

Philosophy Night at St. Stephen's

St. Thomas Aquinas on Sobriety and Drunkenness

January 25th, 2022

Summa Theologica. II-II. Qu. 149: Sobriety in four articles

1. What is the matter of sobriety?
2. Is it a special virtue?
3. Is the use of wine lawful?
4. To whom especially is sobriety becoming?

Article 1. Whether drink is the matter of sobriety?

Objection 1. It would seem that drink is not the matter proper to sobriety. For it is written (Romans 12:3): "Not to be more wise than it behooveth to be wise, but to be wise unto sobriety." Therefore sobriety is also about wisdom, and not only about drink.

Objection 2. Further, concerning the wisdom of God, it is written (Wisdom 8:7) that "she teacheth sobriety [Douay: 'temperance'], and prudence, and justice, and fortitude," where sobriety stands for temperance. Now temperance is not only about drink, but also about meat and sexual matters. Therefore sobriety is not only about drink.

Objection 3. Further, sobriety would seem to take its name from "measure" ['Bria,' a measure, a cup; Cf. Facciolati and Forcellini's Lexicon]. Now we ought to be guided by the measure in all things appertaining to us: for it is written (Titus 2:12): "We should live soberly and justly and godly," where a gloss remarks: "Soberly, in ourselves"; and (1 Timothy 2:9): "Women . . . in decent apparel, adorning themselves with modesty and sobriety." Consequently it would seem that sobriety regards not only the interior man, but also things appertaining to external apparel. Therefore drink is not the matter proper to sobriety.

On the contrary, It is written (Sirach 31:32): "Wine taken with sobriety is equal life to men; if thou drink it moderately, thou shalt be sober."

I answer that, When a virtue is denominated from some condition common to the virtues, the matter specially belonging to it is that in which it is most difficult and most commendable to satisfy that condition of virtue: thus fortitude is about dangers of death, and temperance about pleasures of touch. Now sobriety takes its name from "measure," for a man is said to be sober because he observes the "bria," i.e. the measure. Wherefore sobriety lays a special claim to that matter wherein the observance of the measure is most deserving of praise. Such matter is the drinking of intoxicants, because

the measured use thereof is most profitable, while immoderate excess therein is most harmful, since it hinders the use of reason even more than excessive eating. Hence it is written (Sirach 31:37-38): "Sober drinking is health to soul and body; wine drunken with excess raiseth quarrels, and wrath and many ruins." For this reason sobriety is especially concerned with drink, not any kind of drink, but that which by reason of its volatility is liable to disturb the brain, such as wine and all intoxicants. Nevertheless, sobriety may be employed in a general sense so as to apply to any matter, as stated above (II-II:123:2; II-II:141:2) with regard to fortitude and temperance.

Reply to Objection 1. Just as the material wine intoxicates a man as to his body, so too, speaking figuratively, the consideration of wisdom is said to be an inebriating draught, because it allures the mind by its delight, according to Psalm 22:5, "My chalice which inebriateth me, how goodly is it!" Hence sobriety is applied by a kind of metaphor in speaking of the contemplation of wisdom.

Reply to Objection 2. All the things that belong properly to temperance are necessary to the present life, and their excess is harmful. Wherefore it behooves one to apply a measure in all such things. This is the business of sobriety: and for this reason sobriety is used to designate temperance. Yet slight excess is more harmful in drink than in other things, wherefore sobriety is especially concerned with drink.

Reply to Objection 3. Although a measure is needful in all things, sobriety is not properly employed in connection with all things, but only in those wherein there is most need for a measure.

Article 2. Whether sobriety is by itself a special virtue?

Objection 1. It would seem that sobriety is not by itself a special virtue. For abstinence is concerned with both meat and drink. Now there is no special virtue about meat. Therefore neither is sobriety, which is about drink, a special virtue.

Objection 2. Further, abstinence and gluttony are about pleasures of touch as sensitive to food. Now meat and drink combine together to make food, since an animal needs a combination of wet and dry nourishment. Therefore sobriety, which is about drink, is not a special virtue.

Objection 3. Further, just as in things pertaining to nourishment, drink is distinguished from meat, so are there various kinds of meats and of drinks. Therefore if sobriety is by itself a special virtue, seemingly there will be a special virtue corresponding to each different kind of meat or drink, which is unreasonable. Therefore it would seem that sobriety is not a special virtue.

On the contrary, Macrobius [In Somno Scip. i, 8] reckons sobriety to be a special part of temperance.

I answer that, As stated above (II-II:146:2), it belongs to moral virtue to safeguard the good of reason against those things which may hinder it. Hence wherever we find a special hindrance to reason, there must needs be a special virtue to remove it. Now intoxicating drink is a special kind of hindrance to the use of reason, inasmuch as it disturbs the brain by its fumes. Wherefore in order to remove this hindrance to reason a special virtue, which is sobriety, is requisite.

Reply to Objection 1. Meat and drink are alike capable of hindering the good of reason, by embroiling the reason with immoderate pleasure: and in this respect abstinence is about both meat and drink alike. But intoxicating drink is a special kind of hindrance, as stated above, wherefore it requires a special virtue.

Reply to Objection 2. The virtue of abstinence is about meat and drink, considered, not as food but as a hindrance to reason. Hence it does not follow that special kinds of virtue correspond to different kinds of food.

Reply to Objection 3. In all intoxicating drinks there is one kind of hindrance to the use of reason: so that the difference of drinks bears an accidental relation to virtue. Hence this difference does not call for a difference of virtue. The same applies to the difference of meats.

Article 3. Whether the use of wine is altogether unlawful?

Objection 1. It would seem that the use of wine is altogether unlawful. For without wisdom, a man cannot be in the state of salvation: since it is written (Wisdom 7:28): "God loveth none but him that dwelleth with wisdom," and further on (Wisdom 9:19): "By wisdom they were healed, whosoever have pleased Thee, O Lord, from the beginning." Now the use of wine is a hindrance to wisdom, for it is written (Ecclesiastes 2:3): "I thought in my heart to withdraw my flesh from wine, that I might turn my mind to wisdom." Therefore wine-drinking is altogether unlawful.

Objection 2. Further, the Apostle says (Romans 14:21): "It is good not to eat flesh, and not to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother is offended or scandalized, or made weak." Now it is sinful to forsake the good of virtue, as likewise to scandalize one's brethren. Therefore it is unlawful to make use of wine.

Objection 3. Further, Jerome says [Contra Jovin. i] that "after the deluge wine and flesh were sanctioned: but Christ came in the last of the ages and brought back the end into line with the beginning." Therefore it seems unlawful to use wine under the Christian law.

On the contrary, The Apostle says (1 Timothy 5:23): "Do not still drink water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake, and thy frequent infirmities"; and it is written (Sirach 31:36): "Wine drunken with moderation is the joy of the soul and the heart."

I answer that, No meat or drink, considered in itself, is unlawful, according to Matthew 15:11, "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man." Wherefore it is not unlawful to drink wine as such. Yet it may become unlawful accidentally. This is sometimes owing to a circumstance on the part of the drinker, either because he is easily the worse for taking wine, or because he is bound by a vow not to drink wine: sometimes it results from the mode of drinking, because to wit he exceeds the measure in drinking: and sometimes it is on account of others who would be scandalized thereby.

Reply to Objection 1. A man may have wisdom in two ways. First, in a general way, according as it is sufficient for salvation: and in this way it is required, in order to have wisdom, not that a man abstain altogether from wine, but that he abstain from its immoderate use. Secondly, a man may have wisdom in some degree of perfection: and in this way, in order to receive wisdom perfectly, it is requisite for certain persons that they abstain altogether from wine, and this depends on circumstances of certain persons and places.

Reply to Objection 2. The Apostle does not declare simply that it is good to abstain from wine, but that it is good in the case where this would give scandal to certain people.

Reply to Objection 3. Christ withdraws us from some things as being altogether unlawful, and from others as being obstacles to perfection. It is in the latter way that he withdraws some from the use of wine, that they may aim at perfection, even as from riches and the like.

Article 4. Whether sobriety is more requisite in persons of greater standing?

Objection 1. It would seem that sobriety is more requisite in persons of greater standing. For old age gives a man a certain standing; wherefore honor and reverence are due to the old, according to Leviticus 19:32, "Rise up before the hoary head, and honor the person of the aged man." Now the Apostle declares that old men especially should be exhorted to sobriety, according to Titus 2:2, "That the aged man be sober." Therefore sobriety is most requisite in persons of standing.

Objection 2. Further, a bishop has the highest degree in the Church: and the Apostle commands him to be sober, according to 1 Timothy 3:2, "It behooveth . . . a bishop to be blameless, the husband of one wife, sober, prudent," etc. Therefore sobriety is chiefly required in persons of high standing.

Objection 3. Further, sobriety denotes abstinence from wine. Now wine is forbidden to kings, who hold the highest place in human affairs: while it is allowed to those who are in a state of affliction, according to Proverbs 31:4, "Give not wine to kings," and further on (Proverbs 31:6), "Give strong drink to them that are sad, and wine to them that are grieved in mind." Therefore sobriety is more requisite in persons of standing.

On the contrary, The Apostle says (1 Timothy 3:11): "The women in like manner, chaste . . . sober," etc., and (Titus 2:6) "Young men in like manner exhort that they be sober."

I answer that, Virtue includes relationship to two things, to the contrary vices which it removes, and to the end to which it leads. Accordingly a particular virtue is more requisite in certain persons for two reasons. First, because they are more prone to the concupiscences which need to be restrained by virtue, and to the vices which are removed by virtue. On this respect, sobriety is most requisite in the young and in women, because concupiscence of pleasure thrives in the young on account of the heat of youth, while in women there is not sufficient strength of mind to resist concupiscence. Hence, according to Valerius Maximus [Dict. Fact. Memor. ii, 1 among the ancient Romans women drank no wine. Secondly, sobriety is more requisite in certain persons, as being more necessary for the operations proper to them. Now immoderate use of wine is a notable obstacle to the use of reason: wherefore sobriety is specially prescribed to the old, in whom reason should be vigorous in instructing others: to bishops and all ministers of the Church, who should fulfil their spiritual duties with a devout mind; and to kings, who should rule their subjects with wisdom.

This suffices for the Replies to the Objections.

Summa Theologica. II-II. Qu. 150: Drunkenness in four articles

1. Is drunkenness a sin?
2. Is it a mortal sin?
3. Is it the most grievous sin?
4. Does it excuse from sin?

Article 1. Whether drunkenness is a sin?

Objection 1. It would seem that drunkenness is not a sin. For every sin has a corresponding contrary sin, thus timidity is opposed to daring, and presumption to pusillanimity. But no sin is opposed to drunkenness. Therefore drunkenness is not a sin.

Objection 2. Further, every sin is voluntary [Augustine, De Vera Relig. xiv]. But no man wishes to be drunk, since no man wishes to be deprived of the use of reason. Therefore drunkenness is not a sin.

Objection 3. Further, whoever causes another to sin, sins himself. Therefore, if drunkenness were a sin, it would follow that it is a sin to ask a man to drink that which makes him drunk, which would seem very hard.

Objection 4. Further, every sin calls for correction. But correction is not applied to drunkards: for Gregory [Cf. Canon Denique, dist. 4 where Gratian refers to a letter of St. Gregory to St. Augustine of Canterbury] says that "we must forbear with their ways, lest they become worse if they be compelled to give up the habit." Therefore drunkenness is not a sin.

On the contrary, The Apostle says (Romans 13:13): "Not in rioting and drunkenness."

I answer that, Drunkenness may be understood in two ways. First, it may signify the defect itself of a man resulting from his drinking much wine, the consequence being that he loses the use of reason. On this sense drunkenness denotes not a sin, but a penal defect resulting from a fault. Secondly, drunkenness may denote the act by which a man incurs this defect. This act may cause drunkenness in two ways. On one way, through the wine being too strong, without the drinker being cognizant of this: and in this way too, drunkenness may occur without sin, especially if it is not through his negligence, and thus we believe that Noah was made drunk as related in Genesis 9. On another way drunkenness may result from inordinate concupiscence and use of wine: in this way it is accounted a sin, and is comprised under gluttony as a species under its genus. For gluttony is divided into "surfeiting [Douay:,'rioting'] and drunkenness," which are forbidden by the Apostle (Romans 13:13).

Reply to Objection 1. As the Philosopher says (Ethic. iii, 11), insensibility which is opposed to temperance "is not very common," so that like its species which are opposed to the species of intemperance it has no name. Hence the vice opposed to drunkenness is unnamed; and yet if a man were knowingly to abstain from wine to the extent of molesting nature grievously, he would not be free from sin.

Reply to Objection 2. This objection regards the resulting defect which is involuntary: whereas immoderate use of wine is voluntary, and it is in this that the sin consists.

Reply to Objection 3. Even as he that is drunk is excused if he knows not the strength of the wine, so too is he that invites another to drink excused from sin, if he be unaware that the drinker is the kind of person to be made drunk by the drink offered. But if ignorance be lacking neither is excused from sin.

Reply to Objection 4. Sometimes the correction of a sinner is to be foregone, as stated above (II-II:33:6). Hence Augustine says in a letter (Ad Aurel. Episc. Ep. xxii), "Meseems, such things are cured not by bitterness, severity, harshness, but by teaching rather than commanding, by advice rather than threats. Such is the course to be followed with the majority of sinners: few are they whose sins should be treated with severity."

Article 2. Whether drunkenness is a mortal sin?

Objection 1. It would seem that drunkenness is not a mortal sin. For Augustine says in a sermon on Purgatory [Serm. civ in the Appendix to St. Augustine's works] that

"drunkenness if indulged in assiduously, is a mortal sin." Now assiduity denotes a circumstance which does not change the species of a sin; so that it cannot aggravate a sin infinitely, and make a mortal sin of a venial sin, as shown above (I-II:88:5). Therefore if drunkenness is not a mortal sin for some other reason, neither is it for this.

Objection 2. Further, Augustine says [Serm. civ in the Appendix to St. Augustine's works]: "Whenever a man takes more meat and drink than is necessary, he should know that this is one of the lesser sins." Now the lesser sins are called venial. Therefore drunkenness, which is caused by immoderate drink, is a venial sin.

Objection 3. Further, no mortal sin should be committed on the score of medicine. Now some drink too much at the advice of the physician, that they may be purged by vomiting; and from this excessive drink drunkenness ensues. Therefore drunkenness is not a mortal sin.

On the contrary, We read in the Canons of the Apostles (Can. xli, xlii): "A bishop, priest or deacon who is given to drunkenness or gambling, or incites others thereto, must either cease or be deposed; a subdeacon, reader or precentor who does these things must either give them up or be excommunicated; the same applies to the laity." Now such punishments are not inflicted save for mortal sins. Therefore drunkenness is a mortal sin.

I answer that, The sin of drunkenness, as stated in the foregoing Article, consists in the immoderate use and concupiscence of wine. Now this may happen to a man in three ways. First, so that he knows not the drink to be immoderate and intoxicating: and then drunkenness may be without sin, as stated above (Article 1). Secondly, so that he perceives the drink to be immoderate, but without knowing it to be intoxicating, and then drunkenness may involve a venial sin. Thirdly, it may happen that a man is well aware that the drink is immoderate and intoxicating, and yet he would rather be drunk than abstain from drink. Such a man is a drunkard properly speaking, because morals take their species not from things that occur accidentally and beside the intention, but from that which is directly intended. On this way drunkenness is a mortal sin, because then a man willingly and knowingly deprives himself of the use of reason, whereby he performs virtuous deeds and avoids sin, and thus he sins mortally by running the risk of falling into sin. For Ambrose says (De Patriarch. [De Abraham i.]): "We learn that we should shun drunkenness, which prevents us from avoiding grievous sins. For the things we avoid when sober, we unknowingly commit through drunkenness." Therefore drunkenness, properly speaking, is a mortal sin.

Reply to Objection 1. Assiduity makes drunkenness a mortal sin, not on account of the mere repetition of the act, but because it is impossible for a man to become drunk assiduously, without exposing himself to drunkenness knowingly and willingly, since he has many times experienced the strength of wine and his own liability to drunkenness.

Reply to Objection 2. To take more meat or drink than is necessary belongs to the vice of gluttony, which is not always a mortal sin: but knowingly to take too much drink to the

point of being drunk, is a mortal sin. Hence Augustine says (Confess. x, 31): "Drunkenness is far from me: Thou wilt have mercy, that it come not near me. But full feeding sometimes hath crept upon Thy servant."

Reply to Objection 3. As stated above (II-II:141:6), meat and drink should be moderate in accordance with the demands of the body's health. Wherefore, just as it happens sometimes that the meat and drink which are moderate for a healthy man are immoderate for a sick man, so too it may happen conversely, that what is excessive for a healthy man is moderate for one that is ailing. On this way when a man eats or drinks much at the physician's advice in order to provoke vomiting, he is not to be deemed to have taken excessive meat or drink. There is, however, no need for intoxicating drink in order to procure vomiting, since this is caused by drinking lukewarm water: wherefore this is no sufficient cause for excusing a man from drunkenness.

Article 3. Whether drunkenness is the gravest of sins?

Objection 1. It would seem that drunkenness is the gravest of sins. For Chrysostom says (Hom. lviii in Matth.) that "nothing gains the devil's favor so much as drunkenness and lust, the mother of all the vices." And it is written in the Decretals (Dist. xxxv, can. Ante omnia): "Drunkenness, more than anything else, is to be avoided by the clergy, for it foments and fosters all the vices."

Objection 2. Further, from the very fact that a thing excludes the good of reason, it is a sin. Now this is especially the effect of drunkenness. Therefore drunkenness is the greatest of sins.

Objection 3. Further, the gravity of a sin is shown by the gravity of its punishment. Now seemingly drunkenness is punished most severely; for Ambrose says [De Elia et de Jejuniis v] that "there would be no slavery, were there no drunkards." Therefore drunkenness is the greatest of sins.

On the contrary, According to Gregory (Moral. xxxiii, 12), spiritual vices are greater than carnal vices. Now drunkenness is one of the carnal vices. Therefore it is not the greatest of sins.

I answer that, A thing is said to be evil because it removes a good. Wherefore the greater the good removed by an evil, the graver the evil. Now it is evident that a Divine good is greater than a human good. Wherefore the sins that are directly against God are graver than the sin of drunkenness, which is directly opposed to the good of human reason.

Reply to Objection 1. Man is most prone to sins of intemperance, because such like concupiscences and pleasures are connatural to us, and for this reason these sins are said to find greatest favor with the devil, not for being graver than other sins, but because they occur more frequently among men.

Reply to Objection 2. The good of reason is hindered in two ways: in one way by that which is contrary to reason, in another by that which takes away the use of reason. Now that which is contrary to reason has more the character of an evil, than that which takes away the use of reason for a time, since the use of reason, which is taken away by drunkenness, may be either good or evil, whereas the goods of virtue, which are taken away by things that are contrary to reason, are always good.

Reply to Objection 3. Drunkenness was the occasional cause of slavery, in so far as Cham brought the curse of slavery on to his descendants, for having laughed at his father when the latter was made drunk. But slavery was not the direct punishment of drunkenness.

Article 4. Whether drunkenness excuses from sin?

Objection 1. It would seem that drunkenness does not excuse from sin. For the Philosopher says (Ethic. iii, 5) that "the drunkard deserves double punishment." Therefore drunkenness aggravates a sin instead of excusing from it.

Objection 2. Further, one sin does not excuse another, but increases it. Now drunkenness is a sin. Therefore it is not an excuse for sin.

Objection 3. Further, the Philosopher says (Ethic. vii, 3) that just as man's reason is tied by drunkenness, so is it by concupiscence. But concupiscence is not an excuse for sin: neither therefore is drunkenness.

On the contrary, According to Augustine (Contra Faust. xxii, 43), Lot was to be excused from incest on account of drunkenness.

I answer that, Two things are to be observed in drunkenness, as stated above (Article 1), namely the resulting defect and the preceding act. on the part of the resulting defect whereby the use of reason is fettered, drunkenness may be an excuse for sin, in so far as it causes an act to be involuntary through ignorance. But on the part of the preceding act, a distinction would seem necessary; because, if the drunkenness that results from that act be without sin, the subsequent sin is entirely excused from fault, as perhaps in the case of Lot. If, however, the preceding act was sinful, the person is not altogether excused from the subsequent sin, because the latter is rendered voluntary through the voluntariness of the preceding act, inasmuch as it was through doing something unlawful that he fell into the subsequent sin. Nevertheless, the resulting sin is diminished, even as the character of voluntariness is diminished. Wherefore Augustine says (Contra Faust. xxii, 44) that "Lot's guilt is to be measured, not by the incest, but by his drunkenness."

Reply to Objection 1. The Philosopher does not say that the drunkard deserves more severe punishment, but that he deserves double punishment for his twofold sin. Or we may reply that he is speaking in view of the law of a certain Pittacus, who, as stated in

Polit. ii, 9, ordered "those guilty of assault while drunk to be more severely punished than if they had been sober, because they do wrong in more ways than one." On this, as Aristotle observes (Polit. ii, 9), "he seems to have considered the advantage," namely of the prevention of wrong, "rather than the leniency which one should have for drunkards," seeing that they are not in possession of their faculties.

Reply to Objection 2. Drunkenness may be an excuse for sin, not in the point of its being itself a sin, but in the point of the defect that results from it, as stated above.

Reply to Objection 3. Concupiscence does not altogether fetter the reason, as drunkenness does, unless perchance it be so vehement as to make a man insane. Yet the passion of concupiscence diminishes sin, because it is less grievous to sin through weakness than through malice.