

WHY THE TEMPERAMENTS?

OWEN O'CONNOR, O.P.



NOT LONG AGO a small party of men reached the summit of Mount Everest. They had climbed to the top of the world; they had stood on the highest point of the earth. Asked by the press to give their first impression of this feat, the New Zealander, Sir Edmund Hillary, replied, "It felt darn good!" A native guide, Tenzing Norgay, was also asked to give his feelings at that history-making occasion. He answered, "I thought of God."

Here we see a great contrast in emotions and impressions. Why this difference in feelings of these two men both of whom attained the same goal? What caused one to think of himself, and the other to think of God? The reasons are many; differences in belief, background, etc., but an important factor was probably due to their innate difference in *temperament*.

One of the most noticeable varieties encountered in daily life is that of different personalities. No one but the Divine Planner of this universe would have thought to put such appealing variety into nature. Things indeed would be very monotonous if there were only one color to see, one type of tree, one kind of bee, and so on in every aspect of nature. But the ingenious Creator of our world put spice into his work by giving it such infinite variety.

Even in human nature God made no two persons alike. Some people are sweet and obliging, others are selfish and thoughtless; some are good company, others are always ready for an argument; some have a good, attractive appearance on the outside, while on the inside, they may be full of vice. And still others, while not "God's gift to the world," may have hearts of gold.

So we see in the nature of the human being God has sown a great variety of personalities. No two individuals, Joe nor Paul, Jane nor Janet build their personalities in exactly the same way. Always we are able to detect certain unlikenesses among individuals. These are brought about by the set modes of operation to which man's faculties, spiritual and physical, are disposed. One of the most important single factors which has an impact on this disposition is *temperament*.

TEMPERAMENT

Just what does *temperament* signify? In common parlance, a temperamental person is one given to violent displays of emotion at the smallest incitement. The term temperamental has come to be associated with artists of various kinds—the long-haired musician, or the thin, emaciated painter, both of whom are supposed to be emotionally unstable and highly excitable. This popular notion of temperament, however, is not a true one, for it puts the emphasis on the outward manifestations rather than on the roots or the core which underlie these manifestations.

Temperament is rather innate and hereditary. It stems from physical structure and functional disposition of certain bodily organs and tissues. It is properly viewed from the influence this disposition of the body exerts upon the sensational, emotional, and intellectual life of man. Thus certain bodily dispositions underlie certain temperaments and these in turn influence certain personality and character developments in people.

CHARACTER

Sometimes a person's character is mistaken for his temperament. Character is not the same as temperament. Temperament is largely a matter of inheritance, an innate thing; while character is an achievement of long and hard effort; at least, good character is. Whereas temperament cannot be changed, character can be developed for good or bad by cultivating and perfecting the good or bad elements of one's temperament. Temperament is the result of the kind of bodies we have; character is more concerned with the spiritual nature of man; it has moral connotations. So we always refer to someone as of good character or bad character.

PERSONALITY

Nor must temperament be confused with personality. Like character, personality is brought about by conscious efforts to achieve definite goals. Personality is not innate. It must be worked on for the desired results. Whereas temperament is not worked out or formed by effort; we have it from the cradle. Temperament is like the raw material, and personality the refined, or processed end-product. Personality is different from character in that the former is more concerned with the social aspect, while character relates to morals. A person may be of radiant personality and yet have a very low moral character and vice versa.

MOODS

Is temperament a mood? No, temperament is not the same as mood. We say that Joe or Jane is in a bad or good mood, but not in a bad or good temperament. The main difference is that the temperament is fixed and stable, whereas mood is transient and changeable. Mood is an affair of hours or days. Temperament is like a mood that is permanent, a life-time disposition. A person might easily know the reason for his moodiness, and again he might suffer a mood with no apparent cause. A piece of good fortune, a rise in the stock-market, or even soothing music can induce a pleasant mood; perfect health is also another prime influence. Yet any one of these conditions may occur, or many of them together, and still not change the permanent, firm temperament.

EMOTIONS

Lastly, temperament is not identified with emotion. Emotions are conscious states of excitement arising when a person is faced with some disturbing or stimulating situation, which changes the whole system of the body mechanism. Emotion is the result in us of our being acted upon by some agent outside of ourselves. Temperament is an internal cause of this emotional reaction. It is the factor inside of us. The emotions are in the appetitive faculties, those faculties by which a human desires something external. The temperament is not in the appetitive faculties; therefore causes no desires for external things. It does not bring about bodily changes like the different emotions but it is a fixed disposition of the body.

So we see that temperament is not the same as character, not the same as personality, or mood, or emotion, but it is the foundation of all these, the substructure upon which the edifice of a person's behavior rests.

ORIGIN

As to the theory of the temperaments, its history goes back over two thousand years. The theory of the temperaments found its start in the Hippocratic school, the Greek medical school named after Hippocrates (359 B.C.), the father of medicine.

The Hippocratic school based its theory of the temperaments upon the varying proportions of four juices (humors) in the body. The body was thought to be derived from the four inorganic elements, earth, fire, air, and water. The mixture of these

elements in the body—the coldness of the earth, the warmth of the fire, the dryness of the air, and the wetness of the water, gave the various combinations of humors. They were the blood, the phlegm, the bile or choler, and the atra-bile or melancholia. The blood was warm and moist and produced in the heart; the phlegm, cold and moist and produced in the head; the bile was warm and dry, found in the liver; the atra-bile, cold and dry and found in the spleen. Thus originated the four temperaments: the Sanguine (blood), the Phlegmatic (phlegm), the Melancholic (black bile), and the Choleric (yellow bile).

Since this theory has been proven faulty and science has shown that the endocrine glands are the principal factors involved in man's bodily disposition, only the nomenclature of this primitive theory remains today. Yet we should not underrate the merit it deserves in establishing some notion of these inner forces in man. This theory was handed down through the ages, to the Romans and on to the medievalists; it remains today an honorable and sacred relic in our present psychology. Even St. Thomas and a great many other scholars through the ages used this theory. We even read in the *Summa* that the body of Christ was composed of these four humors. For when the heart of Jesus was pierced with the sword, water and blood gushed forth. The water showing that his body was composed of the four elements and the blood indicating his body also contained the four humors.¹ There are many other references in St. Thomas and other classic works proposing the well-established belief in some physiological composition of bodily organs affecting the disposition of the body.

TYPES

What sort of individuals are associated with these four temperament according to modern psychology? To the *Sanguine* type belong those individuals who find a certain joy in life, who do not take things too seriously, who attempt to see the most beautiful and pleasant side of every event. They are those who are sad when sadness is proper, without breaking down; they who experience a thrill in the lighter things of life, without losing their sense of perspective. They are especially healthy folk, in whom marked defects are not present. If a stone is in their path, they comfortably and easily walk around it.

The *Choleric* individual is the man who fiercely kicks aside the

¹ III, q. 66, a. 4, ad 3.

stone which lies in his way. He is the type whose striving for power is so intense that he makes more emphatic and violent movements in his gait, his speech, and his gestures. He is interested only in a straight-line aggressive approach.

The *Melancholic* type, on seeing the stone, would remember all their sins, begin brooding sadly about their past life, and turn back. They have no confidence in ever overcoming their difficulties or of getting ahead. Such individuals prefer not to rush a new adventure; if they do begin it is with the greatest caution. Doubt always plays the predominant role. This type think more of themselves than of others. They are so oppressed with their own cares that they can stare only into the past, or spend their time in fruitless introspection.

And lastly, the *Phlegmatics* are almost strangers to our planet. They seem to be removed from the ordinary way of life. Nothing makes a great impression on them. They are hardly interested in anything, make few friends, have almost no contact with life around them. Of all types they perhaps stand at the greatest distance from the business of living or making something of themselves. Therefore, when they reach the stone in their path, they neither kick it, nor walk around it, nor brood over it; they do not see it—they might in their stupor even fall over it.

So far we have taken but a cursory glance at the four types of temperament in a rather descriptive fashion, from the physical or bodily point of view. In so doing we have not indicated anything very complimentary about our temperaments. Is then their purpose something more than merely bodily dispositions? Can we make a spiritual application of them? At first glance, it seems that even on the spiritual side, for Christians striving for perfection, these innate temperaments are natural blocks to our swift advancement. But why should God burden us unnecessarily with dispositions such as these which hinder us rather than aid us to a more perfect way of life? This is a dark view of the picture. We should look at it in brighter and more promising light. For all that God made is good. We must use these apparent stumbling blocks rather as stepping stones to perfection. Can it be done?

IN THE SAINTS Saint Paul—*Choleric*

No one will deny that St. Paul was at one time a great persecutor of the Church. He witnessed the stoning of the first

martyr, St. Stephen, with approval (Act. 7, 58). He could not stand the infidelity of this new Christian sect against the Mosaic law. Being a zealous Jew with a deep love of the Jewish traditions, any deviation caused him uncontrollable wrath. He sought out and pursued the Christians with an unquenchable hatred. He secured authorization from the high-priest to go to Damascus to find the Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem in bonds (Acts. 9, 1).

What was this driving force that demanded of Paul that he be more than a simple by-stander or mere condoner of these persecutions? We can truly say that no little part of it was due to *St. Paul's choleric temperament.*

Considering St. Paul as of choleric temperament we will remember him as a man of strong passions, great ambition, intelligent and strong willed. He was riding to do enormous harm to the Christian Church until God saw fit to cast him from his horse and bring about his conversion. St. Paul's life was changed from that moment on, but his basic temperament remained unchanged. He now channeled his powers for evil to do great things for the honor of God. St. Paul by his temperament was not meant to be passive or luke-warm. He was destined to work a great deal of good or a great deal of harm. We venerate him today as a saint only because he kept his eyes fixed on the glory of God and the conquest of souls for God. For the choleric with comparative ease can become a saint.

A closer look at St. Paul might help to make his temperament more manifest to us. After his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul still remained the conqueror, the leader, the zealot; and the disciples were not too ready to accept this convert wholeheartedly. For a long time he had to prove himself because his strong passions were not perfectly controlled. Looking at the dark side of his temperament we see the man still self-confident and opinionated, as when he blamed St. Peter for his imprudent action. "I withstood him to the face——!" (Gal. 2, 11). St. Paul showed this anger because a choleric is vehemently excited by contradiction, resistance and personal offenses. Besides the predominant characteristic of pride, the choleric's anger is most outstanding. No one can whip out with an angry tongue as a choleric person. He can hurt someone more quickly and bitterly than the most professional antagonist. These furious outbursts of anger notable in choleric like Paul are detrimental to himself and to his intimate friends. His anger could so completely blind

him that he may cast aside the plans for victories, for glories and all earthly gains, for which he has worked for years. St. Thomas on this matter says: "The impulse of passion may arise from its quickness, as in choleric persons . . ." ² Disposition to anger is due to a choleric temperament; and of all the humors, the cholera moves the quickest; for it is like fire. ³

There were other signs of St. Paul's choleric tendencies. He oftentimes refused the help of others and preferred to work alone, as he did with Barnabas and John Mark. False sympathy cannot influence him to neglect his duties or abandon his principles. The choleric can be extremely hard, heartless, even cruel if hindered from his goal. The choleric is by his temperament, full of himself; he is domineering, wanting always to hold the first place and be admired by others and hold them all in submission to him. St. Paul very much seemed to tend this way.

Yet considering his good points, which were indeed more numerous, we find a man strong by nature. He was patient and firm in endurance of physical pains and sufferings as we know from his own accounts of his journeys, his shipwrecks, imprisonments and beatings. His whole life was burdened with fever and sickness. A choleric being of active nature feels a constant inclination to activity and occupation of which St. Paul gave sure proof by his many and distant journeys; journeys that would have taxed the strength of the healthiest of men. St. Paul was a man of action; his speech brief and frank; his appearance and firmness of gaze commanded respect of all those who saw or heard him.

So we see from this that the temperament for St. Paul was not a handicap but the very means by which he attained God. Is this true also of the *Sanguine temperament*? The perfect example of its successful use can be found in another great figure of Apostolic times. It can be found in our very first Pope himself, St. Peter.

St. Peter—*Sanguine*

Most authorities say St. Peter was of predominantly sanguine temperament. Enthusiasm is the notable characteristic of this type. As we noted above this type is especially optimistic, always hopeful and not depressed by misfortunes. He is terribly impetuous and inconsistent, as is very obvious in St. Peter.

² II-II, q. 156, a. 1, ad 2.

³ I-II, q. 46, a. 5.

If we look at Peter from the dark side he always seemed to be leaping before looking, as when he jumped from the boat to walk on the water to Jesus. He was full of confidence and he never considered the risk in such foolhardiness. When he starts to sink in the water so does his brave heart and he cries out in fear to the Lord. Peter being of the sanguine temperament lacked depth; he was inclined to treat of things superficially, never being guided by his intellect but rather by his heart and feelings. Such actions naturally lead to mistakes in judgments and decisions. Because the sanguine person has no deep passions, he is easily led by impressions, unstable in his resolutions, he is captivated by every new idea or mood. For example, Peter quickly drew his sword to defend Jesus and a few minutes later took flight. Peter also promised Jesus that even though all others would betray the Master, he would never, and yet that very same night Peter betrayed Him three times.

Another poor characteristic of the sanguine is his inability to put his mind to spiritual things, his ineptness at grasping a situation or the seriousness of a moment. His mind is on the tangibles about him. Jesus, for example, had just finished telling Peter and the other disciples of his coming sufferings. Peter began to chide him about this, but Jesus rebuked him saying, "Get behind me Satan, for thou dost not mind the things of God but those of men."⁴ These and many other stances of rashness and imprudence are numerous throughout Peter's life.

Thus we see the whole period of Peter's life with Jesus marked by mistakes, rebukes from the Master and general unstableness of character. Such inconsistency had he, that one might think Peter had no character at all; that he was not guided by principles. Yet we know that upon this Rock Christ built his Church. Peter became our first Pope, chosen before all the other apostles. This impulsive, impetuous Peter became the new Moses. Why did Jesus choose this man, so entirely human, so full of faults and failings? We might better ask why Jesus loved Peter so much. This love might be the answer to His choice.

Looking at Peter's temperament now from the bright side we see that he literally wore his heart on his sleeve. Love was his most favorable trait. For St. Thomas says that "sanguine temperaments are more inclined to love."⁵ Peter, even though

⁴ Mark 8, 33.

⁵ I-II, q. 48, a. 2.

he was a blunderer, was an entirely lovable blunderer, whose warm and loving heart for Christ is his excuse. Peter's devotion to Christ, his personal friendship, his loving reverence, so virile and strong, was the ideal of his whole life. It stands behind all his words and all his hasty deeds. Never were more sincere words spoken from this crude fisherman than "Master, Thou knowest that I love Thee." What are some of the other sanguine features on the good side that might be remembered of Peter?

We know also from the Gospels that Peter was a humble man, very humble. Though always by the side of Jesus, he never deemed himself worthy of the Master's love, saying so readily, "Depart from me O Lord, for I am a sinful man." He was head of the Apostles, yet this never gave him an exaggerated sense of worth. His writings and those of the disciples show he remained completely humble in his words and deeds. When St. Paul rebukes Peter in a dispute about the Gentiles, Peter humbly admits his own error and rectifies his mistake. His greatest act of humility was to tell Mark, his close associate, of his own treason in denying the Master three times, letting Mark record in his Gospel, for the whole world to read, the most sorrowful mistake of Peter's life.

We see also that Peter was pleasant company for the Lord, for affability is a desirable trait of the sanguine. Peter was pliable and docile; obedience was easy for him. We know he fared well with his fellowmen and endeared himself to them. All this was necessary if he was to be successful in his later apostolate. He was kind and compassionate; he could show the authority he held after the Ascension but never offended others with his corrections. All these are signs of a developed sanguine temperament, put to good use. His good qualities far outshone his weaker ones. He knew his failings but his good qualities gave pardon for them. Peter is another example of the successful use of temperament.

The remaining temperaments to be considered are the melancholic and the phlegmatic. The Choleric and Sanguine as we have seen are the more active members of the temperament family. The Melancholic and Phlegmatic, we will notice, are passive in their traits; they are inclined more to quietude.

St. Jean Vianney—*Melancholic*

To the melancholic, solitude is beatitude. The word "melancholic" usually brings to mind the dreamer, the poet, the artist and inventor, those who are more or less removed from the

trivialities of society. They are people of few words, deep emotions, a definite slowness and hesitancy in their actions. Their eye is sad and troubled; their gait is slow and heavy. Friendship with this type is more difficult because of their somberness and reserve; they are reluctant to reveal themselves for fear of criticism. Truly in the eyes of the world they are not the type to be much envied. Yet many saints were of a melancholic temperament.

The Cure d'Ars is the noteworthy example of a melancholic saint. On the dark side we can say this about him: he possessed a great lack of confidence, a proneness to discouragement, indecision, anxiety, pessimism, strong aversions, sensitivity to grief and a brooding introspection. From his early childhood we see him as a reserved and timid little lad running off into the woods seeking solitude. As a young seminarian, we read, he was slow in his thinking and class work, with few friends, always losing confidence in his superiors because they did not understand him. To poor Jean Vianney the world was indeed in a sad state, with perversion of the people, bad times and the downfall of morals. The consequence of all this was an excessively sad life, which easily could have assumed the proportions of despair.

But after his ordination to the priesthood and with God's abundant grace working within him, we find a man now controlling these tendencies of his nature for the glory of God. He tried now to look about his little world with optimistic eyes; his soul was on fire with love of his fellowmen, a new hope and confidence awakened in him. His whole life now centered around the care of his flock. The good qualities of his temperament began to take the foreground, qualities which too long had lain dormant. This saint now never allowed his naturally sad, morose disposition to show itself. One glance at the Cross of Christ helped quickly to conquer these unpleasant moods.

Another good quality of the melancholic is his ease and joy in interior prayer. In communication with God the melancholic finds a deep and indescribable peace. This peace of heart, Jean Vianney also now felt in his own sufferings and in ministering to those of his fellowmen. The melancholic is often a great benefactor to his neighbor. Jean guided others to God with overwhelming sympathy, frequently at the cost of tears in the presence of pain or evil. For men were no longer just sinners but souls made in the image of God. No longer crowded by pessimism, his goal was God and all that pertained to God.

Biographers tell us that this humble French priest was soft-hearted, a melancholic trait; he often thought of leaving his parish of Ars to seek a more secluded religious life because of his strong yearnings for God and eternity. He felt continually hampered by earthly and temporal affairs, money matters, meals and all bodily needs. Yet by this apparently unhealthy attitude towards living, he gained heaven. Can we then judge him a fool? Truly God's grace played a big part in his life, but it only perfected the nature, it did not change it. He was always melancholic, but his temperament did not rule him but was ruled by him for the good.

What of *Phlegmatics*?

Lastly let us look briefly at the phlegmatic temperament. Briefly, because there is not too much to consider in this disposition. This is truly the weakest of the temperaments.

Taciturn, inarticulate, lazy, slow, tired: these are the adjectives applied to the phlegmatic by their friends as well as their enemies. People of this temperament are rarely found in positions of authority or state of life requiring self-discipline and long hard labor. Therefore they are not apt subjects for religious life. St. Thomas says the phlegmatic is noted for his weakness of will, "a man fails to stand to that which is counselled, because he holds to it in a weakly fashion by reason of the softness of his temperament. This is also the case with phlegmatic temperaments."⁶ They are weak by nature, not disposed to work, sluggish rather than keen and alert. The phlegmatic person is somnolent, tires easily, is of low intelligence; he moves and thinks slowly and is extremely forgetful—a lethargy and forgetfulness which cause the person to have little interest in the affairs of his life.

We should not suppose, then, that God has made the phlegmatic in vain. Even though the phlegmatic may not possess those heroic virtues generally associated with canonized saints, there is still room for him in heaven. We might recall the old fable of the hare and tortoise. Once the phlegmatic begins to lead a life of virtue, he goes on slowly and steadily at his own pace. Patience may be his characteristic virtue. A phlegmatic with all his handicaps can do good precisely because he works slowly and patiently. If his work does not demand much thinking or mental

⁶ II-II, q. 156, a. 1, ad 2.

labor he will work perseveringly until the task is completed. He is not upset by offenses or trials; he is a good-natured fellow. He remains calm, relaxed, thoughtful and deliberate; all these aiding his very practical judgment. He does not ask much from life since he has no strong passions. Are there phlegmatic saints then? Maybe not famous ones, but among the millions in heaven think of those thousands of humble laybrothers, religious faithful to their daily routine, simple, peace-loving lay-folk—the saints of everyday life.

CONCLUSION

How many saints use this method of self-perfection, making stepping stones of their innate, predominant weaknesses and defects. It is wrong and ungrateful to wish to have another temperament, to want to be like Joe or Jane who seem so generously blessed. Christ's own chosen Apostles were real, live men of flesh and blood, with their faults and foibles as well as their apostolic powers. They had their individual temperaments and were fundamentally human, made from the same clay as we are. With their titles of Saint we too readily regard them as marvels of grace. But they were not born saints; they were not without human temptations, human passions and human failings. All twelve of them were strikingly different human characters, each with his own private battle for self-control and self-perfection. Yet these weak and fallible human beings became inheritors of Heaven. So should it be with us also, for God has given us our particular temperament, with all its peculiarities and inclinations, to be used for the services of the Lord and to contribute to His honor and glory.