

QUESTION 155

Continence

Next we have to consider the potential parts of temperance: first, continence (*continentia*) (questions 155-156); second, clemency (*clementia*) (questions 157-159); and, third, modesty (*modestia*) (questions 160-169).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) Is continence a virtue? (2) What is the subject matter of continence? (3) Which power is the subject of continence? (4) Is continence better than temperance?

Article 1

Is continence a virtue?

It seems that continence is not a virtue:

Objection 1: A species is not divided off at the same level from its genus (*species non dividitur generi*). But as is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics 7*, *continence* is divided off at the same level from *virtue*. Therefore, continence is not a virtue.

Objection 2: No one sins in making use of a virtue, since, according to Augustine in *De Libero Arbitrio*, “A virtue is something that no one uses badly.” But an individual can sin in being continent (*continendo potest peccare*), as, for instance, if he desired to do something good and restrained himself from doing it. Therefore, continence is not a virtue.

Objection 3: No virtue draws a man back from what is licit, but instead a virtue draws him back only from what is illicit. But continence draws a man back from what is licit, since a Gloss on Galatians 5:23 says that by continence an individual “abstains even from what is licit.” Therefore, continence is not a virtue.

But contrary to this: A praiseworthy habit seems to be a virtue. But continence is of this sort; for Andronicus claims that “continence is a habit unconquered by pleasure.” Therefore, continence is a virtue.

I respond: There are two ways in which the name ‘continence’ is used by different writers:

What some name by ‘continence’ is *that through which an individual abstains from all sexual pleasure*; hence, in Galatians 5:3 the Apostle joins continence to chastity. And on this score perfect continence is in the first place *virginity* and in the second place *widowhood*. Accordingly, the concept of continence is the same as the concept of the virginity that we called a virtue above (q. 152, a. 3).

By contrast, others claim that continence is *that through which an individual resists disordered sentient desires that are strong within him (per quam aliquis resistit concupiscentiis pravis quae in eo vehementes existunt)*. And this is the way the Philosopher understands continence in *Ethics 7*, and it is also the way in which continence is understood in the writings of the Fathers. Now in this sense (a) continence has something of the nature of a virtue, viz., insofar as reason is firmed up against the passions in such a way as not to be led astray by them, and yet (b) it does not attain to the perfect nature of moral virtue, in accord with which even the sentient appetite itself is subject to reason in such a way that strong passions which are contrary to reason do not rise up within it. This is why, in *Ethics 4*, the Philosopher says, “Continence is not a virtue but a sort of mixture,” viz., insofar as it has something that belongs to virtue and yet falls short of virtue in a certain respect. Still, if we take the name ‘virtue’ in a broad sense for any principle of praiseworthy works, we can say that continence is a virtue.

Reply to objection 1: The Philosopher is dividing off *continence* on the same level as *virtue* with respect to the way in which continence falls short of being a virtue.

Reply to objection 2: The human being is properly speaking what accords with reason. And so an individual is said to contain or restrain himself within himself (*in seipso se tenere*) from the fact that he

contains or restrains himself within that which accords with reason. On the other hand, whatever involves a perversion of reason is not in accord with reason.

Hence, the only individual who is truly called continent is one who contains or restrains himself within what accords with right reason and not within what accords with perverse reason. Now deformed sentient desires are opposed to right reason in the same way that good sentient desires are opposed to perverse reason. And so the individual who is properly and truly continent is one who persists in right reason while abstaining from deformed sentient desires, and not one who persists in deformed reason while abstaining from good sentient desires. The latter individual should instead be said to be obstinate in evil.

Reply to objection 3: The Gloss here is talking about continence in the first sense, according to which ‘continence’ names a perfect virtue that abstains not only from illicit goods but even from certain lesser goods that are licit, in order that he might focus totally on the more perfect goods.

Article 2

Is the subject matter of continence sentient desires for the pleasures of touch?

It seems not to be the case that the subject matter of continence is sentient desires for the pleasures of touch:

Objection 1: In *De Officiis* 1 Ambrose says, “General decorum is such that it has a constraining (*continentem*) stable form and an aggregation of uprightness within its every act.” But not every human act involves the pleasures of touch. Therefore, it is not the case that continence has to do only with sentient desires for the pleasures of touch.

Objection 2: As has been explained (a. 1), the name ‘continence’ is taken from the fact that an individual holds himself firm within the good of right reason. But there are other passions that lead a man away from right reason more strongly than sentient desires for the pleasures of touch do, e.g., fear of the dangers surrounding death, which stupefy a man, and anger, which, as Seneca points out, is similar to insanity. Therefore, it is improper to claim that continence has to do properly with sentient desires for the pleasures of touch.

Objection 3: In *Rhetorica* 2 Tully says, “Continence is that by which excessive desire (*cupiditas*) is ruled by the governance of counsel.” But [the name] ‘*cupiditas*’ is normally used with respect to riches rather than with respect to the pleasures of touch—this according to 1 Timothy 6:10 (“The root of all evils is the excessive desire for money (*radix omnium malorum est cupiditas*)”). Therefore, it is not the case that continence has to do properly with sentient desires for the pleasures of touch.

Objection 4: The pleasures of touch occur not only in sexual matters, but also in eating. But continence is normally applied only to sexual enjoyment. Therefore, it is not the case that sentient desire for the pleasures of touch is the proper matter of continence.

Objection 5: Among the pleasures associated with the sense of touch, some are not human but bestial—both (a) in the case of eating, as when an individual takes pleasure in eating human flesh, and also (b) in sexual matters, e.g., in the sexual misuse of animals and of children. But as is explained in *Ethics* 7, continence does not have to do with things of this sort. Therefore, it is not the case that the proper subject matter of continence is the sentient desire for the pleasures of touch.

But contrary to this: In *Ethics* 7 the Philosopher says, “Continence and incontinence have to do with the same things that temperance and intemperance have to do with.” But as was established above (q. 141, a. 4), temperance and intemperance have to do with sentient desires for the pleasures of touch. Therefore, continence and incontinence likewise have to do with this same subject matter.

I respond: The name ‘continence’ implies a sort of restraint (*refrenationem quandam importat*),

viz., insofar as one *holds himself firm against following his passions*. And so continence has to do properly speaking with those *passions which impel* one to pursue something and which it is praiseworthy for *reason to draw the man back from pursuing*—whereas continence does not properly speaking have to do with those *passions which imply a sort of drawing back*, e.g., fear and others of this kind, since, as was explained above (q. 123, aa. 1-4 and q. 141, a. 3), in those cases it is praiseworthy to *preserve one's firmness in pursuing what reason dictates*.

Now one must take into account that, as was explained above (ST 1, q. 60, a. 2), natural inclinations are principles of everything that supervenes on them. And so passions impel an individual more strongly to pursue something to the extent that they follow more closely upon an inclination of the nature. And the nature mainly inclines one toward those things that are necessary for itself, either in order to conserve the individual, as in the case of food, or to conserve the species, as in the case of sexual acts. The pleasures associated with these things pertain to touch. And this is why continence and incontinence are properly said to be concerned with sentient desires for the pleasures of touch.

Reply to objection 1: Just as the name 'temperance' can be taken in a general sense to apply to any subject matter and yet is properly used in the case of the subject matter in which it is best for a man to restrain himself, so, too, the name 'continence' is properly used in the case in which it is best and most difficult to contain oneself, viz., in the case of the sentient desires for the pleasures of touch. Still, 'continence' can be used in a general sense and relatively speaking (*communiter et secundum quid*) in the case of any other subject matter. And this is the way in which Ambrose is using the name 'continence'.

Reply to objection 2: It is not continence that is properly praised with respect to fear, but rather firmness of mind, which implies fortitude.

Anger, on the other hand, does create an impetus for pursuing something, and yet that impetus follows a mental apprehension (*sequitur apprehensionem animalem*)—in the sense that the individual apprehends that he has been injured by someone—rather than a natural inclination. And this is why the individual is said to 'contain' his anger in a certain respect and not absolutely speaking (*secundum quid, non tamen simpliciter*).

Reply to objection 3: As the Philosopher points out in *Ethics 7*, exterior goods of the sort in question, e.g., honors, riches, etc., seem to be choiceworthy in their own right and not as something necessary for the preservation of one's nature. And so we do not call individuals continent or incontinent *absolutely speaking* in regard to them, but instead call them continent or incontinent in a certain respect, adding that they are continent or incontinent *regarding riches* or *regarding honor*, and so on.

And so either (a) Tully was using the name 'continence' in a general sense that included within itself continence in a certain respect, or (b) he was using '*cupiditas*' strictly for the sentient desire for the pleasures of touch.

Reply to objection 4: The pleasures of sex are stronger than the pleasures of food. And this is why we are more accustomed to apply 'continence' and 'incontinence' to sexual matters than to food—even though, according to the Philosopher, it can be applied to both.

Reply to objection 5: Continence is a good of human reason and so it is concerned with passions that can be connatural to a human being. Hence, in *Ethics 7* the Philosopher says, "If an individual, laying hold of a child, desired him either for eating or for inappropriate sexual pleasure, then whether or not he followed through on the desire, he would not be called continent absolutely speaking, but only relatively speaking."

Article 3

Is the concupiscible power the subject of continence?

It seems that the concupiscible power is the subject of continence:

Objection 1: The subject of a virtue has to be proportionate to the subject matter. But as has been explained (a. 2), the subject matter of continence is sentient desires for the pleasures of touch, and this desire belongs to the concupiscible power. Therefore, continence exists in the concupiscible power.

Objection 2: Opposites have to do with the same thing. But incontinence exists in the concupiscible power, the passions of which overcome reason; for Andronicus says that incontinence is “the badness of the concupiscible power insofar as one chooses disordered pleasures prohibited by the rational power.” Therefore, by parity of reasoning, continence likewise exists in the concupiscible power.

Objection 3: The subject of a human virtue is either reason or the appetitive power, which is divided into the will, the concupiscible power, and the irascible power. But continence does not exist in reason, since then it would be an intellectual virtue. Nor does it exist in the will, since continence has to do with the passions, which do not exist in the will. Nor, again, does it exist in the irascible power, since, as has been explained (a. 2), it does not properly have to do with the irascible passions. Therefore, what remains is that it exists in the concupiscible power.

But contrary to this: Every virtue that exists in a power prevents a bad act of that power. But continence does not *prevent* a bad act of the concupiscible power, since, as the Philosopher puts it in *Ethics 7*, “it keeps disordered sentient desires under control (*habet continens concupiscentias pravas*).” Therefore, continence does not exist in the concupiscible power.

I respond: Every virtue that exists in a given subject makes that subject differ from the disposition it has when it is the subject of the opposing vice.

However, the *concupiscible power* behaves in exactly the same way in an individual who is continent and in an individual who is incontinent, since in both cases it erupts into strong disordered sentient desires. Hence, it is clear that continence does not exist in the concupiscible power as in a subject.

Similarly, *reason* also behaves in the same way in both cases, since both the continent individual and the incontinent individual have right reason, and both individuals, when not experiencing the passions, act with the intention of not following disordered sentient desires.

The primary difference between them lies in the *act of choosing*, since the continent individual, even though experiencing strong sentient desires, chooses nonetheless not to follow those desires, and this because of reason, whereas the incontinent individual chooses to follow them despite being contradicted by reason. And so it must be the case that continence exists, as in a subject, within that power of the soul whose act is the act of choosing. And, as was established above (*ST 1-2*, q. 13, a. 1), this power is the *will*.

Reply to objection 1: Continence has as its subject matter sentient desires for the pleasures of touch, but not in the sense that it *moderates* those desires; this belongs to temperance, which exists in the concupiscible power. Instead, continence has to do with these desires in the sense that it *resists* them. Hence, it has to exist in a different power [from the concupiscible power], since resistance belongs to one power over against another.

Reply to objection 2: The will lies between reason and the concupiscible power, and it can be moved by either of them. In someone who is continent, the will is moved by reason, whereas in an individual who is incontinent, the will is moved by the concupiscible power. And this is why (a) continence can be attributed to *reason* as its first mover and (b) incontinence can be attributed to the *concupiscible power*, even though in each case they belong directly to the *will* as their proper subject.

Reply to objection 3: Even though the passions do not exist in the will as in their subject, it lies

within the will's power to resist them, and it is in this way that the will of the continent individual resists sentient desires.

Article 4

Is continence better than temperance?

It seems that continence is better than temperance:

Objection 1: Ecclesiasticus 26:20 says, "Every act of weighing falls short of a continent soul." Therefore, no virtue can be the equal of continence.

Objection 2: The greater a reward a virtue merits, the more important it is. But continence seems to merit a greater reward. For 2 Timothy 2:5 says, "Only he who strives mightily will be crowned," and the one who strives more is the continent individual, since he experiences stronger disordered sentient desires than does the temperate individual, who does not have strong passions. Therefore, continence is a more important virtue than temperance is.

Objection 3: The will is a more dignified power than the concupiscible power. But as is clear from what was said above (a. 3), continence exists in the will, whereas temperance exists in the concupiscible power. Therefore, continence is a more important virtue than temperance.

But contrary to this: Tully and Andronicus claim that continence is adjoined to temperance as to a principal virtue.

I respond: As was explained above (a. 1), the name 'continence' is understood in two ways:

(a) *as implying the absence of all sexual pleasure (secundum quod importat cessationem ab omnibus delectationibus venereis)*. And if we take the name 'continence' in this way, then continence is a more important virtue than temperance absolutely speaking, as is clear from what was said above (q. 152, a. 5) about the preeminence of virginity over chastity absolutely speaking.

(b) *as implying reason's resistance to disordered sentient desires that are strong in a man*. And on this score temperance is much more important than continence. For the good of a virtue is praiseworthy because it accords with reason. But the good of reason flourishes in a *temperate* individual, in whom even the sentient appetite itself is subject to reason and, as it were, dominated by reason, than in a *continent* individual, in whom the sentient appetite vehemently resists reason by means of disordered sentient desires. Hence, continence is related to temperance as the imperfect to the perfect.

Reply to objection 1: There are two ways in which this passage can be understood:

(a) insofar as 'continence' is being taken as abstinence from all sexual pleasures. And on this score what is being said is that every act of weighing falls short of a continent soul, *in the genus of chastity*, since, as was explained above (q. 152, aa. 4-5), not even the fecundity of the flesh that is sought in matrimony measures up to the continence of a virgin or a widow.

(b) insofar as 'continence' is being taken generally for any sort of abstinence from illicit things. And on this score what is being said is that every act of weighing falls short of the continent soul, since the continent soul does not care about the valuation of gold or silver, which are traded by weight.

Reply to objection 2: The strength or weakness of a sentient desire proceeds from two possible causes:

(a) Sometimes it proceeds from a *corporeal cause*. For some individuals are by their natural makeup more prone than others to have sentient desires. Again, some individuals, more than others, have opportunities ready to hand for pleasures that inflame sentient desires. Weakness of desire in such cases diminishes merit, whereas strength of desire increases merit.

(b) On the other hand, sometimes the weakness or strength of sentient desire proceeds from a *praiseworthy spiritual cause*, viz., from the vehemence of charity or from the strength of reason, as in the

case of a temperate man. And in such cases weakness of desire increases merit by reason of its cause, whereas strength of desire decreases merit.

Reply to objection 3: The will is closer to reason than the concupiscible power is. Hence, the good of reason, because of which virtue is praised, is shown to be greater if it reaches not only to the will but also all the way to the concupiscible power, which occurs in the case of a temperate individual, than if it reaches only to the will, as happens in the case of the continent individual.