
COMMENTARY - THE VIRTUES TO BE REDISCOVERED AND RE-LIVED

TEMPERANCE (BEYOND THE FAMINE)

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Temperance is a word that is fading out from our civil vocabulary. It disappeared long ago from the economic vocabulary in order to leave space for its opposite. We ended up using it for pencils, the climate, musical scales or Bach's 'clavicemballo' (clavier) instead. These are also important things, but not the ones that are normally placed at the heart of our civil lives or social pact.

Along with temperance the entire lexicon of the ethics of the virtues is fading away from the grammar of communal life, and by now the political, civil and economic consequences of this eclipse are sadly noticed by all.

Our civilisation (at least the western one) risks **not understanding the message of good life contained in the ethics of the virtues any more**. There are many reasons for this, but two of them are especially important.

The first one is **the disappearance of the category of the education of character** starting from the education of our children. All that is natural and spontaneous becomes immediately good without any need to correct or give orientation for the forms of behaviour and inclinations that are spontaneous but not good. I know some parents who in the name of some unspecified Neo-Rousseauian pedagogical theories let their children call them Luisa and Marco instead of mum and dad. "*It comes naturally*", they argue seeing my perplexity "*why should we force them to do otherwise?!*" **The ethics of virtue, however, lives off of a dynamic tension between nature** (we are all capable of virtue) **and culture** (but some practice, discipline and willingness are necessary to become what potentially we already are). For this reason, the greatest - and often unconscious - cultivators of the ethic of the virtues are the real athletes and real scientists. The second reason is that we are no longer able to recognize that there is value in the experience of the limits, too. And if you are not able to see the positivity of the limit it is impossible to understand and appreciate the virtues, especially that of temperance which consists in valuing the limit as the hedge on Leopardi's hill of The Infinite (a famous poem by Giacomo Leopardi, Italian poet, 1798-1837), which excludes the horizon but opens up the «*endless spaces beyond the hedge*». Perhaps writing on clay tablets in Mesopotamia started because a messenger of the Lord of Uruk could not speak.

We don't even speak of temperance any more, but the bad fruits of the famine of it are many, very many: from the destruction of the environment to the lifestyles of the new rich and the powerful; from how we speak and write emails to the family tragedies and the endless misery too often caused by men and women who are no longer educated for self-control and control of their passions, that is, temperance.

Temperance was also a great economic virtue of the past generations. It served to orientate consumption and above all it **generated the savings that enabled economic development** after World War II. A virtue that also **formed the lives of entrepreneurs** (not the profit makers, whom I will never tire to distinguish from the entrepreneurs, nor to identify their proliferation as the first disease of every decadent society), who, in fact, despite knowing and enjoying abundance, educated their children and themselves for the good use of things and a certain sobriety that would not humiliate the poor. The virtue of temperance brings me to not consume a portion of my income today to save it for myself and my family tomorrow, and to allow my fellow citizens to use that wealth for other investments during my abstinence. It is significant that the classical economic theory would use the same word "*abstinence*" to justify **savings**, and for *fasting* and *chastity*, too, to remind us that these three phenomena were all the children of **Madonna Temperance**.

Our economic culture that relies on the highest consumption possible here and now, better if through debt, **however, needs to feed on the vice of intemperance** (a web of avarice and greed) **to survive**. The nature of the virtue of temperance is best understood if we think that it is developed in a world characterized by an absolute scarcity of resources. It is better not to abuse goods, since what I consume as superfluous is what the other is lacking as needed. All the teaching of the Church Fathers on the use of goods and on poverty should be read and understood in this context of limited resources, and economic relations as "*zero-sum games*". Also to be included in this horizon of shortages is the farmers' ethics pivoting on the virtue of temperance, including its typical flowering which was the movement of the rural banks, especially in North-East Italy (it is certainly not a coincidence that the region of Trentino Alto Adige today has the lowest rate of population suffering from severe lack of temperance called gambling!).

In the twentieth century, with the second industrial revolution **we thought that the age of scarcity was over and we landed in the Eden of the infinite reproducibility of goods**. And people began to look at the world as a place of potentially unlimited resources. **Hence the decline of temperance as a virtue**. Too bad that this phase of boundlessness lasted little more than a heartbeat because first the environment, then energy and water, and hence the deterioration of civilian, relational and spiritual capital have gradually shown us other limits that are no less stringent and severe than those of the age of the scarcity of private goods and abundance of collective capital. **In fact, today the new limits are primarily social and global limits, and because of this the virtue of temperance should be rediscovered immediately** and it should become the new economic and social virtue.

The internalization of the value of the limit is by now an undelayable step, and only a new ethics of virtue can do it because every internalization requires knowing how to assign an intrinsic value to things above the utilitarian cost-benefit calculation that is dominating every aspect of our culture now. But while yesterday there was a clear relationship between my temperance and my personal well-being and our common good, today, in the age of complexity, this link is blurred. The use of air conditioning in my house is no longer associated immediately to the higher temperature in our cities (and the subsequent further increase of the use of air conditioning, spiralling towards gloomy future scenarios). **Economic rationality alone does not help in this awareness** (in fact, it makes us sink even more) because we would need logical records of virtue leading us to actions because of having internalized its intrinsic value. Therefore if we do not de-marketize our society, that is if we do not free ourselves from the logic of prices and incentives occupying and colonising important areas of civil life today, we will understand less and less the value of sobriety, abstinence, self-control and our children will understand it even less.

Finally, **without temperance there is no sharing of goods** and there is no joy of communion. If we do not educate ourselves continually to demarcate the boundaries of our ego, all we will share with others will be the crumbs of unsound food. **But this way we are not going to experience true brotherhood**, which is the result of costly choices of the person capable to reducing his regions of "mine" to build those of "ours", and those of all.

Translated by Eszter Kató