Virtues and Temperaments

I. What is temperament?
   A. Virtues are fixed interior dispositions to act in a morally good way.
      1. With a virtue, a person will act well dependably, and, because he acts well, he will live a happier life.
      2. Virtues are habits that are acquired by repeated actions. We call the collection of a person’s virtues (and vices) his character.
   B. Temperament is an inborn set of aptitudes, inclinations and tendencies.
      1. Temperament includes differences in modes of perceiving, experiencing emotions, interacting with others, aptitudes for different sorts of activities, likes and dislikes.
      2. These aptitudes or inclinations are not themselves morally good or bad; they can be used for morally good actions or for morally bad actions. In themselves they are morally neutral. An example would be being introverted or extroverted. Neither of these is, in itself, morally good or morally bad (unlike courage and cowardice).
      3. These aptitudes and tendencies tend to be inborn; they tend to be pretty steady throughout life. As inborn, we can say that they are God-given. It is part of the variety God has wanted within the human race (it keeps things from getting too boring).
      4. All these, we can say, constitute a person’s personality. Virtues correspond to character and temperament corresponds to personality (this is a bit of a simplification, but is basically valid).
         a. Since ancient times it has been noticed that people have different sets of aptitudes and inclinations and that these are distinct from virtues and vices. Classically four temperaments were distinguished: Melancholic, Sanguine, Choleric, and Phlegmatic. This classification endured into the nineteenth century and people still refer to it today.
         b. In modern times there are a variety of schemes for categorizing personality types (temperaments), e.g., Meyer-Briggs (16 basic types), Holland personality types (6 types), and many others.
      5. They key point in talking about temperaments is to recognize that people are naturally different and these differences are not just differences of character. Of course, underneath all the differences is human nature which is the same in all.
6. We should not use temperament as an excuse for lack of virtue (e.g., shy persons who might excuse themselves from being properly social with others because they are “introverts”).
   a. Everyone, regardless of his natural temperament, needs to struggle to acquire the moral virtues and build up a good character.
   b. The usual presentations of the various personalities do not usually distinguish between virtuous and vicious development of a particular temperament. They will sometimes treat a vice that is often found in a particular temperament as if it were part of the temperament itself. For example, because it is often found in choleric persons, becoming excessively angry can be taken to be part of the choleric temperament. But in fact it is a vice.

II. The need to understand one’s own and others’ temperaments

   A. Basically this is needed to live Christian charity.
      1. The common tendency is to impose our own personality/temperament on others.
      2. We tend to think there is something wrong with people who are different from ourselves and blame them for it.
      3. Charity requires that we understand people as they are and do not fault them where there is no fault and do not insist that they become some other way, when there is nothing wrong with the way they are.

   B. It is necessary to understand the temperaments of one’s children’s
      1. Each child will have his or her own temperament. Different children, even in the same family, can have quite different temperaments. It is necessary to recognize this so as to be able to encourage the strengths of each child (e.g., artistic talents).
      2. Need to avoid insisting on what they may never be able to do well (e.g., a clumsy boy will never be a good athlete). The tendency is to want them to do what is suitable to our own temperament (what we like doing and value).
      3. Need to see the weaknesses that typically accompany each temperament and help the child to avoid them. Since they have a natural inclination in the direction of the weakness (e.g., choleric persons tend to become angry or introverts tend to be shy), they need to be especially encouraged to fight against these weaknesses and establish a virtuous character.

III. Encouraging the strengths and fighting the weaknesses

   A. As we have said, each temperament will have characteristic strengths and weaknesses

   B. The strengths will tend to come out and children will follow their strengths, because it comes naturally and they find our early on that they are good at this or
that. Problems may arise if parents or teachers do not appreciate their strengths, e.g., a father who does not appreciate artistic talents and just wants his son to play sports, or vice versa.

C. Parents need to watch for the weakness that can come with temperaments. Some examples:

1. Introverts can be excessively shy, and unsocial
2. People who like novelty (e.g., Myer Briggs Perceivers) often can be disorderly in material things, often do not finish projects they begin, often can be easily distracted as they work, etc.
3. People who naturally like order can become excessively rigid; they can miss the forest for the trees, etc.
4. People who naturally have strong feeling of sympathy for others can become overly sentimental.

Understanding for improvement

Understanding a child's temperament can help reframe how parents interpret children's behavior and the way parents think about the reasons for behaviors. By parents having access to this knowledge now helps them to guide their child in ways that respect the child's individual differences. By understanding children's temperaments and our own helps adults to work with them rather than try to change them. It is an opportunity to anticipate and understand a child's reaction. It is also important to know that temperament does not excuse a child's unacceptable behavior, but it does provide direction to how parents can respond to it. Making small and reasonable accommodations to routines can reduce tension. For example a child who is slow paced in the mornings may need an extra half hour to get ready. Knowing who or what may affect the child's behavior can help to alleviate potential problems. Although children obtain their temperament behaviors innately, a large part that helps determine a child's ability to develop and act in certain ways is determined by the parents. When a parent takes the time to identify and more importantly respond to the temperaments they are faced with in a positive way it will help them guide their child in trying to figure out the world.

Recognizing the child's temperament and helping them to understand how it impacts his/her life as well as others is important. It is just as important for parents to recognize their own temperaments. Recognizing each individual's temperament, will help to prevent and manage problems that may arise from the differences among family members.

Temperament continues into adulthood, and later studies by Chess and Thomas have shown that these characteristics continue to influence behavior and adjustment throughout the life-span.

The four temperament types

Each of the four types of humors corresponded in ancient times to a different personality type. These were associated with a domination of various biological functions. Lievegoed suggested that the temperaments come to clearest manifestation in childhood, between approximately 6 and 14 years of age, after which they become subordinate (though still influential) factors in personality.

Sanguine
The sanguine temperament is traditionally associated with air. People with this temperament tend to be lively, sociable, carefree, talkative, and pleasure-seeking. They may be warm-hearted and optimistic. They can make new friends easily, be imaginative and artistic, and often have many ideas. They can be flighty and changeable; thus sanguine personalities may struggle with following tasks all the way through and be chronically late or forgetful.

Pedagogically, they can be best reached through awakening their love for a subject and admiration of people.

**Choleric**

The choleric temperament is traditionally associated with fire. People with this temperament tend to be egocentric and extroverted. They may be excitable, impulsive, and restless, with reserves of aggression, energy, and/or passion, and try to instill that in others.

They tend to be task-oriented people and are focused on getting a job done efficiently; their motto is usually "do it now." They can be ambitious, strong-willed and like to be in charge. They can show leadership, are good at planning, and are often practical and solution-oriented. They appreciate receiving respect and esteem for their work.

Pedagogically, they can be best reached through mutual respect and appropriate challenges that recognize their capacities.

**Melancholic**

The melancholic temperament is traditionally associated with the element of earth. People with this temperament may appear serious, introverted, cautious or even suspicious. They can become preoccupied with the tragedy and cruelty in the world and are susceptible to depression and moodiness. They may be focused and conscientious. They often prefer to do things themselves, both to meet their own standards and because they are not inherently sociable.

Pedagogically, they can be best met by awakening their sympathy for others and the suffering of the world.

**Phlegmatic**

The phlegmatic temperament is traditionally associated with water. People with this temperament may be inward and private, thoughtful, reasonable, calm, patient, caring, and tolerant. They tend to have a rich inner life, seek a quiet, peaceful atmosphere, and be content with themselves. They tend to be steadfast, consistent in their habits, and thus steady and faithful friends.

Pedagogically, their interest is often awakened by experiencing others' interest in a subject.

People of this temperament may appear somewhat ponderous or clumsy. Their speech tends to be slow or appear hesitant.