

Words

Temperance

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Author's abstract

The kind of temperance discussed is the virtue of moderation concerning the pleasures of eating and drinking. A person lacks this moderation if either his desire for such pleasures causes conflicts with his own standards of appropriate behaviour or the standards themselves attach too much importance to the pleasures concerned. Opinions vary about the proper status of these pleasures, but people surely value them too highly if they place them above their health or the moral duty not to cause unnecessary suffering. Temperance concerns medicine because of its connection with health, ethics because it involves not only the good life for the individual but also the welfare of other creatures.

There are many senses of the word *temperance*. It is traditionally used to translate *sophrosune*, Aristotle's virtue of moderation in the sphere of food, drink and sex; a virtue which, like all Aristotle's moral virtues, lies between a vice of excess and one of deficiency. Again, there is the familiar narrow Victorian sense of the word, which applies only to alcohol and signifies not moderation but complete abstinence; through the process which philosophers call persuasive definition, the favourable connotations belonging to an emotive word of rather vague meaning became attached to a new, specific content. In what follows, I shall be discussing a third sense (without wishing to claim there are only these three senses). 'Temperance', I shall claim, is the word which we would most naturally use for the good trait which is the 'opposite' of being a drunkard and of gluttony. ('Greed' is the more usual word for this latter failing, but as 'greed' can be applied also to graspingness about goods in general, I shall stick to 'gluttony'.) Temperance in this sense involves moderation in regard to food, alcohol and perhaps other drugs as well, but not sex, which would now be regarded as the province of the distinct virtue of chastity. For simplicity I shall discuss temperance mainly in terms of food, as alcohol and other drugs

raise special questions; I shall return to drugs briefly at the end.

What kind of moderation is involved, and what sets the standard of it? A simple view would be that moderation applies only to quantity and the standard is the maintenance of health. But there is more to temperance than this, as is clear when we reflect that there are kinds of conduct which show a lack of temperance although they neither involve excess quantity nor endanger health. Medieval philosophers had a tag about gluttony: it is shown in eating 'praepropere, nimis, ardentem, laute, studiose' (too hastily, too much, too keenly, extravagantly, fussily) (1). Similarly, we might think someone a glutton if he fussed too much about his food or bolted it or spent too much time, money or effort on it, whether or not the quantity consumed was excessive.

But these symptoms are not always symptoms of gluttony. If someone spends too much time or money on his food, not to make the food nicer, but to impress others with his wealth or sophistication, we call him vain rather than a glutton. Similarly, a person who bolts his food not because he can't wait to eat it but because he can't wait to get back to his work, is not gluttonous but impatient, a person who eats too much because he thinks he has to please his doting mother is not gluttonous but (misguidedly) dutiful; and so on.

We can see from these examples that we think a person gluttonous if and only if we think he cares too much for the pleasures of food (hereinafter called 'food pleasures' for short) however he manifests this. The manifestations need not involve excess quantity at all. Sometimes, indeed, a person might show a kind of gluttony in eating too little, if he does this because he is inordinately fussy.

What is 'caring too much'? A person certainly cares too much about food pleasures if his desires for them are out of control: in other words, if they push him towards ways of behaving which he judges to be inappropriate, whether because of possible damage to health or good looks, because of more pressing claims on his time, attention or money or because of considerations of etiquette or good taste. There can be various forms of this condition. We can distinguish the *strong-minded* person, a kind of glutton at heart, who manages to act as he thinks fit but is plagued by regrets

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and by temptations to eat more or more richly or more elaborately; the *weak* glutton, who is constantly succumbing to temptation against his better judgement; the *self-deceiving* glutton who tries to distort his judgements to fit what he does, who tells himself that actions are all right which he would disapprove of in someone else; and the *amoral* glutton, who does not allow his judgement to enter into the picture, whose desire for food pleasures prevents him from genuinely confronting any questions about whether his eating and drinking is appropriate. (In calling this last type of glutton 'amoral', I do not wish to claim that all gluttonous behaviour is *morally* inappropriate, but 'amoral' seems the best word to describe the attitude of someone with a kind of 'blind spot' who behaves within a certain sphere as though anything goes.)

In the temperate person, then, the desires for food pleasures must not be out of line with his judgements about appropriate food behaviour. But is this enough? Or am I, in calling someone temperate, implying also that I think the judgements themselves are sound? Suppose, for example, I think that some 'foodie' attaches far too much importance to having nice food, but concede that his desires for food pleasures are perfectly in harmony with his outlook. Do I call him temperate? I might be reluctant to call such a person a glutton – 'gluttony' seeming to carry with it a suggestion of inordinate desires – but I would also hesitate to call him temperate, if I thought his whole outlook mistaken in this respect. In other words, to call someone temperate seems not only to attribute to him a harmony between his desires and his judgements, but also to express approval of the judgements themselves.

But is there any way of *establishing* that some judgements in this area are more reasonable than others? Traditionally philosophers have claimed to be able to show that food pleasures are of minor importance. For example, they are portrayed by Mill (2) as *lower* pleasures, because they are shared by animals rather than characteristic only of human beings, and by Plato (3) as *false* pleasures, which are really only relief from pain. To philosophers who see food pleasures only in this negative light, the chief danger is that we will attach too *much* importance to them, and the theoretical possibility of attaching too little (which Aristotle allows) pales into insignificance.

But both these arguments are doubtful. In answer to Mill we can point out that human food pleasures are very much more complex and sophisticated than those of animals. In answer to Plato we can say that the positive pleasures of eating can easily be distinguished from the relief of hunger pangs in that the latter might be achieved (by drugs, say) without eating at all.

If we can dismiss the arguments which purport to show that food pleasures are of low value, it becomes possible to hold a far more positive view of them, as important pleasures of human life which can be undervalued as well as over-valued. But there is still room for plenty of disagreement about their proper place in life,

and the question is made more complex by the facts that food and drink can have great social and symbolic significance and a considerable aesthetic dimension, and that these aspects of food vary from culture to culture. Perhaps in calling someone temperate, and thereby implying that his attitude to food pleasures is sound, I can sensibly mean no more than that the degree of importance he attributes to food falls within what seem like reasonable limits; there are some things, it might be thought, which are *obviously* more important than the pleasures of food. I shall briefly discuss two of these.

The first is health. It is popularly believed that there is ultimately a conflict between the pursuit of food pleasures and the pursuit of health; with luck you can have a certain amount of both, but beyond that point the more you have of one the less you can have of the other. Given this alleged conflict, many people and perhaps most health workers think that maximising health is obviously more important than maximising food pleasures and that it is unreasonable to adopt a really unhealthy diet, however enjoyable it is. (Of course they may do so nevertheless if they are weak gluttons.) But these days there are also signs of a tendency to challenge this assumption, and to speak of the merits of a short life and a merry one: 'If you cut down on drinking, you won't live to be a hundred, it'll just seem like that', and so on. We should ask, however, whether there necessarily is a conflict between food pleasures and health. The assumption that there is rests on the conception of food pleasures as being of particular, traditional types, involving large quantities, a lot of fat and sugar and so on. But 'food pleasures' does not refer to any *particular* kinds of food; it simply means pleasures which are derived from *whatever* kinds of food and drink people happen to like. The real question, then, is an empirical one: whether people can learn to like best the kinds and amounts of food and drink which are healthiest. If they can, they can have a long life *and* a merry one and there is no ultimate conflict between health and food pleasures.

The second thing which might seem to be obviously more important than maximising food pleasures, and indeed than almost anything else, is not causing suffering. I imagine that most people, if they were asked whether it is permissible to cause suffering in order to have very nice (rather than merely nice) food, would say no. But people are often willing to condone animal suffering in order to have the diet they like best. Nor need it be animal suffering which is in question; think of the families which exhaust housewives by insisting on three elaborate cooked meals a day – often, of course, abetted by the housewives themselves. In both these situations, justifications of various sorts may be produced. But if these people would also say that it is more important to avoid causing suffering than to have the nicest possible food, their 'justifications' are really the rationalisations of self-deceiving gluttons. As with health, the conflict can be avoided if people can learn to like best the kinds of food

which do not involve suffering. But the rationalising glutton (and still more the amoral glutton) have no motive to try to change their pleasures.

Before I conclude, I shall consider three features of drugs such as alcohol, nicotine, cannabis etc. which differentiate them from food in ways relevant to temperance. First, the pleasures of drugs are different. Whereas food pleasures are basically pleasures of taste and smell, the special pleasures of drugs are of a quite different kind, which we may call psychological: they change our mood, make us see things differently and so on. It is true that some drugs, such as alcohol and nicotine, are also associated with food-like pleasures of taste and smell; but they are certainly not consumed only or even mainly for these.

Secondly, there is a special criterion of excess. As we saw, in judging excesses in food we take into account such factors as health and beauty, the claims of others, the size of one's purse and so on. These criteria are also relevant to drugs, but there is another important criterion which is relevant only to drugs (and not to all of those): control of behaviour. A person is judged to take too much of a drug if his intake leaves him unable to control his actions adequately, as for example when drunk. What counts as adequate control? Most would say that this depends on what the drugtaker's circumstances will require of him (4). But there is an ideal according to which *any* loss of control is to be deplored; I have no space to explore this idea further.

Thirdly, there is a special intemperate disposition connected with drugs. In discussing gluttony I distinguished the weak, the self-deceiving and the amoral glutton, all of whom fail in various ways to conform to their own judgements of appropriate ways of taking food. There are similar types of drug-takers, though they will not be called gluttons (except possibly those who are exceptionally fussy or extravagant about wine). But in the case of drugs there is also a type who differs from all these: namely, the addict. He does not merely fail to conform to his judgement as to appropriate drug-taking; he is *unable* to conform – though that fact may be unclear to others or even to himself, so he may seem to be weak, self-deceiving or amoral. (Note that the addict's inability is not the same as inability to control one's behaviour while under the influence of the drug. In theory at least, a person can be habitually drunk but perfectly able to choose how much he drinks, or unable to control his drinking but never drunk.)

These remarks on addiction raise a number of questions, of which I shall mention only one: are addicts literally unable to stop themselves, or do they

simply not try hard enough? This question is notoriously difficult to answer, and I shall sidestep it by pointing out that if we call someone an addict we have decided that at least he cannot be regarded as fully responsible for what he does in connection with his addiction. This is indeed the difference between the addict and the weak glutton or drugtaker: the latter are held to be morally responsible for their actions, whereas the former is not (though he might be morally responsible for having become addicted in the first place – another difficult topic).

It will be recalled that in discussing temperance concerning food, I raised the question whether it involved only conformity without a struggle to one's own judgements about proper eating, and suggested that to call somebody temperate is to imply also that the judgements themselves are reasonable. The same point applies also to drugs, but with even more force. As I have already said, there is room for some differences of opinion about the proper limits of intoxication. But nobody who drinks or takes a drug in quantities which court an early death or cause him to maltreat others is to be called temperate, even if he is sincerely and freely living out his own philosophy in doing so. Of course, we would suspect a philosophy which allowed this of being in reality the rationalisation of a self-deceiving drug-taker.

I see temperance as relevant to medicine because it concerns motivation and character in a sphere which is vitally bound up with health. Some would argue that it is not relevant to ethics, on the ground that it concerns the good of the temperate person rather than that of others as such traits as generosity do. This argument rests on a very narrow sense of 'ethics', which can equally well be regarded as concerned with the whole range of questions about how we should live. But in any case its ground is mistaken. As I have tried to show, the dispositions of temperance and intemperance can be closely bound up with the welfare of creatures other than their possessors.

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References

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- (2) Mill J S. In: Warnock M, ed. *Utilitarianism*. Glasgow: Fontana, 1962: 256–262.
- (3) Plato T. *Republic*. Translated by Lee H D P. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955: 358–363.
- (4) See reference (1): 133–134.