

ANGER:

Aquinas in Dialogue with Modern Psychology

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger, and do not leave room for the devil. (Eph. 4:26-27)

Every Wednesday night, priests, religious, and laypeople praying Compline come across this scripture passage in which St. Paul exhorts the people of Ephesus to live a truly Christian lifestyle. The verse summarizes the Christian perspective of anger and its role in the Christian life, a perspective that has developed over centuries of thought and dispute and continues to be debated today. Anger has been regarded with suspicion because of its potentially destructive consequences. Indeed, the emotions in general are often perceived as irrational and harmful to human flourishing.¹ In the thirteenth century, however, St. Thomas Aquinas proposed a different view, one that embraces the emotions as essential to the human person and as necessary for growing in virtue and union with God. After defining anger, he shows that it is a God-given faculty that is intrinsically tied to reason. Hundreds of years later, although the field of psychology has yet to reach a definitive consensus on the concept of anger, many psychological findings give credence to Aquinas' view. Looking to Jesus as a model of emotional integration and taking Aquinas' insights with the latest science, the Christian can gain a fuller understanding of anger, and most importantly, how to direct it toward its proper end.

Aquinas categorizes each emotion as either concupiscible, meaning it "is inclined to seek what is suitable, according to the senses, and to fly from what is hurtful"; or as irascible, meaning that it "resists these attacks that hinder what is suitable, and inflict harm."² The object of an irascible emotion "is something arduous, because its tendency is to overcome and rise above obstacles."³ Aquinas defines anger, which belongs in the latter category, as "a desire for vengeance" after an injury is inflicted.⁴ Anger involves sorrow from the grievance, hope of revenge (without which the injury leads only to sorrow), and pleasure from the anticipation of

revenge.⁵ Unique because it has no contrary emotion, anger is directed toward two objects: “to vengeance itself, which it desires and hopes for as being a good, wherefore it takes pleasure in it; and to the person on whom it seeks vengeance, as to something contrary and hurtful, which bears the character of evil.”⁶ Aquinas borrows Nemesius’ description of anger as “the sword-bearer of desire” that “assails whatever obstacle stands in the way of desire.”⁷ Thus, anger can be more simply understood as a response to a present, difficult evil that works to eliminate anything standing in the way of attaining happiness, which is the ultimate aim of every appetitive desire within the human person.⁸ Aquinas argues that all of the emotions naturally obey reason.⁹ Aware that anger often carries a reputation of irrationality, he takes special care to discuss whether reason has a role in anger, something he does not do for the other emotions.¹⁰ He explains that the desire for vengeance necessitates the determination of the appropriate punishment for a perpetrated injury, which requires an act of reason.¹¹ Due to its reliance on reason, anger is less tainted by original sin than the concupiscible emotions are, a conclusion that may surprise many Christians.¹² That said, anger itself does not make a decision about the course of action to pursue; if one chooses to pursue vengeance, anger simply serves as a motivator.¹³

Aquinas’ description of anger presents some difficulties. First, one may object to his claim that when a difficult evil is judged to be impossible to overcome, sorrow results instead of anger.¹⁴ It is plausible that a person judging a situation as hopeless may still fly into a rage. In *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion*, Nicholas Lombardo responds that such a reaction is nonetheless the result of a belief, albeit an irrational one, that the fit of rage would achieve something.¹⁵ Initially, this answer is somewhat unsatisfactory as it does not take into account the person who is furious precisely because his or her ability to take vengeance has been frustrated. For instance, consider a mother who flies into a frenzied rage because someone killed her child and she understands that nothing she can do, including killing the murderer, can bring her child back to life. One solution is that the mother is reacting to a separate pain inflicted—the grievance

of being rendered powerless over events in her life—that carries its own hope of revenge: the regaining of a sense of control. The morality and virtuousness of anger will be discussed later, but another possibility is that only an intemperate person who displays disordered anger would continue raging even after realizing that the situation is hopeless. Therefore, it does seem that hope is necessary to anger.

Another objection to Aquinas' account of anger is that in common experience, sadness is unnecessary to the experience of anger.¹⁶ Lombardo suggests that to avoid this difficulty, anger can be thought of as a response to “a future good that is presently arduous, that is, a future good that is attained through the elimination of a present evil.”¹⁷ While hope is still necessary to the experience of anger, sadness is not, but neither is sadness precluded from co-occurring.¹⁸ Although Aquinas' definition of anger raises some technical issues, on the whole his account is robust.

Because the emotions are now considered a topic properly studied in psychology, comparing Aquinas' ideas with modern psychological research is imperative. It is important to note that finding studies on anger as such is difficult, which psychologists themselves recognize; most research focuses on the relation between anger and aggression.¹⁹ Consequently, although people generally understand what is meant by “anger,” it is not a concept with an agreed upon definition. Some even argue that anger should remain undefined.²⁰ Thus, several definitions of anger will be presented. In his 1983 article “Studies on Anger and Aggression: Implications for Theories of Emotion,” James Averill defines anger simply as “a response to some perceived misdeed.”²¹ Jan Smedslund, in “How Shall the Concept of Anger Be Defined?” (1993) offers the following definition: “a feeling involving a *belief* that a person one cares for has, intentionally or through neglect, been treated without respect, and a want to have that respect re-established.”²² In a 2010 psychological encyclopedia, researchers Raymond DiGiuseppe and Raymond Tafrate define anger as “a subjectively experienced emotion with high sympathetic autonomic arousal” that “is elicited by the perception of a threat to one's physical well being, property,

present or future resources, self-image, social status or image as projected to one's group, maintenance of social rules that regulate daily life, or comfort."²³

Smedslund's definition is the closest to Aquinas' because it includes the components of injury, desire, vengeance, and reason. The other two definitions conspicuously leave out the desire for vengeance. Averill explains that his definition is purposely minimal because he wants to examine the subjective experience of anger without too many preconceived notions.²⁴ DiGiuseppe and Tafrate, on the other hand, emphasize the physical experience of anger, which conflicts with other researchers' claims that "mild or moderate anger need not be accompanied by high levels of arousal."²⁵ However, the encyclopedia authors note that "anger produces a strong tendency to approach rather than to avoid the eliciting stimuli," making it "the only negative emotion to motivate approach behaviors."²⁶ These latter points mesh quite well with Aquinas' account. The researchers also assert that "anger motivates a response of antagonism."²⁷ "Antagonism" carries a negative connotation, whereas revenge for Aquinas is a neutral term that can mean the rectification of injustice.²⁸ In fact, among the emotions, anger holds the distinction of triggering the greatest variety of responses, from silent fuming to violent outburst.²⁹ According to Averill, "contrary reactions" such as overt friendliness toward the offender are far more common than direct aggression,³⁰ and almost half of aggression that does occur as a result of anger is nonphysical.³¹

Two particular findings in psychological science support Aquinas' claim that reason is important in the experience of anger. First, as they describe in their article "Thinking Straight While Seeing Red: The Influence of Anger on Information Processing," Wesley Moons and Diane Mackie found in a series of three experiments that mild or moderate anger actually enhances analytic processing.³² Second, Averill's research on the qualitative difference between anger and annoyance sheds light on how reason informs a person's response to a frustrating situation. He argues that because anger is more strongly tied to morality than annoyance is, an annoyed person will attempt to disguise the feeling and exit the situation, whereas an angry person may

purposely pursue a confrontation. In other words, anger impels one toward action in a way that annoyance does not.³³ Imagine, for instance, sitting in a movie theater while someone a few seats over munches loudly on popcorn. The “pain inflicted” is that it is harder to hear the dialogue on screen, and the “vengeance” desired is simply for the person to stop chewing so loudly. One may have the urge to ask the perpetrator to eat more quietly, but reason informs the beleaguered moviegoer that the popcorn will soon be finished, confronting the person may cause additional disturbance, and the person is likely unaware of his or her offense. In response, one chooses to suffer silently or perhaps move to another seat. On the other hand, if the instigator purposely shows disrespect by talking loudly, especially after polite requests to stop, then one would begin to feel anger at the willful offense and be motivated to rectify the situation, perhaps by calling the manager. Thus, the comparison of different levels of anger lends more credence to Aquinas’ claim that anger responds to rational thought.

Understanding the structure of anger, the next step is to explore the morality of anger as understood by Christians. In the Christian tradition, much dispute surrounds Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:22: “But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.” Although the context of the passage is anger leading to murder, some have interpreted Jesus’ words to be a categorical ban on anger.³⁴ St. Augustine, however, proposes an interpretation known as the “person/sin distinction”: “[A]nger at persons is always sinful, while anger at sin is virtuous” because it is with cause.³⁵ Aquinas originally adopted the distinction, but then abandoned it for two reasons. First, the distinction does not encompass all the ways in which anger can be immoral, nor does it account for the fact that not all anger against sin is justified; it may be too excessive. Second, Aquinas argues that anger and hatred are different, and he distinguishes between them by contending that anger is directed toward a particular person, whereas the object of hatred can be something general, such as sin, an inanimate object, or a class of people.³⁶ If the object of anger is sin, as Augustine proposes, then there is no distinction between hatred and anger. Instead, Aquinas asserts that “the hater wishes evil to his enemy, as evil, whereas the angry man

wishes evil to him with whom he is angry, not as evil but in so far as it has an aspect of good.”³⁷ The example of a parent and child shows that Aquinas’ analysis is correct: Generally, a parent who is angry with a child for disobedience does not hate the child, but rather loves the child and wants what is best for him or her.

From a phenomenological perspective, the person/sin distinction is merely mental gymnastics. One becomes angry with the wrongdoer precisely because that person freely chose to perpetrate an evil.³⁸ In a situation in which one realizes that the perpetrator was not culpable for committing an offense—e.g. because of a mental illness, or the wrongdoing was accidental—one’s anger usually subsides. The desire for vengeance inherent in anger is not for vengeance on the sin itself; although one desires that the injury be remedied, it is always in reference to the individual who sinned. For example, if a person’s belongings are stolen and later found and returned by a third party, the victim will be happy to retrieve his or her possessions. Nonetheless, without a resolution with the thief, whether in the form of an arrest or an apology, in some sense the situation remains unresolved. Aquinas’ rejection of the person/sin distinction therefore constitutes an important development in the understanding of anger.

Once it is established that being angry with someone is not inherently wrong, the Christian will want to understand what virtuous anger does and does not look like. To be righteous, anger must be properly ordered under both of its aspects: its object and its mode. In its object, anger is good, or “zealous,” as Aquinas calls it, if vengeance is rationally applied. Conversely, anger is sinful if it leads one to desire punishment disproportionately, toward an innocent party, using illegal means, or for reasons other than the restoration of justice.³⁹ Christians must exercise the virtue of clemency, which “concerns the reasonable moderation of acts of punishment.”⁴⁰ Meekness, or “the reasonable moderation of the passion of anger,” must be cultivated to make sure that anger is rational in its mode, or intensity.⁴¹ Otherwise, it may be too intense or last too long, as when someone chooses to ruminate over an offense, or it may not be intense enough.⁴² Some may be surprised at the latter point, but Aquinas stresses that because people have bodies, “so also does it belong to the perfection of moral good,

that man should be moved unto good, not only in respect of his will, but also in respect of his sensitive appetite.”⁴³ It would be unnatural for a father not to feel anger upon hearing that his child has been violently attacked and for him not to seek justice. Thus, against claims that anger is incompatible with a Christian lifestyle because it may show ingratitude to God and preclude forgiveness, Aquinas’ account demonstrates that when anger is shaped by reason and does not disobey it, not only is it not sinful, but it is a necessity in a world marred by original sin.⁴⁴ After all, for God to give humans a capacity that cannot be virtuous would be illogical and contrary to his nature.⁴⁵

More compelling, however, is that the Gospels provide accounts of Jesus, a sinless man, becoming angry.⁴⁶ Because Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, his experience of the emotions was unique. Jesus felt anger in a way that God, who is immaterial and does not feel sensible pain, does not.⁴⁷ Lombardo adds that Jesus’ “affectivity is more human than ours, not less.”⁴⁸ Jesus suffered on the cross more than anyone else could have precisely because his “humanity was more perfectly human, and therefore his body and soul were more sensitive.”⁴⁹ In “Christian Anger? A Contemporary Account of Virtuous Anger in the Thomistic Tradition,” William Mattison further points to three specific ways in which Jesus experienced anger differently. First, Jesus was never oriented toward disproportionate retribution. Second, Jesus’ anger was always reasonable. And finally, whereas in an average person anger “disturbs” reason (despite relying on it), this was not the case for Jesus.⁵⁰ Christians thus naturally look to Jesus as the model of emotional integration in an imperfect world.⁵¹ Because of the differences in Jesus’ experience of the emotions, however, Stephen Voorwinde cautions in *Jesus’ Emotions in the Gospels* against trying to replicate Christ’s emotions too literally: “Christians are not designed to be emotional clones of Jesus.”⁵² Instead, they should be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who works with each person’s unique temperament and situation. That said, Voorwinde argues that Christians should imitate Jesus’ emotional responses when they “are enjoined in the more prescriptive passages of Scripture, such as in the Epistles and in the recorded teaching of Jesus.”⁵³

Expressing anger to a reasonable extent presents a challenge. St. John of the Cross reflects that even Christians who sincerely strive toward union with God are often prone to imperfections regarding anger.⁵⁴ In his discussion of the spiritual life, he contends that vicious anger “is an imperfection that must be purged through the dryness of the dark night.”⁵⁵ The challenge of being temperate in anger might make some Christians more inclined to suppress angry feelings. Psychiatrist Conrad Baars warns, however, that suppression is unhealthy both psychologically and spiritually. Anger that goes unaddressed results in growing resentment. Even more importantly, stifling one’s anger denies the perpetrator the opportunity to understand the effects of his or her actions as well as the chance to apologize, make restitution for the injury, and change his or her ways.⁵⁶ In other words, one should be honest about angry feelings.⁵⁷

Mattison provides additional practical advice on how to guide one’s anger to become virtuous. The first step is continence, in which one recognizes and controls unreasonable anger. Sources such as “divine law, conscience, upbringing, prayer, education, [and] advice from friends” can inform the intellect about whether anger is legitimate or vicious.⁵⁸ Next, in order to both prevent oneself from lashing out, and in order to subdue the anger itself, a person may employ a number of psychological methods, such as taking deep breaths, walking away from the situation, or counting to ten. Such restraint is vital, because psychological research indicates that “blowing off steam” (for instance, by punching something) when angry actually leads to increased anger.⁵⁹ Since the brain is “plastic,” meaning that neural connections are malleable, every action reinforces a tendency toward a particular response. Therefore, every time a person chooses to practice mindfulness instead of lashing out in the midst of anger, an inclination toward reasonable assessment is reinforced so that eventually, a virtuous reaction to a provocation becomes automatic.⁶⁰ Grace, without which virtue is impossible, assists the person’s growth throughout this process.⁶¹

In his paradigm of the emotions, Aquinas emphasizes that the purpose of the emotions is to guide the human person in the pursuit of goodness and happiness, which culminates

in God. Because of the corrupting effects of original sin, however, the emotions are prone to disorder and lead people to pursue lesser goods, making proper cultivation of the emotions essential. Disordered anger in particular can lead to grave harm. Nonetheless, in a fallen world, anger is vital because it impels people to fight for justice, which leads to peace. For this reason, Paul advises the Ephesians to take the balanced perspective that Aquinas would eventually espouse: While righteous anger should never be repressed, it must be carefully guided by reason, a task with which modern psychology can assist, but that ultimately requires God's grace. Even in righteous anger, however, Christians must follow Christ's example and forgive.

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this paper, 'emotions' will be used in place of Aquinas' terms 'passions' and 'affections' in order to avoid interdisciplinary terminological issues. 'Emotion' or 'emotions' refers to particular phenomena such as joy, sadness, anger, etc.

2. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 81.2. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Online edition 2008. <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

3. Ibid.

4. *ST I-II*, 46.4. According to Nicholas Lombardo, 'vengeance' is to be understood as a neutral term. See Nicholas Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 66.

5. Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire*, 66.

6. I.e., joy and sadness are opposites, but anger has no corresponding opposite emotion in Thomistic categories; *ST I-II*, 46.2.

7. Ibid., obj 1.

8. Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire*, 33.

9. Ibid., 239.

10. Ibid., 67.

11. *ST I-II*, 46.4.

12. Ibid., 83.4.

13. Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire*, 239.

- 14.** STI-II, 46.1.
- 15.** Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire*, 67, n83.
- 16.** Ibid., 73.
- 17.** Ibid.
- 18.** Ibid., 74.
- 19.** James R. Averill, "Studies on Anger and Aggression: Implications for Theories of Emotion," *American Psychologist* 38, no. 11 (1983): 1153.
- 20.** Jan Smedslund, "How Shall the Concept of Anger Be Defined?" *Theory and Psychology* 3, no. 1 (1993): 5-10.
- 21.** Averill, "Studies on Anger and Aggression," 1150.
- 22.** Smedslund, "How Shall the Concept of Anger Be Defined?" 30.
- 23.** Raymond A. DiGiuseppe and Raymond Chip Tafrate, s.v. "Anger," in *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology* (4th ed.) eds. Irving B. Weinger and W. Edward Craighead (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), 100-101.
- 24.** Smedslund, "How Shall the Concept of Anger Be Defined?" 1150.
- 25.** Wesley G. Moons and Diane M. Mackie, "Thinking Straight While Seeing Red: The Influence of Anger on Information Processing." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 33, no. 5 (2007): 717.
- 26.** DiGiuseppe and Tafrate, "Anger," 100.
- 27.** Ibid.

- 28.** Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire*, 66.
- 29.** DiGiuseppe and Tafrate, "Anger," 100.
- 30.** Averill, "Studies on Anger and Aggression," 1148. It should be noted that the research cited only examines anger in Western culture. As Mattison explains, since emotional experience is not merely biological but also social, one should be careful in making generalizations across cultures. See William C. Mattison III, "Virtuous Anger? From Questions of *Vindictio* to the Habituation of Emotion," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 1 (2004): 173.
- 31.** *Ibid.*, 1147.
- 32.** Moons and Mackie, "Thinking Straight While Seeing Red," 717.
- 33.** Averill, "Studies on Anger and Aggression," 1152.
- 34.** William C. Mattison, III, "Jesus' Prohibition of Anger (Mt 5:22): The Person/Sin Distinction from Augustine to Aquinas." *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 861, 845.
- 35.** *Ibid.*, 840-843.
- 36.** *Ibid.*, 855.
- 37.** *ST I-II*, 46.6.
- 38.** *Ibid.*, 46.7, ad 3.
- 39.** *ST II-II*, 158.2.
- 40.** William C. Mattison, III, "Christian Anger? A Contemporary Account of Virtuous Anger in the Thomistic Tradition." Ph.D. diss.,

University of Notre Dame, 2002. 279.

41. Ibid.

42. William C. Mattison, III. *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 244; *ST* II-II, 158.8.

43. *ST* I-II, 24.3; Mattison, “Virtuous Anger?” 166-167.

44. Mattison, “Jesus’ Prohibition of Anger,” 857.

45. Ibid., 856.

46. Ibid.

47. Mattison, “Christian Anger?” 266.

48. Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire*, 206.

49. Ibid.; *ST* III, 46.3.

50. Mattison, “Christian Anger?” 267-268.

51. Ibid., 273-274.

52. Stephen Voorwinde, *Jesus’ Emotions in the Gospels* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2011), 217.

53. Ibid.

54. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), 370.

55. Ibid.

- 56.** Conrad W. Baars, *Feeling and Healing Your Emotions* (Plainsfield, N.J.: Logos International, 1979), 196.
- 57.** Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire*, 106.
- 58.** Mattison, "Virtuous Anger?" 172.
- 59.** Brad J. Bushman, Roy F. Baumeister, and Angela D Stack, "Catharsis, Aggression, and Persuasive Influence: Self-Fulfilling or Self-Defeating Prophecies?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76, no. 3 (1999): 375.
- 60.** Ibid., 174.
- 61.** Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire*, 137.