

Article

Abolishing Anger: A Christian Proposal

Brendan Case 

The Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA;
brendan_case@fas.harvard.edu

Abstract: In recent years, advocates of (so-called) righteous anger have become increasingly vocal and articulate, as is evident from a growing literature defending anger as a moral emotion and tool for social change. Righteous anger has defenders both among secular philosophers—notably Myisha Cherry in her *The Case for Rage and Failures of Forgiveness*—and Christian theologians and activists, particularly, though by no means only, those drawing inspiration from Thomas Aquinas’s Aristotelian defense of anger. As a Christian theologian writing in the first instance for other Christians, I will argue in what follows that permissive attitudes to anger—even of the “righteous” sort—are fundamentally mistaken, not least because they are inconsistent with the universal obligation to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Christians instead ought to take something approaching an abolitionist approach to anger, as an emotion intrinsically opposed to charity. We can see this most clearly by beginning with the faults of a qualified defense of anger, which I reconstruct from Cherry’s work, and from the work of Thomas Aquinas, whose views on anger are interestingly convergent with hers. (This pairing has at least two advantages: it highlights the essentially traditional character of Cherry’s approach, and illustrates how relatively untutored Aquinas’s Aristotelian treatment of anger is by distinctively theological commitments.) I then sketch and defend the view, with a particular reliance on the Sermon on the Mount, that we ought to seek to abolish anger from our lives and defend that position against three apparent defeaters drawn from the Christian Scriptures.

Keywords: ethics; anger; Thomas Aquinas; Myisha Cherry; Sermon on the Mount



Citation: Case, Brendan. 2023. Abolishing Anger: A Christian Proposal. *Religions* 14: 1427. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111427>

Academic Editor: Mirela Oliva

Received: 31 October 2023

Revised: 9 November 2023

Accepted: 14 November 2023

Published: 15 November 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

“If you aren’t angry”—so goes the meme—“you aren’t paying attention”. Americans of many persuasions and walks of life now take for granted that some kinds of anger are not only frequently justified but indeed morally required for the pursuit of justice in an unjust world. Anger has been a particularly dominant note in America’s recent domestic politics; in 2020, millions took to the streets to take a stand—with words and, in many cities, riotous violence—against systemic racism or against an allegedly stolen or rigged election. Each movement culminated in the fall of Capitol Hill: the protests and riots triggered by the murder of George Floyd included the establishment by anarchists in Seattle of a lawless “Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone”, which lasted 24 days until several murders drove police to end it. And the movement to “Stop the Steal” culminated in the January 6th storming of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., by enraged supporters of then-President Trump, in a confused bid to stop Congress from certifying the election of Joe Biden as the 46th President.¹

In recent years, advocates of (so-called) righteous anger have become increasingly vocal and articulate as well, as is evident from a growing literature defending anger as a moral emotion and tool for social change. Righteous anger has defenders both among secular philosophers—notably [Cherry \(2018, 2021, 2023\)](#)—and Christian theologians and activists, particularly, though by no means only, those drawing inspiration from Thomas Aquinas’s Aristotelian defense of anger.² Small surprise, then, that recent critics of anger as a moral emotion have typically regarded the Christian intellectual tradition as an opponent rather than an ally, and have drawn inspiration instead from Stoicism or Buddhism.³

As a Christian theologian writing in the first instance for other Christians, I will argue in what follows that permissive attitudes to anger—even of the “righteous” sort—are fundamentally mistaken, not least because they are inconsistent with the universal obligation to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Christians instead ought to take something approaching an abolitionist approach to anger, as an emotion intrinsically opposed to charity. We can see this most clearly by beginning with the faults of a qualified defense of anger, which I will reconstruct from Cherry’s work, and from the work of Thomas Aquinas, whose views on anger are interestingly convergent with hers. (This pairing has at least two advantages: it highlights the essentially traditional character of Cherry’s approach, and illustrates how relatively untutored Aquinas’s Aristotelian treatment of anger is by distinctively theological commitments.) I will then sketch and defend the view, with a particular reliance on the Sermon on the Mount, that we ought to seek to abolish anger from our lives.

2. An Anatomy of Anger

Genuine disagreement about the moral status of anger is only possible, of course, if all parties agree, at least largely, about what it is. In this case, I am content to take my cues from anger’s defenders. As ever, Aristotle provides a useful starting point. In *De Anima*, he proposed that anger can be considered in two ways: “The philosopher will regard it as a desire for revenge (*ὄρεξις ἀντιλυπήσεως*) or some such, while the physician will regard it as a rush of blood and heat around the heart” (Aristotle 1957, 403b1-4). Aquinas’s own definition is typically Aristotelian: anger is “the desire to hurt another (*appetitus nocendi alteri*) for the purpose of just vengeance” (Aquinas 1888, 1–2.47.1). And for the early modern philosopher and Anglican Bishop Joseph Butler, anger “stands in our nature for self-defence, and not for the administration of justice” (Butler 1850, p. 80).

This approach to anger is also typical of the contemporary psychological literature. In a systematic review of empirical research on anger as a moral emotion, for instance, Lomas (2019) observed that anger “can be explained in physiological terms as being generated by activation of the sympathetic nervous system. . .where autonomic arousal resulting from threat or provocation will lead either to fear and escape behaviours. . .or anger and aggression behaviours.” Cherry’s account of anger, including virtuous anger, belongs to this broad tradition, as when she notes, “Anger, unlike fear, elicits approach tendencies—a propensity to move toward an object”—in the case of anger, a negatively evaluated obstacle to some desired good—“rather than away from it” (Cherry 2021, p. 67). “Approach” would seem to be a milder tendency than “aggression” (though, etymologically, the latter is just the tendency to walk (*gradi*) toward (*ad*) another). Nonetheless, to say that “anger” motivates “approaching” its object is true, but underdetermined. Erotic love, for instance, is also an approach to emotion, but we distinguish it from anger not least on the basis of the very different ways each relates its bearer to its object. Among what Strawson (1962) described as our “reactive attitudes”, anger stands out as distinctively aggressive; it is our fighting emotion.

In its central cases, anger is a three-place emotion: the ordinary structure, as Martha Nussbaum suggests, is that A is angry at B for or under the aspect of C, where C is taken to be some evil in A’s life for which B is responsible (Nussbaum 2016, p. 17). Along these lines, Cherry observes, “Anger is an emotional response that *fits* the occurrence called wrongdoing” (Cherry 2021, p. 36), and that, “when other people wrong us, they send the message that we do not matter. Resentment is a response that communicates that we do not accept this message” (Cherry 2023, p. 12). Anger and sorrow are both likely to result if John is punched by Tom without warning or justification, and both are negative emotions expressive of John’s nilling (i.e., actively rejecting, willing against) the evil of being punched. Nonetheless, John’s sorrow is an emotion of aversion, which will prompt him to flee the evil occasioned by Tom’s violence. By contrast, anger is, in Cherry’s terms, an approach emotion; its natural tendency, here in conflict with grief, will be to turn John back toward Tom to redress the harm done to him.

In the core sense of an aggressive response to perceived harm, anger is no uniquely human possession, but the common inheritance of much—perhaps most—of the animal kingdom. “The social system of African cichlid fish”, as David Barash and Judith Lipton note, “is regulated by male-male aggression” (Barash and Lipton 2011, p. 28). (This is not to say that we know what it seems like to be a fish reacting aggressively to a perceived threat; but if it seems like anything, the best analog to it in our subjective world is surely anger). Barash and Lipton show that “pain-passing” is ubiquitous among animals, both in the straightforward form of “retaliation” against an aggressor and in the more puzzling form of “redirected aggression”, in which *A* harms *B*, causing *B* to harm *C*. (Anger’s cooler counterpart, revenge, has a much more restricted range, proper only to the more deviously intelligent primates, including us and chimps.)

We should note at this point, however, that human anger, perhaps uniquely within the animal kingdom, typically tracks not harm as such, but rather, as we saw Cherry rightly noting above, *wrongdoing*, actions or omissions in which one culpably treats another in a way that disrespects some aspect of the other’s personal worth.⁴ For Aquinas also, anger is always motivated by a particular sort of evil in one’s life, namely the experience of being “slighted” (Aquinas 1888, 1–2.47.2 corp.). That is, being harmed is neither sufficient nor even necessary to provoke anger; anger is fundamentally a response to the sense that one has been treated unjustly or disrespected, even if only in intention.

To see how harming and wronging can come apart in our experience of anger, consider the following two cases. First, we can be harmed without becoming angry: when I stub my toe against a table in a dark room, the table injures me, and I might feel a flash of anger at it, but that feeling ordinarily dissipates quickly, precisely because I recognize that the injury is not the table’s fault. And second, anger is perfectly intelligible even in cases in which the wrongdoer has not obviously harmed the victim: consider a case in which I discover, decades after the fact, that my neighbor had spied on me with prurient interest—say, using a camera hidden in my shower—for a year before his untimely death, though without sharing that fact with anyone or even saving the videos. Harm seems not to be the right term to describe what was done to me—I suffered neither damage nor disability, whether bodily, psychological, or social. Nonetheless, in objectifying me in this way, my neighbor grievously wronged me, and anger, among other negative emotions, would be an entirely intelligible response to this evil in my life.⁵

My efforts above to isolate a common core to anger (not only human, but more broadly animal) are not meant to deny real and significant variation in anger across individuals and cultures, or indeed within individuals across situations. Cherry is right, for instance, to insist that “there is not just one type of anger but many”, and that they vary not least in the extent to which they involve a desire for retaliatory aggression (Cherry 2021, p. 12). Flanagan even suggests that some cultures—he cites anthropological work on the Ifaluk of the South Pacific—socialize anger in ways that attenuate its connection with retaliation, and fix its focus instead on, e.g., refusing to eat (Flanagan 2017, p. 189). Nonetheless, if we are justified in grouping a family of emotions—however far-flung it might be—under the heading of “anger”, that must be because there is some underlying commonality that we identify across its instances. By general consent, the best candidate for that unifying core seems to be aggression in response to perceived threat, harm, or wrongdoing.

3. Just Anger (I): Aquinas’s “Ira per Zelum”

The emotion of anger is no doubt so widespread in the animal world because it is frequently fitness-enhancing, spurring its bearer to defend what is its own or to take what it would like to have, and communicating to others that it is not to be trifled with (Barash and Lipton 2011, pp. 16–18). To explain retaliation or redirected aggression in adaptive terms, however, is not yet to defend it morally: adaptive reproductive strategies employed across the animal kingdom are among the most reprehensible of human acts (consider the prevalence of sexual violence among animals), while much that we rightly prize in ourselves profoundly diminishes our inclusive fitness in Darwinian terms (e.g., education,

which is correlated the world over with declining fecundity) (Flanagan 2017, p. 25). Even anger's defenders, while typically stressing that it is in some sense "a natural, God-given capacity" (Mattison 2002, p. 260; cf. Aquinas 1888, 1–2.24.2, 1–2.46.5), typically adopt a critical attitude toward its origins, aims, and expressions; certainly neither Cherry nor Aquinas offer anything like an unqualified defense of the emotion.

Anger's advocates argue that aggression in response to wrongdoing—or the desire to harm one who has slighted me, in Aquinas's helpfully direct phrasing—can be purified if it is appropriately yoked to or directed by a higher-order desire for justice. Anger tempered by the reasoned quest for justice is "zealous anger (*ira per zelum*)", as opposed to "vicious anger (*ira per vitium*)", in which the passions run out ahead and in defiance of reason (Aquinas 1888, 2–2.158.1). Aquinas argues that anger not only can be restrained by reason, but that such anger can, in fact, become a positive spur to effective action in the pursuit of justice: "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" (Aquinas 1953, 12.1, corp.).

"When someone seeks vengeance according to the due order of justice," Aquinas insists, "this is virtuous; namely, when he seeks vengeance for the correction of sin" (Aquinas 1953, 12.1, corp.). The language of "correction" might suggest that Aquinas sees morally justified anger as necessarily aiming at the rehabilitation of the wrongdoer.⁶ Nonetheless, Aquinas makes it plain that anger involves a desire, not merely for the restoration of justice, but specifically that justice be restored through a particular person's suffering some evil, without any necessary reference to that evil's contributing to the sufferer's ultimate good.

This is evident, in the first place, from the fact that Aquinas takes it that the mere fact of punishment can count as the desired restoration of justice: "by means of punishment", he writes, "the equality of justice is restored, in so far as he who by sinning has exceeded in following his own will suffers something that is contrary to his will" (Aquinas 1888, 2–2.108.4 corp.). And Aquinas not only thought that such punishment could be valued as a demonstration of justice, and so as a good in itself, but also that it could serve as a source of enjoyment for the one who looks for it, as when he writes of how, "as soon as vengeance is present, pleasure ensues" (Aquinas 1888, 1–2.48.1 corp.). Most troubling of all, Aquinas even applies this theory of delightful vengeance to the saints' positive enjoyment of the everlasting punishments of the damned—who certainly do not benefit personally from their dereliction—as expressions of divine justice (Aquinas 1888, Supp. 3.94.3).

4. Just Anger (II): Cherry's "Lordean Rage"

Cherry also sets out to defend a limited and morally purified form of anger, which she dubs "Lordean rage", in the sense of anger directed at "those who are complicit in and perpetrators of racism and racial injustice" (Cherry 2021, p. 23). (Lordean rage takes its name from Audre Lorde, the noted radical feminist author and activist.) "Virtuous anger", she insists, is "a way to express self-respect and bear witness to wrongdoing and oppression. It can also motivate us to engage in social change" (Cherry 2023, p. 12). And "Lordean rage can be *morally* appropriate", she argues, "when it respects the humanity of the wrongdoer and aims to create a better world" (Cherry 2021, p. 37). Cherry explicitly seeks to distance Lordean rage or virtuous anger from the desire for payback or revenge. "Not all types of anger lead to vengeance," she insists (Cherry 2023, p. 74); in particular, "anti-racist anger does not aim for payback and ill-will but change and justice" (Cherry 2021, p. 88).

Notwithstanding her insistence that righteous anger respects the wrongdoer's humanity and abjures the desire for vengeance, Cherry's account of anger is interesting for our purposes precisely for the way that it embraces the emotion's turbulent and potentially violent origins, as in her insistence that Lordean rage can rightly issue in "uncivil disobedience, which may comprise some forms of violence" (Cherry 2021, p. 151). Particularly

illuminating are Cherry's concrete illustrations of Lordean rage in action. As we will see, these suggest that, her theoretical rejection of retaliation notwithstanding, Lordean rage still preserves an important if largely tacit ongoing role for the desire for payback.

For instance, Cherry suggests that, "when Portland protesters in 2020 continued to protest racism—despite the intervention of federal agents—they were appreciating justice" (Cherry 2021, p. 54). She refers here to the more than one hundred days of unbroken protests in Portland following the murder of George Floyd. Many of these devolved into destructive and deadly riots, and federal agents were dispatched there in July 2020 to prevent determined efforts by some protesters to burn down the Mark O. Hatfield Federal Courthouse (Flaccus 2020). Uncivil disobedience, indeed!

So too, Cherry repeatedly adverts to the 2015 student protests at Yale over Erika Christakis's notorious "Halloween costume" email as exemplifying Lordean rage (Cherry 2021, pp. 34–35, 54–57). A brief summary of the events at Yale will clarify the significance of this example; I will rely on the account of the incident given by Haidt and Lukianoff (2018), which is more detailed than Cherry's allusive summaries. On 28 October 2015, Haidt and Lukianoff write, "Erika Christakis, a lecturer at the Yale Child Study Center and associate master of Silliman College. . .wrote an email questioning whether it was appropriate for Yale administrators to give guidance to students about appropriate and inappropriate Halloween costumes, as the college dean's office had done" (Haidt and Lukianoff 2018, p. 56).

Cherry describes Christakis's email as an instance of "white ignorance" and subtle racism, for its defense of dressing up in costumes typical of other races or ethnicities as something "provocative" or "playful" rather than "offensive" and "part of a history of racism" (Cherry 2021, pp. 44, 56). Some Yale students clearly felt the same, and reacted angrily, staging noisy protests outside the Christakis's home in Silliman College. When Erika's husband, Yale professor Nicholas Christakis, went outside to speak with them, students crowded around him, demanding that he denounce his wife, and, when he calmly refused to do so, yelling over him and cursing at him. One particularly irate student was filmed screaming the following into Nicholas's face: "Who the f**k hired you? You should step down! It is not about creating an intellectual space! It is not! It's about creating a home here. . .You should not sleep at night! You are disgusting!" (Haidt and Lukianoff 2018, p. 56)

That background matters, for my purposes, because Cherry repeatedly endorses the Yale students' attitudes and actions: "The students were right to be angry," she writes (Cherry 2021, p. 35). "They had anti-racist anger, targeted at these racial incidents, aimed at changing things at their university, and informed by the idea that all students deserved respect" (Cherry 2021, p. 34). Later, she adds, the "Yale students' rage pointed to the unjust attempt at privileging the offensive expression of one group over the dignity and safety of others" (Cherry 2021, p. 57). Moreover, she suggests that the students needed Lordean rage to screw their courage to the sticking place since those who protested or wrote about the events risked "being gaslighted or blacklisted" (Cherry 2021, p. 54). (In fact, two of the protesters were later honored with Yale's Nakanishi Prize for "provid[ing] exemplary leadership in enhancing race and/or ethnic relations at Yale College" (Yale News 2017)).

Admittedly, I do not share much of Cherry's sympathy for the Yale student protesters in particular, who strike me as more in the grip of some pitiable psychopathology than of zeal for justice.⁷ Nonetheless, even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that the students were rightly aggrieved by Christakis's email, a crowd of students hurling curses at one of their professors as he calmly tried to talk with them seems to me to be a strange place to look for exemplars of righteous anger. (As Nussbaum notes, "To the extent that what is damaged has value, anger has good grounds. It just gives such bad advice" (Nussbaum 2016, p. 127)).

On the one hand, we might simply conclude from the foregoing that Cherry's central cases of Lordean rage are simply ill-fitted to her theoretical commitments; perhaps the theory can stand even if the exemplars must go. Nonetheless, these are not passing illustrations of Lordean rage, but clearly reflect Cherry's considered—not least because

repeated—view of virtuous anger in action. As such, it seems reasonable to conclude that, notwithstanding its orientation to justice and its explicit disavowal of vengeance, Lordean rage as Cherry depicts it still accommodates the clenched (and sometimes flying) fists, screamed invective, and general attitude of retaliatory ill will evident in the exemplars she highlights. That such a desire for payback should reassert itself—if only in a kind of subtle return of the repressed—even within such a deliberate effort to expunge it from righteous anger is perhaps indicative above all of the difficulty we face in detaching this emotion from its deep evolutionary roots in motivating retaliation in the face of threat or harm.

5. The Contrariety of Anger and Charity

An interesting indication of the intimacy of Aquinas's "zealous anger" with Cherry's "Lordean rage" is the fact that, on a single page, [Florer-Bixler \(2021\)](#) quotes from both Aquinas and Lorde in defense of anger. She begins with Lorde's observation, "Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being," and then quickly adds, "Thomas Aquinas offers a warning through the words of John Chrysostom: 'Unreasonable patience is the hotbed of many vices, it fosters negligence, and incites not only the wicked but even the good to do wrong.' If we lack anger at injustice, we are unable to rightly discern and act in the world" ([Florer-Bixler 2021](#), p. 47). Florer-Bixler rightly focuses on the shared Thomist–Lordean interest in anger as a particularly effective spur to the pursuit of justice.

For my part, I doubt that anger reliably plays this motivational role, at least not often enough to be meaningful as a source of practical moral counsel, as opposed to philosophical limit cases. However, both Aquinas and Cherry take it that anger not only subserves reason's aims but also fittingly embodies and expresses reason's judgments within the emotional life of the agent. Cherry describes these as the "motivational" and the "communicative" defenses of anger, respectively ([Cherry 2021](#), p. xii). As we saw above, she insists that "anger is an emotional response that *fits* the occurrence called wrongdoing" ([Cherry 2021](#), p. 36). Aquinas too endorses anger on moral—we might almost say, aesthetic—as well as instrumental grounds: "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" ([Aquinas 1953](#), 12.1, corp.; [Rota 2007](#), p. 417; [Mattison 2002](#), pp. 258–59).

Interestingly, Aquinas took it that the entirety of the Stoics' critique of Aristotle's relatively permissive ethics of anger turned on the issue of anger as motivation: "The whole controversy [between the Peripatetics and Stoics] turned on the second point, regarding the material cause of anger, namely the disturbance of the heart; because the disturbance of the heart impedes the judgment of reason, in which the good of virtue principally consists; and so, no matter why someone is angry, this seems to be the detriment of virtue, and so it seems that all anger is vicious" ([Aquinas 1953](#), 12.1, corp.). As a matter of fact, however, my principal objection to classic and contemporary defenses of anger is not that it is ineffective as a spur to justice, but rather that, even if it were effective, we should not employ it because we are never justified in desiring another's harm as good in itself, even if that harm subserves justice. Such is the case, at any rate, if one accepts the New Testament's teaching that we ought to love our neighbors as ourselves.

As Aquinas himself recognized, this command entails at least (though not only) that everyone has an unconditional obligation to will everyone else's good ([Aquinas 1888](#), 2–2.27.2). And while I do not have space to come fully to the Stoics' aid, it is worth noting that Stoicism as well as Buddhism—both notably anger-skeptical traditions—teach versions of this duty as well, articulated in terms of universal love or compassion,⁸ and that Seneca, in particular, contrasts the expressive tendency of anger with our inborn vocation to love and help one another.⁹ Some defenders of anger, such as Aristotle (and perhaps Cherry), do not admit such an obligation to universal goodwill, and so their defenses of anger will not be directly vulnerable to this line of argument. Nonetheless, whether an anger advocate

recognizes it or not, I take it that inconsistency with our obligation to universal neighbor love suffices to defeat any defense of anger, and certainly suffices to prevent any Christian from subscribing to it.

Now, why might even (so-called) righteous anger be inconsistent with Christian charity? As I have shown above, on a classical and still influential account, endorsed by anger's advocates as much as its detractors, a desire for retaliation against a wrongdoer is ingredient even in apparently righteous anger; as such, anger seeks another's harm as good for oneself, even in abstraction from its further effects on the one so harmed (correction) or on third parties (deterrence). Whatever else it wants, anger—including Thomistic "zealous anger" and arguably also antiracist "Lordean rage"—is in fact in the business of retaliation. But this means that anger at another is a way of willing the other's evil, which is contrary to charity, willing the other's good.

You might object to this that I can will John's good in one narrow respect, by desiring that he be punished, while equally willing it all-things-considered, say, by desiring his repentance or reform. This is true, but in my view, irrelevant: my point is not that we are never justified in conditionally willing evils in the lives of others for the sake of some greater good in their lives, but rather that we are never justified in willing those evils as ends in themselves rather than only as a means to that further good. A surgeon wills to harm the patient's flesh by severing it with a scalpel, but the surgeon wills this, not for its own sake, but as a means to the patient's overall health; if the surgeon could secure that same condition of health without the use of the scalpel—by a medication with no side effects, perhaps, or by a miracle—he or she would gladly do so.

So too, the person who wills another's punishment solely as a means to the offender's reform or to the public disavowal of wrongdoing would happily forego the punishment if—even if only *per impossibile*—that end could be achieved without the infliction of punishment or pain. Indeed, if it is right to imprison a wrongdoer, whether to rehabilitate, to deter future violence, or to express the community's disapproval of the prisoner's actions, then those charged with executing the sentence need not—and perhaps ought not—be angry to do so. It is striking, in this regard, that Aquinas's discussion of the virtue of "vengeance (*vindicatio*)" in the treatise on justice in the *Summa Theologiae*—a virtue proper to magistrates and others with the proper standing to mete out just punishment, which for Aquinas does of course potentially include the infliction of pain as a demonstration of justice in itself—nowhere ascribes anger to the virtuous "avenger (*vindicans*)" (Aquinas 1888, 2–2.108).¹⁰

This apparent separability of the virtue of *vindicatio* from the passion of anger ought to qualify Aquinas's stated conviction that one important reason for cultivating virtuous or "zealous anger" is that it can facilitate our pursuit of justice. Let us stipulate that anger can in fact sometimes speed us toward pursuing justice—how often this is so is an empirical matter, though, as noted above, I suspect such cases are less common than anger's defenders seem to imply. Nonetheless, Aquinas's anger-free treatment of the virtue of *vindicatio* suggests that even he ought to be able to concede Seneca's point that "no one, in becoming angry, is made braver, except the one who would not have been brave without anger. So, [anger] arrives not as a help for virtue, but rather for vice" (Seneca the Younger 1911, 1.13.5, p. 140). In view of the possibility of a dispassionate exercise of *vindicatio*, zealous anger looks less like a morally desirable motive for action than a regrettable counterweight to other potentially disabling passions.

While the disposition to mete out just punishment is separable from the desire to harm, anger does not have this conditional, instrumental relationship to pain-passing; even if anger can be made to serve justice, it starts in the business of payback, of retaliation (Cherry), of hurting the one who has wronged me (Aquinas). To be sure, anger is less morally problematic than, say, hatred; after all, as Aquinas puts it, "the hater wishes evil to his enemy, as evil, whereas the angry man wishes evil to him with whom he is angry, not as evil but in so far as it has an aspect of good, that is, in so far as he reckons it as just, since it is a means of vengeance (*vindicativum*)" (Aquinas 1888, 1-2.46.6 corp.).

6. Life without Payback: Christ's Condemnation of Anger in the Sermon on the Mount

Nonetheless, while justified payback might be a moral improvement over indiscriminate harm, it is still not something permitted by Christian charity. It is not that anger cannot motivate us to pursue justice; rather, even if it does so, the very act of indulging anger is already an offense against charity. This, at least, is what I take to be the point of a significant New Testament statement on the ethics of anger, which occurs on Christ's lips in Matthew's 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 (Matt. 5:21–22).

On its face, this is a strong prohibition of anger in any circumstance, following the pattern of this section of the Sermon, in which Christ introduces a command from the Old Testament law (in this case, the proscription of murder in the Ten Commandments) and then offers a new command that articulates and extends the fundamental principle (the spirit, we might say) of the earlier one: in this case, not only should we not act out our anger in unjustified deadly violence against others; we should not even allow ourselves to take the first step down that road by indulging anger at all.

As Dale Allison (2006) has shown, this passage likely alludes to Cain's murder of Abel in Genesis 4, which (at least in its Hebrew version) makes the same link between anger and murder. Consider: "And the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry?' And why is your face downcast?' . . . And Cain rose up against Abel and killed him" (Gen. 4:6–8). This allusion would also nicely explain why Jesus speaks here of murdering one's *brother* rather than, say, one's neighbor. Jesus' point is not that anger is a risk factor for violence and so needs to be managed carefully. His point is rather that the desire to harm expressed in anger is already tacitly the very same wish later acted out in murder, just as (a few paragraphs later), the lustful gaze already tacitly expresses the very same desire later acted out in adultery (Matt. 5:27–28).

In view of Christ's condemnation of anger in Matthew 5:21–22, it is no surprise to see him, later in the same chapter, rejecting what Nicholas Wolterstorff has called the "reciprocity code" of "'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'" (Matt. 5:38) (Wolterstorff 2011, Kindle loc. 1704 et passim). If the fundamental wish expressed by anger is for retaliation, the repayment of evil for evil, then rejecting anger requires us to reject the *lex talionis* as well. The section that immediately follows in the Sermon deepens the point, moving from merely negating the ethics of payback to enjoining active enemy love: "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:43–44).

These texts deepen and clarify, but ultimately complement, Jesus' prior teaching to abjure anger: all three pericopae are linked by an insistence that we owe one another only goodwill and never ill will. St. Maximus the Confessor noted the essential contrariety of charity and anger in his *Centuries on Charity*: "The passions of the soul's incensive [or "irascible"] power are more difficult to combat than those of its desiring aspect. Consequently, our Lord has given a stronger remedy against them: the commandment of love" (Maximos the Confessor 1981, p. 60).

Notwithstanding that Christians in the West have typically favored qualified defenses of anger at least since the time of Augustine (Augustine of Hippo 1844a, 14.9), the ideal of anger abolitionism was and remains the common sense of much of the spiritual tradition sustained by Christian monasticism, and perhaps best distilled in the eighteenth-century Athonite anthology, the Palmer et al. (1979–1995). It was this tradition, descending back to Evagrius of Pontus, which classed anger among the seven (originally eight) deadly "thoughts (*logismoi*)" or sins (Evagrius of Pontus 1979, pp. 38–54).¹¹ Aquinas was familiar

with this tradition from Cassian's *Institutes*—a rare Latin text that made it into the *Philokalia*—which he draws on and criticizes in the *Quaestiones de Malo* 12 and elsewhere.

7. Three Apparently Angry Authorities: Paul, Jesus, and God

Nonetheless, it must be conceded that the Christian Scriptures also contain some important *prima facie* permissions for anger, three of which are worth briefly considering here: St. Paul's apparent injunction to anger in Ephesians 4:26; a handful of episodes in the Gospels in which anger is apparently ascribed to Jesus; and the large number of passages in the Old and New Testament alike in which God is said to be angry. First, let us consider Ephesians, which Aquinas quotes as his key biblical proof text in defense of anger's legitimacy: "We are induced by a divine precept to be angry, according to Eph. 4:26: *be angry and sin not*" (Aquinas 1953, 12.1, sct. 2). So too does Bishop Butler: "That the natural passion [of anger] itself is indifferent, St Paul has asserted in that precept, 'Be ye angry and sin not'" (Butler 1850, p. 79). Is St. Paul in fact implying here, via his quotation of Old Greek Psalm 4:5, that anger is morally neutral?

The immediate context of the verse arguably weighs against this reading. Just four verses later, Paul writes, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger (*θυμὸς καὶ ὀργή*) and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice" (Eph. 4:30), a passage closely paralleled in Colossians 3:8 ("But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth"). "In saying 'all,'" St. John Cassian comments on this verse, "he leaves no excuse for regarding any anger as reasonable or necessary" (Cassian 1979a, p. 83). If the prohibition on slander or malice in these verses is absolute, then so too must be the prohibition on anger.

Cassian—like others in the later monastic tradition, such as Isaac the Solitary—read Paul's injunction to "be angry, and sin not" as meaning, "be angry with your own passions and with your malicious thoughts, and do not sin by carrying out their suggestions" (Cassian 1979a, p. 83; cf. also Isaac the Solitary 1979, p. 23). The fact that Paul immediately qualifies his quotation of the Psalm with a parallel warning against "letting the sun go down on your anger"—a command with at least two clear parallels from the Dead Sea Scrolls—suggests that the first half of v. 26 is not an exhortation to cultivating virtuous anger, but rather expresses a communal norm in favoring of ridding oneself of anger as quickly as possible.¹²

Nothing in Ephesians 4 indicates that Paul sees anger as morally neutral (much less valuable) in itself; on the contrary, he exhorts his readers to set it aside, to banish it from their lives along with slander and malice. This reading of Ephesians 4:26–30 is made still more plausible by the fact that, like Jesus in Matthew 5, Paul also arguably alludes here to Cain's murder of Abel. The first clause ("Be angry and sin not") is a quotation from Old Greek Psalm 4:5, but it is also strikingly intimate with the Massoretic (Hebrew) text of Genesis 4, where God asks Cain, "Why are you angry?" and warns him, "Sin is crouching at your door" (Gen. 4:6–7). (The allusion is weakened considerably in the LXX, where God instead asks Cain why he is "grieved (*περίλυπος*)".)

A second line of defense for a pro-anger reading of the New Testament is the fact that anger is in places ascribed to Jesus himself, who was "like us in all things but sin" (Heb. 4:15). "There was anger in Christ", Aquinas writes, "in whom, however, there was no sin. . . Therefore, not all anger is sinful" (Aquinas 1953, 12.1, SC 4). The pericope most often cited in this connection is Christ's action in the Temple—narrated in all four Gospels (Matt. 21:12–17; Mk. 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48; Jn. 2:13–17)—in which he wields a whip to drive moneychangers from the Temple. Aquinas overhastily equates this zeal with anger (Aquinas 1888, 3.15.9), but, as Mattison himself concedes, "the Biblical text itself never attributes anger to Christ" in this scene (Mattison 2002, p. 264). Rather John 2:17—the only comment on Jesus' emotional state during the Temple action—describes him as being motivated by "zeal", a term to which we will return below.

There is another passage, also Johannine, which seems to ascribe anger to Jesus: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he growled with

anger (ἐνεβριμήσατο) in his spirit and was troubled. . . And Jesus, once again growling with anger (ἐμβριμώμενος) in himself, came to the tomb" (Jn. 11:33, 38a). It is now a commentarial commonplace to observe that "the Greek verb used here (ἐμβριμασθαι) has some sort of indignation, anger, or annoyance as its root meaning," and that, in consequence, "when the text says that Jesus groaned and troubled himself, it is attributing some sort of anger to Jesus" (Stump 2010, p. 322). This is true enough regarding the sense of the term: ἐμβριμασθαι, a rare word in classical Greek, does occasionally mean something like, "to rage",¹³ though more commonly, it has the sense of, "to rebuke", not least in Matthew 9:30 and Mark 1:43, 14:5 (Lindars 1992, p. 94).

Nonetheless, the description of Jesus either as angry or as issuing a rebuke at this point in the narrative is sufficiently incongruous that it has provoked a great variety of explanations, including that Jesus is angry at Mary, Martha, or the other mourners for her lack of faith, which would be a remarkably callous response to genuine grief in the face of a beloved's death (cf. Jn. 11:32–33; for examples of this reading, cf. Torrey 1923, p. 338), or at Satan for his reign of death (but then, Satan is not mentioned in this passage, and in fact is never connected directly with death in the Gospel of John) (Brown 1966, p. 435). Other proposals are more eccentric still: Cullen Story proposed that 11:33's "ἐνεβριμήσατο τῷ πνεύματι" means, "he rebuked [his] spirit," i.e., rebuked himself for failing to come sooner (Story 1991), while Barnabas Lindars argued that "he rebuked the spirit" is a telltale holdover from John's source, which was a story of Jesus expelling a demon, on analogy with Mark 9:25–29 (Lindars 1992, pp. 99–100).

Interestingly, despite this passage's serving as a key piece of evidence for contemporary arguments that Jesus was angry, it was largely irrelevant to patristic and medieval debates over Christ's anger. For instance, Origen and Chrysostom propose an (admittedly forced) interpretation of ἐμβριμασθαι in John 11:33, 38, as Christ's "rebuking" his grief (Lindars 1992, pp. 95–96). And because both the Vetus Latina and Jerome's Vulgate render "ἐνεβριμήσατο" with "fremuit", "he groaned", neither Augustine (Augustine of Hippo 1844b, 49.18) nor Aquinas (1952, cpt. 11, lect. 5, sct. 1530) makes any reference to Christ being angry in their comments on this passage.

Indeed, the unsatisfactory character of the available interpretations of ἐμβριμασθαι in the context of the Gospel of John suggests that they might in fact be a series of forced answers to a false question posed by a corrupted text. This is not the place for a full treatment of this issue, but I will at least indicate that my own preferred solution to the problem of Jesus' "anger" in John 11 is the one proposed by Charles Torrey in 1923, namely that these occurrences of ἐμβριμασθαι reflect mistranslations of the Aramaic verb "rgz", which can mean "get angry", but also, "be troubled", which is likely its true sense in John 11 (Torrey 1923, pp. 338–39). The cognate Hebrew verb appears in both senses in the Old Testament (and the Aramaic verb appears in the corresponding passages of the Targum Onkelos)—for instance, David "was deeply moved (יָגַז)" at the death of Absalom (2 Sam. 18:33), while the LORD (by means of Isaiah) tells Sennacherib, "I know your rage (יָגַזְתָּ) against me" (2 Kgs. 19:27) (Torrey 1923, p. 339).

This is an admittedly radical solution even to such a vexing interpretive problem. The justification for it must be found in the overall evidence, amassed by Torrey as well as Charles Burney, for the view that the Fourth Gospel not only incorporates substantial Semitic source texts but was in fact originally composed in its entirety in Aramaic (Torrey 1912, 1923, 1936; Burney 1922). This view has little currency in Johannine studies, and readers of this paper might reasonably take it as bearing the burden of proof. (They are of course welcome to consult Burney and Torrey to see if they think that burden can be borne.) Nonetheless, it seems evident that the sudden burst of anger ascribed to Jesus in the Greek texts of John 11 which have come down to us is incomprehensible in its present context; the mistranslation hypothesis has the virtue of saving the intelligibility and integrity of John, albeit at the cost of postulating a quickly-lost Semitic original of the text (at least of John 11), following the venerable scientific procedure of "swelling ontology to simplify theory" (Quine [1951] 2000).

Setting aside the Johannine pericopae, there is in fact only one passage in all the Gospels in which anger is unambiguously ascribed to Jesus: “Looking around at them with anger (μετ’ ὀργῆς), grieved at their hardness of heart, he said, ‘Stretch out your hand’” (Mk. 3:5). Jesus is here described as being both angry and sad because of his fellow synagogue goers, who object to his healing a crippled man on the Sabbath. We should note, for a start, that if Mark is a key source text for Matthew and Luke, they both quietly eliminate the reference to Jesus’ anger from their redactions of the healing in the synagogue (cf. Mt. 12:13, Lk. 6:10), a fact which might suggest some degree of discomfort on their part with the idea of an angry Christ.

This should prompt us to reconsider the significance of Mark’s attributing anger to Jesus. For a parallel and notorious case, recall that in Gethsemane, Christ also pleaded, “Let this chalice pass from me; yet not my will, but thine be done” (Matt. 26:39 et par.), apparently expressing a fearful desire to evade the cross. But of course, this is not how the long Chalcedonian Christological tradition—including Aquinas, who follows John Damascene, and ultimately Maximus Confessor and Cyril of Alexandria—interprets Christ’s appeal; rather, they read it as his permitting himself to experience the “sensitive part’s” instinctual aversion from suffering and death, but not his rational will’s considered judgment about his calling (Aquinas 1888, 3.18.6 ad 3).¹⁴ Christ, in this reading, models the sage’s speedy mastery of the destructive judgments expressed in the passions’ siren song.

Why not, then, read Christ’s brief permission of anger in Mark 3:5 as an expression of instinctual and momentary aggression aroused in him by injustice, but not of any considered embrace or endorsement of that emotion as a reliable motivator of virtuous and loving action? In view of the overwhelming condemnation of human anger elsewhere in the Gospels, in Paul’s epistles, and also in the Epistle of James (“Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God” (1:19–20)), this strikes me as a more plausible approach to a coherent New Testament theology of anger than qualifying Jesus’ and Paul’s explicit and blanket denunciations of anger in view of a single apparent endorsement of it in Mark.¹⁵

Finally, a third set of *prima facie* evidence often cited in support of the legitimacy of human anger is the frequency with which anger is ascribed to God throughout the Bible. This argument was voiced, inter alia, by Adam Smith: “The inspired writers would not surely have talked so frequently or so strongly of the wrath and anger of God”—and indeed, there are 400 or so references to divine anger across the two Testaments—“if they had regarded every degree of those passions as vicious and evil, even in so weak and imperfect a creature as man” (Smith 2018, p. 237). Cassian himself reported frequently encountering this defense of anger: “Some say that it is not injurious if we are angry with the brethren who do wrong, since, say they, God Himself is said to rage and to be angry” (Cassian 1979b, 4.2). But if God is angry, and if none of God’s attributes are intrinsically evil or sinful, then anger must not be intrinsically evil or sinful.

An initial anger-skeptical response to this line of argument might simply be that God’s anger is evoked in the New Testament to quell rather than justify human anger: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Rom. 12:19). Aquinas cites this verse as a potential defeater for the permissibility of all human vengeance (Aquinas 1888, 2–2.108.1, obj. 1). A deeper and ultimately more compelling response, however, would recognize that, if God is metaphysically simple, impassible, and immutable (cf. Aquinas 1888, 1.2–10), then he cannot literally be angry, since anger is definitionally a “reactive attitude”, in Strawson’s terms: if God reacts with anger to creaturely wrongdoing, then creatures can act on God, and he is in consequence passible.¹⁶ But if he is passible, he is composite, and so finite (Aquinas 1888, 1.3.6); and then, he would not be God, but at most a god, Zeus perhaps, but not the transcendent source of all being, truth, and goodness.

Christians have generally—and rightly—insisted that simplicity and impassibility are essential to the divine nature and, in consequence, have conceded that anger cannot literally be predicated of him. (This includes Aquinas, for whom God was, in the final

analysis, not angry at all (Aquinas 1888, 2–2.158.1 ad 4)). Again, this is not the place for a full refutation of the ascription of anger to God; suffice it to say I think we do better to prefer the classical picture, according to which a claim such as “God is love” (1 Jn. 4:7) is literally true, and in fact convertible with the claims that God is being, truth, and goodness (Aquinas 1888, 1.20.1–2). The claim that “God is wrathful”, by contrast, is true only insofar as it describes a particular creaturely experience of God’s love as judgment. As Cassian puts it, “When we read of the anger or fury of the Lord, we should take it. . .in a sense worthy of God, who is free from all passion; so that by this we should understand that He is the judge and avenger of all the unjust things which are done in this world” (Cassian 1979b, 4.4). What seems to us like a change in God—from anger to love in the face of the sinner’s repentance, say—is in fact (or at least, *sub specie aeternitatis*) solely a change in the creature (cf. Tanner 1988; Hart 2012).

8. Justice without Payback: Enriching Our Moral Vocabulary

Anger abolitionism is strong medicine—likely stronger for me, as an undeniably irascible person, than for most of my readers. Embracing it would require revising not only many of our parochial American norms around anger, but indeed of much that is bred in our bones, or at least our amygdalae. Nonetheless, I hope that anger abolitionism might prove less radically revisionist than some might fear since we are arguably in the habit of lumping attitudes together with anger which in fact ought to be classed separately.

For instance, you might worry that anger abolitionism mandates a kind of bovine placidity—or at least, a carefully managed Stoic equanimity—in the face of injustice,¹⁷ and protest that the cries of the oppressed *ought* to drive us from our seats, hearts racing and eyes flashing. They absolutely should, I agree, so long as the desires they inspire do not shade into a desire to harm or retaliate against—to pass pain back to—the oppressors. This qualification is important, of course, since it would arguably require moderating most of our actual experiences of emotional disturbance in the face of injustice, in which the desire for retaliation is a deep-seated ingredient.

Indeed, one virtue of anger abolitionism is its demand that all such emotions justify themselves before the bar of charity. Such a heightened level of scrutiny is crucial for our volatile reactions to perceived injustice because most of us are hardly reliable judges either of whether we have been wronged or—particularly in the face of grave evil—how we would be justified in responding to wrongdoers. This is why, as Evagrius of Pontus wisely observed, “When [the demons] see our [irascible power] tethered by gentleness, they at once try to set it free on some seemingly just pretext” (Evagrius of Pontus 1979, p. 41). In morals as much as in physics, “the first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool” (Feynman 1974).

Feeling upset at the plight of the oppressed frequently, perhaps even normally, coincides with anger at oppressors, but to the extent that the former can exist without the latter, it deserves a different name: why not “righteous indignation” instead?¹⁸ Notice as well that, in the same chapter in which he condemns anger, Jesus praises those who “hunger and thirst for justice (τὴν δικαιοσύνην)” (Matt. 5:6). And when Christ stormed the Temple wielding a whip against the money changers, the disciples ascribed to him (at least in John 2:17), not anger, but “zeal” for God’s house.

You might insist that what I have described as “zeal” or “hunger for justice” is just what you mean by “righteous anger.” I have certainly no interest in arguing about words rather than things; even Nussbaum, anger skeptic that she is, suggests that we might call this kind of attitude “Transition anger” (Nussbaum 2016, p. 6). Nonetheless, I think talk of “righteous” anger courts confusion, not least because the “righteous” in righteous anger is ambiguous: does it modify anger’s aims (justice), its conduct (as somehow purer or loftier than run-of-the-mill anger), or both? As such, a defense of “righteous anger” is too readily—and in our angry age, perhaps inevitably—construed as permission to indulge anger’s vindictive desire for retaliation, so long as it is directed at ostensibly “bad” people and cultivated in the service of some wider social good.¹⁹ This is the cautionary tale told by

Cherry's appeals to the students screaming curses at Nicholas Christakis in order to protest racism at Yale. If anger always bears the traces of its aggressive, vindictive origins, if, as Jesus suggests, it is always halfway out the door toward murder, then we do well not to tie genuinely praiseworthy emotional disturbance in the face of injustice to it.

In the end, though, even those who remain committed to the legitimacy of "righteous anger" ought to be able to recognize substantial common ground with anger abolitionism. Most important to me is establishing broad agreement that anger is, in most cases, something we should seek to avoid and diminish. In this, it is much more like a vice such as envy than a virtue such as generosity. And if this is so, even anger's defenders ought to grant that the contemporary enthusiasm for anger as a critical tool for social change is misleading at best, and dangerous at worst.

Funding: This research was funded by the John Templeton Foundation (grant #: 62731).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ My thinking about these events has been particularly shaped by Michael Lind's remarkable essay, "The Five Crises of the American Regime" (Lind 2021).
- ² (Florer-Bixler 2021; Clem 2020; Brooks 2019, pp. 89–90; Stump 2018, pp. 95–97). Less recent, but still relevant to the discussion of Aquinas in particular, are (Rota 2007; Mattison 2002).
- ³ Flanagan writes, "The Stoics have lost that argument [over the legitimacy of anger] several times, first to Aristotelians, and then to all three Abrahamic traditions, which combine containment [of anger] with powerful convictions about the legitimacy of righteous anger, God's righteous anger, and the anger of those who are on God's side" (Flanagan 2017, p. 173). So too, Martha Nussbaum's (2016) Stoic-inspired critique of anger takes the Christian (and, to a lesser extent, Jewish) tradition as a key obstacle to be overcome. The canonical Stoic case against anger was mounted by Seneca the Younger (1911); a key Buddhist critique of anger can be found in Shantideva (2006, ch. 6).
- ⁴ On wronging as disrespect, cf. (Case 2021, pp. 13–36; Wolterstorff 2009).
- ⁵ I should stress, for the sake of any concerned readers, that this is merely a thought experiment, which I draw from (Wolterstorff 2009, p. 246).
- ⁶ Mattison seems to presuppose such a "restorative" account of punishment in Aquinas, as in his comment, "One could argue, as Thomas does, that such actions are not in fact harmful (even though experienced as such by the offender) precisely because they restore the just order" (Mattison 2002, p. 10). A great deal turns in this case on what Mattison means by "harmful"; for a criminal to suffer capital punishment (cf. Aquinas 1888, 2–2.108.3), for instance, would seem to be harmful to the criminal personally, even if it somehow served to "restore the just order".
- ⁷ On the growing mental health crisis among adolescents and young adults across the developed world, cf. (Haidt and Lukianoff 2018; Twenge 2023, pp. 281–96).
- ⁸ Seneca the Younger futilely exhorted the cruel Nero that each of us ought to cultivate "a love of the human race even as of oneself (*humani generis. . . ut sui amor*)" (Seneca the Younger 1928, 1.11.2). And—to choose but one text from Buddhism's vast store of reflection on the human calling to universal compassion—Shantideva wrote: "For all those ailing in the world, /Until their every sickness has been healed, /May I myself become for them/The doctor, nurse, the medicine itself" (Shantideva 2006, 3.7–8). For Seneca and Shantideva's anger-skeptical arguments, cf. (Shantideva 2006, n. 3) above.
- ⁹ "What is more loving of others than man? What is more hostile than anger? Man is begotten for mutual help, anger for destruction (*Quid homine aliorum amantius? Quid ira infestius? Homo in adiutorium mutuum genitus est, ira in exitium*)" (Seneca the Younger 1911, 1.5.2, p. 118).
- ¹⁰ In (Aquinas 1888, 2–2.108.1 ad 1), Aquinas does quote Romans 13:4 to the effect that the magistrate is an "avenger unto wrath to him who does evil (*vindex in iram ei qui male agit*)", but here the wrath in question is pretty clearly divine rather than human. Mattison seems to miss this point, as in his reference to ST 2–2.108.1 as concerning "the lawfulness of anger", whereas the discussion is in fact about the lawfulness of "vindicatio" (Mattison 2002, p. 223).
- ¹¹ For Aquinas's treatment of anger as a "capital vice", cf. (Aquinas 1888, 2–2.158.6). (The eight *logismoi* became seven deadly sins by way of the conflation of vainglory and pride, which in Evagrius and Cassian were treated separately).
- ¹² The command against "letting the sun go down" has two striking parallels in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Damascus Document enjoins, "They. . . shall bear no rancor from one day to the next" (CD 7.2), while the Community Rule insists, "Let no man address his companion with anger, or ill-temper, or obduracy. . . Let him rebuke him on the very same day, lest he incur guilt because of him" (1QS 5.25–6.1). (Both passages are quoted in O'Brien 1999: ad loc.)

- ¹³ The relevant precedents are few and far between, but cf. Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes*, l. 461, as well as the “Epistula Ecclesiarum apud Lugdunum et Viennam”, 59–60, in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.60; both are quoted and discussed in (Lindars 1992, pp. 92–93). Lindars also notes that in his second-century (CE) translation of the Old Testament, Aquila of Sinope “chose ἐμβριμασθαι and its cognates as his regular translation of Hebrew *z'm* (verb and noun) = ‘be indignant,’ often referring to the wrath of God as expressed in punitive action” (Lindars 1992, p. 94).
- ¹⁴ On the development of Maximus’ dyothelite Christology, cf. (Bathrellos 2004, pp. 100–68; Daley 2018, pp. 211–23; Wood 2022).
- ¹⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for noting that “wrath” is also ascribed to “the Lamb” (sc. Jesus) in Revelation 6:16–17 and 19:15. In both cases, however, wrath seems not to be predicated of Jesus as an interpersonal response, as in Mark 3:6, but rather as a way of describing “the great day of his wrath” (Rev. 6:17), i.e., the creature’s experience of eschatological divine judgment. In the next two paragraphs, I treat biblical ascriptions of wrath to God in the context of divine judgment, and would take those considerations to apply to Revelation 6:16–17 and 19:15 as well.
- ¹⁶ For this argument, cf. (Mullins 2022, pp. 55–56). Mullins, however, introduces this dilemma to motivate a rejection of divine impassibility, thus offering an excellent illustration of the fact that one man’s *modus tollens* is another’s *modus ponens*.
- ¹⁷ Even if he sees his father being murdered, Seneca notoriously insists that the sage still will not allow himself to become angry, though he will pursue swift justice (Seneca the Younger 1911, 1.12). The Stoic ideal of “impassibility” even in the face of grievous loss has rightly been criticized by Christians going back at least to Augustine as attainable in this vale of tears only “at the price of inhumanity in the soul, of stupor in the body” (Augustine of Hippo 1844a, 14.9.4, cf. also 9.4, 14.6–9).
- ¹⁸ So far, I am in agreement with Stump (“Wrath may well be vindictive and so not conducive to the good of either the wrongdoer or the victim; but righteous indignation is the reasonable and also the loving response to some kinds of wrongdoing” (Stump 2018, p. 95)), though I think she is wrong to want to class “righteous indignation” as a sub-type of anger.
- ¹⁹ This is a point that Mattison himself concedes, posing the rhetorical question, “Don’t we most commonly experience our own anger, or recognize that of another, as a prideful imposition of one’s own will, or a selfish concern with trivialities or perceived slights?” (Mattison 2002, p. 218).

References

- Allison, Dale. 2006. Murder and Anger, Cain and Abel. In *Studies in Matthew*. Ada: Baker Academic.
- Aquinas, Thomas. 1888. *Summa Theologiae*. Romae: Textum Leoninum.
- Aquinas, Thomas. 1952. *Super Evangelium S. Iohannis Lectura*. Textum Taurini. Available online: <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Ioan.C11.L5> (accessed on 4 November 2023).
- Aquinas, Thomas. 1953. *Quaestiones Disputatae de Malo*. Textum Taurini.
- Aristotle. 1957. *On the Soul. Parva Naturalia. On Breath*. Translated by Walter Stanley Hett. LCL 288. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Augustine of Hippo. 1844a. *De civitate Dei*. Edited by J.-P. Migne. PL 41. Paris: Imprimerie Catholique.
- Augustine of Hippo. 1844b. *In Evangelium Iohannis Tractatus*. Edited by J.-P. Migne. PL 35. Paris: Imprimerie Catholique. Available online: http://www.augustinus.it/latino/commento_vsg/index2.html (accessed on 4 November 2023).
- Barash, David, and Judith Lipton. 2011. *Payback: Why We Retaliate, Redirect Aggression, and Take Revenge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bathrellos, Demetrios. 2004. *Byzantine Christ: Person, Nature, and Will in the Theology of St. Maximus Confessor*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brooks, Arthur. 2019. *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt*. Northampton: Broadside Books.
- Brown, Raymond. 1966. *The Gospel According to John I–XII*. AB 29. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Burney, Charles. 1922. *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, Joseph. 1850. *Whole Works of Joseph Butler*. London: William Tegg & Co.
- Case, Brendan. 2021. *The Accountable Animal: Justice, Justification, and Judgment*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Cassian, John. 1979a. *On the Eight Vices in the Philokalia: The Complete Text*. Translated by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, vol. 1.
- Cassian, John. 1979b. *The Institutes in the Philokalia: The Complete Text*. Translated by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, vol. 1.
- Cherry, Myisha. 2018. Errors and Limitations of our Anger Evaluating Ways. In *The Moral Psychology of Anger*. Edited by Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Cherry, Myisha. 2021. *The Case for Rage: Why Anger Is Essential to Antiracist Struggle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cherry, Mysiah. 2023. *Failures of Forgiveness*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Clem, Stewart. 2020. How to Be an Angry Christian According to Thomas Aquinas. The Living Church. Available online: <https://covenant.livingchurch.org/2020/10/09/how-to-be-an-angry-christian-according-to-thomas-aquinas/> (accessed on 4 November 2023).
- Daley, Brian. 2018. *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Evagrius of Pontus. 1979. On Discrimination in Respect of Passions and Thoughts. In *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*. Translated by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, vol. 1.
- Feynman, Richard. 1974. Cargo Cult Science. Caltech Commencement Address. Available online: http://csinvesting.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Feynman_Cargo_Cult_Science_reading.pdf (accessed on 4 November 2023).
- Flaccus, Gillian. 2020. *Portland's Grim Reality: 100 Days of Protest, Many Violent*. New York: Associated Press. Available online: <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-ap-top-news-race-and-ethnicity-id-state-wire-or-state-wire-b57315d97dd2146c4a89b4636faa7b70> (accessed on 4 September 2020).
- Flanagan, Owen. 2017. *The Geography of Morals: Varieties of Moral Possibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Florer-Bixler, Melissa. 2021. *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace*. Sydney: Herald.
- Haidt, Jonathan, and George Lukianoff. 2018. *The Coddling of the American Mind*. London: Penguin.
- Hart, David B. 2012. *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Isaac the Solitary. 1979. On Guarding the Intellect: Twenty-Seven Texts. In *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*. Translated by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, vol. 1.
- Lind, Michael. 2021. "The Five Crises of the American Regime" Tablet. Available online: <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/american-crises-capitol-assault> (accessed on 7 January 2021).
- Lindars, Barnabas. 1992. Rebuking the Spirit a New Analysis of the Lazarus Story of John 11. *New Testament Studies* 38: 89–104. [CrossRef]
- Lomas, Tim. 2019. Anger as a moral emotion: A "bird's eye" systematic review. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 32: 341–95. [CrossRef]
- Mattison, William. 2002. Christian Anger: A Contemporary Account of Virtuous Anger in the Thomistic Tradition. Unpublished dissertation, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA.
- Maximos the Confessor. 1981. First Century on Love. In *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*. Translated by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, vol. 2.
- Mullins, Ryan. 2022. *God and Emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2016. *Anger and Forgiveness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Brien, Peter. 1999. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Quine, Willard Van Orman. 2000. Two dogmas of empiricism. In *Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language: A Concise Anthology*. Albany: Broadview, pp. 189–210. First published 1951.
- Rota, Michael. 2007. The Moral Status of Anger: Thomas Aquinas and John Cassian. *The American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 3: 395–418. [CrossRef]
- Seneca the Younger. 1911. *De Ira*. Translated by James Henderson. LCL 214. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Seneca the Younger. 1928. *Moral Essays, Volume I: De Providentia. De Constantia. De Ira. De Clementia*. Translated by John W. Basore. LCL 214. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Shantideva. 2006. *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. Translated by Padmakara Translation Group. Boulder: Shambala.
- Smith, Adam. 2018. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Overland Park: Digireads.com Publishing.
- Story, Cullen I. K. 1991. The Mental Attitude of Jesus at Bethany: John 11.33, 38. *New Testament Studies* 37: 51–66. [CrossRef]
- Strawson, Peter. 1962. Freedom and Resentment. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48: 187–211.
- Stump, Eleonore. 2010. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stump, Eleonore. 2018. *Atonement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tanner, Kathryn. 1988. *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* Oxford: Fortress.
- Palmer, Gerald Eustace Howell, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. 1979–1995. *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*. Translated by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, vols. 1–4.
- Torrey, Charles. 1912. *Translations Made from the Original Aramaic Gospels*. New York: Macmillan.
- Torrey, Charles. 1923. The Aramaic Origin of the Gospel of John. *The Harvard Theological Review* 16: 305–44. [CrossRef]
- Torrey, Charles. 1936. *Our Translated Gospels: Some of the Evidence*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Twenge, Jean. 2023. *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents--And What They Mean for America's Future*. New York: Atria Press.
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 2009. *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 2011. *Justice in Love*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Wood, Jordan Daniel. 2022. *The Whole Mystery of Christ: That Creation Is Incarnation in Maximus the Confessor*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Yale News. 2017. Outstanding Students Honored at Class Day. Available online: <https://news.yale.edu/2017/05/19/outstanding-students-honored-class-day> (accessed on 4 November 2023).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.