

## St. Thomas Aquinas

# The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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### OF INCONTINENCE (FOUR ARTICLES)

We must now consider incontinence: and under this head there are four points of inquiry:

- [\(1\)](#) Whether incontinence pertains to the soul or to the body?
  - [\(2\)](#) Whether incontinence is a sin?
  - [\(3\)](#) The comparison between incontinence and intemperance;
  - [\(4\)](#) Which is the worse, incontinence in anger, or incontinence in desire?
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### Whether incontinence pertains to the soul or to the body?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that incontinence pertains not to the soul but to the body. For sexual diversity comes not from the soul but from the body. Now sexual diversity causes diversity of incontinence: for the Philosopher says (Ethic. vii, 5) that women are not described either as continent or as incontinent. Therefore incontinence pertains not to the soul but to the body.

**Objection 2:** Further, that which pertains to the soul does not result from the temperament of the body. But incontinence results from the bodily temperament: for the Philosopher says (Ethic. vii, 7) that "it is especially people of a quick or choleric and atrabilious temper whose incontinence is one of unbridled desire." Therefore incontinence regards the body.

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said to be incontinent, because "the flesh lusteth against the spirit," and overcomes it. Therefore incontinence pertains to the flesh rather than to the soul.

**On the contrary,** Man differs from beast chiefly as regards the soul. Now they differ in respect of continence and incontinence, for we ascribe neither continence nor incontinence to the beasts, as the Philosopher states (Ethic. vii, 3). Therefore incontinence is chiefly on the part of the soul.

**I answer that,** Things are ascribed to their direct causes rather than to those which merely occasion them. Now that which is on the part of the body is merely an occasional cause of incontinence; since it is owing to a bodily disposition that vehement passions can arise in the sensitive appetite which is a power of the organic body. Yet these passions, however vehement they be, are not the sufficient cause of incontinence, but are merely the occasion thereof, since, so long as the use of reason remains, man is always able to resist his passions. If, however, the passions gain such strength as to take away the use of reason altogether---as in the case of those who become insane through the vehemence of their passions---the essential conditions of continence or incontinence cease, because such people do not retain the judgment of reason, which the continent man follows and the incontinent forsakes. From this it follows that the direct cause of incontinence is on the part of the soul, which fails to resist a passion by the reason. This happens in two ways, according to the Philosopher (Ethic. vii, 7): first, when the soul yields to the passions, before the reason has given its counsel; and this is called "unbridled incontinence" or "impetuosity": secondly, when a man does not stand to what has been counselled, through holding weakly to reason's judgment; wherefore this kind of incontinence is called "weakness." Hence it is manifest that incontinence pertains chiefly to the soul.

**Reply to Objection 1:** The human soul is the form of the body, and has certain powers which make use of bodily organs. The operations of these organs conduce somewhat to those operations of the soul which are accomplished without bodily instruments, namely to the acts of the intellect and of the will, in so far as the intellect receives from the senses, and the will is urged by passions of the sensitive appetite. Accordingly, since woman, as regards the body, has a weak temperament, the result is that for the most part, whatever she holds to, she holds to it weakly; although in /rare cases the opposite occurs, according to Prov. 31:10, "Who shall find a valiant woman?" And since small and weak things "are accounted as though they were not" [\*Aristotle, Phys. ii, 5] the Philosopher speaks of women as though they had not the firm judgment of reason, although the contrary happens in some women. Hence he states that "we do not describe women as being continent, because they are vacillating" through being unstable of reason, and "are easily led" so that they follow their passions readily.

**Reply to Objection 2:** It is owing to the impulse of passion that a man at once follows his passion before his reason counsels him. Now the impulse of passion may arise either from its quickness, as in bilious persons [\*Cf. FS, Question [46], Article [5]], or from its vehemence, as in the melancholic, who on account of their earthy temperament are most vehemently aroused. Even so, on the other hand, a man fails to stand to that which is counselled, because he holds to it in weakly fashion by reason of the softness of his temperament, as we have stated with regard to woman (ad 1). This is also the case with phlegmatic temperaments, for the same reason as in women. And these results are due to the fact that the bodily temperament is an occasional but not a sufficient cause of incontinence, as stated above.

**Reply to Objection 3:** In the incontinent man concupiscence of the flesh overcomes the spirit, not necessarily, but through a certain negligence of the spirit in not resisting strongly.

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## Whether incontinence is a sin?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that incontinence is not a sin. For as Augustine says (De Lib. Arb. iii, 18): "No man sins in what he cannot avoid." Now no man can by himself avoid incontinence, according to Wis. 8:21, "I know [Vulg.: 'knew'] that I could not... be continent, except God gave it." Therefore incontinence is not a sin.

**Objection 2:** Further, apparently every sin originates in the reason. But the judgment of reason is overcome in the incontinent man. Therefore incontinence is not a sin.

**Objection 3:** Further, no one sins in loving God vehemently. Now a man becomes incontinent through the vehemence of divine love: for Dionysius says (Div. Nom. iv) that "Paul, through incontinence of divine love, exclaimed: I live, now not I" ([Gal. 2:20](#)). Therefore incontinence is not a sin.

**On the contrary,** It is numbered together with other sins ([2 Tim. 3:3](#)) where it is written: "Slanderers, incontinent, unmerciful," etc. Therefore incontinence is a sin.

**I answer that,** Incontinence about a matter may be considered in two ways. First it may be considered properly and simply: and thus incontinence is about concupiscences of pleasures of touch, even as intemperance is, as we have said in reference to continence ([Question \[155\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)). In this way incontinence is a sin for two reasons: first, because the incontinent man goes astray from that which is in accord with reason; secondly, because he plunges into shameful pleasures. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. vii, 4) that "incontinence is censurable not only because it is wrong"---that is, by straying from reason---"but also because it is wicked"---that is, by following evil desires. Secondly, incontinence about a matter is considered, properly---inasmuch as it is a straying from reason---but not simply; for instance when a man does not observe the mode of reason in his desire for honor, riches, and so forth, which seem to be good in themselves. About such things there is incontinence, not simply but relatively, even as we have said above in reference to continence ([Question \[155\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#), ad 3). In this way incontinence is a sin, not from the fact that one gives way to wicked desires, but because one fails to observe the mode of reason even in the desire for things that are of themselves desirable.

Thirdly, incontinence is said to be about a matter, not properly, but metaphorically. for instance about the desires for things of which one cannot make an evil use, such as the desire for virtue. A man may be said to be incontinent in these matters metaphorically, because just as the incontinent man is entirely led by his evil desire, even so is a man entirely led by his good desire which is in accord with reason. Such like incontinence is no sin, but pertains to the perfection of virtue.

**Reply to Objection 1:** Man can avoid sin and do good, yet not without God's help, according to Jn. 15:5: "Without Me you can do nothing." Wherefore the fact that man needs God's help in

**Reply to Objection 2:** The judgment of reason is overcome in the incontinent man, not necessarily, for then he would commit no sin, but through a certain negligence on account of his not standing firm in resisting the passion by holding to the judgment formed by his reason.

**Reply to Objection 3:** This argument takes incontinence metaphorically and not properly.

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## Whether the incontinent man sins more gravely than the intemperate?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that the incontinent man sins more gravely than the intemperate. For, seemingly, the more a man acts against his conscience, the more gravely he sins, according to Lk. 12:47, "That servant who knew the will of his lord... and did not... shall be beaten with many stripes." Now the incontinent man would seem to act against his conscience more than the intemperate because, according to Ethic. vii, 3, the incontinent man, though knowing how wicked are the things he desires, nevertheless acts through passion, whereas the intemperate man judges what he desires to be good. Therefore the incontinent man sins more gravely than the intemperate.

**Objection 2:** Further, apparently, the graver a sin is, the more incurable it is: wherefore the sins against the Holy Ghost, being most grave, are declared to be unpardonable. Now the sin of incontinence would appear to be more incurable than the sin of intemperance. For a person's sin is cured by admonishment and correction, which seemingly are no good to the incontinent man, since he knows he is doing wrong, and does wrong notwithstanding: whereas it seems to the intemperate man that he is doing well, so that it were good for him to be admonished. Therefore it would appear that the incontinent man sins more gravely than the intemperate.

**Objection 3:** Further, the more eagerly man sins, the more grievous his sin. Now the incontinent sins more eagerly than the intemperate, since the incontinent man has vehement passions and desires, which the intemperate man does not always have. Therefore the incontinent man sins more gravely than the intemperate.

**On the contrary,** Impenitence aggravates every sin: wherefore Augustine says (De Verb. Dom. serm. xi, 12,13) that "impenitence is a sin against the Holy Ghost." Now according to the Philosopher (Ethic. vii, 8) "the intemperate man is not inclined to be penitent, for he holds on to his choice: but every incontinent man is inclined to repentance." Therefore the intemperate man sins more gravely than the incontinent.

**I answer that,** According to Augustine [\*De Duab. Anim. x, xi] sin is chiefly an act of the will, because "by the will we sin and live aright" [\*Retract. i, 9]. Consequently where there is a greater inclination of the will to sin, there is a graver sin. Now in the intemperate man, the will is inclined to sin in virtue of its own choice, which proceeds from a habit acquired through

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since passion soon passes, whereas a habit is "a disposition difficult to remove," the result is that the incontinent man repents at once, as soon as the passion has passed; but not so the intemperate man; in fact he rejoices in having sinned, because the sinful act has become connatural to him by reason of his habit. Wherefore in reference to such persons it is written ([Prov. 2:14](#)) that "they are glad when they have done evil, and rejoice in most wicked things." Hence it follows that "the intemperate man is much worse than the incontinent," as also the Philosopher declares (Ethic. vii, 7).

**Reply to Objection 1:** Ignorance in the intellect sometimes precedes the inclination of the appetite and causes it, and then the greater the ignorance, the more does it diminish or entirely excuse the sin, in so far as it renders it involuntary. On the other hand, ignorance in the reason sometimes follows the inclination of the appetite, and then such like ignorance, the greater it is, the graver the sin, because the inclination of the appetite is shown thereby to be greater. Now in both the incontinent and the intemperate man, ignorance arises from the appetite being inclined to something, either by passion, as in the incontinent, or by habit, as in the intemperate. Nevertheless greater ignorance results thus in the intemperate than in the incontinent. In one respect as regards duration, since in the incontinent man this ignorance lasts only while the passion endures, just as an attack of intermittent fever lasts as long as the humor is disturbed: whereas the ignorance of the intemperate man endures without ceasing, on account of the endurance of the habit, wherefore it is likened to phthisis or any chronic disease, as the Philosopher says (Ethic. vii, 8). In another respect the ignorance of the intemperate man is greater as regards the thing ignored. For the ignorance of the incontinent man regards some particular detail of choice (in so far as he deems that he must choose this particular thing now): whereas the intemperate man's ignorance is about the end itself, inasmuch as he judges this thing good, in order that he may follow his desires without being curbed. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. vii, 7,8) that "the incontinent man is better than the intemperate, because he retains the best principle [\*{To beltiston, e arche}, 'the best thing, i.e. the principle']," to wit, the right estimate of the end.

**Reply to Objection 2:** Mere knowledge does not suffice to cure the incontinent man, for he needs the inward assistance of grace which quenches concupiscence, besides the application of the external remedy of admonishment and correction, which induce him to begin to resist his desires, so that concupiscence is weakened, as stated above ([Question \[142\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)). By these same means the intemperate man can be cured. But his curing is more difficult, for two reasons. The first is on the part of reason, which is corrupt as regards the estimate of the last end, which holds the same position as the principle in demonstrations. Now it is more difficult to bring back to the truth one who errs as to the principle; and it is the same in practical matters with one who errs in regard to the end. The other reason is on the part of the inclination of the appetite: for in the intemperate man this proceeds from a habit, which is difficult to remove, whereas the inclination of the incontinent man proceeds from a passion, which is more easily suppressed.

**Reply to Objection 3:** The eagerness of the will, which increases a sin, is greater in the intemperate man than in the incontinent, as explained above. But the eagerness of concupiscence in the sensitive appetite is sometimes greater in the incontinent man, because he does not sin except through vehement concupiscence, whereas the intemperate man sins even through slight concupiscence and sometimes forestalls it. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. vii, 7) that we blame more the intemperate man, "because he pursues pleasure without desiring it or with calm," i.e. slight desire. "For what would he have done if he had desired it with passion?"

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## Whether the incontinent in anger is worse than the incontinent in desire?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that the incontinent in anger is worse than the incontinent in desire. For the more difficult it is to resist the passion, the less grievous, apparently is incontinence: wherefore the Philosopher says (Ethic. vii, 7): "It is not wonderful, indeed it is pardonable if a person is overcome by strong and overwhelming pleasures or pains." Now, "as Heraclitus says, it is more difficult to resist desire than anger" [\*Ethic. ii. 3]. Therefore incontinence of desire is less grievous than incontinence of anger.

**Objection 2:** Further, one is altogether excused from sin if the passion be so vehement as to deprive one of the judgment of reason, as in the case of one who becomes demented through passion. Now he that is incontinent in anger retains more of the judgment of reason, than one who is incontinent in desire: since "anger listens to reason somewhat, but desire does not" as the Philosopher states (Ethic. vii, 6). Therefore the incontinent in anger is worse than the incontinent in desire.

**Objection 3:** Further, the more dangerous a sin the more grievous it is. Now incontinence of anger would seem to be more dangerous, since it leads a man to a greater sin, namely murder, for this is a more grievous sin than adultery, to which incontinence of desire leads. Therefore incontinence of anger is graver than incontinence of desire.

**On the contrary,** The Philosopher says (Ethic. vii, 6) that "incontinence of anger is less disgraceful than incontinence of desire."

**I answer that,** The sin of incontinence may be considered in two ways. First, on the part of the passion which occasions the downfall of reason. In this way incontinence of desire is worse than incontinence of anger, because the movement of desire is more inordinate than the movement of anger. There are four reasons for this, and the Philosopher indicates them, Ethic. vii, 6: First, because the movement of anger partakes somewhat of reason, since the angry man tends to avenge the injury done to him, and reason dictates this in a certain degree. Yet he does not tend thereto perfectly, because he does not intend the due mode of vengeance. On the other hand, the movement of desire is altogether in accord with sense and nowise in accord with reason. Secondly, because the movement of anger results more from the bodily temperament owing to the quickness of the movement of the bile which tends to anger. Hence one who by bodily temperament is disposed to anger is more readily angry than one who is disposed to concupiscence is liable to be concupiscent: wherefore also it happens more often that the children of those who are disposed to anger are themselves disposed to anger, than that the children of those who are disposed to concupiscence are also disposed to concupiscence. Now that which results from the natural disposition of the body is deemed more deserving of pardon. Thirdly, because anger seeks to work openly, whereas concupiscence is fain to disguise itself and creeps in by stealth. Fourthly, because he who is subject to concupiscence works with pleasure, whereas the angry man works as though forced by a certain previous displeasure.

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falls through forsaking reason; and thus incontinence of anger is, for the most part, more grievous, because it leads to things that are harmful to one's neighbor.

***Reply to Objection 1:*** It is more difficult to resist pleasure perseveringly than anger, because concupiscence is enduring. But for the moment it is more difficult to resist anger, on account of its impetuosity.

***Reply to Objection 2:*** Concupiscence is stated to be without reason, not as though it destroyed altogether the judgment of reason, but because nowise does it follow the judgment of reason: and for this reason it is more disgraceful.

***Reply to Objection 3:*** This argument considers incontinence with regard to its result.