

QUESTION 157

Clemency and Gentleness

Next we have to consider clemency (*clementia*) and gentleness or meekness (*mansuetudo*) and their opposed vices (questions 157-159).

Concerning these virtues there are four questions: (1) Are clemency and gentleness the same thing? (2) Are both of them virtues? (3) Is each of them a part of temperance? (4) How are they related to other virtues?

Article 1

Are clemency and gentleness altogether the same thing?

It seems that clemency and gentleness are altogether the same thing (*clementia et mansuetudo sint penitus idem*):

Objection 1: As the Philosopher explains in *Ethics* 4, gentleness moderates instances of anger. But anger is a desire for retribution (*appetitus vindictae*). Therefore, since, as Seneca puts it in *De Clementia* 2, clemency is “the leniency of a superior toward an inferior in determining punishments,” where retribution is accomplished through punishments, it seems that clemency and gentleness are the same thing.

Objection 2: In *Rhetorica* 2 Tully says, “Clemency is the virtue by which a mind stirred up with hatred of someone is restrained by kindness (*retinetur benignitate*),” and so it seems that clemency moderates the hatred. But as Augustine explains, hatred is caused by anger, which gentleness deals with. Therefore, it seems that gentleness and clemency are the same thing.

Objection 3: It is not the case that the same vice is opposed as a contrary to diverse virtues. But the same vice, viz., cruelty (*crudelitas*), is opposed to both gentleness and clemency. Therefore, it seems that gentleness and clemency are altogether the same thing.

But contrary to this: According to the above definition given by Seneca, clemency is the leniency of a superior toward an inferior. But gentleness belongs not only to a superior with respect to an inferior, but to anyone with respect to anyone else. Therefore, gentleness and clemency are not altogether the same thing.

I respond: As *Ethics* 2 explains, moral virtue has to do “with passions and actions.” Now interior passions are either principles of exterior actions or likewise impediments to exterior actions. And so virtues that moderate the passions in some way come together with virtues that moderate actions for the same effect—even though these virtues differ in species. For instance, it properly belongs to justice to keep a man from stealing, which an individual is inclined to by a disordered love or desire for money, which in turn is moderated by generosity. And so generosity comes together with justice for the effect of the individual’s abstaining from theft.

And this should likewise be taken into account in the case before us. For an individual is provoked by the passion of anger toward imposing a punishment that is too severe (*graviorem poenam*). But it belongs directly to clemency to reduce punishments, and this could be impeded by an excess of anger. And so gentleness, insofar as it restrains the force of anger, works together with clemency for the same effect. But they differ from one another, in that clemency moderates *the exterior act* of punishing, whereas gentleness properly diminishes *the passion* of anger.

Reply to objection 1: Gentleness deals properly speaking with *the desire itself* for retribution. But clemency deals with *the punishments themselves* that are applied *exteriorly* for the sake of retribution.

Reply to objection 2: A man’s affections are inclined toward minimizing things that are displeasing to the man in their own right. Now given the fact that an individual loves someone else, it happens that punishing that other individual does not please him *in its own right*, but pleases him only

relative to something else, e.g., relative to justice or relative to the correction of the one who is being punished. And so what follows from an individual's love is that he is prompt to reduce punishments, which pertains to clemency, where such reduction is impeded by hatred. And this is why Tully claims that "a mind stirred up with hatred"—viz., toward punishing too severely—"is restrained by clemency," i.e., restrained from inflicting a harsher punishment, so that clemency directly moderates *the punishment* and *not the hatred*.

Reply to objection 3: What is properly speaking opposed to gentleness, which has to do directly with instances of anger, is the vice of irascibility (*iracundia*), which implies *an excess of anger*. Cruelty, on the other hand, implies *an excess in punishing*. Hence, in *De Clementia* 2 Seneca says, "Those who are called cruel have a reason for punishing, but lack moderation in punishing." On the other hand, those who take pleasure in the punishment of men for its own sake can be called *savage* (*saevi*) or *brutal* (*feri*), in the sense that they lack the human affection by which one man naturally loves another.

Article 2

Are clemency and gentleness virtues?

It seems that neither clemency nor gentleness is a virtue:

Objection 1: No virtue is opposed to another virtue. But both clemency and gentleness are opposed to strictness (*severitas*), which is a virtue. Therefore, neither clemency nor gentleness is a virtue.

Objection 2: A virtue is corrupted by excess and deficiency. But both clemency and gentleness consist in a certain deficiency, since clemency is deficient in punishment and gentleness is deficient in anger. Therefore, neither clemency nor gentleness is a virtue.

Objection 3: Gentleness (*mansuetudo*), i.e., meekness (*mititas*), is posited among the beatitudes in Matthew 5:4 and among the fruits [of the Holy Spirit] in Galatians 5:23. But the virtues differ from both the beatitudes and the fruits. Therefore, gentleness is not included among the virtues.

But contrary to this: In *De Clementia* 2 Seneca says, "Every good man is outstanding in clemency and gentleness." But it is properly speaking virtue that belongs to good men, since, as *Ethics* 2 puts it, "Virtue is what makes the one having it good and renders his works good." Therefore, clemency and gentleness are virtues.

I respond: As is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics* 1, the nature of a moral virtue consists in an appetite's being subordinated to reason. But this is preserved both in clemency and in gentleness. For as Seneca explains in *De Clementia* 2, clemency "looks to reason" in reducing punishments. Similarly, as *Ethics* 4 says, gentleness moderates instances of anger in accord with right reason. Hence, it is clear that both clemency and gentleness are virtues.

Reply to objection 1: Gentleness is not directly opposed to [the virtue of] strictness, since gentleness has to do with instances of anger, whereas strictness concerns the exterior infliction of punishments. Hence, on this score it would seem that strictness is opposed instead to clemency, which, as has been explained (a. 1), is thought of as having to do with the exterior punishment. However, it is not in fact opposed to clemency. For inflexible strictness has to do with inflicting punishments when right reason requires this, whereas clemency reduces punishments, also in accord with right reason, i.e., when this is necessary and in the circumstances in which it is necessary. And so they are not opposed to one another, since they do not have to do with the same thing.

Reply to objection 2: According to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 4, "The habit that observes the mean with respect to anger is unnamed, and so the virtue is named from the mitigation of anger, which is signified by name 'gentleness'." For the virtue is closer to a deficiency than to an excess, since it is more natural for a man to desire retribution for injuries inflicted on himself than to fall short of this; for as

Sallust puts it, “Injuries done to oneself are seen as insignificant by hardly anyone.”

On the other hand, clemency reduces punishments—not, to be sure, with respect to what is in accord with right reason, but with respect to what is in accord with common law, which legal justice looks to. Instead, clemency reduces punishments because of certain particulars that have been taken into consideration, discerning, as it were, that a given man is not to be punished any further. Hence, in *De Clementia* 2 Seneca says, “Clemency maintains this in the first place: It announces that those whom it is releasing should suffer nothing further, and that the remission of the due punishment is a kindness.” From this it is clear that *clemency* is related to *strictness* in the way that *epieikeia* [see q. 120] is related to *legal justice*, where legal justice has as a part *strictness* with respect to inflicting punishments in accord with the law. However, as will be explained below (a. 3), clemency differs from *epieikeia*.

Reply to objection 3: The *beatitudes* are the acts of *virtue*, whereas the *fruits* are the delight that accompanies the acts of the virtues. And so nothing prevents gentleness from being posited as a *virtue*, as a *beatitude*, and as a *fruit*.

Article 3

Are clemency and gentleness parts of [the virtue of] temperance?

It seems that clemency and gentleness are not parts of [the virtue of] temperance:

Objection 1: As has been explained (aa. 1-2), clemency reduces punishment. Now in *Ethics* 5 the Philosopher attributes the reduction of punishment to *epieikeia*, which, as was established above (q. 120, a. 2), belongs to [the virtue of] justice. Therefore, it seems that clemency is not a part of temperance.

Objection 2: Temperance has to do with sentient desires. But gentleness and clemency have to do more with anger and retribution than with sentient desires. Therefore, they should not be posited as parts of temperance.

Objection 3: In *De Clementia* 2 Seneca says, “An individual who takes pleasure in savageness (*cui voluptati saevitia est*) is such that we can call him mad.” But this is opposed to clemency and gentleness. Therefore, since madness is opposed to prudence, it seems that clemency and gentleness are parts of prudence rather than of temperance.

But contrary to this: In *De Clementia* 2 Seneca says, “Clemency is temperance of the mind with respect to the power of exacting retribution (*in potestate ulciscendi*).” Tully likewise posits clemency as a part of temperance.

I respond: Parts are assigned to principal virtues insofar as, within certain secondary subject matters, they imitate those principal virtues with respect to the *mode* that the praise of the virtue mainly depends upon, and from there the parts receive the *name* of the virtue. For instance, (a) the mode and name of *justice* consists in a certain sort of *equality*, whereas (b) the mode and name of *fortitude* consists in a certain sort of *firmness*, and (c) the mode and name of *temperance* consists in a certain sort of *restraint*, viz., insofar as temperance restrains the strongest sentient desires for the pleasures of touch.

Now clemency and gentleness likewise consist in a certain sort of *restraint*, since, as is clear from what has been said (aa. 1-2), clemency limits punishments, whereas gentleness mitigates anger. And this is why both clemency and gentleness are adjoined to temperance as to a principal virtue. And accordingly they are posited as parts of temperance.

Reply to objection 1: There are two things that have to be taken into account in the reduction of punishments:

One of them is that reducing a punishment is done in accord with the *intention of the lawgiver*, though not in accord with *the words of the law*. And, on this score, reducing a punishment belongs to *epieikeia*.

The second is a certain *moderation of the affections* that results in a man's not using his power to inflict punishments. And this properly belongs to *clemency*, which is why Seneca says that clemency is "temperance of the mind with respect to the power of exacting retribution." This moderation of the affections arises from a certain agreeableness of affection (*ex quadam dulcedine affectus*) by which one has an aversion to whatever can cause sadness in another. This is why Seneca claims that clemency is a sort of leniency of mind (*quaedam lenitas animi*). For, contrariwise, there seems to be a sort of harshness of mind (*quaedam austeritas animi*) in someone who does not fear causing sadness in others.

Reply to objection 2: The connection of secondary virtues to their principal virtues has more to do with the principal virtue's *mode*—which is, as it were, its *form*—than with the principal virtue's *subject matter*. Now as has been explained, gentleness and clemency agree with temperance in their *mode*, even though they do not agree with temperance in their *subject matter*.

Reply to objection 3: 'Madness' (*insania*) means a corruption of mental health (*dicitur per corruptionem sanitatis*). Now just as bodily health (*sanitas coporalis*) is corrupted by the body's departing from the appropriate constitution of the human species, so madness with respect to the mind has to do with the human soul's departing from the appropriate disposition of the human species. This happens both (a) with respect to *reason*, e.g., when an individual loses the use of reason, and (b) with respect to *the appetitive power*, as when, in the words of *Ethics* 7, an individual loses the human affection "by which a man is naturally friendly to every man."

Now the sort of madness that excludes the use of reason is opposed to *prudence*. On the other hand, taking pleasure in other men's punishments is called 'madness' because the man thereby seems to be deprived of the human affection that clemency follows upon.

Article 4

Are clemency and gentleness the most important virtues?

It seems that clemency (*clementia*) and gentleness (*mansuetudo*) are the most important virtues (*potissimae virtutes*):

Objection 1: The praiseworthiness of a virtue consists mainly in the fact it orders a man toward beatitude, which consists in knowing God. But gentleness more than anything orders a man toward knowing God; for James 1:21 says, "Receive the implanted word with gentleness," and Ecclesiasticus 5:13 says, "Be gentle in listening to the word of God." And in his letter *Ad Demophilum* Dionysius says, "Because of his great gentleness Moses was held worthy of God's appearing to him." Therefore, gentleness is the most important virtue.

Objection 2: The more acceptable a virtue is to God and men, the more important it seems to be. But gentleness seems most of all to be accepted by God; for Ecclesiasticus 1:34-35 says, "Faith and gentleness are most pleasing to God." Again, Christ invites us specifically to imitate His gentleness by saying, "Learn from me, for I am meek (*mitis*) and humble of heart," and Hilary says, "It is through the gentleness of our mind that Christ abides within us." Gentleness is also most acceptable to men; hence, Ecclesiasticus 3:19 says, "My son, accomplish your works in gentleness and you will be loved beyond the glory of men." For this reason Proverbs 20:28 likewise says, "The king's throne is strengthened by clemency." Therefore, gentleness and clemency are the most important virtues.

Objection 3: In *De Sermone Domini in Monte* Augustine says, "The meek (*mites*) are those who yield to reproaches and do not resist with what is evil, but who overcome evil by good." Now this seems to belong to mercy or piety (*ad misericordiam vel pietatem*), which seems to be the most important of the virtues, since a Gloss of Ambrose's on 1 Timothy 4:8 ("Piety is useful for all things") says, "The sum total of the Christian religion consists in piety." Therefore, gentleness and clemency are the greatest of

the virtues.

But contrary to this: They are not posited as principal virtues, but are adjoined to another virtue as to a more principal virtue.

I respond: Nothing prevents certain virtues from being the greatest *in a certain respect* or *with respect to some genus* and not the greatest *absolutely speaking* or *in all respects*. Now it is impossible for clemency and gentleness to be the most important virtues absolutely speaking. For their praise has to do with their holding one back from evil, insofar as they diminish anger or reduce punishment. But it is more perfect to attain the good than to lack evil. And so virtues that order one absolutely speaking toward a good, e.g., faith, hope, and charity and, likewise, prudence and justice, are greater absolutely speaking than clemency and gentleness.

However, nothing prevents gentleness and clemency from having a sort of excellence *in a certain respect* among the virtues which resist disordered affections.

For, because of its force, anger, which gentleness mitigates, especially impedes the human mind from freely judging the truth. And, for this reason, gentleness especially gives the mind mastery over itself; hence, Ecclesiasticus 10:31 says, “My son, keep your soul in gentleness”—even though, as was explained above (q. 141, a. 7), sentient desires for the pleasures of touch are more shameful and disturb one more continuously, for which reason it is instead temperance that is posited as the principal virtue.

On the other hand, clemency, because it reduces punishments, seems to come close especially to charity, which is the most important virtue and through which we do good things for our neighbors and prevent evil things from happening to them.

Reply to objection 1: Gentleness prepares a man for knowing God by removing an impediment, and this in two ways: (a) first, as has been explained, by making the man master of himself by the diminishing his anger; and (b) second, gentleness involves the man’s not contradicting words of truth, which individuals often do because of the agitation caused by anger. And this is why, in *De Doctrina Christiana* 2, Augustine says, “Being meek or pious (*mitiscere*) means not contradicting the divine Scripture—regardless of whether Scripture is (a) understood, if it strikes at some of our vices, or (b) not understood, if we could better and more truly understand it and guide ourselves by it.”

Reply to objection 2: Gentleness and clemency render a man acceptable to God and men insofar as they concur in one of the same effects as charity, which is the greatest of the virtues, viz., the effect of eliminating evils that belong to our neighbors.

Reply to objection 3: Mercy and piety agree with gentleness and clemency insofar as they concur in the same effect, viz., preventing evils from happening to our neighbors.

However, they differ with respect to their motives:

For *piety* removes evils from our neighbors out of the reverence that it has for someone greater, e.g., God or a parent. *Mercy*, on the other hand, removes evils belonging to our neighbors because, as was explained above (q. 30, a. 2), one is saddened by those evils insofar as he thinks of them as his own evils—and this comes from friendship, which makes the friends rejoice and sorrow over the same things.

By contrast, *gentleness* does this insofar as it removes the anger that incites one to retribution, whereas *clemency* does it out of spirit of leniency, insofar as it judges it to be fair that someone should not be punished any further.