad 2).³⁶ So here Aquinas recognizes a social aspect to temperance. As he also puts it in *Commentary on the Ethics*, the temperate person delights in things "as is required for health and fitness of the body *and for appropriate interaction with others*" (emphasis added).³⁷ The need of life is to be understood in terms of the general requirements of morality: "As we have said, temperance pays attention to need as regards what is fitting for life. This is understood not only according to what is fitting for the body, but also according to what is fitting with regard to exterior things, for example, riches and duties; and

even more according to what fits with honesty [*honestas*]” (ad 3).³⁸ Thus the target of temperance, the relative need this virtue aims at, is multidimensional. It incorporates what someone needs for bodily health, what becomes one’s status and office, and what she needs in order to live the “honest”—that is, the morally good life.³⁹

In the end, then, Aquinas proposes a fuller and more moral understanding of temperance’s end than some of his more schematic comments might suggest. Robert C. Roberts points out that for the temperate person, even the bodily appetites have been formed by “moral concerns” such as friendship, justice, and personal dignity, and not merely by considerations of personal health. It would therefore *not* be temperate to eat what is optimally healthy, for example, for a parent of many children during the scarcity of wartime.⁴⁰ One might add that there is no need to appeal to such extreme circumstances for illustration: in today’s globalized world, considerations of justice and ecological concern will inform the temperate person’s eating and other “consumer choices,” so it would be intemperate to focus purely on personal health and well-being.

This more-moral conception of temperance’s target does not exclude relevant concern for personal health; it does imply, however, that personal health cannot be the only consideration. In the early text of *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas says, “The good of the body can be the end of virtue, as a certain terminus or effect of virtuous operation, but not as something in which the intention of virtue stands.”⁴¹ He suggests that the target of virtue is a bodily good, although its overall end is beatitude. As we have seen, in his mature work of the *Treatise on Temperance* in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas offers a fuller understanding of the target of temperance as “the need of this life,” where “need” is interpreted to include whatever is required to live a fitting human, social, and moral life. In the matters of food, drink, sex, and the many other matters with which temperance is concerned, there are many other goods at stake that therefore help to constitute the proximate aim or target of temperance. Whatever its immediate aim, temperance will always choose with a view to the overall human end: the truly blessed life.

AGENT

Aquinas also examines the agent of virtue: What brings about virtue such that we become virtuous, stay virtuous, and even increase in a virtue like temperance? Aquinas recognizes that the human is an agent of growth in virtue. He advances the principle that a virtue is acquired and increased through virtuous acts. Just as a student of the violin could hardly become a proficient player without playing and practicing well, so a temperate person cannot become temperate

without performing the acts of temperance. The basic principle is that like acts produce like habits (*similes actus similes habitus causant*) (I.II 52.3c).

How does this apply to temperance? By temperate acts Aquinas means primarily temperate *desire* rather than temperate *behavior*. “Exterior acts proceed from interior passions of the soul. And therefore their moderation depends on the moderation of interior passions” (II.II 141.3 ad 3).⁴² An illustration can be drawn by consideration of gluttony, a vice directly opposed to temperance. Aquinas thinks of gluttony primarily as a disordered desire to eat; for example, craving excessively sumptuous or gourmet foods, desiring too much food, being too eager to eat, or desiring to eat too early (148.4 arg 1). For Aquinas the correct strategy is to go on a kind of *interior* diet: to learn to moderate one’s cravings.

While the focus is on the interior, Aquinas does not imagine that the modulation of appetite can be achieved without bodily practices. He claims that fasting is the paradigmatic act of “abstinence,” the virtue of temperance as applied to food (147.1). Fasting from food, therefore, is not only the act in which abstinence is primarily displayed but also the practice by which temperance is acquired (147.1, 3). Aquinas claims that fasting is not merely a precept of positive Church law. Rather, it is a requirement of human nature, albeit one that needs to be adapted to times, places, and circumstances (147.3). It is impossible to find the “virtuous mean” in the sphere of temperance, in his view, without a regular practice of fasting.

Is fasting an outdated practice? Aquinas’s view of the value of fasting is confirmed by the current interest in “intermittent fasting” as a way of achieving a healthier pattern of food consumption, especially in a society that finds it difficult to attain the virtuous mean due to the availability of sugar-rich processed foods, the breakdown of social rituals of eating, and a host of other factors. One could argue that “fasting” from other forms of consumption is equally necessary. Digital technologies are one example: though helpful in many ways, when they are used without measure they threaten our ability to attend deeply to something without distraction and to develop relationships of authentic intimacy.⁴³ What is required is not a moralistic denunciation of the Internet or smart phones but rather the wisdom of temperate use that knows when and how to use them and when to put them down. We are unlikely to find the virtuous mean for digital technology use without digital asceticism.

Fasting may be seen as an application of Aristotle’s prescription: when we find ourselves tending to one extreme we should aim for the opposite in order to arrive at the mean, just as by bending a crooked piece of wood we can make it straight. Aquinas, however, makes an enlightening observation: “[Aristotle’s] way of acquiring the virtues is the most efficacious, namely, that someone leans to the contrary of that to which he is inclined either by nature or custom; however, the way taught by the Stoics is easier, namely, that someone recedes little

by little from what he is inclined to, as Cicero explains” (*Tusculan Disputations*: Bk. IV, C. 31–35, nn. 65–76).⁴⁴ This practical piece of wisdom recognizes that in many cases it is better to proceed by small acts of voluntary self-limitation rather than sudden or extreme acts of wholesale abstinence. A continual process of incremental change has a greater chance of being woven into the fabric of one’s life, thus making the change more permanent and avoiding the danger faced by anyone who makes drastic changes to eating or other patterns of consumption—that is, backsliding into the opposite extreme. At the same time, there may be occasions when the more radical Aristotelian approach is indicated.

Laura Hartman proposes two “attitudes” as normative for Christians with regard to the ethics of consumption, whether of food or of other goods. The first is one of renunciation and censure, which opposes the tendency toward personal and social sin in consumption. This attitude is a corrective to greed, gluttony, and participation in unjust social structures.⁴⁵ The second is one of “acceptance and response,” or an acknowledgement of the goodness of created desires and goods. The appropriate response to human hungers and appetites can often be joyful fulfillment with grateful recognition of the gifts of God.⁴⁶ If a twofold mode of restraint and positive enjoyment is constitutive of temperance, then there will be practices that correspond to both poles: we need virtuous practices of feasting as well as of fasting, of Easter and of Lent, so that we may acquire and grow in this virtue.

Aquinas attempts to synthesize the Aristotelian account of virtue-acquisition by habituation with the Augustinian claim that virtue is infused by God (I.II 63.3–4). In his discussion of humility, which for him is a “potential part” or kind of temperance, Aquinas says: “A human arrives at humility by two paths. In the very first place, and principally, by the gift of grace. And in this respect, interior [dispositions] precede externals. The other path, however, is human discipline, by which a human first restrains exterior things, and afterwards manages to uproot the interior root [of pride]” (II.II 161.6 ad 2).⁴⁷ In Aquinas’s theology, grace and human effort are not in competition; rather, they cooperate. Temperance is a matter of both discipline and grace. Yet grace works from the interior in a way that human effort cannot. We become temperate “in the very first place, and principally, by the gift of grace.”

EXEMPLAR

Aquinas understands a human virtue to exist in an exemplary and originative way in God: “It is necessary that the exemplar of human virtue preexist in God, just as the rationales of all things also pre-exist in him” (I.II 61.5c).⁴⁸ While God is seen as wise, just, and merciful, there is a special problem in saying that

God is temperate: the immediate sphere of temperance—namely, the bodily and emotional passion of attraction—is not to be found in the divine being. Nevertheless, in an analogous way Aquinas believes there to be a divine temperance, a “conversion of the divine intention to himself, just as in us temperance is that whereby the concupiscible appetite is conformed to reason” (ibid.).⁴⁹ Aquinas also holds that the exemplar virtues are brought within human reach, so to speak, by the Incarnation, and especially in the cross, where all the divine virtues are manifested in human form. “For whomsoever desires to live perfectly should do nothing other than despise what Christ despised on the cross, and desire what he desired.”⁵⁰ Christian temperance lives out the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ by appreciating and valuing the goodness of the bodily and emotional attractions we experience in our humanity, by putting to death disordered desires through practices of mortification, and by beginning to participate in the risen life even in our bodies and attractions. A properly Christian temperance will be Christoform.

A CAUSAL ACCOUNT OF TEMPERANCE

The above account of temperance suggests the following causal definition:

The virtue of temperance is nothing other than the habit that (i) harmoniously modulates (ii) the passions of attraction and their corresponding actions, sometimes (ia) by restraint, sometimes (ib) by positive channeling; orders (iii) the concupiscible appetite in order to meet (iv) what is needed to live a fitting bodily, relational, and moral life (v) with a view to the overall end of human life; and which (vi) comes about through virtuous practices of fasting and feasting and through grace, (vii) thereby following, dying, and rising with Christ.

This definition illustrates how a specific virtue can be analyzed in terms of the seven elements: (i) mode, (ii) matter, (iii) subject, (iv) target, (v) overall end, (vi) agent, and (vii) exemplar. These are all “causes” in Aquinas’s causal account of virtue, and together they offer a powerful way to address the difficult question of interpreting this virtue and provide a comprehensive account of its nature, origin, and role.

NOTES

1. Ryan M. Niemiec and Jeremy Clyman, “Temperance: The Quiet Virtue Finds a Home,” *PsychCritiques* 54 (November 18, 2009).

2. For contemporary restatements of this argument see Jean Porter, “Perennial and Timely Virtues,” in *Changing Values and Virtues*, ed. Dietmar Mieth and Jacques Marie Pohier (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 60–68; and David S. Oderberg, “On the Cardinality of the Cardinal Virtues,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 7, no. 3 (1999): 305–22.

3. June P. Tangney, Roy F. Baumeister, and Angie Luzio Boone, “High Self-Control Predicts Good Adjustment, Less Pathology, Better Grades, and Interpersonal Success,” *Journal of Personality* 72, no. 2 (2004): 271–324.

4. Peter Wenz, “Synergistic Environmental Virtues: Consumerism and Human Flourishing,” in *Environmental Virtue Ethics*, ed. Ronald D. Sandler and Philip Cafaro (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 208.

5. Louke Van Wensveen, “Attunement: An Ecological Spin on the Virtue of Temperance,” *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 8, no. 2 (2001): 67–78.

6. *Ibid.*, 71.

7. Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 145.

8. Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 267.

9. I.II 61.4: “temperantia vero sit quaedam dispositio animi quae modum quibuscumque passionibus vel operationibus imponit, ne ultra debitum efferantur.”

10. Mark F. Carr, *Passionate Deliberation: Emotion, Temperance, and the Care Ethic in Clinical Moral Deliberation* (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 2001), vii, 53, 159.

11. Van Wensveen, “Attunement” 71, 73.

12. Van Wensveen, “Attunement,” 72. Italics in the original.

13. I.II 61.2: “Ordinem enim rationis necesse est ponere circa passiones, considerata repugnancia ipsarum ad rationem. Quae quidem potest esse dupliciter. Uno modo secundum quod passio impellit ad aliquid contrarium rationi, et sic necesse est quod passio reprimatur, et ab hoc denominatur temperantia. Alio modo, secundum quod passio retrahit ab eo quod ratio dictat, sicut timor periculorum vel laborum, et sic necesse est quod homo firmetur in eo quod est rationis, ne recedat; et ab hoc denominatur fortitudo.”

14. Van Wensveen, “Attunement,” 72.

15. Pieper, *Four Cardinal Virtues*, 175.

16. 141.1: “[Temperantia] in ipso eius nomine importatur quaedam moderatio seu temperies.” On temperance as “proper mixture,” see North, *Sophrosyne*, 262, and Carr, *Passionate Deliberation*, 29–33.

17. Robert C. Roberts, “Temperance,” in *Virtues and Their Vices*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Craig A. Boyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 93.

18. I owe this idea to a comment by Eric Kraemer.

19. Thomas Gilby, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae, Temperance*, vol. 43 (2a2ae. 141–54) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 16–17.

20. Roberts, “Temperance,” 100–106.

21. 155.2 arg 2: “per quam aliquis resistit concupiscentiis pravis, quae in eo vehementes existunt.”

22. 143 ad 1: “Convenit tamen cum temperantia et in materia, quia est circa delectationes tactus; et in modo, quia in quadam refrenatione consistit.”

23. 155.2 ad 1: “continentia habet materiam concupiscentias delectationum tactus, non sicut quas moderetur, quod pertinet ad temperantiam, quae est in concupiscibili, sed est circa eas quasi eis resistens.”

24. 155.4c: “Plus autem viget bonum rationis in eo qui est temperatus, in quo etiam ipse appetitus sensitivus est subiectus rationi et quasi a ratione edomitus, quam in eo qui est continens, in quo appetitus sensitivus vehementer resistit rationi per concupiscentias pravas.”

25. *De Veritate* 14.5.

26. Paul Van Tongeren, “Temperance and Environmental Concerns,” *Ethical Perspectives* 10, no. 2 (2005): 123.

27. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 245–46.

28. *Ibid.*, 249.

29. *On the Virtues* 1.10 ad 14: “semper remanet colluctatio carnis contra spiritum, etiam post moralem virtutem.”

30. I.II 61.4 ad 1: “animi firmitatem contra impetus delectationum.”

31. I.II 56.6 ad 1: “ordinat ad bonum proprium ipsius volentis.”

32. 117.5c: “Liberalitas . . . principaliter est ad alterum, sicut et iustitia.”

33. 30.1 ad 2: “Quia misericordia est compassio miseriae alterius, proprie misericordia est ad alterum.”

34. Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 117. Italics in the original.

35. 141.6c and ad 1: “temperantiae ipsius finis et regula est beatitudo, sed eius rei qua utitur, finis et regula est necessitas humanae vitae, infra quam est id quod in usum vitae venit.”

36. 141.6 arg 2 ad 2: “his moderate utitur, pro loco et tempore et congruentia eorum quibus convivit.”

37. *Comm. Ethic.*, lib. 3 l. 21 n.5: “idest quam requiratur ad sanitatem et bonam habitudinem corporis et ad decentem conversationem cum aliis.”

38. 141.6 arg 2 ad 3: “sicut dictum est, temperantia respicit necessitatem quantum ad convenientiam vitae. Quae quidem attenditur non solum secundum convenientiam corporis, sed etiam secundum convenientiam exteriorum rerum, puta divitiarum et officiorum; et multo magis secundum convenientiam honestatis.”

39. Aquinas divides the good into the useful, the delightful, and the honest (I.5.6). In the broad sense, then, the honest is anything that is good in itself and therefore can be desired for its own sake. In a more specific sense, the honest is the moral good, so coincides with the virtuous. See II.II 145, especially the first article.

40. Roberts, “Temperance,” 99.

41. *Super Sent.*, lib. 4 d. 49 q. 1 a. 1 qc. 1 ad 4: “Bonum ergo corporis potest esse finis virtutis, quasi quidam terminus vel effectus virtuosae operationis; non autem sicut in quo stet virtutis intentio.”

42. II.II 141.3 ad 3: “exterioribus actus procedunt ab interioribus animae passionibus. Et ideo moderatio eorum dependet a moderatione interiorum passionum.”

43. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic, 2011).

44. *Comm. Ethic.*, lib. 2 l. 11 n.8.

45. Laura Marie Hartman, “An Ethics of Consumption: Christianity, Economy, and Ecology” (PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, 2008), 94.

46. *Ibid.*, 74–113.

47. II.II 161.6 ad 2: “homo ad humilitatem pervenit per duo. Primo quidem et principaliter, per gratiae donum. Et quantum ad hoc, interiora praecedunt exteriora. Aliud autem est humanum studium, per quod homo prius exteriora cohibet, et postmodum pertingit ad extirpandum interiorem radicem. Et secundum hunc ordinem assignantur hic humilitatis gradus.”

48. I.II 61.5c: “Oportet igitur quod exemplar humanae virtutis in Deo praeexistat, sicut et in eo praeexistunt omnium rerum rationes.”

49. I.II 61.5c: “conversio divinae intentionis ad seipsum, sicut in nobis temperantia dicitur per hoc quod concupiscibilis conformatur rationi.”

50. *Symbolum Apostolorum*, a. 4: “Quicumque enim vult perfecte vivere, nihil aliud faciat nisi quod contemnat quae Christus in cruce contempsit, et appetat quae Christus appetiit.”