

# Theory 7

## THE FOUR TEMPERAMENTS

The four temperaments were originally proposed by Hippocrates — the "father of medical science" — 350 years before the birth of Christ. Hippocrates used them to explain differences in personality, based on the predominant bodily fluid; hence the rather unappealing names: choleric, sanguine, melancholic and phlegmatic.

Ancient spiritual writers have used insights from Hippocrates in order to understand some components of our human psyche that, once identified, can assist us in uncovering root causes for certain types of behavior. These components, known as **Temperaments**, are inclinations and reactions that each person has regarding given circumstances.

**For example**, when we are assigned a huge task, or have a large block of free time, or find ourselves at a party, how do we react to these situations? Spiritual writers and modern psychologists have utilized this knowledge to help people know themselves better, and to find good strategies for overcoming bad habits.

Rooted as it is in our physiological structure, our temperaments are innate and hereditary. They are permanent and can be modified only secondarily through life's experiences and especially through virtue, without ever being totally eliminated or destroyed. Acquiring the moral virtues are the greatest means to shaping and modifying them in order to make the most out of each.

There are **four classical types of temperaments**, and these are based on the predominant characteristics of our own internal make-up. Most of us exhibit a combination of these temperaments, but one usually predominates.

As stated earlier, these are emotional reactions to situations that we have, and these reactions operate in a typical fashion in each of us. That is to say, that there is a predictable pattern to certain of our responses when presented with certain situations.

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Understanding our temperament is like taking a personal inventory of our natural strengths and weaknesses.

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We need to know what our **weaknesses** are, so that we can "calculate the cost": what skills should we develop and what virtues should we grow in, so that we can more effectively serve Christ and his Church. The temperaments tell us which **strengths** to appreciate as gifts from God, and those areas in which we need to prayerfully grow.

**For example,** if I am a melancholic, I discover that I am tempted to focus on difficulties and have a tendency to be judgmental. Knowing this, I will endeavor to combat my timidity, build confidence in God and in his instruments, and try not to "sweat the small stuff." I will try to focus less on myself and grow in the virtue of supernatural hope.

**Another example:** a very peaceful and cooperative phlegmatic may find that he does not need to work on the virtue of docility — for he is naturally so — but perhaps should develop the virtues of audacity, fortitude, and lack of dependence on human respect.

## Sanguine:

This temperament reacts quickly and strongly to certain stimuli, but is short in duration. Sanguines are cheerful, affable, sympathetic, sensitive, compassionate, and are often the life of the party or the class clown. They are gifted with common sense and make friends easily.

Some negative aspects of this temperament are: superficiality, inconstancy, impulsivity, and sensuality. Sanguines may repent of their sins quickly, only to return to them on the first occasion. Thus, it is crucial to encourage them to persevere through the time of temptation.

## Melancholic:

Melancholics are inclined to reflection, piety, prayer, creativity, and compassion. They tend to have but a few friends, but keep these friends for a life-time. They do not forget easily, so an emotion aroused in them, for good or for ill, will last for a long time, especially if the emotion involves a hurt to themselves, either perceived or real. They tend to be very intelligent, as they are introspective, and spend much time pondering life. If their physical powers are exhausted, their will is weak. They make good artists, poets, philosophers, and contemplatives.

Negative aspects of this temperament are that they concentrate heavily on themselves, a tendency to exaggerate negative experiences, hence a constant feeling of sadness and melancholy, and often lose confidence in themselves and can be timid.

## Choleric:

This temperament is what is often characterized as a 'go-getter,' or 'mover-and-shaker.' Choleric are strongly aroused and the impression lasts for a long time. They have great energy, sharp intellects, strong and resolute will, practicality, and excel at risk-taking and taking initiative. Inactivity is repugnant to them. Hence, they always have an iron in many fires.

The weaknesses of this temperament are as obvious as the strengths, as they are often tied together. Choleric can be insensitive to others, stubborn, prideful, violent, cruel,

and impulsive. They can unfortunately make people feel stepped on or used, and can lack compassion.

## Phlegmatic:

This type of temperament is rarely aroused emotionally, and, if so, only weakly. They work slowly but assiduously. They are not easily irritated by insults, misfortune, or sickness. They can remain tranquil and balanced, and have a good deal of common sense.

Their defects are that they are so slow and calm which causes them to lose many good opportunities because they delay so long in putting works into operation. They tend to be insular, and live in and for themselves.

## Summary:

As was stated earlier, most of us are a combination of these temperaments. Yet, it is helpful for us to discover which one predominates so that we can know which virtues are suitable to acquire. With each, there are unique strengths and weaknesses. As the strengths are honed and the weaknesses modified (virtue accomplishes both of these goals), any of these can become the greatest of saints.

These classifications can be very helpful in raising children as well. For instance, with my phlegmatic daughter, stern challenges followed with stern warnings of punishment if the challenge is not met only crushes her spirit. If I want her to do something, I have to approach her in a very different way.

For my sanguine son, who is absent minded and rarely focuses on what he's doing at the moment, recognizing his temperament helped me not constantly yell at him for having left his homework, computer, clothing, food, drink, and other miscellaneous items strewn about the house when he was younger.

## Temperaments & Heaven

I like to think of these temperaments in light of our relationship to heaven:

The **Choleric** approaches the world with the understanding that, although this isn't heaven, we are on earth with a job to do, namely, to begin building the Kingdom of Heaven now! Therefore, the choleric is very task oriented, not so concerned with people's feelings but rather with accomplishing the goal. Heaven may be home, but we have a job to do on earth too, so let's get to it!

The **Sanguine** acknowledges that heaven awaits, but the joys and levity of heaven can and should be appreciated now! Also, divine tasks are always enjoyed more with a

friend. Thus, building relationships and the kingdom is entertaining. Sanguines are good at remembering that!

**Melancholic's** have the temperament that reminds us that, despite the tasks, work, even joys of this life, it is NOT our home! The melancholic recognizes the glass is half empty because he knows that we are made for more: for heaven—for union with God. And no matter what, this is not heaven, no matter how important and fun the worldly task may be.

The **Phlegmatic** person realizes all the above but knows that slow and steady wins the race! No need to get lost in all the excitement or lose one's nerve. The stable, consistent pursuit of any goal attains it. Worldly emotion may have its role, but so, too, solid pacing and deliberate commitment.

**In conclusion**, we should not be upset at the discovery of the temperament God gave us nor be envious of the others but rather do what we are called to and learn from the other temperaments so as to improve in our areas of weakness. We should also work together. This is the best way to build the Kingdom: zealously, courageously, joyfully, steadily, with friendliness and dedication!

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I am a sanguine melancholic. As I like to tell my wife, I am happy-go-lucky about my brooding worries! I remember getting defensive with my spiritual director many years ago who tried telling me that I am always so negative in how I interpret things. I tried telling her that I wasn't negative, that I was a realist; she, on the other hand, was a Pollyanna nun who obviously lived in a cocoon! Her patient perseverance won out, (she is a Choleric Sanguine) and I slowly realized that she was right. I tend to over analyze and negatively interpret information and people. Knowing this has helped me learn to choose to assume other's motives or ambiguous actions/words in a better light.

Thus, in this lesson we have learned about using the Sacrament of Confession and self-knowledge in the temperaments to uncover our strengths and weaknesses, and grow into the sons and daughters of God we are called to be.

**Resource: Toolbox 4: Description of the Temperaments**