

## SPAZIO APERTO

## OPEN SPACE

Recently two young professionals threw public temper tantrums which are available for viewing internationally via social media. The first, a top tennis player from Kazakhstan, angry at losing, destroyed not one but three tennis rackets by beating them against the ground. The second, an Italian musician, angry due to problems with audio, destroyed the decorations at a national music festival, kicking and throwing roses and entire floral arrangements. For the sake of our discussion of moral education, I will introduce a third young man of about the same age, my nephew, Henry. At the age of two, Henry would express his anger by clenching his fists and crying out, "I'm mad!" Depending on the specific situation his parents would respond by either ignoring the outburst, asking questions if the cause of his anger was unknown, and, if necessary, correcting the child. My nephew is now a fine young man, and like most young adults, though he still gets angry at times, he no longer throws tantrums.

The responses to the childish tantrums of these two professionals, and that of my nephew, confirm that parents, the education system, and society at large, regardless of culture, have expectations for normal moral maturation as one leaves childhood, including moderation of one's anger. This emotional growth can be considered 'natural,' not because it occurs automatically, but rather because it is in accord with human nature. Even in our relativistic world where freedom is equated with license and tolerance proclaimed chief of all virtues, public response shows general agreement that something went awry in the moral education of two of these young men. There is less agreement as to where lay blame and how to find the solution. Whether implicit or explicitly stated, any answer will necessarily reveal an anthropology, a theory of virtue itself and whether it can be taught, the specific nature of temperance, and its relation to moral education. The anthropology presented in this article is Thomistic.

### Can virtue be taught?

Long ago Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, followed by Thomas Aquinas and other scholastics, raised the question of whether one can teach virtue. Plato opens the

## Temperance and Moral Education

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*Meno* with his main character asking Socrates: "whether virtue is acquired by teaching or by practice; or if neither by teaching nor by practice, then whether it comes to man by nature, or in what other way?"<sup>1</sup> Socrates responds by leading Meno through a long discussion on virtue. Once Meno arrives at a definition of virtue as "the desire of things honorable and the power of attaining them,"<sup>2</sup> Socrates moves on to answer the original question by introducing an example of Themistocles and his son Cleophantus.

The interlocutors agree that Themistocles is a virtuous and honorable man who wished that his son might also become an honorable gentleman. As such, Themistocles would necessarily teach his son all skills required of a gentleman including not only horsemanship and javelin-throwing, but also virtue, if it could be taught. In this way the son could acquire from his father all those "qualities in which he himself excelled."<sup>3</sup> A problem arises since although the son excelled in the physical accomplishments, he was



not noted for having the same level of virtue as his father. The logical conclusion is that since the son was taught virtue but did not acquire it, virtue cannot merely consist of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> This conclusion, however, seems to contradict another well-known teaching of Socrates: that virtue is wisdom, and wisdom is knowledge, which leads one to conclude that virtue can be taught.<sup>5</sup>

Though Aristotle agrees with Socrates as to nature and education being insufficient causes of virtue, he stoutly defends the necessity of education accompanied by experience and repeated acts, though adding a caveat. Since education is necessary but insufficient, he says one wastes time formally teaching virtue to the young (whether young by age or by character). Knowledge of virtue does not profit these because they are ruled by passion, and the end of teaching virtue is not mere knowledge but action.<sup>6</sup>

Building upon the wisdom of the philosophers, Thomas Aquinas argues that two things are required for a man to do a good or virtuous deed. First, his reason must be well-disposed having been perfected by a habit of intellectual virtue, and in this way study and teaching on virtue are necessary.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as demonstrated by his predecessors, intellectual knowledge alone is insufficient. One also needs a well-disposed appetite formed by repeated good actions.<sup>8</sup>

### Teaching Temperance

Wise men seem to agree that though insufficient, moral education is necessary. If so, there must be educators of youth, and to perform their task well these must understand how reason comes to bear on the sense appetite and its passions. Employing a political analogy, they must know how a man or woman becomes a strong city of virtue with reason prudently governing and guiding the sense appetite. Only with this knowledge can they guide youth towards virtuous self-mastery, that human excellence whereby the temperate person, wishing to achieve a true good, refrains from bodily pleasure and faces dangers not with distress but with some ease and even pleasure.<sup>9</sup> Such an education presupposes some foundational principles which include but are not limited to the following.

*First*, human passions, as responses to sense data presented by the exterior or interior senses, are morally neutral in themselves. The passion of anger one feels over losing a match or not receiving a

second ice cream are not inherently good or evil. They are passions of a rational being, and as such, are naturally designed to be brought under “the command of the reason and the will,” and in this way, they become morally good or evil by participation.<sup>10</sup>

*Second*, though speaking of the virtue of temperance which specifically is defined as moderation of our desires for sensible pleasure, primarily including food and sexuality, temperance considered as moderation or tempering one’s passions in general can apply relatively to other virtues and their objects, such as greed, ambition, and anger, as in the case of our young men.<sup>11</sup>

*Third*, virtue “is nothing else than a certain habitual conformity of these powers to reason.”<sup>12</sup> Prior to arriving at virtue a person must possess a will strong enough to bring the passions, still disordered, under the guidance of reason. He or she lacks the ease and joy that accompany the virtue of temperance but still performs a morally good action and by repeated “like acts” of proportional intensity, will eventually acquire the virtuous habit of temperance.<sup>13</sup>

*Fourth*, this understanding of virtue and the role of the will is opposed to a Kantian deontological interpretation of virtue as willful denial of one’s natural desires in favor of following the law. One does not attain to virtue *in spite of passion*, but rather, as Thomas argues, “it belongs to man’s moral good to be moved toward the good both by the will *and by the sensitive appetite*.”<sup>14</sup>

Consider the analogy of a horse trainer. The trainer’s skill lies not in brute force, anger, or whips. Anyway can make whip an animal to make it obey. The trainer has a higher, more difficult goal. Respecting the natural powers of the horse, he harnesses rather than destroys them, so that the animal will accomplish the deeds he commands. The passions, too, have their own natural power. The virtuous prudent person does not crush the passions but rather reason guides them or can be said to *enter* into the powers, so that they achieve their proper end.

We err by forgetting this is an analogy. The terms “training” and “control” are often used when speaking of human passions because we see similarity between our training of the horse, the puppy and our three young men (when each was a small child). Such terms imply “tyrannical rule” which may be rightly applied to animals who are slaves to their trainer. But whereas the well-trained puppy

reaches maturity by simply performing the acts it was trained to do, a child’s “training” is a necessary but only the first step along a much different journey to mature virtuous integration. Mere control of one’s disordered emotions, which Thomas calls “continence,” falls short of mature internal self-mastery.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

We assume that the actions of the two young men, as professionals, indicates a lacuna in their moral education. They lack full self-mastery, but they also lack either intellectual knowledge of virtuous action or training or both, and so, when faced with difficult obstacles their disordered passions take control, to the point of blocking reason. Their public error, though unfortunate, offers an opportunity for parents, educators, and political leaders, and also the young men, to revisit the question of moral education. Since virtue requires both intellectual knowledge and repeated practice of virtuous acts, hopefully these two young men are learning from this experience and will begin the struggle of bringing reason to bear on their sensible appetites to eventually attain not only the virtue of temperance, but something of all of the virtues.

### NOTES

1. Plato, “Meno,” in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (London: Oxford University Press, 1892), p. 71.
2. Plato, “Meno,” p. 77.
3. Plato, “Meno,” p. 93.
4. Plato, “Meno,” p. 100.
5. Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, trans H. G. Dakyns (NY: Dover, 2018), bk III.9, 5; bk IV, 6, 7.
6. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics [NE]*, trans. W.D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), bk I, 3.
7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae [ST]*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (NY: Benzinger Brothers, 1948), Ia-IIae q58 a2.
8. *ST Ia-IIae q58 a2*.
9. Cf. *NE Bk II, 3*.
10. *ST Ia-IIae q24 a1*.
11. *ST Ia-IIae q155 a2 ad2-5*.
12. *ST Ia-IIae q56 a4*.
13. Cf. *ST Ia-IIae q52 a3; 56 a5*.
14. *ST Ia-IIae q24 a3*.
15. *ST Ia-IIae q155 a1*.