

# Restoring Virtue, Reclaiming Freedom: A Thomistic Approach to Addiction Recovery

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**ABSTRACT:** Contemporary counseling for people battling addiction confronts a significant challenge due to the widespread misconceptions regarding morality, rights, and liberties that pervade modern society. This lack of knowledge frequently stems from an inadequate grasp of human psychology. Despite the passage of time, philosophers from ancient Greece and Rome to present-day Thomists have consistently upheld the unity of the human body and mind, with their epistemological frameworks solidly grounded in empirical evidence. For a successful Christian approach to counseling addiction, a correct understanding of temperance is indispensable.

**KEYWORDS:** virtues, addiction, Thomas Aquinas, Christian counseling, ancient philosophy, Thomism

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## 1. Introduction

Addiction recovery is widely acknowledged to benefit from the guidance of professional counselors, particularly in cases involving severe chemical dependencies. However, when we consider addictions of a different nature, such as those related to eating, drinking, or sex, the path to recovery may not always be as straightforward. In these instances, individuals may find themselves grappling with pleasures that compromise their ability to make sound judgments and exercise self-control.

In such complex situations, we propose that addicts can often chart their own course to recovery through a multidisciplinary approach that combines the insights of philosophy and theology. Philosophy (Rotaru 2005a, 25-38), dating back to ancient times, was originally conceived as a practical tool for personal improvement and ethical living. While it has evolved into a more abstract and academic discipline in recent centuries, its core principles remain rooted in the pursuit of wisdom and virtue. Similarly, theology offers valuable insights into anthropology (Rotaru 2005b, 35-316) and the quest for spiritual fulfillment under the influence of divine grace. By integrating theological approaches with philosophical wisdom, individuals

grappling with addiction can access a rich tapestry of insights and resources to support their journey towards recovery.

## 2. “The roaming unrest of the spirit”

From a Christian perspective, humans are beings that need to attain the furthest potentialities of their nature. Art, science, universities, everywhere there are people, they should feel focused, enthused, and energetic in their quest for their own moral and spiritual progress (Rotaru 2023, 62-79). Both their affections and reason should be involved in this, but we know that this is not the case. In fact, lust is strongly affecting the reason (Kreeft 2014a). Instead of a state of enthusiasm, they end up in a muddle of addictions, many of them unidentified, that are limiting their development and potentialities. Aquinas is emphasizing the fact that it is *acedia*, “the roaming unrest of the spirit”, that makes people unwilling to accept their great destiny and nobility prepared for them by their Heavenly Father, a disorder that is turning them to the insatiability of different vices (Pieper 1965, 201). We will argue that a correct understanding of the cardinal virtues rooted in the Thomistic perspective could give a starting point for those who want to become free of addictions.

There is a strong opinion that in the field of virtues there is no possibility for new ideas, because the brightest thinkers over the centuries have contributed heavily to it. It is important, though, for the new generations, to correctly understand the concept of virtues, and the relationship between virtues and reason and truth, as man's thoughts and actions will be molded and guided by the perfection of reason in the pursuit of truth (Hadot 1995, 12). But there seems to be no truth without prudence, similarly as there is no justice, fortitude, or temperance without it. If temperance seems to be the virtue that the addicts would need, we will see that it is not possible to attain it without the joint effort of the other ones. For instance, temperance needs prudence for the right transformation of the knowledge of truth into valid decisions, through the three steps process of deliberation, judgment, and decision (Pieper 1965, 162).

Natural desires that cause the general *intemperantia* of modern-day society seem to be weaker than they manifest. The additional strength is given by the large availability of the devices invading society from multiple directions: from drugs, shops, accessories, to applications, and real-life opportunities (Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat - Proverbs 23:20), in a context of lax self-control and public opinion. *Intemperantia* is obviously an expression of weakness, and we can notice it at transformative leaders with great impact on society. These leaders exhibit a very poor classical (in fact, foundational) education, and this highly impacts their views and influence. Strangely enough, these essential powers (namely the delight in food and drink and sexual pleasure) that contribute to self-preservation, self-assertion and self-fulfillment are

manipulated and channeled in a way that contribute together to the self-destruction of the moral person (Pieper 1965, 149), when they degenerate into selfishness (Pieper 1965, 150). In other words, although humans are naturally inclined towards desire, it is the artificial stimuli that society has created that lead to the most sinfulness. These stimuli, fuelled by a combination of uncontrolled desire and self-serving ambition, have created a culture of excess and indulgence that has corrupted the natural expression of sexuality (Pieper 1965, 173). The addict, because of his hidden immoderate pleasure-seeking, is in a contemptible situation, more than the one who sins openly (Pieper 1965, 196).

But *intemperantia* seems more than an unconsciously self-indicted suffering. According to St. Thomas, the sin of the flesh is, in fact, both a punishment and cure from God for the sin of pride, which seems to be much worse than the fleshly sins. In other words, it is not the flesh, but the spirit that lies as the main cause of the addiction. It is suffering that will represent another facet of the remedy prepared by God for the ones asking for spiritual health. To effectively conquer the allure of worldly pleasures, it is important to confront the underlying spiritual transgressions within us that fuel them.

It is very clear, according to philosophies rooted in Christianity, that becoming free from addiction, similarly as becoming free from the sinful way of life, is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, as temperance is one of the fruits of the Spirit listed by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:22-23. The same Apostle states that “I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (Romans 7:19). Addressing addiction requires a collaborative effort of the Holy Spirit and individuals, who will make them understand the theory behind living correctly in the world, so in opposition to what has been presented them ignorantly and wrongly. As Pieper asserts: “not unjustly has it been said of psychotherapy unrelated to either religion or metaphysics that it tends to produce an anxiously fostered middle-class tranquillity, poisoned by its triteness. This failure is no accident, but rather an inevitable accident” (Pieper 1965, 150). He is stating the same idea in an other place: “what is required is that the dogmatic truth of God the Creator and His works be wholly appropriated in humbly confident assent, and that this truth obtain the radiant and vivifying power which is the exclusive property of genuine vitality” (Pieper 1965, 172).

The knowledge of the virtue of temperance is important in freeing the human person gradually away from addiction, as it has been observed that “ethics without virtue is illusion” (Kreeft 1992, 21). Addiction is a result of the mind not being controlled anymore by the reason, but being afflicted by *perturbationes animi*, which originate in *intemperantia* (Frank 1968, 233). The Latins were so drastic that they believed that *cupido* and *libido* lead to psychological pathologies and that love of women (*mulierositas*) was of the same category as love of money (*avaritia*) (Frank 1968, 234).

This research relies heavily on the pragmatic character of Pieper, Kreft and Hadot's thinking. The latter is strongly advocating the need for a practical perspective of studying philosophy, while the first two, with their thinking rooted in Thomism, show the mechanics of the pursuit of virtuous living, for a better understanding of human behavior. Our research is just a clear example of the fact that, at the end of the day, all theory and all philosophy find its practical utility even in an endeavour as difficult as ours. In other words, philosophy (and theology, or metaphysics, in the language from above) should be introduced as useful tools for the betterment of mankind, and as anti-addiction tools.

### 3. The wider context of *intemperantia*

Addiction is opposite to temperance and moderation. The latter belong both to the fourth cardinal virtue, so they are not to be achieved lightly. There is a long road from the state of addiction to that of virtue, and the person capable to complete it proves himself as strong as the addiction, or the *intemperantia* he fought against. According to Pieper, "In St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians (12: 24) it is written: *Deus temperavit corpus*. "Thus, God has established a harmony in the body, giving special honor to that which needed it most. There was to be no want of unity in the body; all the different parts of it were to make each other's welfare their common care." The primary and essential meaning of *temperare*, therefore, is this: to dispose various parts into one unified and ordered whole" (Pieper 1965, 150). In other words, the road to temperance is not through negative actions, but living according to order, or reason. One important element for its success is the right knowledge that would reveal the dis-order that is in the addict's life. Reason will reorder the building blocks of knowledge in the subconscious to the extent that there will be a strong tension between the intemperance side of the addict, and the new personality, strengthened day by day through the right spiritual practices. The role of *temperantia* is the achievement of man's inner order (Pieper 1965, 147), while the destruction of this inner order by the total weakening of the powers that sustain self-preservation is called intemperance (Pieper 1965, 148). The re-ordering doesn't mean abstinence, and rejection of pleasure, because, in Thomist view, this would be considered a *vitium* (a moral defect), because heresy is always closely related to exaggerated ascetism (Pieper 1965, 154).

This living according to reason is the experience that the philosophers had from antiquity, whatever school they belonged to. It is important to remind as often as possible that at the beginning, philosophy was a practical school trying to improve those attending the master's speeches. Before Christianity, philosophy was mainly a way of making people better, according to what they sensed to be the Logos (Rotaru 2005c, 295-324). In this respect, it was possible to be used against the vices of their times for the improvement of the addicts.

The Greek Orthodox tradition, as a heir of the Greek ancient philosophy, has a great deal to say about *intemperantia*. According to Stăniloae (Stăniloae 2019, 87), the untrained human person is attracted by pleasure, and at the same time he is fleeing from pain. Freedom is possible through a joint effort of the spiritual (which in Greek is called *askesis*) and mystical exercises. The same is true from the Western perspective: “chastity, continence, humility, gentleness, mildness, *studiositas*, are modes of realization of the discipline of temperance” (Pieper 1965,151).

Another dimension to the relationship between virtues and freedom from addiction emerges, namely, the difference between *temperantia* and *continentia* in the realm of chastity. While the former expresses total control over the will and urge, the latter is more about the control of the conscious will. It is only in the situation of *temperantia* that both the will and urge are under the control of the rational order (Pieper 1965,163). Another relevant term in this study of virtues from a Thomist perspective is that of weakness, *infirmetas*, when somebody sins as a result of being uncontrolled.

Hope for healing or transformation from *intemperantia* from solely reason should not be expected. Rather, a combination of knowledge with the natural affects should be considered. In other words, we see a higher chance of success when we build on the foundation of correct information, and influencing the invisible side of personality, the one enchained. The correct knowledge should give a clear understanding of what is wrong in the argumentation of the one trying to escape from addiction. This type of knowledge has been available for centuries, and contemporary additions should be carefully considered.

*Intemperantia* is also strikingly harmful when the person is not seeing things to get information out of them but is enjoying the process of seeing. The same is true about ‘the concupiscence of the palate’, when tasting food is more important than the eating itself (Pieper 1965,200). This aspect of *intemperantia* is called by the Thomists *curiositas*, because it is a sort of inordinate knowledge that is acquired for the wrong purpose.

#### **4. The effects of *temperantia***

It has been observed that lust takes away clarity and reason in the mind, as well as restrict freedom in the will. And these two powers, mind and will, are the two most precious powers of the soul, and their objects—truth and goodness—are the only two things we absolutely and eternally need. That is why lust is no casual and relatively harmless sin and is drawing people to addictions (Kreeft 2014a).

It is the opposite of *intemperantia* that will have the liberating effect from these addictions. It is well-known from antiquity that *vexatio dat intellectum*, difficulties produce the true knowledge of reality, as opposed to the one that is a result of the above-mentioned *curiositas*. It is the Divine intervention that makes people become sober from their metaphorical drunkenness, that could include the literal

drunkenness as well, but also any other addictions. The addict who wants to get out of his bondage must first know his true position in the Divine plan, he also must know the goals that were set for his life and strive to attain them with Divine grace. This is a time-consuming goal, because he will have to be blessed with the right attitude of keeping away from all the dangerous paths that could appear in his attempt for liberation. As discussed above, the artificial triggers are numerous, and they could allure him in another wrong path. *Temperantia* can be realized only when all these paths, leading to wrong, earthly, telluric goals, become meaningless in comparison with the Divine sonship he was prepared for. In other words, it is a total rejection of any worldly, seemingly unharmed benefit (leadership in spiritual congregations, wealth, charisma, prestige etc.) and aiming at the wisdom of knowing what is really required of him. Pascal, cited by Kreeft, concludes his *Pensee* #347 in the same spirit: "Let us then strive to think well; that is the basic principle of morality" (Kreeft 2014b). By cultivating a deeper understanding of Heavenly wisdom, the path to holiness becomes less challenging and the choice of good becomes effortless. However, reaching this state of effortless goodness requires a lifetime of dedicated effort (Kreeft 2014c).

This research does not advocate a passive attitude by waiting for God to make the necessary changes, or worse, to believe that He will do them instantly at baptism. On the contrary, in the sanctification process of a Christian addict, he first needs to realize that he is not sinning because of deliberate lack of obedience to God, but because of his weakness, ignorance and blindness. Part of his guilt is shared with his fellow church members and leaders, who were not able to give an appropriate teaching and did not warn him. Every time when defeated, he will have to understand that he needs a stronger grace from God, which would help him to become free. For Kreeft, "one of the most serious faults in the evangelical and fundamentalist ethic is its passivity" (Kreeft 1992, 23). He repeats it in another place: "one of the misunderstandings [...] the one that sees these virtues as a sheer gift of God and not also as hard human work [...] sees righteousness as automatically coming with the territory, or part of the package deal" (Kreeft 1992, 43). Laaser recommends the use of the terms "healing" or "transformation" more than recovery because addicts, he says, go forward by healing and transformation, and not by recovery. On the same pattern, he recommends not calling families healthy or unhealthy, but families that make mistakes (Laaser 2009, 18). We fully embrace these recommendations on the basis that Christian individuals and families are, according to the Scriptures, both spiritually ill and suffering also of ignorance. They are also fortunate being able to realize and accept that they have these weaknesses.

According to St. Thomas, sloth is the source of lust, and its cure would be the knowledge of God, having God the central principle in life, through spiritual passion and joy, because everything is a substitute of God. Sloth is defined as "sorrow in the presence of spiritual good" (Kreeft 2014d). He adds that there are two ways of

escaping from sorrow, corresponding to the “irascible” and “concupiscible” emotions. When sorrow is produced because of a pain (like a wound), it produces an irascible (averting) anger and a rejection of the pain. On the other hand, when sorrow is produced by boredom, people turn to “concupiscible” (attracting) emotions, which produce lust.

For a person fighting with addiction, it is important to understand that in life it is more important to concentrate on the engagement in serving the public good instead of gratifying the own pleasures. That is true today as it was in the classical antiquity and Middle Ages because “the community depends on the public spirit of its citizens” (Frank 1968, 238). In other words, it means involvement in the public sphere for the public good, as those Venetians who prepared themselves to become *Pregadi* or *Rogadi*, asked to participate in the Senate to serve the people of Venice.

## 5. Conclusions

We have met several Latin concepts describing this virtue, borrowed by Pieper from Thomas Aquinas, such as *intemperantia* (intemperance), *temperare* (the harmony of the human body), *vitium* (a moral defect), *continentia* (continence), *infirmetas* (being uncontrolled), *abstinentia* (an anti-gratification of the palate, by abstinence from food, drinks), *curiositas* (knowledge acquired for the wrong reason). It is clear that addiction can arise from a wide range of sources.

Christian addicts need to realize that their suffering comes from their lack of spiritual activity. As Aristotle pointed out, humans instinctively seek to avoid pain and discomfort. This innate aversion to sorrow manifests in two primary ways: first, we strive to eliminate the source of distress, and second, we gravitate towards pleasurable experiences as a means of escape. This explains why individuals who find spiritual pursuits unfulfilling often turn to physical pleasures for solace. In other words, “Man cannot live without joy. That is why one deprived of spiritual joy goes over to carnal pleasures” (Kreeft 2014d).

The entanglement of addiction frequently emerges from deliberate indulgence in sinful behaviors, serving both as a natural consequence and a potential divine retribution. Specifically, individuals who embrace non-traditional sexual orientations may find themselves ensnared in addiction, which, in the broader theological context, can be viewed as both a punishment and a path to redemption for the sin of pride that they so much celebrate. This complex interplay underscores the multifaceted nature of addiction, suggesting that it may serve as a consequence of personal choices while also carrying deeper spiritual implications related to individual moral conduct and divine intervention.

When approached with the right perspective, philosophy serves as a potent tool for personal development and enlightenment. Originating as a practical discipline, its early roots were deeply intertwined with the pursuit of wisdom and the enhancement of individuals through engagement with the teachings of masters.

By immersing themselves in the discourse of philosophical thought leaders, students sought not only to expand their intellectual horizons but also to cultivate practical virtues and refine their moral character. Thus, philosophy, when embraced earnestly and with the intention of self-improvement, stands as a valuable resource for navigating life's complexities and striving towards personal growth and fulfilment.

However, it would be unrealistic to rely solely on reason for the prospect of healing from addiction. While reason undoubtedly plays a crucial role in understanding and addressing challenges, the complexity of human experience often necessitates a multifaceted approach to healing. Beyond rationality, healing often requires emotional support, spiritual power in the form of the grace of God, and interpersonal connections. It is through a holistic integration of various modalities, including but not limited to reason, that individuals can embark on a journey towards profound healing and transformation. Therefore, while reason may provide valuable insights, it should not be viewed as the sole remedy for the intricacies of human suffering and growth.

One of the most glaring deficiencies within evangelical ethics concerning addiction lies in its tendency towards passivity. This passive stance impedes the ethical framework's capacity to effectively address the complexities of addiction and provide meaningful support and guidance to those affected by it. Rather than actively engaging with the multifaceted challenges of addiction, evangelical ethics may adopt a passive approach, characterized by a lack of proactive intervention and a failure to initiate meaningful dialogue and action.

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