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Aquinas on Temperance

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore, and clarify, some key features in Aquinas' account of the virtue of temperance, with an eye to answering some common objections raised against a positive evaluation of temperance. In particular, I consider three features of Aquinas' understanding of temperance: First, the role of the rational mean in temperance; second, the role of rightly ordered passions in temperance; and third, the 'despotic' control of reason over the passions in temperance. Along the way I consider three common objections to Aquinas' account of temperance: the objection that temperance can be misused for evil, the objection that temperance devalues effort, and the objection that temperance devalues strong passions and thereby implicitly devalues the goodness of sexuality. In responding to these objections on behalf of Aquinas, I take the opportunity to clarify and slightly extend Aquinas' account of temperance.

Keywords

Aquinas, virtue ethics, Temperance, Rationality, Sexuality

Introduction

The cardinal virtues are of chief importance to Aquinas' account of the moral life, and scholarship on Aquinas' virtue ethics has flourished in recent years, to the benefit of both moral theology and moral philosophy. Aquinas' understanding of the virtue of temperance, however, has received comparatively little discussion.[1] The purpose of this essay is to explore, and clarify, some key features in Aquinas' account of the virtue of temperance, with an eye to responding to some natural objections raised against the positive

[1] Happy exceptions to this trend include, notably, Giuseppe Butera, "On Reason's Control of the Passions in Aquinas's Theory of Temperance," *Medieval Studies* 68 (January 2006): 133–60, and Steven J. Jensen, "Virtuous Deliberation and the Passions," *The Thomist* 77 (2013): 193–227.

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evaluation of temperance as a moral virtue. After briefly introducing Aquinas' understanding of habit and virtue (§1), I consider Aquinas' understanding of temperance (§2), focusing on three features: the role of the rational mean in temperance (§3), the role of rightly ordered passions in temperance (§4), and finally, the 'despotic' control of reason over the passions in temperance (§5). My discussion is guided by three natural objections to Aquinas' account of temperance: the objection that temperance is not virtuous because it can be misused for evil (§3), the objection that temperance devalues effort in the moral life (§4), and the objection that temperance devalues strong passions, thus implicitly leading to a devaluing of sexuality (§5). I respond that Aquinas' account of temperance has the resources to answer these objections, and in doing so, I take the opportunity to clarify (and, in one place, to extend) Aquinas' account of temperance.

A caveat before we begin. While the features of temperance discussed in this essay pertain in large part to both the acquired and infused virtues of temperance, the primary concern of this essay is with the *acquired* virtue of temperance. Despite its crucial importance in Aquinas' account of the moral life, a discussion of the infused virtue of temperance lies outside the scope of this essay.

1. **Aquinas on habits and virtues**

Aquinas defines temperance as a type of virtue (*virtus*), and in turn defines virtue as a type of habit (*habitus*). It will be helpful, then, to begin by considering Aquinas' understanding of the notions *virtue* and *habit*. It is worth noting at the outset that contemporary Thomists disagree over how the historical Aquinas defined these terms.[2] One underlying cause of this state of affairs is Aquinas' tendency to incorporate apparently conflicting definitions (from authorities as diverse as Augustine, Aristotle, and Averroes) into his own accounts of *habit* and *virtue*. Aquinas' appeal to an Aristotelian metaphysics of substance and accident is seen, for instance, in the *Prima Secundae*, where he defines a habit (*habitus*) as "a disposition whereby

[2] For instance, neo-Aristotelians like Martin Rhonheimer, *The Perspective of Morality: Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics,* trans. Gerald Malsbury (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 202 argue that Aquinas *rejected* the Augustinian definition of virtue in *ST* I-II q.49 a.2, in place of the Aristotelian definition of moral virtue given in *NE* II, 6. On the other hand, Thomists like Eleonore Stump, "The Non-Aristotelian Character of Aquinas's Ethics: Aquinas on the Passions," *Tópicos* (2012), 27–50 argue that Aquinas rejected the Aristotelian definition, precisely on the basis of Aquinas' inclusion of the Augustinian definition in *ST* I-II q.49 a.2.

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someone is disposed, well or ill."[3] Aquinas locates habits and dispositions within the category of *quality* (one of Aristotle's nine categories of accident),[4] and singles out habits and dispositions from other types of quality precisely on account of their alone being capable of being "disposed, well or ill," i.e. their capable of being *good* or *bad*. This is because, in contrast with the other qualities,[5] habits and dispositions alone are "according to nature" (*secundum naturam*)[6], and to be "according to nature" involves being ordered with respect to a thing's end (*rationem finis*), i.e. being ordered according to the end (good) or failing to be so ordered (bad). Elsewhere, though, Aquinas invokes a narrower definition of habit, namely, the Avveroist definition of habit as a quality "whereby we act *when we will*"[7], i.e. a quality pertaining specifically to the will.[8]

Aquinas' definitions of habit pave the way for his definition of virtue in question 55 of the *Prima Secundae,* where Aquinas approves Augustine's definition of virtue as one which "comprises perfectly the essential notion of virtue". Although Augustine's definition ("Virtue is a good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us without us.")[9] does not explicitly mention 'habit', Aquinas goes on to state that "the definition would be more suitable if for quality we substitute habit, which is the proximate genus",[10] and further goes on to summarize Augustine's definition of virtue as an "operative habit . . . productive of good works."[11] (By adding 'operative', Aquinas brings

[3] "habitus, secundum quod est qualitas, dicitur dispositio secundum quam bene, aut male disponitur dispositum," *ST* I-II q.49 a.2 obj. 1. All translations of *ST* from the translation of the Dominican Fathers of the English Province.

[4] Cf. *In V Metaph*. 9. There, Aquinas defines qualities as accidents which are (i) in their subject (as opposed to accidents which are outside their subject, e.g. habit, time, and place), (ii) absolutely (as opposed to accidents partially in their subject, e.g. relation), (iii) following the subject's form (as opposed to accidents absolutely in their subject following matter, e.g. quantity). For a very helpful discussion of Aquinas on quality cf. Nicholas Kahm, "Aquinas on Quality," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, no. 1 (January 4, 2016): 23–44.

[5] The other qualities are capacity and incapacity, passion and sensible quality, figure and form; cf. *In V Metaph*. 9.

[6] *ST* I-II q.49 a.2 resp.

[7] "habitus est, quo quis agit cum voluerit," *ST* I-II q.49 a.3 s.c.

[8] Aquinas thus says that "habit . . . is principally related to the will" (habitus apparet, quod habet quemdam principalem ordinem ad voluntatem, *ST* I-II q.50 a.5 resp.), and that animals lack habits "properly speaking" (proprie loquendo, *ST* I-II q.50 a.3 ad 2). Both of these claims only make sense given the Averroist definition of habit.

[9] "Virtus est bona qualitas mentis, quae recte vivitur, qua nullus male utitur, quam Deus in nobis sine nobis operatur," *ST* I-II q.55 a.4 obj. 1.

[10] "esset tamen convenientior definitio, si loco qualitatis habitus poneretur, qui est genus propinquum," *ST* I-II q.55 a.4 resp.

[11] "virtus humana, quae est habitus operativus, est bonus habitus, et boni operativus," *ST* I-II q.55 a.3 resp.

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Augustine's definition of virtue into closer alignment with the Aristotelian definition of virtue as a "habit for choosing").[12]

In short, Aquinas understands virtues to be *good habits*. However, not all virtues play an equal role in the moral life. Following Aristotle, Aquinas rejects the Platonic conception of morality as a purely intellectual affair, making a distinction between intellectual virtues (such as the science of geometry) and moral virtues (among which resides the virtue of temperance).[13] Intellectual virtues perfect the intellect, but they do not always dispose a person to make good choices; it is only moral virtues (which perfect either the will or the sense appetite) which do so.[14] It is among the moral virtues that Aquinas places temperance; let us now turn, then, to Aquinas' treatment of temperance.

2. **Aquinas on temperance**

Aquinas gives the name "temperance" (*temperantia*) to the virtue by which we gain proper control, or 'moderation', over the "desires and pleasures of touch"—by which he means the passions associated with food, drink and sex.[15] (In this, Aquinas follows Aristotle's claim that eating, drinking and sex are all based on the same sense, the sense of touch).[16] The reason why Aquinas regards temperance as a cardinal virtue is that the desires for food, drink and sex are the most basic ('natural')[17] to our animal nature, and hence move the appetite with greater force,[18] and longer duration, than all the other passions.[19] Since these most forceful and basic of the desires is moderated by temperance, the virtue of temperance is "one of those things that are requisite for the notion of virtue in general," insofar as it is the virtue that moderates pleasure, *par excellence*.

[12] "estin ara hē aretē hexis proairetikē," *NE,* II, 6 (1106b-1107a). All translations of the *NE* and *EE* from *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation,* trans. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[13] A third category, that of the theological virtues, lies outside the scope of the present essay.

[14] Cf. *ST* I-II q.58 a.1 ad 2.

[15] Aquinas calls them the desires and pleasures of touch because he accepts Aristotle's claim that the passions associated with food, drink and sex "result from the sense of touch" (consequuntur sensum tactus). For discussion, cf. Diana Fritz Cates, "The Virtue of Temperance (IIa IIae, Qq. 141-170)", in *The Ethics of Aquinas,* ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 322.

[16] *ST* II-II, q.141, a.4, s.c.

[17] *ST* II-II q.141 a.7 ad 3.

[18] *ST* II-II q.141 a.7 ad 3.

[19] Thus, even though Aquinas says in *ST*, II-II q.123 a.12 resp. that fear of the dangers of death "has the greatest power to make man recede from the good of reason," Aquinas thinks they are typically fleeting and hence overall less of a problem to control than passions for food, drink and sex, which are more frequent and permanent.

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It should be noted that, as with the terms "habit" and "virtue", Aquinas sometimes uses "temperance" in more than one way. In particular, Aquinas sometimes uses "temperance" in a broader sense, referring not just to the virtue dealing specifically with the *strongest* desires of the concupiscible appetite (i.e. for food, drink and sex), but rather, to the moderation of the concupiscible appetite in general.[20] In this latter, broader sense, temperance is understood as one of four subcategories encompassing all the moral virtues. However, in the narrower sense, temperance is distinct from a number of other virtues residing in the concupiscible appetite, which do not take the passions for food, drink, and sex as their object. Thus, Aquinas distinguishes temperance from virtues that moderate senses other than the sense of touch,[21] as well as from virtues that moderate passions weaker than the passions of touch,[22] such as the desire for knowledge (moderated by *studiositas*).[23] In what follows, we will focus on this narrower understanding of temperance, i.e. the virtue dealing solely with the pleasures associated with food, sex and drink.

According to Aquinas, temperance moderates the pleasures for food, sex and drink by aligning our desires for these things with a mean between two vicious extremes:[24] On the one hand, an *insufficient* desire, for food, sex and drink (*insensibilitas*),[25] and on the other hand (and far more commonly), an *excessive* desire for food (gluttony),[26] for drink (drunkenness),[27] or for sex (lust).[28] This conception of temperance might appear puzzling insofar as it seems difficult to make sense of things such as *fasting* or *virginity* (both of which Aquinas regards as parts of the temperate life) as falling within a 'mean'—after all, fasts typically involve eating "too little", and

[20] This way of speaking of temperance is found, for instance, in *ST* II-II, q.123 a.1 resp.

[21] ST II-II, q.141, a.4, s.c. It is worth noting that in a.5 ad 1, Aquinas distinguishes between the passion associated with "the use of food" (*usus ciborum*) which he ascribes to *tactus*, and that associated with "taste" (*gustus*), which involves "the pleasure of savours" (*delectatio saporum*) as distinct from the pleasures of *tactus*. So Aquinas can go on to argue that temperance is not *essentially* about taste, since the desire and sense of taste is distinct from that of touch. (Nonetheless, taste, smell, and other sensory pleasures do come under the umbrella of temperance a *secondary* sense, insofar as they relate indirectly to touch).

[22] Aquinas calls "modesty" (*modestias*) the virtue that in general is concerned with passions weaker than the pleasures of touch: "temperantia magis se habet ad passiones vehementes, modestia vero ad mediocres", ST II-II q.160 a.1 ad 2.

[23] *ST* II-II q.166 a.1 ad 1

[24] Following Aristotle, who regarded temperance as "the mean state in regard to… profligacy and insensibility," *EE* III.2, 1231a26-39.

[25] *ST* II-II q.142 a.1.

[26] *ST* II-II, q.148.

[27] *ST* II-II, q.150.

[28] *ST* II-II, q.153.

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virginity involves the permanent renunciation of sexual pleasure. To see why Aquinas regards both virginity and fasting as compatible with temperance understood as a mean state, it is necessary to elaborate on Aquinas' conception of the 'rational mean' (*medium rationis*).

Following Aristotle, Aquinas regards the rational mean as a mean "through conformity with right reason".[29] As Aristotle put it, such a rational mean is "relative to ourselves" and "determined by a rational principle... that principle by which a man of practical wisdom would determine it."[30] Two observations can be made about this conception of the rational mean. First, it is a mean determined not by quantitative but rather by *prudential* considerations about what is morally appropriate in a given circumstance. It is the prudential character of the rational mean that explains why Aquinas regards fasting and virginity as characteristic of temperance. While they lie on an 'extreme' from a *quantitative* perspective (i.e. involving excessively little quantities of food, or sexual pleasure), they do not lie on a *prudential* extreme, because, as Aquinas argues elsewhere, fasting and a commitment to virginity are both praiseworthy and morally good actions, which can therefore lie within the dictates of prudence.[31]

Second, the rational mean is "relative to ourselves", i.e. what counts as the mean is not the same for every person, but is sensitive to contextual facts about each individual. For instance, chastity may call for an absence of sexual passion in certain circumstances (e.g. if one is married but is temporarily absent from one's spouse)[32] but not in others (Aquinas notes, for instance, that chastity in the married state may even require a greater sexual desire than one is inclined to, given that prudence dictates it is good to, at least sometimes, "pay the marriage debt").[33]

3. **Can temperance be misused for evil?**

It will be helpful at this point to consider a common objection to temperance, my reply to which will help to highlight the nature of the rational mean in Aquinas' account of temperance. The objection, in short, is that temperance seems capable of being misused for evil, and thus cannot be considered truly *good*. The objection is a serious

[29] "virtus moralis dicitur consistere in medio per conformitatem ad rationem rectam", *ST* I-II q.64 a.2 s.c.

[30] "estin... he aretē hexis proaeretikē, en mesotēti oūsa tē pros hēmas, hōrismenē logō kai hō an ho phronimos horiseien," *NE* II, 6 (1106b36-1107a2).

[31] For fasting, cf. *ST* II-II q.147; for virginity cf. q.152. For a helpful, critical discussion of Aquinas' arguments, cf. Cates, "The Virtue of Temperance", 322.

[32] For, as Aristotle says, there is no 'moderation' in the matter of adultery. Cf. *NE* II, 6 (1106b36-1107a2).

[33] *ST* II-II q.153 a.3 ad 3.

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one, since Aquinas holds to the Augustinian definition according to which virtue is a habit "of which no one can make bad use."[34] If this is right, and if temperance *can* be abused for evil, then, *by Aquinas' own lights,* temperance would fail to truly be a virtue. However, the objection goes, temperance (understood as the moderation of pleasures) *does* appear to be capable of abuse. As Kant put the objection:

> Moderation in affections and passions [i.e. temperance], self-control, and sober reflexion . . . are far from being properly described as good without qualification (however unconditionally they have been commended by the ancients). For without the principles of a good will they may become exceedingly bad; and the very coolness of a scoundrel makes him, not merely more dangerous, but also immediately more abominable in our eyes than we should have taken him to be without it.[35]

Kant's implicit argument is that a scoundrel's 'temperance' would, if anything, make him *more dangerous* than an intemperate one (his self-restraint might make him capable of pulling off crimes that intemperate scoundrels would lack the self-discipline to carry out).

Before I reply on behalf of Aquinas, it is worth noting one avenue of reply to Kant taken by some virtue theorists, namely, that of conceding that temperance is indeed capable of being abused for evil.[36] This concession, it is argued, does not pose a serious problem for virtue ethics: We simply need to realize that 'un-abusable virtue' is not the correct moral ideal, and that virtues are still good and worth striving for despite their capacity for abuse.[37] Neither Aquinas nor Kant would find this reply satisfying, since they both regard ethics as concerned with what is *unqualifiedly* good, and not merely with what is good in a merely qualified, or instrumental, sense. Indeed, Aquinas' agreement with Kant on this score is illustrated in his example of the so-called "temperate miser" who plays a similar role to that of Kant's scoundrel in appearing to abuse

[34] Cf. *ST* I-II, q.155, a.4, cited above.

[35] Immanuel Kant, "The Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals," trans. with analysis and notes, H.J. Paton, The Moral Law (3rd ed., London: Hutchinson, 1956), Ak. 394.

[36] Alisdair MacIntyre defends such a 'fallibilist' view of the virtues in *After Virtue,* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 200: "I do have to allow that courage sometimes sustains injustice, that loyalty has been known to strengthen a murderous aggressor and that generosity has sometimes weakened the capacity to do good."

[37] This approach is mentioned in Bonnie Kent, "Moral Growth and the Unity of the Virtues," in *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education*, ed. Jan Steutel and David McLain Carr (Routledge, 1999), 1–16.

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virtuous qualities for base ends. Aquinas's verdict is that the miser is not truly virtuous:

> The prudence of the miser, whereby he devises various roads to gain, is no true virtue; nor the miser's justice, whereby he scorns the property of another through fear of severe punishment; nor the miser's temperance, whereby he curbs his desire for expensive pleasures; nor the miser's fortitude, whereby as Horace says, he braves the sea, crosses mountains, and goes through fire, in order to avoid poverty.[38]

What is noteworthy for present purposes is that, while Aquinas does not think the miser's 'virtues' (such as the capacity for curbing short-term desires for the sake of long-term monetary gain) are true virtues (i.e. moral virtues) at all, he does not take the miser to be a *counterexample* to temperance's status as an unqualifiedly good virtue. Rather, he simply uses it to illustrate that the habit of temperance is in a different order from habits such as self-discipline, self-denial, or self-restraint, *precisely because* the latter are merely instrumental habits, and can be used for both good and bad ends. As such, they can be possessed independently of *prudence*,[39] because acting for bad ends involves a failure of prudential judgment (to judge what is good according to right reason in a given situation). Temperance, by contrast, is by its nature inseparable from prudence, since it involves the conformity of one's desires *to the rational mean,* a mean determined by prudence. Kant's critique is thus instructive: it reveals the importance of Aquinas' understanding of temperance *as determined by a rational mean* in distinguishing temperance from merely instrumental, non-moral (and indeed, potentially evil) habits for moderating sensual desires in a merely routine, or quantitative, way.

4. **Does temperance devalue effort?**

Our discussion of temperance and the rational mean has shown that Aquinas regards temperance as crucially determined by right reason. One consequence of this we have just seen is that, for Aquinas, temperance is (*pace* Kant) incapable of being abused for evil, or used to make immoral decisions. A second consequence is that, for Aquinas, temperance is distinct not only from intemperance, but also from two other states: *continence* and *incontinence*. The difference

[38] *ST* II-II q.23 a.7 resp. For a discussion of this example, albeit in a different context, cf. Thomas M. Osborne Jr, "Perfect and Imperfect Virtues in Aquinas," *The Thomist* 71 (2007), 45.

[39] Prudence, of course, "consists not in thought merely, but in its application to action, which is the end of the practical reason" (*ST* II-II q.47 a.1 ad 3).

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between the three states can be stated (in brief) by considering the following three elements in temperance:

(i) passions and desires rightly ordered to reason
(ii) the right judgment of reason
(iii) right action

A *continent* person has (ii) and (iii) but not (i); he lacks *rightly ordered desires*. Thus, the continent person, like the temperate, still acts in accord with right reason, but he finds it *difficult* (e.g. to refrain from an alcoholic binge) whereas the temperate person, with rightly ordered desires, finds it easy. On the other hand, the intemperate and incontinent both lack (iii) and (i): Like the continent, they lack rightly ordered desires, but they furthermore allow those disordered desires to lead to disordered action. However, as Aquinas puts it, "the incontinent man repents at once, as soon as the passion has passed,"[40] while the intemperate person "rejoices in having sinned, because the sinful act has become connatural to him by reason of his habit." Aquinas describes this difference between the incontinent and the intemperate as a difference in 'choice': the incontinent acts "without choice",[41] because his sin does not proceed so much from his will or intellect, but rather from his disordered passions (which overcome his will and intellect in the heat of the moment). The intemperate, on the other hand, acts "from choice", since his intellect regards the disordered actions as good not just in the heat of the moment, but in a more permanent way. Thus, the incontinent might be said to retain (ii) to a greater degree than the intemperate, being able to judge rightly when not overcome by the 'heat of passion'.

Now, few would challenge Aquinas' claim that intemperance is worse than incontinence.[42] However, Aquinas' claim that temperance is a better state than continence is more controversial. Indeed, a well-known objection (again found in Kant) is that, if we regard temperance as greater than continence, we thereby devalue the importance of *effort* in the moral life. In a well known example, Kant compares persons who protect themselves from threats to their life out of "an immediate inclination to do so," with a suicidal man for whom "disappointments and hopeless misery have quite taken away the taste for life", such that he "longs for death," yet "still preserves his life without loving it—not from inclination or fear but from duty".[43] Both the ordinary persons and the suicidal man are striving

[40] *ST* II-II q.156 a.3 resp.

[41] *ST* I-II, q.78, a.4; cf. also II-II, q.156, a.3.

[42] Compare, e.g., an intemperate child abuser, lacking any remorse or acknowledgment of their wrongdoing, with an incontinent child abuser filled with shame and guilt at their actions.

[43] Kant, "Groundwork," Ak. 394.

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to protect their lives, but Kant takes it that only the latter has acted from a maxim with "moral content", since the ordinary persons act only from *inclination* and not from duty. The objection to Aquinas can be put as follows: If temperance is valued as a virtue, doesn't this lead us to falsely praise those ordinary persons who act merely from inclination, while devaluing the truly moral soul who acts out of *duty* and not inclination?

As Jean Porter has noted,[44] a difficulty in answering this objection is that it highlights a deep divide between Kantian and Aristotelian approaches to morality. While the Kantian approach emphasizes duty and effort in the moral life, the Aristotelian approach emphasizes human flourishing in a more general sense. The two are not necessarily in conflict, and indeed, there is a degree of common ground. Hence, even though Aquinas regards temperance as better than continence, he nevertheless regards continence as having "something of the nature of a virtue".[45] Nevertheless, the Kantian objector would be right in identifying Aquinas' understanding of temperance as one that does not value 'moral struggle' or 'effort' in and of itself. For the Aristotelian, there is good reason for this position, since such struggle reflects the existence of *disordered appetites* within the soul, and disordered appetites are incompatible with complete human flourishing. While this assessment of moral struggle might not convince a Kantian, it highlights what is distinctive about Aquinas' ethics. Here we will note two such features. First, the *importance* of desires in the moral life. Whereas the Kantian focuses solely on the "good will", and hence finds more to admire in the continent's exercise of willpower than in the prompt and easy actions of the temperate, Aquinas regards desires and passions as themselves important factors in moral evaluation. Second, Aquinas' *optimistic* perspective on passions. Whereas the Kantian is suspicious of acts proceeding from inclination or emotion, Aquinas has an outlook on human passions and desires that is fundamentally positive. For although Aquinas regards passions as morally neutral in themselves, they are necessary components of moral perfection in good acts, and hence in the virtuous life.[46] To conclude this section, I should re-iterate that, in replying to the objection that temperance devalues effort, my purpose has not been to provide a dialectically effective response to a Kantian

[44] Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: the Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 112-4.

[45] "aliquid de ratione virtutis". *ST* II-II, q. 155, a.1.

[46] Aquinas thus says: "just as it is better that man both will good and do it in his external act, so too it pertains to the perfection of moral goodness that man be moved towards the good not only in accordance with his will, but also in accordance with his sense appetite" (Sicut igitur melius est quod homo et velit bonum, et faciat exteriori actu; ita etiam ad perfectionem boni moralis pertinet quod homo ad bonum moveatur non solum secundum voluntatem, sed etiam secundum appetitum sensitivum), *ST* I-II q.24 a.3 resp.

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objector. Rather, it has been to clarify what I take to be an important feature of Aquinas' account of temperance. I have suggested that, by contrasting temperance with continence, Aquinas should be seen not so much as devaluing effort, but rather, as emphasising the importance of passions and desires (and their potential for good) in the moral life.

5. **Does temperance devalue strong passions?**

We have so far discussed the role of the rational mean in temperance and the fact that passions and desires (rightly ordered) are essential to the life of the temperate person. However, what has not yet been discussed is the precise nature of the relationship between the *passions* on one hand, and *reason* on the other, in the life of the temperate person. Is it possible for passions to exhibit 'spontaneity' and independence from reason (while remaining in harmony with reason) in the temperate person's life? Or rather, must they always be fully subjugated to reason, 'at the beck and call' of the judgment of reason? While some contemporary Thomists have portrayed Aquinas as allowing a degree of spontaneity in passion, Giuseppe Butera has recently shown that the latter, 'subjugated' view is Aquinas' own.[47] On Aquinas' view, the temperate person has no strong passions for food, drink and sex that are involuntary or that arise independent of the judgment of reason. The reason for this is twofold. First, Aquinas holds that an act is virtuous only insofar as it follows from the judgment of reason, as opposed to a strong passion. This point is most clearly made in *De Veritate* q. 26, ad 7:

> [A] passion which precedes choice hinders the act of virtue by hampering the judgment of reason necessary in choosing. But after the choice has already been made purely by a rational judgment, a passion that follows helps more than it hurts, because even if it should disturb rational judgment somewhat, it does make for alacrity in execution.[48]

It would follow from Aquinas' position that the stronger a passion is, the more it would appear to detract from the moral worth of the act *when occurring prior to,* or 'antecedent', to an action. Hence, Aquinas says that antecedent passions detract from one's culpability

[47] As Butera, "On Reason's Control of the Passions," 157 puts it: "the perfection towards which temperance inclines, even if it cannot attain this goal without grace, is the *complete and ordered subjection of the lower powers to reason.*"

[48] "passio electionem praeveniens impedit actum virtutis, in quantum impedit iudicium rationis quod necessarium est in eligendo; postquam vero puro iudicio rationis iam electio est perfecta, passio sequens plus prodest quam noceat, quia etsi in aliquo turbet rationis iudicium, facit tamen ad promptitudinem executionis," *De Veritate* 26.7 ad 3, trans. Robert W. Schmidt, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Truth* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1954), 3:285. Cf. also *ST* I-II q.24 a.3 ad 1.

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in committing sin, but also that when doing a good act, "such a passion diminishes the goodness and merit of the act."[49]

Secondly, Aquinas holds that if the soul is strongly drawn to the operation of some power, the activity of other powers will be diminished: "when one power is intent in its act, another power becomes remiss, or is even altogether impeded, in its act."[50] The result is that if one's passion (e.g. for food) is excessively strong, one will be strongly hindered from judging according to reason. It should be noted that Aquinas holds that antecedent passions exist in everyone (even temperate persons) in light of the Fall, because one of the results of the Fall was that mild inordinate antecedent passions (*fomes peccati*) are always present in everyone (except Mary and Jesus). As a result, Aquinas holds that reason's control over the concupiscible powers in a post-Fall world is never complete, or "despotic", but rather partial, or "political,"[51] i.e. the sense appetites always have power to move the will with *some* independence from reason. (In contrast, "in the state of innocence the inferior appetite was wholly subject to reason: so that in that state the passions of the soul existed only as *consequent* upon the judgment of reason").[52] However, Aquinas nonetheless accepts that these antecedent passions do not prevent us from gaining temperance, because in a temperate person these passions will be so *mild* as to pose no threat to reason's control (in contrast to 'vehement' antecedent passions which impede reason, as mentioned above).[53] In sum, the temperate person, while having mild antecedent passions like everyone else, will ideally tend towards the sort of 'despotic' control over his passions through reason, akin to that exercised by Adam prior to the Fall. The temperate lack *strong* antecedent passions, and their passions are (by and large) *voluntary*: they arise "either from being commanded by the will," or from "not

[49] "talis passio diminuit bonitatem, et laudem actus," *ST* I-II q.77 a.6 ad 2.

[50] In context: "cum enim omnes potentiae animae in una essentia animae radicentur, necesse est, quod *quando una potentia intenditur in suo actu, altera in suo actu remittatur, vel etiam totaliter in suo actu impediatur*: tum quia omnis virtus ad plura dispersa fit minor: unde e contrario quando intenditur circa unum, minus potest ad alia dispergi: tum quia in operibus animae requiritur quaedam intensio, quae dum vehementer applicatur ad unum, non potest alteri vehementer attendere," *ST* I-II q.77 a.1 resp. For more textual evidence, cf. Butera, "On Reason's Control of the Passions," 142.

[51] "The Philosopher says that the soul rules the body with a despotic command as the master rules his slave . . . But the irascible and concupiscible powers do not obey the mere will of reason; on the contrary, they have their own proper movements, by which, at times, they go against reason" (Philosophus dicit . . . quod anima regit corpus despotico principatu, idest sicut dominus servum . . . sed irascibilis, et concupiscibilis non obediunt ad nutum rationi; sed habent proprios motus suos, quibus interdum rationi repugnant), *ST* I-II q.56 a.4 ad 3.

[52] "in statu vero innocentiae inferior appetitus erat rationi totaliter subjectus; unde non erant in eo passiones animae, nisi ex rationis judicio consequentes," *ST* I q.95 a.2 resp.

[53] As Butera, "On Reason's Control of the Passions," 145.

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being checked by the will"[54] (i.e. permitted to continue, but remaining within one's power to eliminate if required). In any case, they are not 'spontaneous' or independent of reason.

Aquinas' portrayal of the temperate person as (ideally) exercising 'despotic' control over his passions may appear more Kantian than Aristotelian, insofar as it appears to devalue any kind of good action that does not immediately proceed from a 'dispassionate' rational judgment. In fact, we will now consider an objection that Aquinas' account of temperance, while emphasizing rightly ordered passions, at the same time unacceptably eliminates an important category of passions from the moral life, namely, *strong, yet good,* antecedent passions.[55] One paradigmatic case of such a passion is the passion involved in sexual intercourse, which contemporary philosophers and theologians have tended to treat in a much more positive light than has been in the past, given contemporary theological reflections on the good of marriage and spousal union. The objection can be put like this: The passions involved in the sexual act are no doubt strong and vehement ones. However, they surely seem to be capable of being regarded as *good,* indeed virtuous and temperate, if enjoyed in the proper context of mutual marital self-giving and a proper appreciation of one's spouse and the nuptial union.[56] But Aquinas seems unable to follow this development in moral theology, in light of his firm view that strong passions diminish (indeed, perhaps eliminate) the judgment of reason in an act, and his view that the judgment of reason is key to an act's goodness. Since intercourse involves strong passions, it would seem that Aquinas can never regard marital intercourse as truly good or virtuous, unless it were engaged in without any strong sexual pleasure, or with sufficiently 'moderated' pleasure. But surely decreased pleasure should not determine the goodness of marital intercourse.

The above criticism can be extended from the case of sexual passion to other cases of apparently strong yet morally virtuous passion. Consider, for instance, a musician's highly emotionally charged performance; an artist's creative inspiration; spontaneous emotions of grief over the death of a loved one. In each case, a similar accusation can be made: Aquinas seems categorically incapable of acknowledging that such actions have anything of *virtue*, unless the emotions and passions are moderated so as to provide more room for rational judgment.

[54] *ST* I-II q.24 a.1 resp.

[55] The framing of the discussion that follows is indebted to Fr David Willis OP.

[56] Cf. Randall G. Colton, "Two Rival Versions of Sexual Virtue: Simon Blackburn and John Paul II on Lust and Chastity." *The Thomist* 70 (2006): 71-101 for a useful discussion of contemporary Thomism, the virtue of chastity, and contemporary Catholic theology.

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In evaluating whether this objection is a fair one to make against Aquinas, three points can be made. First, it should be clarified that Aquinas does not take any kind of negative view toward sexual pleasure as such. In a well-known passage, Aquinas says:

> The fact that the reason's free attention to spiritual things cannot be simultaneous with the pleasure does not show that there is something contrary to virtue here, any more than when the reason suspends its activity according to right reason. Otherwise it would be against virtue to go to sleep.[57]

This passage shows that Aquinas does not regard sexual pleasure as (in itself) bad in any way. However, it does not yet respond to the objection, since the claim that pleasure is not contrary to virtue does not show whether Aquinas can hold that an act involving strong pleasure *itself* could be virtuous.

This brings us to the second point, which concerns the distinction between antecedent and consequent passions. A key assumption made by the objection is that in each example (e.g. marital intercourse), there are only strong *antecedent* passions, and not strong *consequent* passions. However, it is not difficult to see that the passions involved in marital intercourse can be strong consequent passions, i.e. passions that proceed from a prior act of will (e.g. the decision to engage freely in intercourse, or the decision to engage in certain intimate acts that one foresees will lead to intercourse). Since Aquinas holds that consequent passions "help more than hurt" acts, this is one way in which Aquinas can legitimately be understood as regarding strong passions as good. However, this point still does not fully satisfy, insofar as the sexual passions, on this view, are understood in a somewhat counterintuitive way, i.e. *only* as passions which are subsequent to a prior decision, as opposed to passions which in many cases do *precede* a decision to consummate the marital act. Insofar as we want to make room, at least for the *potential* for a positive moral evaluation of sexual passions in this latter scenario, the problem re-emerges. For nothing we have said so far helps us to see how, in the latter scenario, Aquinas might regard the sexual passions as virtuous.

This brings us to my third point, which is inspired by Robert Roberts' recent defence[58] of the virtue of temperance. There, Roberts defends a conception of the rational mean similar to the one we have discussed earlier in this essay: In virtue of having a rational

[57] "non enim est virtuti contrarium, si rationis actus aliquando intermittatur pro aliquo, quod secundum rationem fit: alioquin, quod aliquis se somno tradit, esset contra virtutem," *ST* II-II, q.153, a.2.

[58] Robert C. Roberts, "Temperance," in *Virtues and Their Vices*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Craig A. Boyd (Oxford University Press, 2014), 93–111.

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mean, temperance consists not merely in 'restraining' or 'stoking' our desires for food, drink and sex so that they become desires for an appropriate *quantity* of those objects (e.g. one serving of dinner and not two), or for an appropriate *type* of object (e.g. not just meat but also vegetables; or, not underage or homosexual union, but union with adult members of the opposite sex). Rather, temperance has a further component, namely, a cultivation of the right *understanding*, or *perception,* of the relevant objects of desire. According to Roberts, a temperate person who is told that this wine costs $80 a glass will lose his very desire for that wine, precisely because the information he has received changes his *perception* of the wine: It is not just that the person knows that he lacks $80 to spare from his monthly budget, and is able to restrain his desires appropriately; rather, he perceives the wine *as* 'too-expensive wine' and his desires are promptly transformed according to this new perception. If Roberts is correct, the relationship between reason and passion becomes intertwined, and inseparable from, the act of perception. Arguably, such a picture of perception accords with Aquinas' view.[59] In any case, it provides us with a way of deflecting the brunt of the present objection, because acts such as marital intercourse (or grief over the death of a loved one, etc.) undeniably are shaped by perception: Sexual passion is passion *for* a specific person, overwhelming grief is grief *for* the loss of a specific person, and so on.[60] If temperance can be understood as the proper shaping of one's perceptions through reason, whereby a spouse's sexual passion crucially involves e.g. perceiving the object of their desire *as their spouse in sacramental marriage, who is currently willing and able to have conjugal relations* (for example), it follows that 'strong passions' such as those involved in the sexual act can indeed be subject to judgments of reason, *understood as perception.* (E.g. a spouse whose sexual passion involved the appropriate perception of their spouse, would 'spontaneously' lose their passion in circumstances where intercourse were rendered imprudent, e.g. if the spouse became unwilling or sick, etc.).

If this suggestion is accepted, it follows that Aquinas can recognize the goodness of strong passions like sexual desire without significantly modifying his conception of the relationship between passion and reason. After all, what is crucial to Roberts' conception of temperance as proper perception, is that reason can still be understood as having despotic control over passion *insofar as reason is presupposed in correct perception.* What needs to be changed in Aquinas' picture, is merely the claim that all instances of strong

[59] For discussion of whether Aquinas does in fact take such a view, cf. Jensen, "Virtuous Deliberation and the Passions," 193-227.

[60] Hence, e.g., the intelligibility of experiences where a person loses their desire immediately upon realizing the person they are being intimate is not who they thought was.

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sexual passion are cases of strong antecedent passion. Instead, it can be recognized that many cases of strong sexual passion are not truly strong antecedent passions, but in fact *consequent* to a person's rational judgment insofar as their passion presupposes a proper, rational *perception* of their spouse as the object of their desire. On this view, 'vehement' passions remain incompatible with temperance, not on account of strength or vividness, but rather on account of being so strong as be, *by their very nature,* an obstacle to the proper perception of the object of desire. Insofar as sexual passions or spontaneous acts of grief do not obscure such perception of their objects (and in at least some cases of marital union, we conjecture, they do not), we are thus able to say that Aquinas could in theory accept these passions as proper parts of a virtuous act.

6. **Conclusion**

We have discussed a number of distinctive elements in Aquinas' account of temperance, and have seen that Aquinas' conception of temperance differs on the one hand from contemporary 'instrumentalist' conceptions of temperance (in its emphasis on the absolute goodness of temperance and its inseparability from the virtue of prudence), as well as broadly Kantian ethical approaches which tend to value continence over temperance (in its emphasis on rightly ordered desire in the good life). Finally, we have seen how Aquinas' conception of temperance places distinctive emphasis on the absolute, or 'despotic', role of rationality in the moral life. While we saw that this view appeared vulnerable to an objection that temperance devalues strong passions, and (by extension) human sexuality, we also saw that contemporary ethics (in particular, Roberts' account of temperance as *right understanding*) offers insights into our conceptualization of rationality that give Aquinas' account the ability to accomodate strong passions in the moral life. I conclude that, in the face of modern objections, Aquinas' account of temperance retains its plausibility.[61]

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