

## QUESTION 150

### Drunkenness

Next we have to consider drunkenness (*ebrietas*). And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Is drunkenness a sin? (2) Is drunkenness a mortal sin? (3) Is drunkenness the most serious of sins? (4) Does drunkenness excuse one from sin?

#### Article 1

##### Is drunkenness a sin?

It seems that drunkenness is not a sin:

**Objection 1:** Every sin has another sin that is opposed to it, in the way that [the vice of] daring (*audacia*) is opposed to timidity or cowardice (*timiditas*), and in the way that presumption (*praesumptio*) is opposed to pusillanimity (*pusillanimitas*). But there is no sin opposed to drunkenness. Therefore, drunkenness is not a sin.

**Objection 2:** Every sin is voluntary. But no one wants to be drunk, since no one wants to be deprived of the use of reason. Therefore, drunkenness is not a sin.

**Objection 3:** If an individual is a cause of another individual's sinning, then he himself commits a sin. Therefore, if drunkenness were a sin, then it would follow that those who invite others to take the drink by which they are inebriated would themselves sin. But this seems very harsh.

**Objection 4:** Correction is appropriate for all sins. But correction is not applied to drunkards; for Gregory says, "They should be left to their innate disposition with forbearance (*cum venia suo ingenio sunt relinquendi*), lest they become worse by being torn away from such a habit." Therefore, drunkenness is not a sin.

**But contrary to this:** In Romans 13:13 the Apostle says, "... not in revelry and drunkenness ..."

**I respond:** 'Drunkenness' can be taken in two senses:

In one sense, insofar as it signifies the *defect itself* of a man (a) which occurs because of his having drunk a great deal of wine and (b) from which it results that he does not have full possession of his reason (*non sit compos rationis*). And taken in this sense, 'drunkenness' does not name a sin but instead names a *punitive defect that follows from a sin*.

In the second sense, 'drunkenness' can name *the act by which an individual falls into this defect*. Now there are two ways in which this act can cause drunkenness:

In the first way, because of the great strength of the wine *beyond the drinker's awareness*. And on this score, drunkenness can again occur *without sin*, especially if it is not because of the man's negligence that this happens. As we read in Genesis 9:21, this is the way in which Noah is believed to have become drunk.

In the second way, because of *a disordered desire for and use of the wine*. And on this score drunkenness is a sin, and it is contained under gluttony in the way that a species is contained under its genus. For gluttony is divided into festive revelry (*commessatio*) and drunkenness (*ebrietas*), both of which the Apostle forbids in the cited passage.

**Reply to objection 1:** As the Philosopher points out in *Ethics 3*, insensibility (*insensibilitas*), which is opposed to temperance, "does not occur very much." And so both insensibility itself and all of its species, which are opposed to the species of intemperance, lack a name. Hence, the vice opposed to drunkenness is unnamed. And yet if one knowingly abstained from wine to the extent of greatly damaging his nature, then he would not be immune from sin.

**Reply to objection 2:** This objection goes through for the case of the resulting defect, which is involuntary. However, the unmoderated use of wine is voluntary, and it is in this that the sin consists.

**Reply to objection 3:** Just as an individual who is drunk is excused from sin if he is unaware of

the strength of the wine, so, too, an individual who invites another to drink is excused from sin if he is unaware that the drinker's condition is such that he will be inebriated by this drink. However, if this lack of awareness is absent, then neither of them is excused from sin.

**Reply to objection 4:** As was explained above (q. 33, a. 6), sometimes the correction of a sinner is put off in order that he not be made worse by it. Hence, in *Epistola ad Arelium Episcopum* Augustine says in connection with instances of revelry and drunkenness, "As far as I can tell, these faults are removed not by bitterness, severity, or harshness, but by teaching more than by commanding, by advising more than by threatening. This is what should be done in the case of most sinners, whereas severity should be exercised in the case of the sin of just a few."

## Article 2

### Is drunkenness a mortal sin?

It seems that drunkenness is not a mortal sin [by its species]:

**Objection 1:** In the sermon *De Purgatorio* Augustine says that drunkenness is a mortal sin "if it is assiduous." Now assiduousness involves a circumstance that does not change the species of a sin and so, as is clear from what was explained above (*ST* 1-2, q. 88, a. 5), it cannot aggravate a sin to an infinite degree, so as to make a sin that is mortal [by its species] out of a sin that is venial [by its species]. Therefore, if drunkenness is not otherwise a mortal sin [by its species], then it will likewise not be a mortal sin [by its species] because of this.

**Objection 2:** In the same sermon Augustine says, "Whenever a man takes more meat and drink than is necessary, he should know that this involves one of the lesser sins (*ad minuta peccata noverit pertinere*)." But lesser sins are called venial sins. Therefore, drunkenness, which is caused by immoderate drinking, is a venial sin.

**Objection 3:** It should not be the case that a mortal sin is committed because of a physician. But some individuals drink excessively on the advice of a physician, so that they might afterwards be purged by vomiting—and drunkenness follows from this excessive drinking. Therefore, drunkenness is not a mortal sin.

**But contrary to this:** In the *Canons of the Apostles* one reads, "A bishop, priest, or deacon who is given to gambling or drunkenness must either stop or be deposed, whereas a subdeacon, lector, or cantor who does these things must either stop or be deprived of Holy Communion. And the same holds for the laity." But punishments of this sort are inflicted only for a mortal sin. Therefore, drunkenness is a mortal sin.

**I respond:** As has been explained (a. 1), the sin of drunkenness consists in the immoderate desire for and use of wine. But there are three ways in which this can occur:

(a) It can occur in such a way that the individual is unaware that his drinking is immoderate and has the potential to inebriate him. And, as has been explained (a. 1), in a case like this drunkenness can occur without sin.

(b) It can occur in such a way that the individual understands that the drinking is immoderate, but does not think that the drink has the potential to inebriate him. And in such a case the drunkenness can involve a venial sin.

(c) It can happen that an individual knows well that his drinking is immoderate and inebriating, but he wills to incur drunkenness rather than to abstain from drinking. And this sort of individual is properly called a drunkard, since moral entities take their species not from what happens incidentally beyond [the agent's] intention, but from what is intended in its own right. And, so understood, drunkenness is a mortal sin, since on this understanding a man knowingly and willingly deprives himself of the use of

reason, by which one operates in accord with virtue and turns aside from sins. And so he commits a mortal sin by giving himself over to the danger of sinning (*periculo peccandi se committens*). For in *De Patriarchis* Ambrose says, “We claim that drunkenness should be avoided, since because of it we are unable to avoid serious sins. For the sins we avoid when sober, we unknowingly commit because of drunkenness.” Hence, drunkenness is in its own right (*per se loquendo*) a mortal sin.

**Reply to objection 1:** The assiduousness brings it about that the inebriation is a mortal sin—not just because of the reiteration of the act, but because it is impossible for a man to be assiduously inebriated without his knowingly and willingly incurring the drunkenness, given that he has experienced many times both the strength of wine and his own susceptibility to drunkenness.

**Reply to objection 2:** To take in more food and drink than is necessary pertains to the vice of gluttony, which is not always a mortal sin. But, in addition, to consume drink knowingly up to the point of drunkenness is a mortal sin. Hence, in *Confessiones* 10 Augustine says, “Drunkenness is far from me; have mercy lest it come near me. But overindulgence has sometimes crept up on Your servant.”

**Reply to objection 3:** As has been explained (q. 141, a. 6), food and drink should be moderated in a way that befits bodily well-being. And so just as it sometimes happens that food and drink that are moderate for a healthy individual are excessive for a sick individual, so, too, it can happen conversely that what is excessive for a healthy individual is moderate for a sick individual. And in this way, when someone eats or drinks a lot on the advice of a physician in order to induce vomiting, one should not think of the food or drink as excessive.

Nor is it necessary, in order to induce vomiting, that the drink should be inebriating, since drinking warm water also causes vomiting. And so no one is excused from being drunk for this reason.

### Article 3

#### Is drunkenness the most serious of sins?

It seems that drunkenness is the most serious of sins (*ebrietas sit gravissimum peccatorum*):

**Objection 1:** Chrysostom says, “Nothing is as much friendly to a demon as drunkenness and lasciviousness (*lascivia*), which is the mother of all vices.” And *Decretals*, dist. 35, says, “Above all, clerics should avoid drunkenness, which is the root of all vices and nourishes them.”

**Objection 2:** Something is said to be a sin because it excludes the good of reason. But it is most of all drunkenness that does this. Therefore, drunkenness is the greatest of sins.

**Objection 3:** The magnitude of a sin is shown by the magnitude of its punishment. But drunkenness seems to be punished most of all; for instance, Ambrose says, “There would not be servitude among men if there were no drunkenness.” Therefore, drunkenness is the greatest of sins.

**But contrary to this:** According to Gregory, spiritual vices are greater than carnal vices. But drunkenness is included among the carnal vices. Therefore, drunkenness is not the greatest of vices.

**I respond:** A thing is said to be bad because it is bereft of some good. Hence, the greater the good that a given bad thing is bereft of, the more serious the badness is. Now it is clear that the divine good is greater than a human good. And so sins that are directly contrary to God are more serious sins than the sin of drunkenness, which is directly opposed to the good of human reason.

**Reply to objection 1:** A man is especially prone to sins of intemperance because sentient desires and pleasures of the sort in question are connatural to us. And, accordingly, sins of this sort are especially friendly to the devil, not because they are more serious sins than the others, but because they occur more frequently among men.

**Reply to objection 2:** There are two ways in which the good of reason is impeded: (a) through what is *contrary to reason*, and (b) through what *takes away the use of reason*. What is contrary to reason

has more of the character of evil than what takes away the use of reason for a while. For the use of reason, which is undermined by drunkenness, can be both good and bad, whereas the goods which are associated with the virtues and which are undermined by what is contrary to reason are always good.

**Reply to objection 3:** Servitude followed from drunkenness as an *occasional cause*, insofar as Ham received the curse of servitude in his posterity because he had laughed at his drunk father. But servitude was not *directly* the punishment for drunkenness.

#### Article 4

##### Does drunkenness excuse one from sin?

It seems that drunkenness does not excuse one from sin:

**Objection 1:** In *Ethics 3* the Philosopher says, “Drunkenness merits a twofold curse.” Therefore, drunkenness aggravates a sin rather than excusing it.

**Objection 2:** One sin is not excused by another, but is instead increased by it. But drunkenness is a sin. Therefore, it does not excuse one from a sin.

**Objection 3:** In *Ethics 7* the Philosopher says that just as a man’s reason is bound fast by drunkenness, so, too, it is bound fast by disordered sentient desire (*per concupiscentiam*). But disordered sentient desire does not excuse one from sin. Therefore, neither does drunkenness.

**But contrary to this:** As Augustine explains in *Contra Faustum*, Lot is excused from incest because of his drunkenness.

**I respond:** As has been explained (a. 1), in the case of drunkenness there are two things to focus on, viz., (a) the *resulting defect* and (b) the *preceding act*.

On the part of the *resulting defect*, in which the use of reason is bound fast, drunkenness is able to excuse the sin, insofar as it causes involuntariness through ignorance.

However, on the part of *preceding act*, it seems that a distinction must be drawn:

For if the drunkenness has followed from that preceding act without sin, then the resulting sin is totally excused from any fault, as perhaps happened in the case of Lot.

By contrast, if the preceding act was culpable, then the individual is not entirely excused from the resulting sin, which is rendered voluntary by the voluntariness of the preceding act, insofar as the individual falls into the resulting sin by doing something illicit. Still, the resulting sin is diminished, just as the nature of the voluntariness is diminished. Hence, in *Contra Faustum* Augustine says, “Lot should not shoulder as much blame as the incest deserves, but he should shoulder as much blame as the drunkenness deserves.”

**Reply to objection 1:** The Philosopher does not say that the drunkard deserves a *more serious* curse; instead, he says that he deserves *two* curses, because of the twofold sin.

An alternative reply is that he is speaking in accord with the law of a certain Pittacus, who, as *Politics 2* reports, ordered that “if drunkards carried out beatings, they were to be punished more severely than sober individuals, because they were being injurious in more than one way.” “In this,” Aristotle continues in the same place, “he seems to have paid more attention to usefulness”—i.e., limiting the injuries—“than to the leniency that one ought to exercise in the case of drunkards”—i.e., given that they are not in their right minds.

**Reply to objection 2:** As has been explained, drunkenness is able to excuse one from sin not because it itself is a sin, but because of the defect that results from it.

**Reply to objection 3:** Disordered sentient desire (*concupiscentia*) does not *totally* bind reason in the way that drunkenness does—unless, perhaps, the desire is so strong that it renders a man insane.

Still, the passion of sentient desire does indeed diminish a sin, since it is less serious to sin out of weakness than to sin out of malice.