
THE MORAL STATUS OF ANGER:
THOMAS AQUINAS AND JOHN CASSIAN

ABSTRACT:

Is anger at another person ever a morally *excellent* thing? Two competing answers to this question can be found in the Christian intellectual tradition. John Cassian held that anger at another person is never morally virtuous. Aquinas, taking an Aristotelian line, maintained that anger at another person *is* sometimes morally virtuous. In this paper I explore the positions of Cassian and Aquinas on this issue. The core of my paper consists in a close examination of two arguments given by Aquinas in support of his view. The first involves the usefulness of anger in the moral life; the second focuses on the nature of the human being as a composite of soul and body.

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I explore two contrasting positions on the moral status of anger. More specifically, I am interested in the question of whether anger at another person is ever a morally *excellent* thing. Two opposing answers to this question can be found in the Christian intellectual tradition. The 5th Century monk John Cassian took the view that anger at another person is never morally virtuous. Thomas Aquinas, taking an Aristotelian line, maintained that anger at another person *is* sometimes morally virtuous (and, indeed, that a lack of anger is sometimes grounds for moral censure). I think Aquinas is right in this debate, and that we can learn something important about the role of anger in the moral life by attending to his views.

In what follows I examine and defend Aquinas's position, using the contrast of Cassian's views to exhibit Aquinas's position and arguments in a clearer light. I first sketch Cassian's position and some of the principal considerations that can be marshaled in its favor, and then turn to Aquinas's account.

I have chosen Cassian as a foil for Aquinas for two reasons. First, Cassian is an influential figure in the history of Christian thought. Despite his controversial theology of grace, his writings were

esteemed by such luminaries as St. Benedict, Alcuin, St. Peter Damian, St. Dominic, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. Francis de Sales.¹ To my mind, the fact that Aquinas and Cassian disagree on the moral status of anger is an interesting fact, precisely because both Cassian and Aquinas are key figures in the Christian intellectual tradition. There are of course numerous disagreements on major issues between key figures in the Christian tradition—my point is merely that an examination of such disagreements often proves to be fruitful.

Second, Cassian presents a strong case in support of a view opposed to Aquinas's, and does so even while sharing many of Aquinas's ethical commitments. Cassian's worries about the morality of anger are worries that Aquinas takes seriously. And yet Aquinas explicitly considers and rejects key premises of Cassian's position.² Seeing how Aquinas responds to Cassian's worries, and seeing just why Aquinas ultimately rejects Cassian's position, helps one to grasp better the contours of Aquinas's view.

II. CASSIAN ON ANGER

Sometime between 425 and 430 A.D., John Cassian wrote *The Monastic Institutes*, at the request of Bishop Castor of Apt.³ As Cassian reports, Castor had asked him “to describe to the brothers of [Castor's] new monastery the monastic customs which we saw in action in Egypt and Palestine and which the fathers there explained to us.”⁴ In the second part of this work, Cassian describes the causes and remedies of the “principal vices,” reckoned “to be eight in number” by the monks of Egypt and Palestine.⁵ The fourth such vice is anger, or wrath. Following his teachers, Cassian takes the position that one ought never be angry at another. According to Cassian, anger is a disease of the soul and a great obstacle to

¹ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 151 – 157.

² See *Summa theologiae* (ST) II-II.158.1 obj. 2 and ad 2, and *Questiones disputatae de malo* (QDM) 12.1 objs. 4 and 6 and Aquinas's replies.

³ John Cassian, *The Monastic Institutes*, (henceforth MI) trans. Jerome Bertram (London: The Saint Austin Press, 1999), x.

⁴ MI, preface, p. 4.

⁵ MI preface, p. 5.

perfection. “An athlete of Christ who competes lawfully,” he writes, “must eradicate the emotion of anger.”⁶

Cassian was writing to Christian monks, a self-selected group living in a very different milieu than that in which we find ourselves today. It is therefore not clear that Cassian’s views map easily onto contemporary Western society. Nevertheless, some of Cassian’s reasons for his position are worthy of consideration.

We can divide Cassian’s arguments for his position into two basic groups. The first group is properly theological. He quotes a Scriptural passage (taking it as authoritative), and then gives an interpretation of the passage that supports his claim about anger. Among other passages, Cassian adduces St. Paul’s injunction that “all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander” should be put away from us (Eph. 4:31), and Christ’s comments on anger in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire (Mt. 5:21-22).⁷

An advantage of Cassian’s view on anger, from one theological perspective, is that it allows us to give straightforward interpretations of the texts just mentioned, and many others as well.

The second group comprises those arguments and considerations that do not involve premises drawn from revelation (that is, the philosophical arguments).⁸ It is on this group that I shall focus.

In his discussion of anger, Cassian repeatedly stresses the fact that anger blinds judgment and prevents sound deliberation.⁹ His point here is not hard to see: a strong emotion of anger clouds one’s

⁶ MI, book 8, ch. 22, p. 137.

⁷ All Scripture texts not contained within other quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

⁸ I do not mean to imply that Cassian himself consciously separates these two groups of arguments.

⁹ See MI, book 8, chs. 1, 6, and 10.

judgment, and since good moral action depends on good moral judgment, anger hinders good moral action.

It might be objected that there are times when deliberation is in fact a bad thing. Hamlet, for example, goes wrong precisely in deliberating for too long a time. If we assume for the sake of argument that the morally good action for Hamlet to pursue was to take punitive action against Claudius, it appears that anger would have helped Hamlet to perform a morally good action, by helping him conclude deliberation.

Cassian could respond to this objection by distinguishing between appropriate deliberation and an inappropriate inability to conclude deliberation. Let appropriate deliberation be the reasonable amount of deliberation, given all relevant circumstances. So defined, appropriate deliberation is never a bad thing. Hamlet's problem is not that he appropriately deliberates; his problem is that he *fails* to appropriately deliberate. If Hamlet had appropriately deliberated, he would have settled upon the right course of action more swiftly. Given this distinction, the question for the objector is whether or not anger inhibits appropriate deliberation. And, Cassian would argue, since anger inhibits the use of reason, anger always inhibits appropriate deliberation. In some cases anger inclines one to conclude deliberation too hastily. In others anger inclines one to settle on the wrong course of action. And in those cases where we might think anger is helpful to appropriate deliberation, cases where a speedy resolution of deliberation *is* appropriate, proper dispositions (such as the virtue of justice) suffice for appropriate deliberation. Anger is not needed to hasten one's deliberation because sound practical wisdom will achieve the same end. To return to our example, Hamlet was not in need of the passion of anger; he was in need of a suitable appreciation for justice and a firm and steadfast will to pursue it.

The preceding objection to Cassian's position depends on the claim that anger would have helped Hamlet take morally appropriate action. An objector could press the generalized claim that anger is useful in situations where injustice must be opposed and wrongdoers corrected. To this objection Cassian would respond by denying that anger is ever useful or helpful for the performance of good actions, including

such good actions as the correcting of wrongdoers or the righting of injustice.¹⁰ Cassian realizes that the faults or crimes of others sometimes demand corrective action on our part, but he denies that this action should involve the passion of anger. As he sees it, the one who aims at correcting a wrongdoer or righting an injustice will be better able to perform his task if his moral vision is not obscured by anger.

Commenting on *Ephesians* 4:31 (“let all anger, indignation, violence and blasphemy be eliminated from among you with all ill-will”), Cassian writes:

When he says, “let all anger be eliminated from among you”, he makes no exception as if it could ever be needful or useful for us. ...One who wishes to heal the wound of another should be healthy and free from all debilitating sickness, lest in the Gospel’s words they say, “Physician, heal thyself!” (*Luke* 4:23) and lest he observe a speck in his brother’s eye, without seeing the beam in his own eye; how will he be able to see to remove the speck from his brother’s eye when he carries the beam of wrath in his own eye? (*Matthew* 7:3-5)¹¹

So Cassian denies that anger is useful in correcting wrongdoers, on the grounds that anger inhibits the corrector’s ability to accurately assess a situation and determine the best response.

We can put forward an additional reason in support of Cassian’s position on the uselessness of anger. There are many instances in which person A’s correction of person B’s wrongdoing would be much less effective were person A to administer the correction angrily, since person B would respond defensively to A’s anger. By maintaining a firm yet tranquil composure, A can communicate a rebuke or administer a punishment (even a severe one) in a way that B is more likely to accept or benefit from. St. Francis de Sales, a sixteenth century Catholic Bishop influenced by Cassian, develops this very point:

Undoubtedly, we must oppose what is wrong, and steadfastly check the vices of those under our care, but we must do so quietly and gently. ...The correction which is administered through passion, although reasonable, will not be as effectual as if reason alone were the instigator; for the

¹⁰ Cf. MI, book 8, chs. 5, 7.

¹¹ MI, book 8, ch. 5, p. 128.

reasonable soul is naturally subject to reason, but tyranny only subjects it to passion; and wherever reason is accompanied by passion, it is rendered hateful in proportion, and its just empire is lowered by its unworthy society. The peaceful visit of a prince gratifies and comforts his people, but when he is accompanied by an army although it may be for the public good, these visits are very unacceptable and mischievous, since, however strictly military discipline is observed, it is impossible always to insure that none shall suffer unjustly. So, while reason reigns and administers its reproofs, corrections, and chastisements, albeit with strictness and severity, it is loved and approved; but if it is accompanied by anger, wrath, and passion (which St. Augustine styles it soldiers), it becomes more an object of terror than of love, and it will be resisted and disliked.¹²

Let us take stock of Cassian's position thus far. Cassian's main argument is that anger always blinds moral judgment and is therefore never virtuous. In response to the objection that anger is sometimes useful as an impetus to conclude deliberation or as a help in administering justice, Cassian maintains that deliberation can be concluded and justice administered more effectively by one who is sober and composed than by one who is gripped with anger.

Cassian also considers and rejects the maxim that one is permitted to be angry provided that one has good cause to be angry. Keenly aware of the human capacity for rationalization, Cassian fears that permission to be angry "with good cause" would be "a pretext for anger 'without cause.'"¹³ Since "no one will admit that he is angry without cause no matter what the reason for his wrath,"¹⁴ a maxim that permits anger with good cause would be of no use in guiding one's actions. The angry man always considers his anger to be justified and so would never quell his anger on the basis of such a maxim. Just as today we

¹² St. Francis de Sales, *Philothea or An Introduction to the Devout Life* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan, 1994), 139-40.

¹³ MI, book 8, ch. 21, p. 136.

¹⁴ MI, book 8, ch. 21, p. 136.

might think that it is safer for alcoholics to avoid alcohol altogether than to try to moderate their alcohol consumption, Cassian thinks that it is safer to avoid anger altogether than to try to moderate it.¹⁵

For these and other more directly theological reasons, Cassian holds that a monk “aiming at perfection...must be a stranger to all taint of anger and wrath...”¹⁶ In Cassian’s view, a complete lack of anger conduces to moral perfection: “Now if we want to gain that pitch of perfection and its divine reward...we must not only eliminate anger from our actions, but also eradicate it from our thoughts.”¹⁷ Cassian would thus hold that anger at another is never morally virtuous or excellent.¹⁸

III. THOMAS AQUINAS ON ANGER

As I see it, Cassian’s view has serious problems, both philosophically and as an interpretation of revealed Christian doctrine; but in this paper I wish to critique Cassian’s position from a philosophical

¹⁵ St. Francis de Sales makes the same point: “It is better (says St. Augustine, writing to Profuturus) to exclude wholly even the slightest wrath, albeit just and reasonable, for once having entered the heart it is hard to dislodge; especially though it enters in but a mote, it speedily waxes great and becomes a very beam. For if it abides with us, and, contrary to the Apostle’s injunction, the sun goes down upon our wrath, and it is turned into hatred, we can no longer set ourselves free, for then it will be fed by a thousand false fancies and delusions; inasmuch as no angry man ever thinks his anger unjust. It is safer, then, to avoid all anger, rather than to try and guide our anger with discretion and moderation...” (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, 140).

¹⁶ MI, book 8, ch. 5, p. 128. Cassian’s statement here does admit of one exception – anger directed at oneself. He writes, “we have the healthy instinct of anger given us for a valid reason, for which alone it is useful and healthy to feel anger, that is when we are aroused to combat the evil passions of our own hearts, and are indignant that our secret thoughts turn to things which we would be ashamed to do or even speak of before men” (MI, book 8, ch. 7, p. 129).

¹⁷ MI, book 8, ch. 20, p. 135.

¹⁸ Cassian holds that anger at another is never morally virtuous, but whether Cassian also holds that anger at another is never morally justified is a slightly different question. While interesting, this further issue does not bear directly on the core question of the paper, so I will pass over a discussion of it.

perspective, not from a theological one. I'll do so by examining and defending St. Thomas's alternative account of the relationship between anger and moral excellence.

An appreciation of Thomas's views on anger requires some understanding of his broader theory of the passions in general; accordingly, I shall discuss the passions in general before turning to anger in particular.

Aquinas's account of the causes, structure, and effects of the passions is complex, includes elements based on erroneous biology, and is in some ways foreign to the contemporary sensibility for biological reductionism. Despite his use of biological theories now known to be false (e.g. that the bodily change involved in anger is a boiling of the blood around the heart), the general tenets of his account remain valid. This is so because the bulk of his analysis concerns higher-level claims about the functioning of human passions (e.g. a passion can influence choice), and these claims are no less plausible today than they were in Aquinas's time. I provide below a generalized description of Aquinas's account of the passions.¹⁹

Suppose you see a square figure drawn on the left side of a chalkboard. Now suppose that you look to the right side of the board and see written there the definition of a myriagon (a closed plane figure with 1000 equal sides). When you look at the left side of the board, you become aware of the square by means of one of your senses, that is, you sensibly apprehend the square. When you look to the right you also become aware of a geometric figure, but in a very different way. You neither see a 1000-sided figure nor even picture one in your imagination. While you do sensibly apprehend numerous chalk marks on the board (the words in the definition), you do not sensibly apprehend a myriagon. Yet you still become aware of a myriagon in some fashion. You could think about its properties and could even deduce

¹⁹ Lest I distract from the main question at hand, I shall be brief, including the bare minimum of analysis required for an exposition of Aquinas's position on the morality of anger. For more on Aquinas's account of the passions, see Peter King, "Aquinas on the Passions," in *Aquinas's Moral Theory: Essays in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, eds. S. MacDonald and E. Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 101-132.

conclusions about it if you wished. To distinguish this mode of apprehension from sensible (or sensitive) apprehension, let us say that you apprehend a myriagon intellectually.²⁰

Consider next that it is one thing to apprehend an object and another thing to desire or shun that object. Appetite (desire, inclination, tendency toward) differs from apprehension. Now, just as one can distinguish between sensitive and intellectual apprehension, one can also distinguish between sensitive and intellectual appetite. Notice the difference between the instinctive, bodily craving one feels when one is hungry and smells food and the more reflective, ethereal desire one might have for a new medicine which one has never taken (or even seen) but which one knows will improve one's health. In the latter situation, one would not have a bodily craving for the medicine, but one could nonetheless intensely desire it. As a first pass towards understanding the distinction between sensitive and intellectual appetite, take one's craving for food as an example of sensitive desire, and the desire for the new medicine as an example of intellectual desire.

Perhaps the best way to get an intuitive handle on the distinction between desires of the sensitive appetite and desires of the intellectual appetite (the will) is to consider cases where the two are at odds. Suppose that you greatly desire to regain your health, and therefore greatly desire to take your medicine, but you also find its taste repulsive. In virtue of an act of your sensitive appetite, you are inclined away from taking the medicine; in virtue of an act of your intellectual appetite, you are inclined toward it.

I include these examples to motivate two distinctions employed by Aquinas: (i) the distinction between sensitive apprehension and intellectual apprehension, and (ii) the distinction between sensitive appetite and intellectual appetite. On Aquinas's view, humans share with other animals several powers (or faculties) that enable acts of sensitive apprehension (in most animals, the five external senses and several internal senses), as well as a power that enables acts of sensitive desire and aversion, called the sensitive appetite. By means of the sensitive appetite, humans experience a certain set of reactions to objects

²⁰ The myriagon example comes from Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. E.I. Watkin (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959), 116.

sensibly apprehended as desirable or undesirable. But humans also have an intellectual apprehensive power, the intellect, and an intellectual appetite, the will. The intellect enables its possessor to intellectually apprehend objects, while the will enables its possessor to intellectually desire or shun objects intellectually apprehended as good or evil.²¹

Properly speaking, passions are movements or operations of the sensitive appetite.²² Since the “sensitive appetite is a power of a corporeal organ,”²³ a movement in the sensitive appetite involves a change in a corporeal organ. Thus passions, in the proper sense of the term, always involve a “corporeal transmutation,” i.e., a bodily change.²⁴

Thus far I have spoken of *the* sensitive appetite, but in fact Aquinas conceives of the sensitive appetite as a generic power, divided into two specific powers called the concupiscible and irascible powers.²⁵ This distinction seems to be derived, ultimately, from Aristotle’s division of irrational desire into appetite and anger, and Plato’s distinction between the appetitive and spirited elements of the soul.²⁶ The two powers are distinguished by their objects: the passions of the concupiscible appetite are directed at things sensibly apprehended as good or evil, considered just as such, while the passions of the irascible appetite are directed at things sensibly apprehended as good or evil, considered as difficult to obtain or overcome.

²¹ As Aquinas uses the terms, ‘good’ and ‘evil’ have a much broader sense than ‘moral good’ and ‘moral evil’.

²² ST I-II.23.1 *sed contra*. See also ST I-II.22.1-3. The sensitive appetite is a power, while a passion is an actualization of that power.

²³ ST I-II.17.7c. All translations of Aquinas are my own. I have used the Leonine Commission’s critical editions of Aquinas’s works.

²⁴ ST I-II.22.3c.

²⁵ At ST I.81.2, Aquinas gives reasons for thinking that we need to posit both these separate faculties. See also I-II.23.1.

²⁶ See Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, I.10 (1369 a4) and Plato’s *Republic* IV (439a—441b).

Working with the distinction between the concupiscible and irascible appetites, Aquinas develops a taxonomy of the passions.²⁷ He enumerates six concupiscible passions: love and hate, desire and aversion, and joy and sorrow, and five irascible passions: hope and despair, daring (or confidence) and fear, and anger.

Love is the initial positive response to a sensible good, hate is the initial negative response to a sensible evil. Desire is a movement toward a sensible good not yet obtained; aversion is a movement away from a sensible evil not yet present. Joy (or pleasure) arises when a sensible good is obtained, while sorrow (or pain) results from the presence of a sensible evil. Hope is the passion experienced in response to a sensible good not yet obtained, considered as difficult to obtain but obtainable. Despair is a response to a sensible good not yet obtained, considered as not only difficult to obtain but unattainable. Daring is a response to a sensible evil not yet present, considered as difficult but conquerable. Fear is a response to a sensible evil not yet present, considered as difficult and irresistible. Anger is a certain sort of response to a present, difficult, sensible evil.²⁸

Let us now more closely examine Aquinas's understanding of the passion of anger. Aquinas has a rather narrow definition of anger that may strike us as artificial and rather counterintuitive. In this section I want to explain this definition of anger and try to show why it is not as counterintuitive and artificial as it might seem.

Aquinas defines the passion of anger (*ira*) as the desire to hurt another for the purpose of just retribution, motivated by some injury inflicted by that other and perceived as unjust by the angry man.²⁹

²⁷ See ST I.23.4.

²⁸ Aquinas has much to say about the causal relations between the passions. Anger, for example, is caused by sorrow, desire, and hope, in that the angry person experiences sorrow or pain on account of a present evil, and desires and hopes for revenge (see ST I-II.46.1). "Revenge" here is taken broadly; almost any sort of punitive response can count as revenge, as Aquinas is using the term.

²⁹ See ST I-II.47.1-2.

The retribution sought by the angry man is accomplished through punishment, the nature of which is “to be contrary to the will, to be painful, and to be imposed on account of some fault.”³⁰

Some of the puzzling aspects of this description of anger are worth examining. First, while Aquinas defines anger as the desire to hurt another for the purpose of *just* retribution, he does not intend to imply that every angry person seeks what is *in fact* just retribution. Many angry persons, of course, desire what is in reality unjust retribution, though it seems fitting in their eyes. If it seems strange to think of, say, the anger of an Al Capone as involving a concern for justice, consider that every angry person who desires that the target of their anger be punished judges that the target of their anger *deserves* it, in some sense. And to judge that someone deserves punishment, to judge that punishment is due, is to consider punishment to be just, as Aquinas uses the term.

Second, we need to take “punishment” in the broad sense in which Aquinas means it. There are certainly cases where punishment in a narrow sense is precisely what the angry person wants. But there are other cases that do not seem to fit Aquinas’s mold so easily. Suppose a daughter is angry with her father because, say, he said he would be at her theatre performance but did not show up. We might balk at saying that the daughter desires her father to be punished. Upon reflection, though, it is quite plausible that the daughter *does* desire that her father face punishment, in Aquinas’s sense of the term. For imagine what the daughter might feel and desire in this situation. She might very well feel that her father should be corrected. She might feel that he should not be allowed to just get away with failing to show. She might even feel that he should be rebuked—or at least given the silent treatment. But all these responses can be seen as a desire for punishment, in Aquinas’s sense of that term. This is so because the responses (rebuking the father or giving him the silent treatment) are unpleasant to the father, are contrary to his

³⁰ ST I-II.46.6 ad 2: “The angry person wishes evil to someone, under the aspect of just retribution. Now, retribution is brought about by the infliction of punishment. And it is of the nature of punishment to be contrary to the will, to be painful, and to be imposed on account of some fault. And therefore the angry person desires this, that the one upon whom he brings harm should perceive it, and suffer, and know that this befalls him because of the injury he has done the other.”

will, and are inflicted in response to a fault. So Aquinas's position on the relationship between punishment and anger is more plausible when we understand his notion of punishment.

Even with this broad sense of punishment in mind, though, Aquinas's description of anger may still strike us as overly narrow. It might be³¹ that people are sometimes quite angry but lack the desire that the target of their anger be punished. A mother, for example, could be angry with her daughter for some wrong her daughter has done, and yet fervently desire that her daughter not be punished for her wrongdoing. I doubt whether the mother in this example would really lack all desire that her daughter be punished or corrected in some way (perhaps by her, if by no one else). This doubt notwithstanding, I concede the possibility that Aquinas's *ira* is a narrower concept than our *anger*. If this is in fact the case, Aquinas's account of anger is, more accurately, an account of anger in just that sense of anger involving the desire for punishment of some kind. Since this is an extremely common form of anger, Aquinas's account will still be of great interest to us in examining the moral status of the broader form of anger. What is more, if Aquinas has good arguments for the narrower conclusion that anger, in the sense of anger involving the desire to punish an offender, is sometimes morally virtuous, then he will also have given us good arguments for the broader conclusion that anger at another is sometimes morally virtuous – and this is the question at issue.³²

³¹ As Eleonore Stump has suggested to me.

³² This last point has implications for a possible objection to my project. Since Aquinas's rather technically defined "*ira*" may be narrower than a common-sense, ordinary language sense of "anger," and since Cassian seems to be working with an everyday understanding of anger, it might very well be that Aquinas and Cassian are not talking about quite the same thing. My effort to bring Aquinas's account into dialogue with Cassian's might therefore involve equivocation—or so goes the objection.

In fact, no such danger is present. For even if there is a common-sense meaning of anger which is different than Aquinas's *ira*, Aquinas's *ira* is nonetheless a species or special case of that broader genus of anger. Of anyone experiencing Aquinas's *ira* it could also truly be said that that person is experiencing anger in a broad, common-sense use of that term. Thus Aquinas's position (to be examined in what follows) that some *ira* is morally virtuous

The passion of anger, on Aquinas's account, is subject to the control of reason. This occurs in two ways. First, anger is under the control of reason because it normally (though not always) follows an act of reason. Aquinas writes, "The beginning of anger is in the reason," and again, "the movement of anger begins in the reason."³³ Aquinas's claim here may seem suspect, since we sometimes think of anger as an animalistic feeling that grips one despite one's state of intellect. A closer inspection of the phenomenology of anger supports Aquinas's view, however. Take the following as a paradigm case of anger: Jimmy Connors is playing tennis (on clay) against John McEnroe and hits a forehand right in the corner of McEnroe's side of the court. The ball bounces in the court and Connors knows it, but McEnroe slyly erases the mark and convinces the referee that the ball was long, thus stealing the point from Connors. Connors immediately becomes angry.

What has occurred in Connors' mind preceding his anger? Connors would not be angry at McEnroe unless he had first formed both of the following judgments (judgments of reason): (a) My shot was in, (b) McEnroe erased the mark on purpose (and thus must have known it was in) and then lied to the referee. In our example, Connors is angry precisely because he believes McEnroe has cheated him. This belief does not arise in Connor's mind without an act of reason, in which Connors perceives that McEnroe has intentionally wronged him. Because anger, in most cases, is a response to an injustice done, and because an act of reason is required for one to judge that an injustice has been done, anger, in most cases, requires a preceding act of reason.³⁴

will imply the more general proposition that some anger (in a broad sense) is morally virtuous, which indeed does contradict Cassian's position, *sans* equivocation. Even if Aquinas and Cassian did mean slightly different things by "anger," then, Aquinas's position directly implies the falsity of Cassian's view that anger at another person is never morally excellent.

³³ ST I-II.48.3 ad 1 and ad 3. See also ST I-II.46.4c.

³⁴ It might be asked: given that an act of the sensitive appetite is, by definition, a response to a sensible good or evil, how can anger be a response to an act of reason without ceasing to be an act of the sensitive appetite and becoming an act of the intellective appetite (the will)? Reply: Aquinas does not hold that anger is a response to an act of

The second way in which anger is subject to the control of reason depends on reason's ability to excite or moderate a passion already present. In this regard Aquinas observes that, "It is clear that the universal reason directs the sensitive appetite... Anyone can experience this in himself, for anger or fear or the like may be mitigated, or stirred up, through the application of certain universal considerations."³⁵ By directing our thoughts to some things rather than others, we can exercise an influence on our passions.

I have said that, on Aquinas's account, anger *normally* follows an act of reason because Aquinas acknowledges that the sensitive appetite can also be moved by imagination and sense. (Here "imagination" refers to a cognitive power responsible for processing sensory data in various ways.) He writes:

[S]ince there is both reason and imagination in a human being, a movement of anger can arise in a human being in two ways. In one way, merely from the imagination declaring an injury. And in this way a movement of anger can even arise toward an irrational and inanimate thing, which movement is similar to the movement in animals against anything harmful.³⁶

reason, exactly; the point is rather that an act of reason is normally required (in humans) for anger to occur. As an act of the sensitive appetite, anger remains a response to some sensible form present through sensation or imagination. (Just which bits of perceptual information or imaginative content anger is a response to is a question for the neuroscientist, not for the philosopher.)

A host of interesting questions lie in the neighborhood here. For example, how exactly do one's beliefs (which are acts of reason) affect one's passions, given that a passion is a response to a sensible form? On this question see Peter King, "Aquinas on the Passions," in *Aquinas's Moral Theory: Essays in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, eds. S. MacDonald and E. Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 101-132, at 126-132 and 107-110. I thank an anonymous reviewer for ACPQ for raising these issues.

³⁵ ST I.81.3c.

³⁶ ST I-II.46.7 ad 1. More generally: "it sometimes happens that a movement of the sensitive appetite is aroused suddenly by an apprehension of imagination or sense" (ST I-II.17. 7c). See also ST I.81.3 ad 2.

Aquinas seems to think of the paradigm cases of anger, however, as cases where anger arises in consequence of an act of reason, not cases where anger arises merely in consequence of something sensed or imagined.³⁷

In those instances where anger *is* suddenly aroused because of some sense apprehension or non-voluntary imagination, the initial occurrence of anger is not subject to the control of reason. But once such anger has arisen it is, consequently, in the control of reason because one can direct one's thought to other things. With this background in place we are now prepared to consider Aquinas's position on the moral status of anger.

Unlike Cassian, Aquinas holds that anger directed at another can be morally virtuous. Some anger is in accordance with right reason, and such anger is "worthy of praise."³⁸ In what follows I shall present two arguments which Aquinas makes to support his position.

An argument from utility. The first takes as its point of departure Cassian's worry that anger always hinders the judgment of reason. Aquinas sees reason as the faculty by which humans perceive the moral order, and therefore takes very seriously the objection that all anger is evil because it hinders the judgment of reason. Commenting on a controversy between the Stoics and the Peripatetics over the moral status of anger, Thomas notes that the bodily disturbance involved in anger (which he took to be an "agitation of the heart") was the center of the controversy, since

such agitation hinders the judgment of reason, in which the good of virtue principally consists.

And thus for whatever reason someone is angry, it seems to be detrimental to virtue, and to this extent it seems that all anger is vicious.³⁹

³⁷ See ST I-II.46.4.

³⁸ ST II-II.158.1c.

³⁹ "[H]uiusmodi commotio iudicium rationis impedit, in quo consistit principaliter bonum uirtutis; et ideo ex quacumque causa aliquis irascatur, uidetur hoc esse in detrimentum uirtutis, et pro tanto uidetur quod omnis ira sit uitiosa" (QDM 12.1c).

In responding to the claim that all anger is vicious on account of its harmful effect on the judgment of reason, Aquinas draws a distinction between two different relations that can obtain between a passion and a judgment of reason. Simply put, a passion can come before the judgment of reason or it can come after the judgment of reason. He writes:

[A]nger and other such passions can be related to the judgment of reason in two ways. First, antecedently, and in this case it is necessary that anger and every such passion always hinder the judgment of reason, since the soul is best able to judge the truth when possessed of a certain tranquility of mind... In another way, anger can be related to the judgment of reason consequently, in that after reason has determined and ordained the manner of retribution, then the passion arises to carry it out, and in this way anger and other such passions do not hinder the judgment of reason, which already preceded, but help to execute it more promptly; and in this way [such passions] are useful to virtue.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ “...ira et alie huiusmodi passiones dupliciter se possunt habere ad iudicium rationis: uno modo antecedenter, et sic necesse est ut semper ira et omnis huiusmodi passio iudicium rationis impediatur, quia anima maxime potest iudicare ueritatem in tranquillitate quadam mentis... Alio modo potest se habere ira ad iudicium rationis ut consequenter, quia scilicet postquam ratio diiudicauit et ordinauit modum uindictae, tunc passio insurgit ad exequendam, et sic ira et alie huiusmodi passiones non impediunt iudicium rationis quod iam precessit, set magis adiuuant ad promptius exequendum, et in hoc sunt utiles uirtuti” (QDM 12.1c). See also ST I-II.24.3 ad 1, ST II-II.158.1 ad 2, and *Questiones disputatae de ueritate* (QDV) 26.7.

As the reader may have noted, Aquinas asserts in QDM 12.1c that “anger and *other such passions*” can help to execute the command of reason, and are thus helpful to virtue. In fact, both Aquinas’s argument here, and the one I will examine in what follows, are based on general considerations which could be applied equally to any passion. In this paper I focus only on the passion of anger, however. I do so in part because the thesis that anger has a place in a virtuous life is more interesting, because less universally accepted, than similar theses about the passions of, say, hope, daring, or love.

Let's look more closely at the distinction between consequent and antecedent passion. Recall that Aquinas thinks of the paradigm cases of anger as cases where anger arises in consequence of an act of reason (as opposed to cases where anger arises merely in consequence of something sensed or imagined). Now, in these paradigm cases of anger, there is at least one act of reason which comes before anger arises, something like

(J1) I have been wronged (or slighted) by X.

This judgment always occurs before anger of the paradigm sort arises. In addition, Aquinas seems to think that a second judgment must come before anger (of the paradigm sort) arises, namely:⁴¹

(J2) I want to get back at X; X should be punished.

Finally, there is the judgment as to the manner of retribution or punishment:

(J3) X should be punished in *this* manner.

We might wonder what Aquinas means when he talks about anger consequent to the judgment of reason. Is anger that comes after (J2) and before (J3) said to be consequent to the judgment of reason? Or is it only anger that comes after (J3) that is said to be consequent to reason? We find the answer in the text just quoted: "In another way, anger can be related to the judgment of reason consequently, in that after reason has *determined and ordained the manner of retribution*, then the passion arises to carry it out..." Anger consequent to reason is anger that comes after (J3). By implication, anger that arose after (J2), but before (J3), would be antecedent to the judgment of reason.⁴²

Recall Cassian's main argument that anger is never virtuous because it always hinders the judgment of reason. Aquinas concedes that anger which precedes the judgment of reason is useless for, and harmful to, virtue.⁴³ But he points out that anger can come after a judgment of reason has already

⁴¹ See ST I-II.46.4c and St. Thomas's commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle, *Sententia libri Ethicorum* (In NE), L. VII, lect. vi, #1386 & 1388, with the text of Aristotle.

⁴² See In NE, L. VII, lect. vi, #1386 & 1388.

⁴³ QDM 12.1 ad 6. Cf. ST I-II.24.3 ad 1 and II-II.158.1 ad 2.

been firmly established. In such a case, it would not hinder the judgment of reason and would therefore not be morally wrong on Cassian's grounds. If it be insisted that consequent anger is vicious because it disturbs the judgments of reason which occur after it arises, Aquinas replies that anger consequent upon a firm (and good) judgment of reason need not take away from the virtue of the agent. Although consequent anger "does indeed disturb reason somewhat...it does not take away the order of reason which was already established by the preceding judgment of reason."⁴⁴

Not only does anger consequent to reason not hinder virtue, it can also be positively useful to the cause of virtue, because consequent anger can help one execute the judgment of reason more promptly.⁴⁵ The passions can be thought of as engines for action; the motive force which they possess can be harnessed for the performance of virtuous deeds. Suppose a woman sees a child drowning in an icy pond, judges that she should save him, and wills to do so. The passion that Aquinas calls "daring" helps her speedily and forcefully execute this judgment, despite the danger and difficulty it involves. Similarly, when a police officer judges rightly that a wrongdoer should be punished in a particular way (say, by arrest to be followed by a fair trial), a moderate passion of anger helps him or her to execute that judgment despite the difficulties it may involve. The execution of a judgment to punish often involves actions harmful or painful to the one executing the judgment. Since human beings naturally feel an aversion to pain, the carrying out of judgments to punish would thus often be hindered were there not a countervailing impetus to punish. Anger provides this countervailing impetus. In general, when the passions are harnessed in accordance with reason, they provide assistance rather than hindrance to the accomplishment of virtuous action.

Aquinas's reply to Cassian's main argument is now clear. Whereas Cassian had argued that anger always hinders good moral judgment, Aquinas has pointed out that consequent anger need not hinder

⁴⁴ "[I]ra quando sequitur iudicium rationis turbat quidem aliquantulum rationem...non tollit ordinem rationis qui iam ex precedenti iudicio rationis stabilitus est" (QDM 12.1 ad 4).

⁴⁵ See QDM 12.1 ad 6.

judgment, since firm moral judgment can be established before the onset of consequent anger.⁴⁶ And while Cassian had argued that anger at another is never useful, Aquinas has given us good reason to think that anger can be useful, since anger consequent to judgment can help the righteously angry person to promptly execute a (good) judgment of reason. Had Hamlet suitably deliberated and decided to take appropriate action against Claudius, consequent anger would then have helped him carry out his resolve. In sum, anger at another person which is consequent to the judgment of reason can be morally excellent, because it can help one carry out a good decision to counter injustice.

A further aspect of Aquinas's views. Before proceeding to Aquinas's second argument for the claim that it is sometimes morally virtuous to be angry, I want to pause and consider a further aspect of his views. Although Aquinas's position on the permissibility of anger is much stronger than Cassian's, there is a way in which Aquinas's position may strike us as still too weak.

To see this, consider a claim he makes in the *Summa theologiae*: Anger antecedent to reason “withdraws reason from its rectitude, and therefore has the character of evil.”⁴⁷ As we've seen, anger which precedes one's judgment as to the manner of response (or punishment) counts as anger antecedent to reason, even if that anger follows the judgments that one has been wronged and that the offender should be responded to. All this seems to imply that Aquinas would censure us for any anger we experience prior to the time at which we make a judgment about how we will respond to the relevant situation. Now, it is one thing to agree that anger which precedes one's judgment as to the manner of response can be harmful (insofar as it can lead one to make a poor decision about how to respond). But it seems considerably less plausible to think that *any* anger one experiences before one's judgment as to the manner of response is evil or vicious.

Consider an example. You, as usual, are delivering a superb lecture. Oblivious to your brilliance, two students in the back of class are chatting away. Not content with talking to each other, they have

⁴⁶ See QDM 12.1 ad 4 and ad 6.

⁴⁷ ST II-II.158.1 ad 2.

recourse to their cell-phones. You form the judgment that they are disrupting class (which is to wrong you, since they are interfering with your goals for your class and disrupting your other students, whom you care about). This is (J1). In a split-second, or perhaps at the same time, you judge that (J2) they must be corrected. After a brief moment, you judge that (J3) you should stop your lecture and gently rebuke the offending students. It only seems natural that you might begin to feel anger after J2. Yet Aquinas seems to be committed to the position that if you did in fact feel anger after J2 but before J3, then that anger would “have the character of evil.” Should we really accept this?

The first thing to note, concerning this question, is that Aquinas has the resources to hold that some anger antecedent to J3 is not morally evil. This is so because Aquinas thinks that some passions are not voluntary, and that passions only take on the character of moral evil or moral good to the extent that they are voluntary.⁴⁸ Passions are said to be voluntary “either because they are commanded by the will, or because they are not checked by the will.”⁴⁹ Therefore even if one is angry antecedent to reason, such anger might not be morally evil, if it (a) was not commanded by the will, and (b) had not been present long enough to be checked by the will. When Aquinas says in ST II-II.158.1 that anger antecedent to reason has “the character of evil,” I think we should take him to be stating a general truth, but should not conclude that he admits of no exceptions to this general statement.⁵⁰

Still, it does seem to be Aquinas’s position that anger antecedent to the judgment of reason is always “harmful to virtue”⁵¹ (even if it is not always morally evil or something for which we are culpable). As seen above, he holds that anger and all such passions antecedent to the judgment of reason *always* hinder the judgment of reason, *necessarily*.⁵² Antecedent anger can only hurt good deliberation.

⁴⁸ See ST I-II.24.1c, QDM 10.1 ad 1, and QDV 26.6 ad 17.

⁴⁹ ST I-II.24.1c.

⁵⁰ On this score, see ST II-II.158.2 ad 3.

⁵¹ QDM 12.1 ad 6.

⁵² QDM 12.1c.

I think Aquinas is on to something here. When we are angry, we tell ourselves to stay calm, to take it easy, to think things through. Perhaps this is because we recognize that anger simply won't help us see things clearly. Since anger obscures reason, its contribution to rational judgment at the stage before (J3) can only be negative.

Even if it is granted that anger can only hinder the judgment of reason, there still might be cases where antecedent anger could impel someone to do what is in fact right. Isn't anger helpful to virtue in *those* cases? Perhaps not. In such cases, whether or not the agent does what is right becomes a matter of chance:

Thus when passions precede the will, they diminish praiseworthiness, since an act of will is praiseworthy insofar as it is ordained to the good by the reason, according to a due measure and manner. And this manner and measure, indeed, is only preserved when the action is done from *discretio*. And *discretio* is certainly not preserved when a human being is incited to will something on account of the force of passion (even if [the thing willed] is good); rather [in that case] the manner of the action will depend on whether the force of passion is great or small, and thus it will occur only by chance that the due measure is preserved.⁵³

The intensity of one's anger will depend in part on random factors, e.g. one's physical state at the time. Thus even when antecedent anger impels one to do what is right, it makes doing what is right a matter of chance. And to leave such things to chance is not something we should strive for in the moral life.

To return to the lecture example: anger before J3 might very well fail to be morally evil (since it might be involuntary), but it would still be harmful to virtue (since it would hinder sound deliberation as

⁵³ "Secundum igitur quod sunt praecedentes voluntatem, sic diminuunt de ratione laudabilis, quia laudabilis est actus voluntatis secundum quod est per rationem ordinatus in bonum secundum debitam mensuram et modum. Qui quidem modus et mensura non servatur nisi cum actio ex discretione fit; quae quidem discretio non servatur cum homo ex impetu passionis ad aliquid volendum etiamsi sit bonum, provocatur, set erit modus actionis secundum quod impetus passionis est magnus vel parvus; et sic non nisi a casu continget quod debita mensura servetur" (QDV 26.7c).

to the manner of response). Aquinas would encourage us to cultivate within ourselves the disposition to resist anger until we have a clear view of the situation and how we should respond.

The composite nature of human beings and the full extension of rational activity. A second strain of argument can be found in Aquinas's writings on the morality of anger. While the first argument focused on the utility of consequent anger, the second focuses on the nature of the human being as a composite of soul and body. In the *De malo*, Thomas gives this second argument in compressed form:

Since human nature is a composite of soul and body, and of an intellectual and a sensitive nature, it belongs to the good of a human being that the whole as such should be subject to virtue, namely, according to the intellectual part and according to the sensitive part and according to the body. And thus the virtue of a human being requires that the desire for due retribution should exist not only in the rational part of the soul, but also in the sensitive part, and in the body itself, and that the body itself should be moved to serve virtue.⁵⁴

Because we are composites of body and soul, we are most completely ordered or directed toward moral goodness when we are ordered toward moral goodness in our sensitive powers and our bodies as well as in our intellectual powers. If a person's sensitive appetite were unengaged in all his virtuous decisions, he would not be as completely directed toward goodness as he could be. And it is better to be wholly and completely directed to goodness than only partially so. Therefore it is better for humans to be directed to goodness in their passions than not.

An analogy might help bring out the force of Aquinas's argument here. Imagine a husband who intellectually desires the good of his wife, but who does not feel the slightest affection for her in his heart. It's clear that something would be wrong with such a man. In a properly functioning human being, the

⁵⁴ "Sic ergo, quia natura hominis composita est ex anima et corpore et ex natura intellectiua et sensitua, ad bonum hominis pertinet quod secundum se totum uirtuti subdatur, scilicet et secundum partem intellectiuam et secundum partem sensitiuam et secundum corpus; et ideo ad uirtutem hominis requiritur ut appetitus debite uindicte non solum sit in parte rationali anime set etiam sit in parte sensitua et in ipso corpore, et ipsum corpus moueatur ad seruiendum uirtuti" (QDM 12.1c).

various powers should work in harmony – a husband should will the good of his wife *and*, at least sometimes, feel affection for her with his sensitive appetite.

In the *Summa theologiae* Aquinas presents a similar argument, but this time he explicitly draws on the connection between moral goodness and reason.⁵⁵ He writes:

For since the good of a human being is rooted in the reason, that good will be all the more perfect insofar as it [reason] is extended to more things pertaining to man. For this reason no one doubts that it belongs to the perfection of moral goodness that the acts of the external members should be directed by the rule of reason. Therefore, since the sensitive appetite is able to obey reason (as said above), it belongs to the perfection of moral or human goodness that the passions themselves should also be ruled by reason.

Thus, just as it is better for a human being both to will what is good *and* to accomplish it through his exterior acts, in the same way it belongs to the perfection of moral goodness that a human being should be moved to the good not only on account of his will, but also on account of his sensitive appetite.⁵⁶

This passage raises some interesting questions for the student of Thomas. Aquinas is arguing for the conclusion that it is morally better for a human being to be moved toward the good by his will *and* by his

⁵⁵ In the *De malo* passage, Aquinas explicitly applies the argument to anger; in the ST passage, he leaves it at the level of the passions in general.

⁵⁶ “Cum enim bonum hominis consistat in ratione sicut in radice, tanto istud bonum erit perfectius, quanto ad plura quae homini conveniunt, derivari potest. Unde nullus dubitat quin ad perfectionem moralis boni pertineat quod actus exteriorum membrorum per rationis regulam dirigantur. Unde, cum appetitus sensitivus possit obedire rationi, ut supra dictum est, ad perfectionem moralis sive humani boni pertinet quod etiam ipsae passiones animae sint regulatae per rationem.

“Sicut igitur melius est quod homo et velit bonum, et faciat exteriori actu; ita etiam ad perfectionem boni moralis pertinet quod homo ad bonum moveatur non solum secundum voluntatem, sed etiam secundum appetitum sensitivum” (ST I-II.24.3c).

sensitive appetite, than by his will alone. But how exactly is Aquinas’s argument supposed to go? A puzzle is raised by the way Aquinas shifts between three phrases: “the good of a human being” (*bonum hominis*), “human goodness” (*humanum bonum*), and “moral goodness” (*morale bonum*). Two indications internal to the passage suggest that Aquinas is using all three terms as synonyms in the present context. First, Aquinas appears to equate moral goodness and human goodness in the third sentence of the quotation (“it belongs to the perfection of *moral or human goodness* that...”). Second, he moves, without any comment or explanation, from the use of “the good of a human being” in the first sentence, to the use of “moral goodness” in the second sentence, and then to the use of “moral or human goodness” in the third sentence. So Aquinas seems to equate *bonum hominis*, *humanum bonum*, and *morale bonum* in this passage.

Yet—and this is the puzzle—on Aquinas’s own Aristotelian views, he should not equate those terms. Or so it might appear. For Aquinas adopts an Aristotelian (and Pseudo-Dionysian) view about the connection between human goodness and rationality:

Now in human acts “good” and “evil” are predicated in relation to reason, since, as Dionysius says...the good of a human being is to be according to reason, but evil [for a human being] is that which is contrary to reason.⁵⁷

According to Aristotle’s way of thinking, a thing of a certain kind is said to be good insofar as it performs well the proper function special to the kind of thing it is (and so we say that a good knife is one that cuts well). To put this in scholastic parlance, a thing of a certain kind is good to the extent that it exercises its specific capacity well. Now, on the Aristotelian view, the specific capacity of a human is reason, and so it follows that a human will be good, *qua* human, to the extent that she or he engages in rational activity well. The good of a human being, then, will be excellent rational activity.

⁵⁷ “In actibus autem humanis bonum et malum dicitur per comparationem ad rationem: quia, ut Dionysius dicit, IV cap. de Div. Nom., bonum hominis est *secundum rationem esse*, malum autem quod est *praeter rationem*” (ST I-II.18.5c). See also ST I-II.21.1c and *Summa contra Gentiles* (SCG) III.9 [1].

But surely the excellent use of the speculative intellect is included (and perhaps even paramount) in a life of excellent rational activity. Thus the good of a human being will, at the very least, include the excellent use of the speculative intellect. On this view, one has more human goodness insofar as one knows metaphysics or geometry, for example. But since one isn't morally better on account of one's knowledge of the theoretical sciences, we should not equate human goodness in the Aristotelian sense with moral goodness. Why then does Aquinas equate human goodness with moral goodness in ST I-II.24.3c?

The answer, I think, is that Aquinas is sensitive to a common-sense intuition about what we normally mean when we say that some particular person is good. We do not call a human being good in any absolute or unqualified sense simply on account of that person's intellectual perfections. Rather, we call someone good in an unqualified sense on account of his or her good will. After all, a person with many intellectual perfections only uses those intellectual perfections well on account of a will to do so. Thus Aquinas can say:

Anything with a will is called good insofar as it has a good will, since we utilize all our powers through the will. For this reason a human being who [merely] has a good intellect is not called good, but [it is] one who has a good will [that is called good].⁵⁸

And, more carefully:

...since good absolutely speaking consists in actuality, and not in potentiality, and the ultimate actuality is operation, or the use of things possessed, [it follows that] the good of a human being absolutely speaking is found in good operation, or the good use of things possessed. Now we use something through the will. For this reason, a human being is called good on account of a good will, by which a human being uses well things possessed, and [a human being is called] evil on

⁵⁸ "...quilibet habens voluntatem, dicitur bonus in quantum habet bonam voluntatem: quia per voluntatem utimur omnibus quae in nobis sunt. Unde non dicitur bonus homo, qui habet bonum intellectum: sed qui habet bonam voluntatem" (ST I.5.4 ad 3).

account of an evil [will]. For he who has a bad will is able to use poorly even the good that he has, as when a grammarian voluntarily speaks ungrammatically.⁵⁹

Aquinas would no doubt assent to the claim that the possession of intellectual virtue does contribute to the overall goodness of a human being, but he would add that this is so in a sense that needs qualification.

Knowing geometry does not make the geometer good absolutely speaking. Because Aquinas thinks of the good of a human being, absolutely speaking, as being a matter of the will, he can equate (a) the good of a human being (*bonum hominis*) and (b) human goodness (*humanum bonum*) with (c) goodness that consists in or is a direct result of having a good will. And goodness that consists in or is a direct result of having a good will is just what Aquinas means by (d) moral goodness.⁶⁰ So Aquinas can equate (a) and (b) with moral goodness. A human being is good absolutely speaking insofar as he or she is morally good.

With all this in mind, we can now analyze the structure of Aquinas's argument in I-II.24.3c.

Aquinas's first inference is that "since the good of a human being is rooted in the reason, that good will be all the more perfect insofar as it [reason] is extended to more things pertaining to man." His first premise, then, is that the good of a human being is rooted in the reason. Aquinas could be calling either of

⁵⁹ "...cum bonum simpliciter consistat in actu, et non in potentia, ultimus autem actus est operatio, vel usus quarumcumque rerum habitarum; bonum hominis simpliciter consideratur in bona operatione, vel bono usu rerum habitarum. Utimur autem rebus omnibus per voluntatem. Unde ex bona voluntate, qua homo bene utitur rebus habitis, dicitur homo bonus; et ex mala, malus. Potest enim qui habet malam voluntatem, etiam bono quod habet, male uti; sicut si grammaticus voluntarie incongrue loquatur" (ST I.48.6c). See also ST I-II.56.3c, SCG III.116 [3], In NE 3.6.451, QDM 1.5c, and Jan A. Aertsen, "Thomas Aquinas on the Good: The Relation between Metaphysics and Ethics," in *Aquinas's Moral Theory: Essays in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, eds. S. MacDonald and E. Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 235-253, at 247-9. In assembling references on this issue, I've been helped by consulting Petrus de Bergomo, *In opera sancti Thomae Aquinatis index seu tabula aurea eximii doctoris* (Roma: Editiones Paulinae).

⁶⁰ See SCG III.9 [1], ST I.48.1 ad 2, ST I-II.74.1c, QDM 7.3c, and *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus in communi* 12 ad 15.

two claims to mind here. He could be making the general Aristotelian point that human goodness has its ultimate source in the good use of the rational faculties. But since Aquinas is in fact concerned here with human goodness in the absolute sense, i.e. moral goodness, it is more likely that he wants to call to mind a more particular claim: moral goodness has its source in the reason, because moral goodness depends on the will, and the will is good when it is willing an object in accord with reason.⁶¹

Aquinas moves from his claim about the relationship between human goodness and reason to the proposition that the good of a human being will be more complete insofar as reason “is extended to more things pertaining to man.” To understand this second proposition, we must note that many human powers can be governed by reason. Our power to move our “external members,” for example, is under the command of the will (i.e., is voluntary). And most of our bodily actions are commanded by the will with some reason or purpose in mind. Now, when we conduct our bodily actions according to the best objective reasons for action, our bodily actions can be said to be governed by reason. Aquinas’s point is that a human being will be morally better to the extent that more of those powers which can be governed by reason, are governed by reason. Just as the will has the property of moral goodness when it is willing an object in accord with reason, so the other powers operating at the command of the will have moral goodness when they are operating in accord with reason; and thus the person who possesses those powers is more completely good, morally, when all of his or her powers that can be governed by reason, are so governed.

But, third, the sensitive appetite is one such power, i.e. “the sensitive appetite is able to obey reason.” It follows that a human being will be morally better to the extent that his or her sensitive appetite is governed by reason. In Aquinas’s words, “it belongs to the perfection of moral or human goodness that the passions themselves should also be ruled by reason.”

⁶¹ Indeed, Aquinas made just this claim only a few articles before ST I-II.24. “[T]he goodness of the will depends on its being subject to reason” (ST I-II.19.3 s.c.). See I-II.19.3c, read with I-II.18.5c.

What does Aquinas have in mind when he speaks of the passions being governed or ruled by reason? While he often speaks of the passions (or the sensitive appetite) as being subject to the reason, he occasionally expresses his position with more precision: “[T]he sensitive appetite is obedient to the reason, not immediately but through the will.”⁶² That is, the passions can be obedient to the intellect, with the help of the will. When they are, they are said to be voluntary. As noted above, passions can be voluntary either because (a) they are commanded by the will, or because (b) they are not checked by the will.⁶³ If you were called upon to rescue a child from an icy pond, you might stir up an emotion of daring by directing your mind toward certain things (the plight of the child and the fact that you could come to the rescue). This would be an example of (a) a passion “commanded” by the will. If you were feeling moderately angry with your disruptive students, and (after determining the proper manner of response) you did not check your anger, this would be an example of (b) a passion voluntary in virtue of not being checked. Suppose you chose to let yourself be affected by a slight feeling of anger so that you could administer your rebuke more effectively than you could have without the cooperation of your emotions.⁶⁴ Then you would have brought your passions into the realm of rational activity, and harnessed them for assistance in achieving an end you see (with your intellect) as worthwhile. In both cases, we can see how a person, through the use of intellect and will, could influence what sort of passions she was feeling, in order that she might be helped by those passions to achieve an end seen as good by her intellect. When one harnesses one’s passions to move oneself to what one correctly sees to be an objectively good action (or state), it can be said that one’s passions are governed by reason.

Now we can understand the final step in Aquinas’s argument. He has already argued that the completion or perfection of moral goodness includes the governance of the passions by reason. Put that as a conditional: if one’s passions are governed by reason, then one will be more completely morally good.

⁶² ST I-II.46.4 ad 1.

⁶³ ST I-II.24.1c.

⁶⁴ See ST I-II.24.3 ad 1.

But if one harnesses one's passions to move one towards the good, then it can be said that one's passions are governed by reason. Thus, if one harnesses one's passion to move one towards the good, then one will be more completely morally good. Or, in Aquinas's words, "it belongs to the perfection of moral goodness that a human being should be moved to the good not only on account of his will, but also on account of his sensitive appetite."

This conclusion implies that a person is sometimes morally better precisely on account of the presence of certain passions. Aquinas applies this point to anger specifically in the *De malo* passage: "And thus the virtue of a human being requires that the desire for due retribution should exist not only in the rational part of the soul, but also in the sensitive part."⁶⁵ On Aquinas's view, anger at another is sometimes morally virtuous (i.e. morally excellent).⁶⁶

IV. CONCLUSION

We have examined two of Aquinas's arguments for the claim that anger at another is sometimes morally excellent. The first focused on the utility of consequent anger, the second on the composite nature of human beings and the full extension of rational activity in human life. We can round out this examination of Aquinas's account of anger by a brief look at his discussion of the ways in which anger can go wrong. As we have seen, Aquinas thinks that anger antecedent to reason is harmful to virtue. Furthermore, Aquinas holds that anger is evil if (a) the angry man desires punishment to be inflicted on someone who does not deserve it, or (b) he desires a punishment more severe than the wrongdoer's act of injustice calls for, or (c) he desires a punishment not in accordance with the order prescribed by law

⁶⁵ QDM 12.1c.

⁶⁶ One might ask whether the limitation on morally good anger specified in the argument from utility (viz., that anger should be consequent to reason) is maintained or changed in this second argument. It is maintained. For the second argument depends on the claim that one's passions should be subject to reason. Because we can see that antecedent anger is harmful to virtue, antecedent anger would not be anger subject to reason, and so would be censured by the second argument as by the first. I thank an anonymous reviewer for ACPQ for calling this question to my attention.

(perhaps St. Thomas has vigilantism in mind here), or (d) he does not desire punishment for the proper reason, which is “the maintaining of justice and the correction of moral fault” or even if (e) the movement of anger is immoderately fierce.⁶⁷ However, if anger is consequent to the judgment of reason, and the angry man desires an appropriate punishment for a person who really does deserve it, and desires that this punishment be carried out in a way compatible with law, for the purpose of maintaining justice and correcting sin, then—says St. Thomas—then his anger is not merely permissible or justifiable, but is actually good, virtuous, and worthy of praise.⁶⁸

I should note, however, that while Aquinas is committed to the position that some anger is virtuous, he would urge us to exercise great caution with respect to our anger, noting that “the virtue [of meekness] is nearer to the extreme of deficiency than to the extreme of excess, since it is more natural to human beings to desire retribution for injuries inflicted than to be lacking in that desire.”⁶⁹ ⁷⁰

⁶⁷ ST II-II.158.2c. See also QDM 12.1c.

⁶⁸ See ST II-II.158.1c.

⁶⁹ ST II-II.157.2 ad 2.

⁷⁰ I am grateful to Eleonore Stump, Kevin Dyer, S.J., and an anonymous reviewer for ACPQ for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks also to Gregory Beabout and an audience at Saint Louis University for helpful comments and criticisms.