

The Four Temperaments
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I. The Sanguine and Melancholic

Psychologists have many opinions about the definition and classification of temperament. For our purposes we define temperament as the pattern of inclinations that proceed from the physiological constitution of the individual. It is a dynamic factor that takes into account the way that the individual will react to stimuli of various kinds.

Since it is rooted in the physiological structure, temperament is something innate and hereditary. It is that element of personality which makes the personality unique, since individuality is rooted in matter, and temperament is the natural inclination of the somatic structure. It is, therefore, something permanent and admits of only secondary modification. One’s temperament can never be totally destroyed without destroying the individual. The axiom “grace does not destroy nature but perfects it” has its most obvious application in the area of temperament.

The classification of the temperaments is nothing more than a handy framework which has been constructed according to the predominant characteristics of various physiological constitutions. It is by no means exclusive or definitive, nor does it signify that there are “pure” temperaments.

As a matter of fact, individual persons generally manifest a combination of the characteristics of several temperaments. Whenever there are several elements combined in any composite, however, one or another will usually predominate at any given time. In the matter of temperament we find that, although persons are usually a composite of many characteristics, one or another characteristic will specify the temperament.

Bearing this in mind, we shall discuss the four temperaments according to the ancient classification of sanguine, melancholic, choleric and phlegmatic.

1. The sanguine temperament

A person of sanguine temperament reacts quickly and strongly to almost any stimulation or impression, but the reaction is usually of short duration. The stimulation or impression is quickly forgotten, and the remembrance of past experiences does not easily arouse a new response.

Among the good qualities of the sanguine temperament, we may list the following:

- affability and cheerfulness;
- sympathy and generosity toward others;
- sensitivity and compassion for the sufferings of others;
- docility and submission to superiors;
- sincerity and spontaneity.

There may at times be a violent reaction to injuries received, but all is soon forgotten and no rancor remains. There is no obstinacy and stubbornness but the ability to act with complete self-

detachment. Others are attracted by the individual's goodness of heart and contagious enthusiasm.

Sanguine persons usually have a serene view of life and are optimists. They are not discouraged by difficulties or obstacles but hope for a successful outcome in all their efforts. They are gifted with a great deal of common sense and a practical approach to life; they tend to idealize rather than criticize.

Since they possess an affectionate nature, they make friends easily and sometimes love their friends with great ardor or even passion. Their intellects are alert and they learn quickly, although often without much depth. Their memory dwells on pleasant and optimistic things, and their imagination is active and creative. Consequently, they readily excel in art, oratory and the related fields, though they do not often attain the stature of the learned or the scholars.

Sanguine persons could be superior types of individuals if they possessed as much depth as they do facility and if they were as tenacious in their work as they are productive of new ideas and projects. The following saints are examples of the sanguine temperament: St. Peter, St. Augustine, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Francis Xavier and St. Rose of Lima.

The defects of the sanguine temperament

But each temperament will also be characterized by certain qualities which are dangerous and could become predispositions to evil. Thus the principal defects of the sanguine temperament are superficiality, inconstancy and sensuality.

The first defect – superficiality - is due primarily to the ease and rapidity with which these persons conceive ideas and the creative activity of their imagination. While they appear to grasp in an instant even the most difficult problem or subject, they sometimes see it only superficially and incompletely. As a result, they run the risk of hasty judgments, of acting with insufficient reason, and of formulating inaccurate or false conclusions. They are more interested in breadth of knowledge than depth.

The inconstancy of the sanguine person is the result of the short duration of his impressions and reactions. He may pass quickly from joy to sorrow. He quickly repents of his sins but may return to them on the first occasion that presents itself. Being readily moved by the impression of the moment, he easily succumbs to temptation.

As a rule he is not drawn to abnegation, sacrifice or any effort that is of long duration. For that reason he has great difficulty in observing custody of the external senses and the imagination and is easily distracted in prayer. His occasional periods of great fervor are often followed by discouragement and languor.

From the foregoing it is evident that sensuality finds easy access to the sanguine temperament. Such persons are easy victims of gluttony and lust. They may react strongly and with great sorrow after they have fallen, but they lack the energy and perseverance to fight against the inclinations of the flesh when the passions are again aroused. The entire organism is quickly alerted when the occasion is offered for sensual pleasure, and the strong tendency of the individual to

sensuality causes the imagination to produce such phantasms very easily.

Fostering the good and suppressing the bad

The development and control of any temperament requires the fostering of its good qualities and the eradication or suppression of its defects. The sanguine person should utilize his good qualities, such as energy, affection, vivacity and sensitivity, but he should take care that these qualities be directed to objects that are good and wholesome. For him more than for any other person the advice of St. Augustine has special significance: "Choose wisely and then love with all your heart."

At the same time, he must fight against the evil inclinations of his sanguine temperament. To overcome superficiality, he must acquire the habit of reflection and of thinking a matter through before he acts. This means that he has special need of deliberation or judgment as a subjective part of the virtue of prudence.

Against his inconstancy he will strengthen his will to carry through resolutions that have been made and be faithful in the practice of prayer and the performance of good works, even in periods of aridity or in times of hardship and difficulty. The secondary helps which are of the greatest importance in this regard are a plan of life, followed conscientiously, and the daily examination of conscience, with self-imposed penances for failures. Sanguine persons sometimes need an expert spiritual director whom they should obey without question.

Lastly, sensuality must be combated by constant vigilance and an unrelenting struggle. Above all, the sanguine person must flee immediately from the occasions of sin and take special care to observe a strict custody of the eyes. The custody of the external senses and the imagination should be further safeguarded by the practice of recollection and practices of mortification, for it would be futile to try to avoid sensuality if one were to leave the windows of the senses open to every kind of distraction and temptation.

2. The melancholic temperament

The melancholic temperament reacts weakly to stimulus, and it is difficult to arouse; however, after repeated impressions the reaction is strong and lasting, so that the melancholic temperament does not forget easily.

As regards good qualities which serve as predispositions to virtue, persons of melancholic temperament are inclined to reflection, solitude, piety and the interior life.

They are compassionate toward those who suffer, attracted to the corporal works of mercy, and able to endure suffering to the point of heroism in the performance of their duties. They have a sharp and profound intellect, and, because of their natural bent to solitude and reflection, they generally consider matters thoroughly in silence and tranquility.

They may become detached and dry intellectuals, or contemplatives who are concerned solely with the things of God. They usually appreciate the fine arts but are more drawn to the sciences, especially the speculative sciences.

As regards their affective powers, when they love it is with difficulty that they detach themselves from the object of their love. They suffer greatly if others treat them with coldness or ingratitude.

The power of their will is greatly affected by their physical strength and health. If their physical powers are exhausted. Their will is weak and practically null, but if they are in good health and spirits they are energetic workers and joyful in spirit.

They have great sobriety and continence because they seldom experience the disorderly passions which may torment the persons of a sanguine temperament. We may say in general that this temperament is opposed to the sanguine temperament as the choleric temperament is opposed to the phlegmatic temperament.

Among the saints who possessed this particular temperament are St. John, the beloved disciple, St. Bernard, St. Aloysius Gonzaga and St. Therese of Lisieux.

Unfavorable traits

The unfavorable traits of the melancholic temperament are the following:

The tendency for isolation sometimes is symptom of melancholy
an exaggerated tendency to sadness and melancholy;
an inclination to magnify difficulties and thus to lose confidence in self;
excessive reserve and timidity, with a propensity to scrupulosity;
lack of resolution.

Persons of melancholic temperament do not show their feelings as do the sanguine; they suffer in silence because they find it difficult to reveal themselves. They always seem to see the difficult and pessimistic side of things. Many enterprises are never begun because of their lack of confidence and resolution.

Those who are in charge of educating or training the melancholic temperament should keep in mind their strong tendency to concentrate excessively on themselves; otherwise there is danger of doing them an injustice or of treating them in a tactless manner.

It is important to inculcate in these persons a strong confidence in God and in themselves, as well as a more optimistic view of life. Since they have good intellects and tend to reflection, they should be made to realize that there is no reason for them to be timid or irresolute.

At all costs the director must destroy their indecision and cowardice and get them to make firm resolutions and to undertake projects with enthusiasm and optimism. Sometimes it is necessary to give them a special regimen of rest and nourishment and to forbid them to spend long hours in prayer and solitude or to observe fasts.

3. The choleric temperament

Persons of a choleric temperament are easily and strongly aroused, and the impression lasts for a long time. Theirs is the temperament which produces great saints or great sinners. While all the

temperaments can be utilized as material for sanctity, it seems that the largest number of canonized saints possessed a choleric temperament.

The good qualities of this temperament can be summarized as follows:

- great energy and activity;
- sharp intellect;
- strong and resolute will;
- good powers of concentration;
- constancy, magnanimity, and liberality.

Choleric persons are practical rather than theoretical. They are more inclined to work than to think. Inactivity is repugnant to them, and they are always looking forward to the next labor or to the formulation of some great project. Once they have set upon a plan of work, they immediately set their hand to the task. Hence this temperament produces many leaders, superiors, apostles. It is the temperament of government and administration.

These persons do not leave for tomorrow what they can do today, but sometimes they may try to do today what they should leave for tomorrow. If difficulties or obstacles arise, they immediately set about to overcome them. Although they often have strong movements of irascibility and impatience in the face of problems, once they have conquered these movements they acquire a tenderness and sweetness of disposition that are noteworthy.

The saints who possessed a choleric temperament are numerous, but we shall mention only St. Paul, St. Jerome, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Francis de Sales.

Bad tendencies of the choleric

The tenacity of the choleric temperament sometimes produces the following evil effects:

- hardness,
- obstinacy,
- insensibility,
- anger and pride.

If choleric persons are resisted, they may easily become violent, cruel, arrogant, unless the Christian virtues moderate these inclinations. If defeated by others, they may nurture hatred in their hearts until they have obtained their vengeance. They easily become ambitious and seek their own glory.

They have greater patience than do the sanguine, but they may lack delicacy of feeling, are often insensitive to the feelings of others, and therefore lack tact in human relations. Their passions, when aroused, are so strong and impetuous that they smother the more tender emotions and the spirit of sacrifice which springs spontaneously from more sympathetic hearts. Their fever for activity and their eagerness to execute their resolutions cause them to disregard others, to thrust all impediments aside, and to give the appearance of being heartless egoists.

In their treatment of others they sometimes display a coldness and indifference which reaches the

point of cruelty. The only rights which they acknowledge are the satisfaction and attainment of their desires. It is evident from the foregoing that, if the choleric person pursues the path of evil, there is no length to which he will not go in order to achieve his goal.

Training the choleric person

Choleric persons can be individuals of great worth if they succeed in controlling and guiding their energies. They could arrive at the height of perfection with relative facility. In their hands even the most difficult tasks seem to be brought to an easy and ready solution. Therefore, when they have themselves under control and are rightly directed, they will not cease in their efforts until they have reached the summit.

They must be taught to keep themselves under the reins of self-mastery, not to act with precipitation, but to mistrust their first inclinations.

Above all, they need to cultivate true humility of heart, to be compassionate to the weak and the uninstructed, not to humiliate or embarrass others, not to exert their own superiority, and to treat all persons with tenderness and understanding. In a word, they should be taught how to be detached from self and to manifest a generous love toward others.

4. The phlegmatic temperament

The phlegmatic is rarely aroused emotionally, and if so, only weakly. The impressions received usually last for only a short time and leave no trace.

The good characteristics of the phlegmatic person are these:

- he works slowly but assiduously;
- he is not easily irritated by insults, misfortunes or sickness;
- he usually remains tranquil, discreet and sober;
- he has a great deal of common sense and mental balance.

He does not possess the inflammable passions of the sanguine temperament, the deep passions of the melancholic temperament, or the ardent passions of the choleric temperament.

In his speech he is orderly, clear, positive and measured, rather than florid and picturesque. He is more suited to scientific work which is the fruit of long and patient research and minute investigation than to original productions.

He has a good heart, but it seems to be cold. He would sacrifice to the point of heroism if it were necessary, but he lacks enthusiasm and spontaneity because he is reserved and somewhat indolent by nature.

He is prudent, sensible, reflexive and works with a measured pace. He attains his goals without fanfare or violence because he usually avoids difficulties rather than attacking them.

Physically the phlegmatic is usually of robust build, slow in his movements, and has an amiable

face. St. Thomas Aquinas seems to have possessed the best qualities of the phlegmatic temperament.

The defects of the phlegmatic

The defective qualities of the phlegmatic temperament are as follows:

Their slowness and calmness cause these persons to lose many good opportunities because they delay so long in putting works into operation.

They are not too interested in events that take place around them, but rather tend to live by and for themselves, almost to the point of egoism.

They are not suitable for government and administration.

They are not usually drawn to corporal penances and mortification, as St. Teresa points out, and there is no fear that they will kill themselves by penance and self-abnegation.

In extreme cases they become so lethargic and insensible that they become completely deaf to the invitation or command that would raise them out of their stupor.

The phlegmatic can avoid the bad effects of his temperament if he is inculcated with deep convictions and if he demands of himself methodical and constant efforts toward greater perfection. He will advance slowly, to be sure, but he will advance far.

Above all, he must not be allowed to become indolent and apathetic, but should be directed to some lofty ideal. He, too, needs to gain control of himself, not as the choleric, who must restrain and moderate himself, but to arouse himself and put his dormant powers to good use.

Conclusion on temperaments

Having seen a brief description of the four basic temperaments, we repeat that none of these temperaments actually exists in a “pure” state. The reader himself may be aware that the complete portrait of his own temperament has not been found in any one of the four temperaments but that he possesses characteristics of several. This explains to a large extent why there are so many different opinions and theories in psychology on the question of temperaments. Nevertheless, each person will exhibit sufficient predominant qualities of a given temperament so that he can be classified under that particular type.

If we were to attempt to delineate the perfect temperament, we would select the best qualities of each temperament, taking care that they are not mutually exclusive. Thus we would take from the sanguine his sympathy, generous heart and vivacity; from the melancholic, the depth and delicacy of feeling; from the choleric, his inexhaustible energy and tenacity; and from the phlegmatic, his self-control, prudence and perseverance.