

## QUESTION 156

### Incontinence

Next we have to consider incontinence (*incontinentia*). And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Does incontinence belong to the soul or to the body? (2) Is incontinence a sin? (3) What is the relation between incontinence and intemperance? (4) Who is more shameful, an individual incontinent with respect to anger or an individual incontinent with respect to disordered sentient desire?

#### Article 1

##### Does incontinence belong to the soul or to the body?

It seems that incontinence belongs to the body and not to the soul:

**Objection 1:** The diversity of the sexes is on the part of the body and not on the part of the soul. But the diversity of the sexes makes for diversity as regards incontinence; for in *Ethics 7* the Philosopher says that women are not called either continent or incontinent. Therefore, continence belongs to the body and not to the soul.

**Objection 2:** What belongs to the soul does not follow bodily constitutions. But incontinence does follow the body's constitution; for in *Ethics 7* the Philosopher says, "It is especially people who are sharp"—i.e., choleric—"and melancholic who are incontinent with respect to unrestrained sentient desire." Therefore, incontinence belongs to the body.

**Objection 3:** Victory belongs more to what conquers than to what is conquered. But an individual is called incontinent from the fact that his flesh conquers him when it has sentient desires that are opposed to his spirit. Therefore, incontinence belongs more to the flesh than to the soul.

**But contrary to this:** Man differs from the beasts mainly with respect to his soul. But men differ with respect to the nature of continence and incontinence, while, as is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics 7*, we do not call beasts either continent or incontinent. Therefore, incontinence exists mainly on the part of the soul.

**I respond:** Any given thing is attributed more to a *per se* cause of it than to what provides only an occasion for it. But what exists on the part of the body provides only an occasion for incontinence. For it can happen that because of the body's disposition strong passions rise up in the sentient appetite, which is a power belonging to a corporeal organ; still, no matter how strong passions of this sort are, they are only an occasion for incontinence and not a sufficient cause of it. For given that the use of reason endures, a man is always able to resist these passions. On the other hand, if the passions grow in strength to the point that they totally remove the use of reason—as happens in the case of those who incur insanity (*qui amentiam incurrunt*) because of the strength of their passions, then the nature of neither continence nor incontinence will remain; for reason's judgment, which the continent individual observes and the incontinent individual abandons, is not preserved in them.

And so it follows that the *per se* cause of incontinence is on the part of the soul, which does not resist the passion by means of reason. To be sure, as the Philosopher points out in *Ethics 7*, there are two ways in which this happens: (a) when the soul yields to the passions *before reason deliberates*, and this is called 'unrestrained incontinence' (*irrefrenata incontinentia*) or 'impetuosity' (*praevolatio*); and (b) when the man does not remain firm in what has been deliberated, in the sense that he holds weakly to what reason has judged, and this sort of incontinence is called 'weakness' (*debilitas*).

And so it is clear that incontinence belongs mainly to the soul.

**Reply to objection 1:** The human soul is the form of a body and it has certain powers that make use of corporeal organs, whose operations also contribute to all the works of the soul that exist without corporeal instruments—i.e., the act of intellect and the act of will, insofar as the intellect receives from sense and the will is impelled by the passions of the sentient appetite. And on this score, since a woman

has a somewhat weak composition with respect to the body, it happens that in most cases a woman holds weakly to whatever she holds to, even if in rare cases it happens otherwise with some women—this according to Proverbs 31:10 (“Who will find a strong woman?”). And since what is reputed as small or weak is reputed as nothing, the Philosopher talks about women as if they did not have a firm judgment of reason, even though the exact opposite occurs in some women. And because of this he claims that “we do not call women continent, since they do not lead”—in the sense of having resolute reason—“but are instead led”—in the sense of easily following their passions.

**Reply to objection 2:** It happens that because of the force of a passion an individual follows the passion immediately, before reason deliberates. Now the force of a passion can arise either from its *quickness*, as in the case of choleric individuals, or from its *strength*, as in the case of melancholic individuals, who because of their earthy makeup are inflamed more strongly—just as, contrariwise, it happens that an individual does not persist in what has been deliberated, since, as has been explained in the case of women, he adheres to it weakly because of the softness of his constitution. This likewise seems to happen in the case of individuals who are phlegmatic, for the same reason as in the case of women. Now these things happen insofar as one is given an *occasion* for incontinence because of his bodily composition; however, as has been explained, this is not a *sufficient cause*.

**Reply to objection 3:** In the case of an individual who is incontinent, excessive desires of the flesh overcome the spirit not by necessity, but through a sort of negligence on the part of a spirit that does not strongly resist.

## Article 2

### Is incontinence a sin?

It seems that incontinence is not a sin:

**Objection 1:** As Augustine says in *De Libero Arbitrio*, “No one sins in that which he cannot avoid.” But no one is able to avoid incontinence on his own—this according to Wisdom 8:21 (“I know that I am unable to be continent unless God grants it”). Therefore, incontinence is not a sin.

**Objection 2:** Every sin seems to exist in [the power of] reason. But in an individual who is incontinent, the judgment of reason is overcome. Therefore, incontinence is not a sin.

**Objection 3:** No one sins in loving God vehemently. But an individual becomes incontinent because of the vehemence of his love of God; for in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says, “It was through the incontinence of his love of God that Paul said, ‘I live, now not I ...’ [Galatians 2:20]. Therefore, incontinence is not a sin.

**But contrary to this:** Incontinence is numbered among other sins in 2 Timothy 3:3, where it says, “... slanderers, the incontinent, the unmerciful, etc.” Therefore, incontinence is a sin.

**I respond:** There are three ways in which incontinence can be thought of with respect to something:

(a) *properly and absolutely speaking (proprie et simpliciter)*. In this way, incontinence, like intemperance, is thought of as having to do with disordered sentient desires for *the pleasures of touch (circa concupiscentias delectationum tactus)*; this was explained above for the case of continence (q. 155, a. 2). And on this score incontinence is a sin, and this for two reasons. First, because the incontinent individual is drawing back from what is in accord with reason, and, second, because he is immersing himself in unseemly pleasures. This is why, in *Ethics 7*, the Philosopher says, “Incontinence is blamed not only as a sin”—i.e., because of its drawing back from reason—“but as a type of badness”—viz., insofar as it follows perverse desires.

(b) *properly speaking, to be sure (proprie quidem)*, insofar as the individual draws back from what

is in accord with reason, *but not absolutely speaking (sed non simpliciter)*—as, for instance, when an individual does not preserve the mode of reason in his desire for *honor, riches*, and other things of this sort, which are seen as goods in their own right. With respect to such things there is incontinence in a certain respect and not incontinence absolutely speaking—just as was explained above in the case of continence (q. 155, a. 2). And on this score incontinence is a sin, not because the individual gives himself over to perverse desires, but because he does not preserve the appropriate mode of reason even in the case of a desire for things that are desirable in their own right.

(c) *not properly speaking, but in accord with a similitude (non proprie, sed secundum similitudinem)*, viz., with respect to desires *for things that an individual cannot make bad use of*, e.g., desires for the virtues. An individual can be called ‘incontinent’ by similitude with respect to the virtues, since just as someone who is incontinent is totally led by bad sentient desire, so some individual is totally led by good desire that is in accord with reason. And this sort of ‘incontinence’ is not a sin but instead belongs to the perfection of virtue.

**Reply to objection 1:** A man is able to do good and avoid evil, but not without God’s help—this according to John 15:5 (“Without me you can do nothing”). Hence, incontinence’s being a sin is not ruled out by the fact that a man needs God’s help in order to be continent; for as *Ethics* 3 says, “What we can do through our friends we can in some sense do through ourselves.”

**Reply to objection 2:** In an individual who is incontinent the judgment of reason is overcome not by necessity, which would remove the nature of a sin, but out of a sort of negligence on the part of a man who does not firmly intend to resist his passions through the judgment of reason that he already has.

**Reply to objection 3:** This argument goes through for the case of incontinence by similitude, and not for the case of incontinence properly speaking.

### Article 3

#### Does the incontinent individual sin to a greater degree than the intemperate individual does?

It seems that the incontinent individual sins to a greater degree than the intemperate individual does (*incontinens plus peccet quam intemperatus*):

**Objection 1:** The more an individual acts contrary to his conscience, the more seriously he seems to sin—this according to Luke 12:47-48 (“A servant who knows the will of his master and does what is worthy of stripes will be flogged with many of them”). But an incontinent individual seems to act in a way contrary to his conscience more than the intemperate individual does, since, as *Ethics* 7 explains, the incontinent individual, though knowing that what he desires is disordered, nonetheless acts, and this because of his passion, whereas the intemperate individual judges that the things he desires are good. Therefore, the incontinent individual sins more seriously than the intemperate individual does.

**Objection 2:** To the extent that a sin is more serious, it seems to be less curable; hence, sins against the Holy Spirit, which are the most serious sins, are even called unforgivable. But the sin of incontinence seems to be more incurable than the sin of intemperance. For an individual’s sin is cured through admonition and correction, which seem to do no good for an incontinent individual, who knows that he is acting badly and nonetheless acts badly, whereas it seems to the intemperate individual that he is acting well, and so an admonition could possibly do some good in his case. Therefore, it seems that an incontinent individual sins more seriously than an intemperate individual does.

**Objection 3:** To the extent that an individual sins out of a more disordered desire, he sins more seriously. But an incontinent individual sins out of a more disordered desire than an intemperate individual does, since the incontinent individual has strong sentient desires, which an intemperate individual does not always have. Therefore, the incontinent individual commits a greater sin than does the

intemperate individual.

**But contrary to this:** Impenitence aggravates a sin; hence, in *De Verbo Domini* Augustine says that impenitence is a sin against the Holy Spirit. But as the Philosopher says in *Ethics 7*, “The intemperate individual is not repentant, since he remains in his sin, whereas every incontinent individual is repentant. Therefore, the intemperate individual sins more seriously than the incontinent individual does.

**I respond:** According to Augustine, a sin consists mainly in an act of will (*praecipue in voluntate consistit*), since it is the will by which one sins and by which one lives rightly. And so when the will has a greater inclination toward sinning, the sin is more serious.

Now in an individual who is intemperate, the will is inclined toward sinning *by the individual’s own choice*, and this choice proceeds from a *habit* that has been acquired through past experience (*per consuetudinem*). By contrast, in an individual who is incontinent, the will is inclined toward sinning by a *passion*. And since a passion passes quickly, whereas a habit is difficult to change, it follows that the incontinent individual immediately repents once the passion has passed—something that does not happen in the case of the intemperate individual, who, to the contrary, is glad that he has sinned, since the operation of sinning has become connatural to him because of his habit. Hence, of such individuals Proverbs 2:14 says, “They rejoice when they act badly, and they exult in the worst things.”

Hence, it is clear that the intemperate individual is much worse than the incontinent individual, as the Philosopher likewise claims in *Ethics 7*.

**Reply to objection 1:** To be sure, ignorance in the intellect sometimes *precedes* the inclination and causes it. And so the greater the ignorance is, the more it diminishes the sin or totally excuses it, insofar as it causes involuntariness. On the other hand, conversely, ignorance in the reason may *follow upon* the inclination of the appetite. And the greater this sort of ignorance is, the more serious the sin is, since the inclination of the appetite is shown to be greater.

Now the ignorance that belongs to both the incontinent individual and the intemperate individual follows from the fact that the appetite is [already] inclined toward something—either (a) because of a *passion*, as in the case of the incontinent individual or (b) because of a *habit*, as in the case of the intemperate individual. But greater ignorance is thereby caused in the intemperate individual than in the incontinent individual:

(a) in one way, with respect to *duration*, since in the incontinent individual the ignorance lasts only as long as the passion lasts, just as an attack of intermittent fever lasts [only] as long as the humor is disturbed. By contrast, the intemperate individual’s ignorance lasts persistently because of the permanence of the habit; hence, as the Philosopher points out in *Ethics 7*, the intemperate individual’s ignorance is comparable to tuberculosis (*phthisis*) or to any chronic disease.

(b) in a second way, with respect to *what one is ignorant of*. For the incontinent individual’s ignorance has to do with *some particular object that can be chosen*, in the sense that he thinks of it as something that should be chosen *now*, whereas the intemperate individual has ignorance of *the end*, insofar as he judges that it is good to follow his sentient desires in an unrestricted way. Hence, in *Ethics 7* the Philosopher says, “The incontinent individual is better than the intemperate individual because the best principle is preserved in the former,” viz., a correct assessment of the end.

**Reply to objection 2:** Cognition alone is not sufficient for the curing of an incontinent individual; instead, what is required is the *interior* assistance of grace mitigating the disordered desire in addition to the application of the exterior remedy of admonition and correction. By these means the individual begins to resist the desire, and because of this, as was explained above (q. 142, a. 2), the disordered desire becomes weaker.

The intemperate individual can also be cured in these same ways, but his cure is more difficult—and this because of two things:

(a) The first is *on the part of reason*, which has been corrupted with respect to its assessment of the

end, where the end is like the principle in demonstrative matters. Now it is more difficult to lead someone back to the truth who is mistaken about the principle and, similarly, in matters of action it is more difficult to lead someone back to the truth who is mistaken about the end.

(b) The second is *on the part of the appetite's inclination*, which in the case of the intemperate individual arises from a habit that is difficult to break. By contrast, an incontinent individual's inclination arises from a passion, which can more easily be repressed.

**Reply to objection 3:** As is clear from what was just said above, the excessive desire which belongs to *the will (libido voluntatis)* and which increases the sin, is greater in the intemperate individual than in the incontinent individual. But excess in the desire that belongs to *the sentient appetite* is sometimes greater in the incontinent individual, since the incontinent individual sins only from a strong desire, whereas the intemperate individual sins from a weak desire as well and sometimes forestalls the desire. This is why, in *Ethics 7*, the Philosopher says that we blame the intemperate individual more because he pursues pleasures “quietly or even while not experiencing strong desire,” i.e., while desiring just a little. “For what would he do if his youthful desire were present?”

#### Article 4

##### Is someone who is incontinent with respect to anger worse than someone who is incontinent with respect to disordered sentient desire?

It seems that someone who is incontinent with respect to anger (*incontinens irae*) is worse than someone who is incontinent with respect to disordered sentient desire (*incontinens concupiscentiae*):

**Objection 1:** The more difficult it is to resist a passion, the less serious the incontinence is; hence, in *Ethics 7* the Philosopher says, “It is not amazing—indeed it is pardonable—if an individual is overcome by strong and overwhelming pleasures or pains. But “as Heraclitus claimed, it is more difficult to fight against disordered sentient desire than to fight against anger.” Therefore, incontinence with respect to disordered sentient desire is less serious than incontinence with respect to anger.

**Objection 2:** If by its vehemence a passion completely removes reason's judgment, then the individual is altogether excused from sin; this is clear in the case of an individual who falls into madness because of a passion. But more of reason's judgment remains in an individual who is incontinent with respect to anger than in an individual who is incontinent with respect to disordered sentient desire; for as is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics 7*, the angry individual hears reason, whereas the individual experiencing disordered sentient desire does not. Therefore, incontinence with respect to anger is worse than incontinence with respect to disordered sentient desire.

**Objection 3:** The more dangerous a sin is, the more serious it seems to be. But incontinence with respect to anger is more dangerous, since it leads a man to a greater sin, viz., homicide, which is a more serious sin than adultery, to which incontinence with respect to disordered sentient desire leads him. Therefore, incontinence with respect to anger is more serious than incontinence with respect to disordered sentient desire.

**But contrary to this:** In *Ethics 7* the Philosopher says, “Incontinence with respect to anger is less evil than incontinence with respect to disordered sentient desire.”

**I respond:** There are two ways in which the sin of incontinence can be thought of:

(a) First, it can be thought of *on the part of the passion by which reason is overcome*. And on this score incontinence with respect to disordered sentient desire is worse than incontinence with respect to anger, since the movement of disordered sentient desire has a greater disorder than the movement of anger—and this for the four reasons that the Philosopher touches on in *Ethics 7*:

First, because the movement of anger participates *to some extent* in reason, viz., insofar as the angry

individual tends toward seeking retribution for an injury that has been inflicted on him (*ad vindicandum iniuriam sibi factam*), something that reason dictates, but he does not do this in a perfect way, since he does not intend the right mode of vindication. By contrast, the movement of disordered sentient desire is *totally* in accord with the senses and *in no way* in accord with reason.

Second, because the movement of anger *follows more closely upon the body's constitution*, because of the quickness of the movement of the bile (*propter velocitatem motus cholerae*), which tends toward anger. Hence it is that an individual who is disposed by his bodily constitution toward becoming angry gets angry more promptly than an individual who is disposed toward disordered sentient desire engages in disordered sentient desire. Hence, it happens more frequently that irritable individuals are born of irritable parents than that individuals who engage in disordered sentient desire are born of parents who engage in disordered sensual desire. And what occurs because of the body's natural disposition is thought of as more deserving of leniency.

Third, because anger seeks to operate *in open manner*, whereas disordered sentient desire seeks hidden places and goes around stealthily.

Fourth, because an individual who engages in disordered sentient desire operates with pleasure, whereas the angry individual is driven by a sort of antecedent sadness.

(b) In the second way, the sin of incontinence is thought of *with respect to the evil that the individual who is departing from reason falls into*. And on this score incontinence with respect to anger is, for the most part, more serious, since it leads to things that involve harm to one's neighbor.

**Reply to objection 1:** It is more difficult to fight with persistence (*assidue*) against pleasure than against anger, since disordered sentient desire is more continuous; however, in the moment it is more difficult to resist anger because of its force.

**Reply to objection 2:** Disordered sentient desire is said to exist without reason not because it totally removes the judgment of reason, but because there is no one in whom it proceeds in accord with the judgment of reason. And because of this it is more shameful.

**Reply to objection 3:** This argument goes through on the part of those things into which the incontinent individual is led.