



Aquinas on the Passion of Despair

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Abstract

St. Thomas Aquinas argues that all of the passions, including hatred, anger, sorrow and despair, are morally neutral. That is, Thomas Aquinas argues that the manner in which a person responds to a particular passion determines the morality of the passion, and not the passion itself. Hatred, for example, can lead one to a good end, as when one comes to hate his sin. Likewise, Aquinas notes that even the passion of despair is not necessarily evil, since when felt rightly it can move one to some good end. Aquinas, however, fails to recognize that according to his own account despair so stupefies the soul that it cannot lead to any good end. Unlike hope or love, or any of the other passions, despair paralyzes the soul and thus must always be avoided.

The passions play an important but often ignored role in Aquinas' explanation of habit and the virtues. Following the treatises on the Human Act at the beginning of the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologica*, the Treatise on the Passions contains 26 questions and 132 articles—more questions and articles than either the Treatises on Virtues or Law—arguably the best known treatises of the *Prima Secundae*. Although the number of questions and articles certainly does not correspond directly with the importance or dignity of the subject-matter, it is surprising that so little has been written on Aquinas's view of the passions—no more than 15 articles in the last 30 years.¹

Aquinas' presentation of his doctrine on the passions in Questions 22–48 in the *Prima Secundae* is characteristically straightforward. He first provides a list of the different passions, highlighting what the passions are and are not. He then proceeds to present detailed comments on each of the passions, explaining how the individual

¹ Some of the relevant articles include: Claudia Eisen Murphy, "Aquinas on Our Responsibility for Our Emotions" *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 8 (1999): 163–205; Shawn Floyd, "Aquinas on Emotion: A response to Some Recent Interpretations" *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 15 (1998): 161–175; Norman Kretzmann, "Aquinas on God's Joy, Love and Liberality" *The Modern Schoolman* 72 (1995): 125–148; Robert Roberts, "Thomas Aquinas on the Morality of Emotions" *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 9 (1992): 287–305; and Mark Drost, "Intentionality in Aquinas's Theory of Emotions" *International Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (1991): 449–460.

passion and the soul interact. Aquinas also comments throughout the *Treatise on the Passions* about the moral worth of the passions, making the interesting claim that the passions, in themselves, are morally neutral. That is, Aquinas claims that no particular passion, whether it be love, hope, hatred or anger, is good or evil in itself. Rather, he argues that the manner in which a person responds to the particular passion, either “in harmony or in discord with reason,” determines the morality of the passion.² In this paper I will investigate this claim. In particular, I will examine whether all of the passions, including anger, hatred and despair, are actually morally neutral.

The Nature and Relationship of the Passions

Aquinas acknowledges eleven passions.³ Ten are linked in five contrary pairs; anger, the remaining passion, stands alone. The five pairs and the single passion of anger are divided in two main groups, the concupiscible and the irascible. The concupiscible passions pairs are love and hate, desire and aversion, and pleasure and sorrow; each passion is directed to the apprehension of good or evil considered absolutely, insofar as it causes pleasure or pain. The irascible passion pairs are hope and despair, and courage and fear. This later group is completed with the single passion of anger. Aquinas argues that these irascible passions are also directed to good or evil, but not absolutely; rather, these passions are concerned with what is difficult to obtain or avoid. Aquinas clearly recognizes that other emotions exist, but he considers those other emotions as particular forms of the eleven. For example, he considers envy a subset of sorrow, and serenity a certain form of pleasure.

Aquinas carefully explains that all passions, of both groups, cause movement in the soul.⁴ The concupiscible passion pairs are distinguished by their contrary movements toward or away from the perceived good and evil. That is, love, desire and pleasure all direct the soul toward the perceived good, whereas hatred, aversion and sorrow withdrawal the soul from the perceived bad. Aquinas explains that hope and despair, two of the irascible passions, share this paired attraction to good and withdrawal from evil, but not absolutely. Rather, both hope and despair are linked insofar as the particular object that is the subject of the passion is understood as difficult to obtain. For example, hope directs the soul toward something the soul considers

² ST.I-II. 24.4. All quotations are from the Blackfriars Edition of *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*. (New York: McGraw Hill).

³ See ST.I-II. 23.1 and 2 for more on how Aquinas conceives the order of and relationship between the passions.

⁴ See ST.I-II. 23.2.

worth the effort needed to obtain it – as when a runner hopes to win the race only when he thinks he has trained enough to win. In contrast, despair draws the soul away from some object when it is thought the cost necessary to obtain the object is too great or the likelihood of successfully obtaining it is too small. For example, the runner despairs he will win the race when he perceives the required training would be too arduous or beyond his ability.

Aquinas explains that courage and fear, the other irascible passions pair, are not linked because they respond one to the good and the other to the bad, but because they draw the soul toward or away from the same object. Fear leads the soul to shun some evil object, whereas courage moves the soul toward the same object in order to escape being subject to that evil. For example, fear moves many to flee the attacking army, whereas courage draws others into battle rather than risk being subject to the enemy's control.

Aquinas explains that anger, the last irascible passion, is always a movement toward a good. For example, he states that anger directs a person to want his enemy to suffer some punishment, not because the punishment is an evil, but because it is a good, since the angry person believes the punishment is just revenge for the evil done by his enemy to him.⁵ Aquinas reasons anger, the only passion not paired with a contrary passion, stands alone because there is no corresponding irascible passion that directs the soul away from an arduous evil.⁶ Serenity is not a proper match with anger because it is not an irascible passion; serenity also finds rest and not a struggle in its object, and thus Aquinas recognizes it to be a particular kind of pleasure. Aquinas recognizes that fear and despair could be matched with anger, but he thinks they are better paired with courage and hope respectively.⁷

Do the Passions Help or Harm?

Regardless of the relationship between the various passions, Aquinas stresses that all of the passions move the soul toward or away from some perceived object. Since movement is the central effect of the passions, it is reasonable to ask what benefit or harm, if any, these movements have upon the soul. At first glance it may appear reasonable to say that love, desire, pleasure, hope and courage should all be sought out as 'good' passions, since they all direct the soul toward some perceived good. Likewise, many might immediately consider hatred, aversion, sorrow, despair, fear and anger 'bad' passions to be

⁵ See ST.I-II. 46.6.

⁶ See ST.I-II. 23.3.

⁷ See ST.I-II. 25.3.

avoided, since they often cause emotional harm to those who experience them. These judgments are supported by common experience: we seek opportunities to feel love, pleasure, hope, and the like, but typically try to avoid others feelings, such as sorrow or fear.

Aquinas strongly rejected the christening of ‘good or bad’ passions. Aquinas noted that in themselves, what he calls their natural genus, the passions are movements of the irrational appetite and thus have “no moral good or evil in them.” However, considering what Aquinas calls their moral genus, the passions are morally good or evil in so far as they are “subject to the command of the reason and will.”⁸ The deciding factor regarding their moral worth, therefore, is not inherent to the passions themselves; rather, the passions are properly considered good and pertaining to virtue “when they are controlled by reason” and evil “when they are not controlled by reason” since they then incline us to sin.⁹ Thus, the passions are morally good or bad only “in so far as the object to which a passion tends, is, of itself, in harmony or in discord with reason.”¹⁰

But, if it could be determined that some passions are always contrary to the order of reason, would it not follow that these passions, according to their natural genus, are evil? Conversely, if it could be determined that some passions are always properly governed by right reason, would that not mean that these passions are naturally good? And if it were shown that a naturally good or bad passion actually exists, it would, of course, also show that Aquinas erred in claiming that all of the passions are morally neutral.

All Passions Can Harm, but Do Any Always Harm?

To determine if Aquinas erred on this point, it is necessary to examine more closely Aquinas’ comments regarding the moral nature of the passions. Aquinas notes throughout the *Treatise on the Passions* that all of the passions can harm the soul, antecedently to the judgment of reason, if “they obscure the judgment of reason.”¹¹ For example, he notes that inordinate sexual desire makes it exceedingly difficult to think clearly and act rightly, acute sorrow impedes learning something new and even recalling something once known, and intense fear makes it nearly impossible to act rightly.¹² He also explains that the often admired passion of love harms the one who loves wrongly since “love of a good which is unsuitable to the lover, wounds and

⁸ ST.I-II. 24.1 and 4.

⁹ ST.I-II. 24.2.

¹⁰ ST.I-II. 24.4.

¹¹ See ST.I-II. 24.3.

¹² See ST.I-II. 33.3; 37.1, and 44.4.

worsens him.”¹³ Given my familiarity with the creativity of fallen human nature, I believe Aquinas is right when he claims that no passion is naturally good; every passion can harm the one who has it, if it is directed irrationally to or away from some object.

However, I find it difficult to accept Aquinas’ confident claim that all the passions can likewise “increase the goodness of an action.”¹⁴ He makes this claim because he is certain that man is perfected when his sensitive appetites obey reason in the same way man is made stronger when his external members are subject to reason. Aquinas does not bother to offer examples to illustrate how each of the eleven passions perfect in this manner, assuming, I think, that his readers can imagine for themselves how many of the passions, if rightly ordered, would perfect a person. For example, it is easy to imagine that the passions of love, desire, pleasure, hope and courage could make the soul better since these passions move the soul toward some perceived good. If the perceived good really is good, the soul would then be made more perfect because of its impulse toward that good.

But, even if Aquinas is right that the five passions just mentioned can help move a person toward perfection, it is not as clear that the remaining passions—hatred, aversion, sorrow, fear, anger and despair, those often considered the ‘bad’ passions—can all help perfect the soul. Is it reasonable to expect that each of these passions can, at least in one situation, work in accord with reason?

For example, considering the concupiscible passions first, how does hatred perfect the soul? At first glance it appears that hatred cannot work in accord with reason since Aquinas states that it is always sinful to hate another; doing so is to deny the good in your neighbor, which exists by order of his or her creation by God.¹⁵ However, Aquinas notes that it is reasonable to hate the sin of your neighbor, because sin is always against the good of right order. So, when the hatred is directed rightly, at the sin and not the sinner, the passion is morally right. This hatred is beneficial because the hatred of the sin of your neighbor could lead a different sinner to hate his own sin, which may lead to his conversion. The wise man would then say, post conversion, ‘Thank God I hated my neighbor’s sin, for through it I came to recognize the evil of my own sin. I am better because of my hatred.’

Likewise, if a man feels aversion toward a true good his soul will be harmed because he has turned away from the good. But when the passion of aversion withdraws one from a deadly moral evil, the

¹³ ST.I-II. 28.5.

¹⁴ ST.I-II. 24.3.

¹⁵ See ST.II-II. 34.3.

passion is ordered rightly and is of great benefit, since without this passion someone may have foolishly embraced the evil.

Aquinas offers multiple examples of how sorrow, so often rightly avoided, can also be a beneficial impulse when it is felt rightly, as when it “denotes perception and rejection of evil.”¹⁶ For example, it is good for the sinner to experience sorrow since he should rightly feel shame for his sins.¹⁷ This sorrow for what ought to be avoided is always useful, since it loosens the attachment to an occasion of evil and “makes one avoid evil more eagerly.”¹⁸ Moreover, Aquinas notes that moderate sorrow, when it does not cause the mind to wander, can both motivate someone to learn more about the things that may free him from his pain, and take away an excess of pleasure, often an impediment to learning.¹⁹ Clearly sorrow, as described, can be of great benefit to the sinner.

It is important to note that all three examples of the so-called ‘bad’ concupiscible passions—the hatred of sin, the aversion of some evil object, and sorrow for sin—all come about because one is fundamentally actually attracted (moved) by the previous impulse of love. That is, the one hating correctly loves right order; the one avoiding rightly loves some good instead of the perceived evil; and the one correctly feeling sorrow for past sins loves the time in which he felt no pain. In fact, Aquinas believes that all of the concupiscible passions, even when not ordered rightly to reason, find love to be their “primary root” for love is the first cause in the order of execution.²⁰ Hence, given the salvific nature of love, it should come as no surprise that Aquinas believes that none of these three passions, in their nature, are inherently ‘bad.’

Regarding the irascible passion of fear, Aquinas is clear that intense fear can do great harm since it often leads to inactivity. However, Aquinas notes that moderate fear has at least two beneficial effects; moderate fear makes men take council from the wise and it makes men work with greater attention.²¹ With newfound hope it is easy to imagine that both actions would be of great benefit to the sinner, if the advice given is wise and the work done noble.

Aquinas believed that anger too is generally to be avoided, since it can be a great obstacle to reason. However, as noted earlier, anger is just when it is a response to some slight suffered unjustly. Rightly ordered anger requires the proper understanding of man’s excellence, for if a person did not properly understand that he was slighted he

¹⁶ ST.I-II. 39.2.

¹⁷ See ST.I-II. 37.1.

¹⁸ ST.I-II. 39.3.

¹⁹ See ST.I-II. 37.1.

²⁰ ST.I-II. 46.1 and making reference to ST.I-II. 25.2.

²¹ ST.I-II. 44.2 and ST.I-II. 44.4 respectively.

would not be angry.²² The passion of anger, therefore, can increase our respect and admiration for our own excellence and that of others. In fact, the passion of anger depends upon a sense of hope, that the slight will be corrected. Aquinas is so convinced that right anger is a benefit he argues that the more excellent man is angry most often and with the greatest justification, since he is most often unjustly slighted by fools and the ignorant.²³

It is also important to stress that Aquinas believes that hope and love are at the root of all the other passions. That is, even fear and anger are primarily motivated by hope, the “first of all the irascible passions,” which is, in turn, primarily inspired by love.²⁴ When felt rightly, those that feel hatred, aversion, sorrow, fear or anger are simultaneously feeling hope or love, although differently from when they feel hope or love alone. For this reason Aquinas judges the passions so many wish to avoid may in fact be of great benefit to man, since these passions could be the catalyst that moves the sinner in the direction of a rightly ordered love. Thus, hatred, aversion, sorrow, fear, and anger (as well, of course, as love, desire, pleasure, hope and courage) all have the potential to help make someone a better person when felt in accord with reason. It appears, therefore, that Aquinas was right when he claimed that no particular passion is good or bad in itself.

What about Despair?

But what of despair? If rightly ordered hatred, aversion, and sorrow can increase one’s love, and rightly ordered fear and anger increase one’s hope, can despair, like the other ten passions, be rightly ordered and thus lead to correct thinking or right action? That is, can despair be of benefit the soul, if it leads one to hope or love the more? Or is despair somehow different in Aquinas’ system of the passions since it is a movement away from hope?

At first glance, it appears as if Aquinas can see no benefit to despair, even rightly ordered despair. Over and above other sins contrary to the theological virtues, Aquinas notes that despair is especially grievous because it implies a withdrawal from God.²⁵ He goes on to write that despair is a more grievous sin from our point of view than either unbelief or hatred of God because once hope is lost we “rush headlong into sin, and are drawn away from good works.”²⁶ Quoting

²² See ST.I-II. 47.2.

²³ See ST.I-II. 47.3.

²⁴ ST.I-II. 25.3

²⁵ See ST.I-II. 20.3.

²⁶ ST.I-II. 20.3.

a gloss of Prov. 24:10 Aquinas notes, “Nothing is more hateful than despair, for the man that has it loses his consistency both in the every day toils of his life, and, what is worse, in the battle of faith.”²⁷

Aquinas explains that the two sources of despair, lust and sloth, greatly harm the soul.²⁸ Lust leads to despair because an inordinate love for bodily pleasure, notably sexual pleasure, encourages distaste for the spiritual goods. Sloth, the second source of despair is “a sadness that casts down the spirit” that makes it appear the arduous good is impossible to obtain. This state of mind so dominates the affections that it seems to the one despairing that “he will never be able to rise to any good.”²⁹ Given the severity of these warnings, it appears unlikely that the passion of despair would ever be of benefit to someone.

In spite of these comments, Aquinas argues that despair, like all the passions, can be beneficial if rightly ordered to a good. Aquinas explains that all sins against the theological virtues, including despair, “consist principally in aversion from the immutable good” but as such they “imply conversion to a mutable good, in so far as the soul that is a deserter from God, must necessarily turn to other things.”³⁰ This means, according to Aquinas, that every occasion of despair includes an impulse toward some mutable good. If it is actually rational to seek this mutable good, Aquinas concludes that the passion of despair should be praised since it moves the soul toward a proper good.

Aquinas offers one example to illustrate the possible benefit of despair. In answering whether hope is a help or a hindrance to action Aquinas writes: “Despair threatens danger in war, on account of a certain hope that attaches to it. For they who despair of flight, strive less to fly, but hope to avenge their death: and therefore in this hope they fight the more bravely, and consequently prove dangerous to the foe.”³¹ In this example it appears as if the soldier in battle despairs once he realizes that his escape route has been cut off. But, as a result of losing his hope to survive the battle, the despairing soldier now hopes to make the enemy pay for his imminent death, and as a result becomes a greater threat to the enemy. This new mutable good, the additional destruction of the enemy, apparently illustrates for Aquinas that even despair, if properly ordered, can be a worthwhile passion.

I think Aquinas is wrong to claim despair, in its nature, is not morally good or bad. That is, Aquinas does not understand that despair is always to be avoided, for its effect, unlike the other ten

²⁷ ST.I-II. 20.3. The Proverb reads: If thou lose hope being weary in the day of distress, thy strength shall be diminished.

²⁸ See ST.I-II.20.4.

²⁹ ST.I-II. 20.4.

³⁰ ST.I-II. 20.1.

³¹ ST.I-II. 40.8.

passions, never leads to even a mutable good. Aquinas apparently accepts this very point, although unknowingly, when he distinguishes the effect of despair from sadness. In the midst of a discussion about the negative effects of sorrow Aquinas stresses that depression is like a weight upon the soul which hinders movement. He explains that if some present evil is “not so strong as to deprive one of the hope of avoiding it” the soul will be sad because it cannot acquire the enjoyment it seeks, but it nevertheless retains the ability to repulse the evil. However, if “the strength of the evil be such as to exclude the hope of evasion, then even the interior movement of the afflicted soul is absolutely hindered, so that it cannot turn aside either this way or that. Sometimes even the external movement of the body is paralyzed, so that a man becomes completely stupefied.”³² So, according to Aquinas, if someone retains even a trace amount of hope the soul retains the power to move itself toward some good. However, if one despairs his hope is gone, and he is completely unable to seek any good; the depressed soul is paralyzed.

Despair, in itself, never benefits the person experiencing the passion. Unlike the other ‘negative’ passions – sorrow, aversion, fear, anger, and hatred – which are often harmful but occasionally beneficial to the soul when felt in the right manner, despair can never be felt rightly because it always eradicates hope, which along with love is the engine of the passions. Sorrow, aversion, fear, anger and hatred, however, can all engender feelings of love and hope, placing them in the soul when they were not there before, as when an evil act of an enemy increases one’s love of justice or the recognition of a sudden danger causes one to suddenly hope for escape. Hatred does not necessarily destroy love, since one can hate the sin but simultaneously love the sinner all the more. Despair, however, kills hope; the destruction of hope – by its very nature – is the effect of despair. Despair, therefore, leads to paralysis and nothing more.

For this reason I think Aquinas’s example of the soldier benefiting because of his despair is misleading. In the example it appears as if the soldier despairs when his escape route is cut off by an overwhelming enemy, which apparently motivates him to kill many of the enemy before he dies, which we must take to be a good end. However, Aquinas stresses in the example that the soldier never lost the hope he brought with him to battle – that he will harm his enemy. If a soldier does not expect to at least cause harm to his enemy, he would never enter the battle. Every soldier, like every student, athlete or entrepreneur acts with hope that he can obtain some good end. If that hope leaves so does the movement toward the good. For example, when a struggling student retains the hope of passing the class, he

³² ST.I-II. 37.2.

works all the harder in preparation for the upcoming test. But if the same student comes to realize he cannot pass, he will quickly stop studying. To study is no longer worth the effort once he lacks the hope of success. Likewise, an entrepreneur declares bankruptcy once there is no hope for profit, and the tennis player stops competing, even if the rules require he must serve the ball to complete the game. Even more clearly, chess players forfeit once hope of victory is lost. However, in every case if some hope remains, however slight, the individual will fight until the end because the effort appears worth it. It is possible that even those certain to lose may act heroically to the end, but if they do so it is because they retain some hope for some success, and not because they despair.

The cornered soldier in Aquinas' example may in fact be a greater danger to his enemy than one with an escape route, but he is not the greater foe because he despairs. Rather, he is an increased threat to others because the dire circumstances of the battle simply intensified the hope inherent in every decision to fight. That is, the fear of an imminent danger moved him to recognize the necessity and benefit of fighting well. Admittedly, the pressure of some likely danger—be it a whistle, a proposal or paper deadline, or the sight of a strong and approaching enemy—can motivate a passionate flurry of activity. But this activity is not the result of despair itself, but of some other passion that/which is rooted in love or hope. So he now acts because he hopes that if he fights well the enemy may retreat and he will survive another day. But, if the soldier truly has no hope—if he is filled with despair—the soldier would not fight. Overcome with despair he would have no hope to even achieve the end of every battle – to harm his enemy – and he would simply sit down and wait for his death.

Despair stands apart from the other passions. It alone cannot lead the soul to even a mutable good, since it cannot increase hope any more than water can increase flame. Thus, Aquinas is wrong when he states that none of the passions are essentially good or bad. Despair never causes the soul to move to even a mutable good since this passion alone essentially stops all movement, both of the body and the soul. If one filled with despair acts toward a good it is not because felt the passion in accord with reason, but because some initial hope inherent in one of his current activities remains in spite of his despair. The passion of despair is not morally neutral; it always works to an evil end and never is felt rightly.

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