

St. Thomas Aquinas

The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 157](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

OF CLEMENCY AND MEEKNESS (FOUR ARTICLES)

We must next consider clemency and meekness, and the contrary vices. Concerning the virtues themselves there are four points of inquiry:

(1) Whether clemency and meekness are altogether identical?

(2) Whether each of them is a virtue?

(3) Whether each is a part of temperance?

(4) Of their comparison with the other virtues.

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 157](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Article: 1](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Whether clemency and meekness are absolutely the same?

Objection 1: It would seem that clemency and meekness are absolutely the same. For meekness moderates anger, according to the Philosopher (Ethic. iv, 5). Now anger is "desire of vengeance" [*Aristotle, Rhet. ii, 2]. Since, then, clemency "is leniency of a superior in inflicting punishment on an inferior," as Seneca states (De Clementia ii, 3), and vengeance is taken by means of punishment, it would seem that clemency and meekness are the same.

Objection 2: Further, Tully says (De Invent. Rhet. ii, 54) that "clemency is a virtue whereby the mind is restrained by kindness when unreasonably provoked to hatred of a person," so that apparently clemency moderates hatred. Now, according to Augustine [*Ep. ccxi], hatred is

Objection 3: Further, the same vice is not opposed to different virtues. But the same vice, namely cruelty, is opposed to meekness and clemency. Therefore it seems that meekness and clemency are absolutely the same.

On the contrary, According to the aforesaid definition of Seneca (Objection [1]) "clemency is leniency of a superior towards an inferior": whereas meekness is not merely of superior to inferior, but of each to everyone. Therefore meekness and clemency are not absolutely the same.

I answer that, As stated in Ethic. ii, 3, a moral virtue is "about passions and actions." Now internal passions are principles of external actions, and are likewise obstacles thereto. Wherefore virtues that moderate passions, to a certain extent, concur towards the same effect as virtues that moderate actions, although they differ specifically. Thus it belongs properly to justice to restrain man from theft, whereunto he is inclined by immoderate love or desire of money, which is restrained by liberality; so that liberality concurs with justice towards the effect, which is abstention from theft. This applies to the case in point; because through the passion of anger a man is provoked to inflict a too severe punishment, while it belongs directly to clemency to mitigate punishment, and this might be prevented by excessive anger.

Consequently meekness, in so far as it restrains the onslaught of anger, concurs with clemency towards the same effect; yet they differ from one another, inasmuch as clemency moderates external punishment, while meekness properly mitigates the passion of anger.

Reply to Objection 1: Meekness regards properly the desire itself of vengeance; whereas clemency regards the punishment itself which is applied externally for the purpose of vengeance.

Reply to Objection 2: Man's affections incline to the moderation of things that are unpleasant to him in themselves. Now it results from one man loving another that he takes no pleasure in the latter's punishment in itself, but only as directed to something else, for instance justice, or the correction of the person punished. Hence love makes one quick to mitigate punishment -- and this pertains to clemency--while hatred is an obstacle to such mitigation. For this reason Tully says that "the mind provoked to hatred" that is to punish too severely, "is restrained by clemency," from inflicting too severe a punishment, so that clemency directly moderates not hatred but punishment.

Reply to Objection 3: The vice of anger, which denotes excess in the passion of anger, is properly opposed to meekness, which is directly concerned with the passion of anger; while cruelty denotes excess in punishing. Wherefore Seneca says (De Clementia ii, 4) that "those are called cruel who have reason for punishing, but lack moderation in punishing." Those who delight in a man's punishment for its own sake may be called savage or brutal, as though lacking the human feeling that leads one man to love another.

Whether both clemency and meekness are virtues?

Objection 1: It would seem that neither clemency nor meekness is a virtue. For no virtue is opposed to another virtue. Yet both of these are apparently opposed to severity, which is a virtue. Therefore neither clemency nor meekness is a virtue.

Objection 2: Further, "Virtue is destroyed by excess and defect" [*Ethic. ii, 2]. But both clemency and meekness consist in a certain decrease; for clemency decreases punishment, and meekness decreases anger. Therefore neither clemency nor meekness is a virtue.

Objection 3: Further, meekness or mildness is included ([Mt. 5:4](#)) among the beatitudes, and ([Gal. 5:23](#)) among the fruits. Now the virtues differ from the beatitudes and fruits. Therefore they are not comprised under virtue.

On the contrary, Seneca says (De Clementia ii, 5): "Every good man is conspicuous for his clemency and meekness." Now it is virtue properly that belongs to a good man, since "virtue it is that makes its possessor good, and renders his works good also" (Ethic. ii, 6). Therefore clemency and meekness are virtues.

I answer that, The nature of moral virtue consists in the subjection of appetite to reason, as the Philosopher declares (Ethic. i, 13). Now this is verified both in clemency and in meekness. For clemency, in mitigating punishment, "is guided by reason," according to Seneca (De Clementia ii, 5), and meekness, likewise, moderates anger according to right reason, as stated in Ethic. iv, 5. Wherefore it is manifest that both clemency and meekness are virtues.

Reply to Objection 1: Meekness is not directly opposed to severity; for meekness is about anger. On the other hand, severity regards the external infliction of punishment, so that accordingly it would seem rather to be opposed to clemency, which also regards external punishing, as stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)). Yet they are not really opposed to one another, since they are both according to right reason. For severity is inflexible in the infliction of punishment when right reason requires it; while clemency mitigates punishment also according to right reason, when and where this is requisite. Wherefore they are not opposed to one another as they are not about the same thing.

Reply to Objection 2: According to the Philosopher (Ethic. iv, 5), "the habit that observes the mean in anger is unnamed; so that the virtue is denominated from the diminution of anger, and is designated by the name of meekness." For the virtue is more akin to diminution than to excess, because it is more natural to man to desire vengeance for injuries done to him, than to be lacking in that desire, since "scarcely anyone belittles an injury done to himself," as Sallust observes [*Cf. Question [120]]. As to clemency, it mitigates punishment, not in respect of that which is according to right reason, but as regards that which is according to common law, which is the object of legal justice: yet on account of some particular consideration, it mitigates the punishment, deciding, as it were, that a man is not to be punished any further. Hence Seneca says (De Clementia ii, 1): "Clemency grants this, in the first place, that those whom she sets free are declared immune from all further punishment; and remission of punishment due amounts to a pardon." Wherefore it is clear that clemency is related to severity as equity [the Greek 'epieikeia' [*Cf. Question [120]]] to legal justice, whereof severity is a part, as regards the

Reply to Objection 3: The beatitudes are acts of virtue: while the fruits are delights in virtuous acts. Wherefore nothing hinders meekness being reckoned both virtue, and beatitude and fruit.

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 157](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Article: 3 [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Whether the aforesaid virtues are parts of temperance?

Objection 1: It would seem that the aforesaid virtues are not parts of temperance. For clemency mitigates punishment, as stated above ([Article \[2\]](#)). But the Philosopher (Ethic. v, 10) ascribes this to equity, which pertains to justice, as stated above ([Question \[120\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)). Therefore seemingly clemency is not a part of temperance.

Objection 2: Further, temperance is concerned with concupiscences; whereas meekness and clemency regard, not concupiscences, but anger and vengeance. Therefore they should not be reckoned parts of temperance.

Objection 3: Further, Seneca says (De Clementia ii, 4): "A man may be said to be of unsound mind when he takes pleasure in cruelty." Now this is opposed to clemency and meekness. Since then an unsound mind is opposed to prudence, it seems that clemency and meekness are parts of prudence rather than of temperance.

On the contrary, Seneca says (De Clementia ii, 3) that "clemency is temperance of the soul in exercising the power of taking revenge." Tully also (De Invent. Rhet. ii, 54) reckons clemency a part of temperance.

I answer that, Parts are assigned to the principal virtues, in so far as they imitate them in some secondary matter as to the mode whence the virtue derives its praise and likewise its name. Thus the mode and name of justice consist in a certain "equality," those of fortitude in a certain "strength of mind," those of temperance in a certain "restraint," inasmuch as it restrains the most vehement concupiscences of the pleasures of touch. Now clemency and meekness likewise consist in a certain restraint, since clemency mitigates punishment, while meekness represses anger, as stated above ([Articles \[1\],2](#)). Therefore both clemency and meekness are annexed to temperance as principal virtue, and accordingly are reckoned to be parts thereof.

Reply to Objection 1: Two points must be considered in the mitigation of punishment. one is that punishment should be mitigated in accordance with the lawgiver's intention, although not according to the letter of the law; and in this respect it pertains to equity. The other point is a certain moderation of a man's inward disposition, so that he does not exercise his power of inflicting punishment. This belongs properly to clemency, wherefore Seneca says (De Clementia ii, 3) that "it is temperance of the soul in exercising the power of taking revenge."

[Donate bitcoin.](#) St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS157.html](#) bils from anything that may be painful to another. Wherefore Seneca says (De Clementia ii, 3) that "clemency is a certain smoothness of the soul"; for, on the other hand, there would seem to be a certain roughness of soul in one who fears not to pain others.

Reply to Objection 2: The annexation of secondary to principal virtues depends on the mode of virtue, which is, so to speak, a kind of form of the virtue, rather than on the matter. Now meekness and clemency agree with temperance in mode, as stated above, though they agree not in matter.

Reply to Objection 3: "Unsoundness" is corruption of "soundness." Now just as soundness of body is corrupted by the body lapsing from the condition due to the human species, so unsoundness of mind is due to the mind lapsing from the disposition due to the human species. This occurs both in respect of the reason, as when a man loses the use of reason, and in respect of the appetitive power, as when a man loses that humane feeling whereby "every man is naturally friendly towards all other men" (Ethic. viii, 1). The unsoundness of mind that excludes the use of reason is opposed to prudence. But that a man who takes pleasure in the punishment of others is said to be of unsound mind, is because he seems on this account to be devoid of the humane feeling which gives rise to clemency.

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 157](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Article: 4 [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Whether clemency and meekness are the greatest virtues?

Objection 1: It would seem that clemency and meekness are the greatest virtues. For virtue is deserving of praise chiefly because it directs man to happiness that consists in the knowledge of God. Now meekness above all directs man to the knowledge of God: for it is written ([James 1:21](#)): "With meekness receive the ingrafted word," and (Ecclus. 5:13): "Be meek to hear the word" of God. Again, Dionysius says (Ep. viii ad Demophil.) that "Moses was deemed worthy of the Divine apparition on account of his great meekness." Therefore meekness is the greatest of virtues.

Objection 2: Further, seemingly a virtue is all the greater according as it is more acceptable to God and men. Now meekness would appear to be most acceptable to God. For it is written (Ecclus. 1:34,35): "That which is agreeable" to God is "faith and meekness"; wherefore Christ expressly invites us to be meek like unto Himself ([Mt. 11:29](#)), where He says: "Learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart"; and Hilary declares [*Comment. in Matth. iv, 3] that "Christ dwells in us by our meekness of soul." Again, it is most acceptable to men; wherefore it is written (Ecclus. 3:19): "My son, do thy works in meekness, and thou shalt be beloved above the glory of men": for which reason it is also declared ([Prov. 20:28](#)) that the King's "throne is strengthened by clemency." Therefore meekness and clemency are the greatest of virtues.

Objection 3: Further, Augustine says (De Serm. Dom. in Monte i, 2) that "the meek are they who yield to reproaches, and resist not evil, but overcome evil by good." Now this seems to pertain to mercy or piety which would seem to be the greatest of virtues: because a gloss of

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things," observes that "piety is the sum total of the Christian religion." Therefore meekness and clemency are the greatest virtues.

On the contrary, They are not reckoned as principal virtues, but are annexed to another, as to a principal, virtue.

I answer that, Nothing prevents certain virtues from being greatest, not indeed simply, nor in every respect, but in a particular genus. It is impossible for clemency or meekness to be absolutely the greatest virtues, since they owe their praise to the fact that they withdraw a man from evil, by mitigating anger or punishment. Now it is more perfect to obtain good than to lack evil. Wherefore those virtues like faith, hope, charity, and likewise prudence and justice, which direct one to good simply, are absolutely greater virtues than clemency and meekness.

Yet nothing prevents clemency and meekness from having a certain restricted excellence among the virtues which resist evil inclinations. For anger, which is mitigated by meekness, is, on account of its impetuosity, a very great obstacle to man's free judgment of truth: wherefore meekness above all makes a man self-possessed. Hence it is written (Ecclus. 10:31): "My son, keep thy soul in meekness." Yet the concupiscences of the pleasures of touch are more shameful, and harass more incessantly, for which reason temperance is more rightly reckoned as a principal virtue, as stated above ([Question \[141\]](#), [Article \[7\]](#), ad 2). As to clemency, inasmuch as it mitigates punishment, it would seem to approach nearest to charity, the greatest of the virtues, since thereby we do good towards our neighbor, and hinder his evil.

Reply to Objection 1: Meekness disposes man to the knowledge of God, by removing an obstacle; and this in two ways. First, because it makes man self-possessed by mitigating his anger, as stated above; secondly, because it pertains to meekness that a man does not contradict the words of truth, which many do through being disturbed by anger. Wherefore Augustine says (De Doctr. Christ. ii, 7): "To be meek is not to contradict Holy Writ, whether we understand it, if it condemn our evil ways, or understand it not, as though we might know better and have a clearer insight of the truth."

Reply to Objection 2: Meekness and clemency make us acceptable to God and men, in so far as they concur with charity, the greatest of the virtues, towards the same effect, namely the mitigation of our neighbor's evils.

Reply to Objection 3: Mercy and piety agree indeed with meekness and clemency by concurring towards the same effect, namely the mitigation of our neighbor's evils. Nevertheless they differ as to motive. For piety relieves a neighbor's evil through reverence for a superior, for instance God or one's parents: mercy relieves a neighbor's evil, because this evil is displeasing to one, in so far as one looks upon it as affecting oneself, as stated above ([Question \[30\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)): and this results from friendship which makes friends rejoice and grieve for the same things: meekness does this, by removing anger that urges to vengeance, and clemency does this through leniency of soul, in so far as it judges equitable that a person be no further punished.