



## Thomas Aquinas on the Emotions<sup>1</sup>

*Nicholas E. Lombardo, O.P.*

Despite its enormous historical influence, Thomas Aquinas's account of the emotions has been neglected since the early modern period. Recently however, it has been drawing renewed attention from scholars in a number of disciplines. This paper gives an overview of Aquinas's account of the emotions and the state of contemporary scholarship. It describes his fundamentally positive attitude toward desire and emotion, and then it shows the centrality of his theory of the emotions to his ethics and his understanding of virtue. In the course of its argument, the paper examines the relationship between reason and emotion, the inseparable link between emotion and virtue, the influence of Christology on Aquinas's understanding of the emotions, and the moral normativity of unspecified passion. It also compares Aquinas to David Hume. Finally, it proposes a tentative explanation for why Aquinas was motivated to give more attention to emotion in his writings than any previous philosopher or theologian, and it discusses Aquinas's hidden influence in contemporary philosophy and theology of emotion.

**Keywords:** *Thomas Aquinas, Emotion, Desire, Passion, Affection, Reason, Virtue, Christ, David Hume*

When I would tell people that I was working on Aquinas's theory of the emotions, they were often surprised. They would ask me, "Did Aquinas write much about the emotions?" A couple of times, people would ask me, "Did Aquinas *have* emotions?"

---

<sup>1</sup> This article reproduces, with some adaptations and additions, material from various parts of Nicholas Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), esp. xi-xii, 1-20, 34-43, 49-50, 94-117, 148-49, 220-23, 272-74. Reprinted with permission.

It is not hard to see where these questions were coming from. Aquinas cuts to the point immediately, and he does not waste time on pleasantries. He almost never lets his emotions surface; he keeps his personality carefully sequestered from his arguments. That is not to say we do not see his temper flare on a few occasions. He calls out David of Dinant for teaching “most stupidly” (*stultissime*) that God is prime matter.<sup>2</sup> He coldly denounces Siger of Brabant for corrupting the minds of his students, and after laying out his arguments against Siger’s questionable cosmology, he challenges Siger “not to speak in corners or to boys who cannot judge of such arduous matters, but reply to this in writing, *if he dares*.”<sup>3</sup> But besides these rare outbursts of anger, his writing seems devoid of emotion, and also completely innocent of any attempt to incite an emotional response in his readers. So philosophers and theologians can be forgiven for thinking that Thomas Aquinas must not have had much to say about emotion.

## Historical Context and Historical Influence

But as a matter of fact, when Aquinas finished his *Treatise on the Passions* in 1271,<sup>4</sup> it probably constituted the longest sustained discussion of the emotions ever written.<sup>5</sup> The *Treatise on the Passions* is the culmination of a lifetime of reflection

---

<sup>2</sup> ST I 3.8.

<sup>3</sup> *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*, 124, in Ralph M. McInerny, *Aquinas against the Averroists: On There Being Only One Intellect* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), 145. Translation slightly modified.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the historical origins and precise chronology of the *Summa theologiae* and Aquinas’s other works, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. I: *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), esp. 146-47, 330-61. On the origins of the *Summa*, see also Leonard E. Boyle, “The setting of the *Summa theologiae* of Saint Thomas,” in *Facing History: A Different Thomas Aquinas*, (Louvain-La-Neuve: Fédération Internationale des Instituts d’Études Médiévales, 2000), 65-91, and M. Michèle Mulchahey, “*First the Bow is Bent in Study: Dominican Education before 1350*” (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998), 278-306. For an accessible introduction to the *Summa* and the history of its reception, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Aquinas’s Summa: Background, Structure, & Reception* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> To my knowledge, the longest sustained discussion of the passions before Aquinas is found in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, and Aristotle’s treatment is neither as long nor as systematic as Aquinas’s.

Paul Gondreau states that the *Treatise on the Passions* “dwarfs the only known historical precedents [for a systematic treatment of the passions], both of which Aquinas draws upon: Nemesius of Emesa’s short treatise on the passions in his *De natura hominis* and, following this, John Damascene’s treatise on the same in his *De fide orthodoxa* (Aristotle left us no systematic treatment of the passions).” Gondreau, “The Passions and the Moral Life: Appreciating the Originality of Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 71 (2007): 426. See also Paul Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ’s Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2003), 106.

Servais Pinckaers writes: “To our knowledge, there does not exist in the Fathers nor in the Middle Ages a study of the human passions comparable for its length and its quality. It is a unique, classic work—and is too neglected.” Servais Pinckaers, “Les passions et la morale,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 74 (1990): 379.

and the centerpiece of a much larger project. Aquinas's attention to the passions spans his entire literary output, beginning with his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, and permeates each part of the *Summa theologiae*.<sup>6</sup> In the *Summa*, he thoroughly integrates his discussion of the passions with his metaphysics and his account of human nature, the desire for happiness, virtue, vice, sin and grace.<sup>7</sup> In its integration within such an expansive project, the *Treatise on the Passions* is without historical precedent,<sup>8</sup> as is the *Prima secundae*, the section of the *Summa* in which it is found.<sup>9</sup> Aquinas's account of the passions also represents an original synthesis of

---

Simo Knuuttila calls it "the most extensive medieval treatise" on the passions. Simo Knuuttila, *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 239.

<sup>6</sup> Besides the *Summa*, the most significant places where Aquinas discusses the passions include (listed in approximate chronological order): *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* II.36, III.15-16, III.26-27, III.34, IV.49; *De veritate* 22.3-4, 25-26; *Summa contra gentiles* I.89-91; *Sententia libri De anima*, *passim*, esp. 3.14; *De malo*, *passim*; *De virtutibus* 1.4-5, 4.1-2; *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, *passim*, esp. 2.5. Of these, Aquinas's discussion of the passions in the *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* and *De veritate* 25-26 are probably the most important.

<sup>7</sup> Most studies of Aquinas on the passions focus almost exclusively on the *Treatise on the Passions* and Questions 80-82 of the *Prima pars*. As a result, there is much work that remains to be done, especially in clarifying his treatment of the passions vis-à-vis original sin, grace, and specific virtues and vices.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Jordan argues that Aquinas's extended discussion of the passions in the *Prima secundae* constitutes a structural innovation vis-à-vis the work of his predecessors. See Mark D. Jordan, "Ideals of *Scientia moralis* and the Invention of the *Summa theologiae*," in *Aquinas' Moral Theory: Essays in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, ed. S. MacDonald and E. Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 84-90. Kevin White described the *Treatise on the Passions* as a new literary form in a philosophy lecture at the Catholic University of America.

<sup>9</sup> Historical evidence suggests that Aquinas began writing the *Summa theologiae* to correct the casuistry prevalent in manuals for confessors and other works of moral theology. He was concerned that the moral theology taught to Dominican students and others had a skewed emphasis on vice and sin and lacked sufficient theological and anthropological context. Consequently, one of Aquinas's principal objectives in writing the *Summa* was to give a balanced foundation for the study of Christian ethics. For this reason, Leonard Boyle suggests that the *Prima secundae*, Aquinas's analysis of human actions and passions *par excellence*, is the heart of the *Summa theologiae*. In any case, nothing comparable to the *Prima secundae* in scope or content existed before Aquinas or during his lifetime. There are contemporary parallels to the *Secunda secundae* and its discussion of particular virtues and vices, such as the *Summa de vitiis et virtutibus* of William Perardus, and there are parallels to the *Summa theologiae* considered as a whole, notably the *Summa theologiae* of Alexander of Hales, one of the principal models for Aquinas's work, but there are no parallels to the *Prima secundae*. See Boyle, "Setting of the *Summa*," Torrell, *The Person and his Work*, 142-59; and Gondreau, *Passions of Christ's Soul*, 22, 45-46, 107-10.

Mark Jordan comes to a conclusion similar to Boyle's about the centrality of the *Secunda pars* to Aquinas's project. He writes: "I believe that Thomas wrote the *Summa* for the sake of the second part – that is, in order to situate the moral component of theology within a properly ordered account of the whole. Thomas undertook the writing at the end of a series of experiments in comprehensive theological composition: a first commentary on the Lombard, a projected series of Boethius commentaries, the so-called *Contra gentiles*, an abandoned *Compendium*, and the bare beginnings of a second commentary on the Lombard. Reading through these experiments, we can argue over Thomas's motives for moving from one project to another. But the largest contrast between the *Summa* and the earlier works seems to me beyond argument: it is the contrast created by the *secunda pars*, by the large and ingeniously arranged teaching of *scientia moralis* at the center of theology. Any account of

every major thinker available to him, particularly Aristotle, Augustine, Nemesius of Emesa, John Damascene, and his teacher, Albert the Great.<sup>10</sup> When his writings are considered under the rubric of emotion—a modern concept considerably broader than the ancient and medieval concept of passion—the scope of his achievement becomes even more impressive.

Nonetheless, despite renewed interest in emotion among contemporary philosophers and theologians, Aquinas's account of emotion remains neglected. Robert Solomon's anthology of classic texts on emotion, a standard philosophy textbook, does not include anything from Aquinas.<sup>11</sup>

Interest in Aquinas's account of emotion, however, is growing. Recent studies have made almost extravagant statements about Aquinas's influence on subsequent medieval and early modern thinkers. Peter King states that Aquinas "set the agenda for later medieval discussions of the passions" such that "later thinkers could do no better than to begin with his account, even when they disagreed with it."<sup>12</sup> In her book, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Susan James devotes a chapter to Aquinas. Of all the medievals, she claims, he exerted the greatest influence on early modern theorists of the passions, and perhaps even eclipsed Aristotle.<sup>13</sup> Eileen Sweeney suggests that Descartes and Hobbes should be understood "as reacting to and constructing alternatives to Aquinas's arrangement

---

the *Summa's* purposes that fails to explain the unprecedented size and scope of the moral teaching in the work will be an inadequate account" (Jordan, "Invention of the *Summa theologiae*," 97).

With 27 questions and 132 articles, the *Treatise on the Passions* is the longest treatise in the *Prima secundae* (Pinckaers, "Les passions et la morale," 379). This does not necessarily mean that Aquinas regarded his treatment of the passions as the centerpiece of the *Prima secundae* and his fundamental moral theology, but all things considered, it is possible that he did. If so, and if Boyle is right that the *Prima secundae* is the heart of the *Summa*, than the *Treatise on the Passions* may be the centerpiece of more than just Aquinas's account of emotion.

For an extended discussion of the originality and historical context of the *Secunda pars* and the relationship between the *Prima secundae* and the *Secunda secundae*, see Jordan, "Invention of the *Summa theologiae*," 79-97.

<sup>10</sup> For discussions of Aquinas's sources, and those he deliberately excludes, see Gondreau, *Passions of Christ's Soul*, 101-35; Mark D. Jordan, "Aquinas's Construction of a Moral Account of the Passions," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 33 (1986), 71-97; and John Patrick Reid, Introduction, notes and appendices to *Summa theologiae*, Vol. 21: *Fear and Anger* (London: Blackfriars, 1965), 146-50.

<sup>11</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *What Is an Emotion? Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Peter King, "Late Scholastic Theories of the Passions: Controversies in the Thomist Tradition," in *Emotions and Choice from Boethius to Descartes*, Studies in the History of the Philosophy of Mind, 1, ed. Henrik Lagerlund and Mikko Yrjönsuuri (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), 229.

<sup>13</sup> "However, the Scholastic interpreter [of Aristotle] who exerted the greatest influence on early-modern theorists of the passions was undoubtedly Thomas Aquinas. His analyses of the differences between activity and passivity, alongside his description and classification of the passions of the soul, were reiterated and discussed throughout the seventeenth century, and may well have been more widely read than Aristotle's own texts." Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 30.

of the passions.”<sup>14</sup> Thomas Dixon’s historical study of the categories of passion and emotion singles out Augustine and Aquinas as the two principal representatives of the Christian tradition prior to the early modern period.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, a number of analytic philosophers have offered sympathetic reconstructions and appraisals of Aquinas’s understanding of the passions.<sup>16</sup> The revival of virtue ethics seems partly responsible for much of this interest, since Aquinas is one of the primary representatives of the virtue ethics tradition, and his account of the passions is closely connected to his account of virtue.<sup>17</sup>

There has been a similar renewal of interest in Thomist scholarship.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Eileen Sweeney, “Restructuring Desire: Aquinas, Hobbes, and Descartes on the Passions,” in *Meeting of the Minds: The Relations between Medieval and Classical Modern European Philosophy*, ed. Stephen F. Brown (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 215.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26-61.

<sup>16</sup> See Mark P. Drost, “Intentionality in Aquinas’ Theory of the Emotions,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (1991): 449-60; Robert C. Roberts, “Thomas Aquinas on the Morality of Emotions,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 9 (1992): 287-305; Norman Kretzmann, “Philosophy of Mind,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 128-59, esp. 144-46; Mark Stephen Pestana, “Second Order Desires and Strength of Will,” *Modern Schoolman* 72 (1996): 173-82; Peter King, “Aquinas on the Passions,” in *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 353-84; Claudia Eisen Murphy, “Aquinas on Our Responsibility for Our Emotions,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 8 (1999): 163-205; Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 200-64.

<sup>17</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> The following are some highlights of recent literature. In English, Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ’s Soul*; Craig Titus, *Resilience and the Virtue of Fortitude: Aquinas in Dialogue with the Psychosocial Sciences* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006); and Kevin White, “The Passions of the Soul (Ia IIae, qq. 22-48),” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 103-15. Craig Titus’s work deserves special mention as a pioneering attempt to integrate contemporary psychology with Aquinas’s anthropology and ethics.

In French, Pinckaers, “Les passions et la morale,” and Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), esp. 244-65.

In Spanish, Marcos Manzanedo has written an excellent series of articles in *Studium*. His articles focus on a close textual analysis of Aquinas’s work on the passions, giving special attention to the development of his thought over the course of his lifetime.

In Italian, Matteo Laghi, “Passio et ‘passione’ nella letteratura tomista: Riflessioni in merito allo Status Quaestionis,” *Divus Thomas* (Piacenza) 103 (2000): 59-92; Constantino Marmo, “Hoc autem etsi potest tollerari: Egidio Romano e Tommaso d’Aquino sulle passioni dell’anima,” in *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale*, vol. 2 (Spoleto, Italy: Centro italiano di studi sull’alto Medioevo, 1991), 281-315; Italo Sciuto, “Le passioni dell’anima nel pensiero di Tommaso d’Aquino,” in *Anima e corpo nella cultura medievale*, ed. C. Casagrande and S. Vecchio (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 1999), 73-93; and Antonio Stagnitta, *L’antropologia in Tommaso d’Aquino: saggio di ricerca comparata sulle passioni e abitudini dell’uomo* (Naples: E.D.I. Editrice, 1979).

In German, Alexander Brungs, *Metaphysik der Sinnlichkeit: Das System der Passiones Animae bei Thomas von Aquin* (Halle/Saale, Germany: Hallescher Verlag, 2002), which along with Gondreau’s

Thomist scholars have always looked to Aquinas as a primary point of reference on the passions. Nonetheless, until the twentieth century, his treatment of them was neglected, because the centrality of the passions to his anthropology and ethics was insufficiently appreciated.<sup>19</sup> Neglect of Aquinas's treatment of the passions begins with Aquinas's contemporaries and immediate successors. For example, there are almost twice as many extant manuscripts of the *Secunda secundae*, the section of the *Summa* concerned with specific virtues and vices, than the section that includes the *Treatise on the Passions*. The great medieval scholar Leonard Boyle thought that Aquinas's project of regrounding moral questions in a comprehensive anthropological and theological context went over the heads of his Dominican confreres.<sup>20</sup>

Since the early twentieth century, there has been sustained interest in the passions among Thomist scholars and an unbroken chain of scholarship, with varying degrees of attentiveness to non-Thomist philosophy and scientific psychology.<sup>21</sup> During the early and mid-twentieth century, the passions received relatively intense attention before passing into a period of mild neglect. The passions are now receiving more attention within Thomist circles, in large part due to the scholarship of

---

book constitute the only monographs on Aquinas and the passions published in recent years, up until 2009.

Gondreau also offers a survey of Thomist scholarship on Aquinas and human affectivity. See Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ's Soul*, esp. 23-25.

Three important monographs were published in 2009: Diana Fritz Cates, *Aquinas on the Emotions: A Religious-Ethical Inquiry* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009); Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 22-48* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Servais Pinckaers, *Passions et Vertu* (Paris: Éditions Parole et Silence, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ's Soul*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> The breakdown of extant manuscript copies of the *Summa* reflects their interests: the *Tertia pars* accounts for 18%, the *Prima secundae* for 20%, the *Prima pars* for 25%, and the *Secunda secundae* for 37%. It may have been its originality that caused it to be overlooked. (Boyle, *Setting of the Summa*, 23)

Similarly, one of the most popular and influential guides for confessors in the middle ages, which was written by a Dominican and sought to popularize the moral teaching of Aquinas, quotes the *Secunda secundae* frequently but only refers to the *Prima secundae* occasionally. While this focus on the *Secunda secundae* is not surprising, considering the work's orientation toward concrete pastoral advice rather than theory, it is consistent with the supposition that even Aquinas's fellow Dominicans did not fully appreciate the relevance of the *Prima secundae*, let alone the *Treatise on the Passions*, to his overall project. See Leonard E. Boyle, "The 'Summa confessorum' of John of Freiburg and the Popularization of the Moral Teaching of St. Thomas and Some of His Contemporaries," in *Facing History: A Different Thomas Aquinas* (Louvain-La-Neuve: Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales, 2000), 50.

<sup>21</sup> Of special note is the work of two Dutch psychiatrists, Anna Terruwe and Conrad Baars, who pioneered the integration of Thomistic psychology with clinical practice. Each published numerous books. A synthesis of their mature thought can be found in Anna A. Terruwe and Conrad W. Baars, *Loving and Curing the Neurotic: A New Look at Emotional Illness* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1972). A revised version was republished in two separate volumes: *Healing the Unaffirmed* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1976) and *Psychic Wholeness and Healing* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1981).

Servais Pinckaers and Jean-Pierre Torrell, as well as the growing interest of analytic philosophers in both Aquinas and emotion. Nonetheless, Torrell notes that the *Treatise on the Passions* “has scarcely attracted the attention of moralists,” and in a paper given at the American Catholic Philosophical Association’s annual meeting in 1997, it was observed that “perhaps no aspect of Aquinas’s moral theory has been more neglected than his treatment of the *passiones animae*.”<sup>22</sup>

## Overview of Aquinas’s Account of Emotion

Despite the neglect of Aquinas’s theory of the emotions, it is not an exaggeration to say that emotion is central to Aquinas’s theological project.

Aquinas’s account of emotion centers on his account of desire. In turn, it is desire that gives the *Summa theologiae* its *exitus-reditus* structure: Aquinas begins with God and then traces how creation flows from God’s desire and returns to him through ours. Consequently, to follow the theme of emotion through the *Summa* is to follow the guiding principle around which Aquinas organized his most mature thought. The *Summa* is often compared to the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages for its vast structure and its comprehensive synthesis of so many component parts. Looking at the theme of desire and emotion is like stepping away from the many side chapels of the *Summa* and looking down the nave.

Desire and emotion are not just central to the structure of the *Summa*: they are central to Aquinas’s project and especially his ethics. For Aquinas, ethics is nothing other than the study of human psychology insofar as it flourishes or fails to flourish. Unlike approaches that regard psychology and ethics as two distinct categories that are only occasionally concerned with each other, or perhaps extrinsically related in a calculus where psychological well-being is weighed against doing what is right, Aquinas’s approach offers a refreshing synthesis of psychology and ethics. In many popular understandings, there is something paradoxical about divine commandments: God gives us desires and then commands us not to act on them. For Aquinas, there is no paradox, because God commands us *through* the desires he gives us. The commandments of divine revelation are ancillary to our natural inclinations; they are signposts to the fulfillment of desire, shorthand conclusions following from the logic of human nature.

Two extreme views about emotion seem to emerge continually in different eras of human history and sometimes side by side within the same culture. There is one view that is suspicious of human emotion and seeks to guard against it, restrain it, and prevent it from taking control. Then there is another view that exults in emotion

---

<sup>22</sup> Torrell, *Spiritual Master*, 259; Richard K. Mansfield, “Antecedent Passion and the Moral Quality of Human Acts According to St. Thomas,” in *Virtues and Virtue Theory: Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 71 (1997): 221.

and desire and glorifies following wherever it might lead. While most cultures and peoples settle on some middle way, it is striking how frequently the extreme views manifest themselves time and again, in all sorts of different cultural contexts. Nonetheless, it is not all that surprising. Both views have their origins in human experience: all of us at times experience the goodness of desire and emotion, and all of us at times experience how our emotions can mislead us, disrupt our inner calm, and generally cause trouble. These experiences can be so intense that we are liable to emphasize one reality at the expense of the other. Aquinas manages to avoid either extreme. He affirms the fundamental goodness of emotion even while maintaining that, in a fallen world, human affectivity is prone to distortions. In consequence, his account is of broad interest to anyone who seeks to reconcile a positive view of the human person with the empirical fact of our proclivities toward self-destructive and other-destructive behavior.

The positive role of emotion in Aquinas's theology derives in no small part from the cultural milieu of the Dominican Order to which Aquinas belonged. The order had grown out of an informal band of itinerant preachers devoted to defending the goodness of the material world against the dualistic beliefs of the Cathars of southern France. These origins gave Dominic and his companions an especially acute attentiveness to the goodness of creation. Insofar as they established the government and basic structure of the order, and consciously and unconsciously shaped the distinctive traits of Dominican culture, their legacy undoubtedly influenced Aquinas toward a more pronounced appreciation of creation—and therefore of emotion. His account of emotion, then, in part reflects the cultural dispositions of the early Dominicans. This genealogy underscores its rootedness in practical concerns and the analysis of ordinary human experience, and also helps to explain its balance and humaneness.

### Categories of Emotion in Aquinas's Writing

One major difficulty in making sense of Aquinas's theory of the emotions is that the word "emotion" has no direct parallel in the Latin vocabulary of the thirteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Emotion has been an important psychological category only since the early nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Since the mid-twentieth century, scholars of Aquinas writing in English frequently identify what he calls the passions of the soul (*passiones animae*) with the emotions, translating *passio* as "emotion," rather than the more literal "passion."<sup>25</sup> This translation is seriously misleading. While it is accurate to regard

<sup>23</sup> The closest etymological parallel to emotion in Latin is *motus*, or movement, which is occasionally used in a psychological context (sometimes as *motus animae*) to refer to a movement of the soul (Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*, 39-40). It will be argued that the closest parallel in meaning is *affectus* or *affectio*, that is, affection.

<sup>24</sup> Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*, 4

<sup>25</sup> Many of the volumes of the Blackfriars *Summa* edited by Thomas Gilby adopt this practice.

many of the passions as emotions, Aquinas also speaks of affections (*affectiones* or *affectus*) that are not passions and yet clearly correspond to the category of emotion. For example, he speaks about certain kinds of joy or love that he explicitly says are not passions, but clearly should be considered emotions.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Aquinas also writes about a category called the passions of the body (*passiones corporalis*) that encompasses phenomena that we would hesitate to describe as emotions, such as itches, pangs, hunger, and thirst.

For reasons that cannot be discussed here, I maintain that Aquinas's category of affection (in Latin, *affectus* and its synonym *affectio*) should be seen as corresponding to the contemporary category of emotion.<sup>27</sup> Within his category of affection there are two subgroups. First, there are *passions of the soul*, which are movements of the sense appetite, and therefore involve both the body and the soul. We share these in common with animals. Second, there are *intellectual affections*, which are movements of the will, and therefore only involve the soul. We share these in common with angels and God. According to Aquinas, intellectual affections are tightly interwoven with the passions of the soul: for example, joy in the will overflows to the sense appetite.

The category of intellectual affection is crucial to Aquinas's account of emotion, but it has received very little attention in the secondary literature. In the past fifteen years, some British scholars working in the field of intellectual history have drawn attention to this category. My own research has strongly confirmed its importance. In my research, I first looked closely at the *Prima pars* and the *Prima secundae*, and these sections were enough to convince me of its significance. Then I started going through the *Secunda secundae*, and I found the significance of affection confirmed to a striking degree. In the *Secunda secundae*, Aquinas starts to use the words "affectus" and "affectio" more and more as he discusses specific virtues and vices, in order to indicate that they involve human affectivity without necessarily involving the body and the passions.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes he uses "affectus" because he

Eric D'Arcy prefaces his translation of Questions 22-39 of the *Treatise on the Passions* with a detailed explanation for his choice of emotion for *passio*. See Eric D'Arcy, Introduction and notes to *Summa theologiae*, Vol. 19: *The Emotions* and Vol. 20: *Pleasure* (New York: McGraw-Hill; London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967, 1975).

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of the category of affection in Aquinas, see *The Logic of Desire*, 75-93. See also Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*, 26-61, esp. 40. Dixon's work first drew my attention to the significance of affection in Aquinas vis-à-vis the contemporary category of emotion.

<sup>27</sup> For more on the correspondence between the categories of affection and emotion, see *The Logic of Desire*, 224-229.

<sup>28</sup> Aquinas's use of "affectus" becomes proportionately greater in the *Secunda secundae* than it was in the *Prima secundae*. The *Index Thomisticus* available on the Corpus Thomisticum website ([www.corpusthomisticum.org](http://www.corpusthomisticum.org)) indicates that there are 193 instances of *affectus* and 42 instances of the close synonym *affectio* in the *Secunda secundae*, compared with 67 instances of *affectus* and 43 instances of *affectio* in the *Prima secundae*. This increase is significant, even taking into account the greater length of the *Secunda secundae*.

By way of comparison, *passio* occurs in 1131 instances in the *Prima secundae*, but it occurs in

is talking about a movement of the will. Other times he seems to use “affectus” because he wants to leave vague whether he is referring to the passions or intellectual affections or both.

### *Aquinas’s Positive Evaluation of the Passions*

I have claimed that Aquinas has a remarkably positive evaluation of the emotion and desire. I also want to make the more specific claim that he has a remarkably positive evaluation of the *passions*. Some recent scholars such as Thomas Dixon argue that Aquinas has a positive view of intellectual affections, but a negative view of bodily passions, so I want to develop this point.<sup>29</sup>

Some texts can indeed be used to argue that Aquinas’s default attitude toward the passions is negative. However, these texts are few and far between, and they are vastly outnumbered by texts in which Aquinas clearly argues for a very positive evaluation of the passions (some of which I discuss shortly). It would take too much time to parse the negative sounding texts and explain why they do not imply a negative evaluation of the passions. However, I do want to explain why it is easy to misread Aquinas, and why I think there is any controversy in the first place.

The first thing to understand about Aquinas is that he bends over backwards to show continuity with the opinions of established intellectual authorities, whether Jewish, Christian, Islamic, or pagan. In the writings of many pagan philosophers and patristic theologians, the word “passion” has negative connotations, even when they otherwise have a generally positive interpretation of desire and emotion. But in the Middle Ages these philosophers and theologians were considered authorities. Consequently, Aquinas goes out of his way to show continuity with these authors, even when he is subverting their conceptualization of passion toward a more positive interpretation. In order to read Aquinas correctly, it is important to be attentive to his subversive project.

As Bonnie Kent observes, in his attentiveness to innumerable authorities, Aquinas is “very much like a host laboring to produce congenial, fruitful conversation among guests deeply at odds with each other. Like all good hosts, he conceals how hard he must work to ensure that conflicts are defused and the party goes well. Sometimes Thomas repeats, approvingly, the words of an authority while giving them a meaning rather different from what the author intended... Sometimes he sounds as if he agrees wholeheartedly when he actually agrees only with significant reservations. And sometimes his reservations become clear only later in the *Summa*,

---

only 403 instances in the *Secunda secundae*. This statistic is somewhat misleading, because *passio* has many meanings unrelated to *passiones animae*. Nonetheless, the sharp drop in its use seems to indicate that, compared to the *Prima secundae*, Aquinas is less concerned with the *passiones animae* and more interested in *affectus* in the *Secunda secundae*.

<sup>29</sup> See Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*, 26-61.

so that his earlier statements appear, retrospectively, in an altogether different light.”<sup>30</sup>

And so, when it comes to interpreting Aquinas on the emotions, it is crucial to take a canonical approach, and to interpret any individual statement in light of his entire corpus. When we take such an approach, his positive view of the passions becomes much more evident.

## The Nature of Passion and Affection

So for Aquinas, what exactly is passion? He defines passion as follows: “Passion is a movement of the sense appetite caused by imagining good or evil.”<sup>31</sup> This pithy definition, borrowed from John Damascene, summarizes Aquinas’s understanding of the passions of the soul. But because this definition is filled with Aristotelian terminology, it is helpful to translate it into contemporary language. For Aquinas, a passion is an interior movement triggered by a sensible object, and by definition it involves not only our minds, but also our bodies.<sup>32</sup> It responds to an object that we have come to know through our senses, and judged either good or evil.<sup>33</sup> First, the cognitive faculties “present” a sensible object to us. Then, if that object corresponds to our capacities and inclinations, whether for good or ill, our emotional capacities are triggered and we experience a passion of some sort. There are thus two aspects of a passion: receptivity to a sensible object, and then movement toward some *telos*. When the object is good for us, we move toward it; or if we already possess it, we enjoy it. When the object is bad for us, we move away from that object; or if we cannot avoid it, we experience sadness. Aquinas identifies eleven different passions from eleven different categories of objects: love, desire, joy, hate, aversion,

<sup>30</sup> Kent, “Habits and Virtues,” 116.

<sup>31</sup> *ST* I-II 22.3. See also John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa* 2.22. The translations from the *Summa theologiae* are my own, working in consultation with the English Dominican and Blackfriars translations.

<sup>32</sup> See *ST* I-II 22.2-3, 41.1, 45.2.

<sup>33</sup> When he discusses the passions, Aquinas often refers to the object of a passion without any qualifier such as “sensible.” It is simply an object, or a good, or an evil. However, it is evident that, for Aquinas, the proper object of the sense appetite is a sensible object. First, in his view that sense appetite responds to sense cognition (see especially *ST* I 81.1), Aquinas makes plain that the objects of sense appetite are known through sense cognition, and thus must be sensible. Second, Aquinas specifies the object of concupiscible passions as “a straightforward sensible good or evil,” and the object of irascible passions as “a good or evil that is arduous or difficult” (*ST* I-II 23.1; see also *ST* I-II 46.3). While Aquinas does not explicitly describe the object of irascible passion as sensible here, it is evident from the context that it is not just an arduous good or evil, but an arduous sensible good or evil. Hence both sorts of passions have sensible objects, according to Aquinas.

It is important to note that concepts and abstract ideals can elicit a response from the sense appetite, insofar as they involve sensible characteristics in the subject’s apprehension of them. For a discussion of this aspect of his account, see *The Logic of Desire*, 90-91.

sadness, hope, daring, despair, fear, and anger.<sup>34</sup> This taxonomy is not intended to be an inventory of every conceivable passion, but rather a catalog of the basic types.

Intellectual affections work the same way. The only difference is that they respond to intellectual objects, not sensible objects, and they do not directly involve the body. Our minds “present” an intellectual object to our intellectual appetite, that is, our will, and then, if it corresponds to our inclinations, we experience an intellectual affection. These intellectual affections often spill over into the passions. So when we feel great joy about an intellectual object, such as hearing some good news about a friend, it can spill over into our passions and our bodies. Likewise, although intellectual affections respond to intellectual objects, because intellectual objects are often bound up with sense perceptions, our intellectual affections also respond *indirectly* to sensible objects, as when we look forward to seeing a play, or a special dinner at a French restaurant.

Because passions and intellectual affections are so intertwined, it can be hard to draw the line between them. Nonetheless, unlike either animals or angels, we have the capacity for both bodily emotions and non-bodily emotions, not just one or the other. Consequently, for Aquinas, it does make sense to distinguish between passions and intellectual affections, if even in practice it can be very difficult to do so.

## Passion, Reason and Virtue

These preliminary remarks about passion and affection set the stage to understand Aquinas’s views on passion, reason, and virtue. This understanding is fundamentally positive: he sees passion, reason, and virtue as essentially aligned and complementary. Despite the possibility of internal conflict, Aquinas trusts the fundamental orientation of the passions, as well as their capacity to be guided by reason.<sup>35</sup> His positive evaluation becomes more striking when we compare him with his contemporaries, and realize that he is consciously staking out a position that stands in opposition to theirs. For example, in the view of Bonaventure, his Franciscan colleague at the University of Paris, the passions lack either an instinctual drive toward conformity with reason or an intrinsic ordering to human flourishing. They can be forced to submit to reason (*obtemperat rationi*) by an exterior imposition,

---

<sup>34</sup> Aquinas’s account of the structure of the passions is original to him. It first appears in the *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* (see *Sentences* III.26) and remains unmodified in later works. Nonetheless, some key aspects derive from John of La Rochelle. All of Aquinas’s eleven passions, for instance, are also found in John of La Rochelle. Aquinas’s originality and taxonomical innovations are in his metaphysics and the principles of classification that undergird his system. See John of La Rochelle, *Tractatus de divisione multiplici potentiarum animae*, ed. Pierre Michaud-Quantin (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964); Gondreau, *Passions of Christ’s Soul*, 211@-18; and Knuuttila, *Emotions*, 243.

<sup>35</sup> For a similar interpretation of Aquinas’s understanding of the passions and their role in the moral life, and how this stems from his view that the passions can be guided by reason, see Gondreau, “The Passions and the Moral Life,” esp. 431-42.

but their independent dynamism is an inherent threat to virtue.<sup>36</sup> Bonaventure views the autonomy of the passions as a hindrance, rather than a help, to virtue.

For Aquinas, however, the spontaneity of the passions is a positive feature of human affectivity. Unless the passions become corrupted and disordered, their independence is not a threat to interior freedom, but a support to it. The passions have their own source of energy, and when guided by reason, their resources assist the will in its striving toward its chosen objectives. He notes, for example, that while the passions sometimes hinder the use of reason, they sometimes sharpen it, too, as when moderate fear concentrates the mind, or when the “pleasure that follows the act of reason, strengthens the use of reason.”<sup>37</sup> Most importantly, Aquinas thinks that the passions intrinsically desire the guidance of reason.<sup>38</sup> According to Aquinas, “It is natural to the sense appetite to be moved by the rational appetite.”<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere he uses slightly stronger language and says that for the passions “it is natural to obey reason” (*natae sunt rationi obedire*).<sup>40</sup> The passions aren’t simply docile to reason, or ready to obey reason when it commands something; they actively seek out its guidance, because, according to Aquinas, “appetite tends (*tendit*) toward conformity with reason.”<sup>41</sup> This natural tendency of the sense appetite is compromised by original sin, because the complete subjection of the lowers powers to reason is a gift of grace.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, although the passions are not completely subject to reason in humanity’s fallen condition, the sense appetite still obeys reason “to some extent” (*aliquoliter*).<sup>43</sup>

The natural capacity to be moved by reason does not mean that the sense appetite is like a lump of clay that can be molded passively into any shape. Rather,

<sup>36</sup> Bonaventure, *Commentaria in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi* (Quaracchi, Florence: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1882-89), III 33.1.3 ad 1; Marie-Dominique Chenu, “Les passions vertueuses: L’anthropologie de saint Thomas,” *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 72 (1974): 13-16; W. D. Hughes, Introduction, notes, and appendices to *Summa theologiae*, Vol. 23: *Virtue* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co.; London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1969), 245-46; and Gondreau, *Passions of Christ’s Soul*, 276-81.

<sup>37</sup> Aquinas notes the salutary effects of pleasure in *ST* I-II 33.4 ad 1 and of fear in *ST* I-II 44.4. He discusses how the passions can hinder or sharpen reason in various places, including *ST* I-II 10.3, 33.3, 33.4 ad 1, 37.1, 44.2, 44.4, 46.4 ad 3, 48.3, 77.7. For a discussion of Aquinas’s understanding of how passion influences reason, see Uffenheimer-Lippens, “Rationalized Passion and Passionate Rationality,” 547-57.

<sup>38</sup> My analysis of this aspect of Aquinas’s thought and my appreciation of its significance is greatly indebted to the works of Anna Terruwe and Conrad Baars.

<sup>39</sup> *ST* I-II 50.3 ad 3.

<sup>40</sup> *ST* I-II 56.4. See also *ST* I-II 50.3 ad 1, 74.3; *ST* III 18.2.

<sup>41</sup> *ST* I-II 59.1. As he progresses through the *Summa*, Aquinas seems to become more emphatic about the natural tendency of the passions to look to reason for guidance.

<sup>42</sup> *ST* I 95.1. See also *ST* I-II 85.3, where Aquinas discusses how original sin introduces disorder into the passions and thwarts their natural inclination toward virtue: “All the powers of the soul are destitute in a certain way of their proper order, by which they would be naturally ordered to virtue, and on account of this destitution nature is said to be wounded.”

<sup>43</sup> *ST* I 95.2.

according to Aquinas, the sense appetite responds to reason in a way that involves its own natural dynamism. The sense appetite is oriented toward reason's guidance, but it responds to reason on its own terms. The passions, he writes, "do not obey the command of reason automatically, but have their own proper movements, by which they sometimes oppose reason."<sup>44</sup>

Because Aquinas believes that the passions in their inner structure tend toward the guidance of reason,<sup>45</sup> he rejects the idea that virtue forces passion to submit to reason. Instead, he maintains that virtue simply orders passion toward human flourishing.<sup>46</sup> This view crystallizes in Aquinas's claim that the sense appetite can be the subject, that is, the seat or location, of virtue.<sup>47</sup> He classifies different virtues according to the passions they perfect: "temperance is concerned with the concupiscible passions; fortitude, with fear and daring; magnanimity, with hope and despair; meekness with anger."<sup>48</sup> Although he is developing a position held by

---

<sup>44</sup> *ST I-II* 56.4 ad 3.

<sup>45</sup> One might object that this account overplays Aquinas's account of the sense appetite's ordering to reason. It is one thing to say that Aquinas holds that the sense appetite is naturally susceptible to being molded by reason; it is another thing to say that Aquinas thinks that the sense appetite actually inclines toward this guidance, even if only to a limited extent. The following passage, taken from Aquinas's treatment of avarice, offers support for this objection. He writes, "Virtue is perfected according to reason, but vice is perfected according to the inclination of the sense appetite" (*ST II-II* 118.7 ad 1; see also *ST I-II* 71.2 ad 3). This passage can be read as implying that the sense appetite does not seek out the guidance of reason and that the sense appetite might passively accept reason's guidance, but it is not actually inclined toward it.

However, this passage need not be read so strictly, especially since Aquinas is writing not to define the nature of sense appetite's relation to reason, but rather to explain why avarice is a capital vice. In the light of his explicit statements about sense appetite's ordering to reason, it seems best to interpret this comment as explaining that vice perfects certain inclinations of the sense appetite, but not all of them, and that the sort of perfection characteristic of vice is accomplished at the expense of the sense appetite's inclination toward the guidance of reason. Elsewhere, for example, Aquinas notes that, since desire (*concupiscentia*) is naturally guided by reason, desire is natural to man only insofar as it follows reason. Consequently, disordered passion, precisely because it is departs from reason's guidance, is not natural to man (*ST I-II* 82.4 ad 1).

<sup>46</sup> Chenu gives a helpful overview of the importance of the passions to Aquinas and his disagreement with Bonaventure, and also of the neglect and disparagement Aquinas's theories received in his lifetime and afterwards. See Marie-Dominique Chenu, "Body and Body Politic in the Creation Spirituality of Thomas Aquinas," in *Western Spirituality: Historical Roots, Ecumenical Routes*, ed. Matthew Fox (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1981), 193-214.

<sup>47</sup> *ST I-II* 56.4, 56.5 ad 1. Aquinas qualifies his claim by observing that virtue is in the passions only insofar as they participate in reason: "Virtue cannot be in the irrational part of the soul, except to the extent that it participates in reason." Therefore, he explains, "reason or mind (*ratio sive mens*) is the proper seat of virtue." (*ST I-II* 55.4 ad 3) He does not specify much more than this about the precise mechanism by which virtue is present in the passions, but it seems he would hold that it is present especially in the memory, the particular reason, and the body (insofar as the passions affect the body's physical constitution).

<sup>48</sup> *ST I-II* 60.4. Aquinas's analysis of particular virtues in the *Secunda secundae* includes detailed and interesting discussions of how the virtues intersect with the passions, how one virtue generates passions other than the passions immediately proper to itself (if any), and how the lack of a given virtue has negative consequences in the sense appetite.

Aristotle, it was controversial in his time. Many of his contemporaries, including Hugh of St. Cher, John of La Rochelle, and Bonaventure, disagreed and located virtue only in the reason and the will.<sup>49</sup> Their position follows from their view of passion as fundamentally irrational, just as Aquinas's more optimistic outlook follows from his view of the passions as fundamentally oriented toward reason's guidance. For them, the various moral virtues describe *volitional* dispositions to right behavior. For Aquinas, the various moral virtues are *holistic character traits* with passion and reason inclined (and mutually inclining) toward our *telos*, that is, our perfection as human persons created in the image and likeness of God.

Aquinas rejects the idea that virtue eradicates passion.<sup>50</sup> If disordered, the passions of the soul may incline to sin, "but in so far as they are ordered to reason they pertain to virtue."<sup>51</sup> Passion is not just tamed by virtue; ordered passion positively assists the execution of virtuous acts, and "helps the execution of reason's command."<sup>52</sup> Even sorrow can be a mark of virtue when moderate and appropriate, contrary to Stoic philosophy.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, he argues that the vehement expression of anger can also be virtuous, as in Aristotle's magnanimous man "who is open about what he loves and hates and in how he speaks and acts."<sup>54</sup> For Aquinas, virtuous passions also impart what we might call "affective knowledge," and this "affective knowledge" assists moral decision making, so that we make the right choice not just by the judgment of reason, but also by the instinctual response of passion.<sup>55</sup> In sum, virtue does not eradicate the passions, but rather produces ordered passions, that is, passions actively and proactively oriented toward human flourishing.<sup>56</sup>

Consequently, when it is well-ordered, intense passion is a mark of intense virtue. It indicates that the will is powerfully inclined toward the good, and that the sense appetite has been thoroughly suffused with right reason. "The more perfect the virtue," Aquinas writes, "the more it causes passion."<sup>57</sup>

*Is Aquinas right about the orientation of passion to reason?*

Aquinas's account of passion and virtue rests on his claim that the passions

---

<sup>49</sup> See Aristotle, *Ethics* III.10, 1117b23; Chenu, "Les passions vertueuses," 16-18; Hughes, Appendices to *Summa*, 245-46; and Gondreau, *Passions of Christ's Soul*, 276-81.

<sup>50</sup> ST I-II 59.2.

<sup>51</sup> ST I-II 24.2 ad 3. See also ST I-II 24.3.

<sup>52</sup> ST I-II 59.2 ad 3.

<sup>53</sup> ST I-II 59.3.

<sup>54</sup> ST I-II 48.3 ad 2; Aristotle, *Ethics* 4.3, 1124b26.

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Maguire and Thomas Ryan give a lengthy treatment of "affective knowledge" and its role in Aquinas's moral theory, especially with regard to the virtues of prudence, fortitude, and temperance, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. See Daniel C. Maguire, "Ratio Practica and the Intellectualistic Fallacy," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 10 (1982): 22-39 and Ryan, "Revisiting Affective Knowledge."

<sup>56</sup> ST I-II 59.5 ad 1.

<sup>57</sup> ST I-II 59.5.

naturally tend toward conformity with reason.<sup>58</sup> Everything hangs on whether he is right on this point. If he is not, the passions cannot be the seat of virtue. Furthermore, the spontaneity of the passions could not be anything but a threat to the mastery of reason and will. Even if the passions happen to align with reason's guidance from time to time, they would be completely untrustworthy.

So, does Aquinas's claim about passion's natural obedience to reason hold up? Experimental psychology may help here, since Aquinas's claim is partially testable, and might be proven or disproven by experiment. Experimental observation, however, is not strictly necessary; this question can also be approached by reflection on personal experience and general observations about human psychology.<sup>59</sup> When his claim is unpacked, it is less radical than it might seem at first. It simply thematizes ordinary experience in a way that is wide-ranging in theoretical implications.

For example, the phenomenon of anger presents itself to our consciousness and motivates us toward some kind of retaliatory action. Anger, however, stops short of making a decision. It presents itself, but then waits for us to make a judgment about the situation and decide upon a course of action. Once we evaluate the situation and decide on a course of action, anger responds accordingly. If we decide on some retaliatory action, the anger becomes directed toward that action. If we decide not to act on the anger, over time, the anger begins to fade, unless the cause of the anger continues to provoke us, either by continual experience of some injustice or a recurring memory. Reason can guide anger to some extent, but if it tries to extinguish anger inappropriately, the passions rebel and anger continues to assert itself.

The passions also obey reason when reason helps shape the intentional objects to which the passions respond. When we realize that the cause of our anger is not a genuine injustice—for example, when we realize that we deserved some criticism after all, or that our friend was not in fact the source of a calumnious rumor—our anger might dissipate immediately.

## **The Normative Quality of Generic Passion**

Today, when we talk about the morality of the emotions, we typically say that emotions are morally neutral in themselves, that it's only in a particular context that emotions are morally good or morally defective. Aquinas is usually seen as taking a similar approach. According to this standard interpretation, Aquinas

---

<sup>58</sup> See chap. 4. The analysis given in this section is greatly indebted to the work of Conrad Baars and Anna Terruwe.

<sup>59</sup> Aquinas himself alludes to personal experience in making his case for the tendency of the passions to follow reason. He writes, "Anyone can experience this in himself: by applying certain universal considerations, anger, fear, and other such things can be mitigated or instigated" (*ST* I 81.3).

considers generic passion, that is, passion considered in itself, to be morally neutral or morally indifferent.<sup>60</sup> Many texts support this interpretation, and it is accurate as far as it goes.<sup>61</sup> For Aquinas, generic passion is a theoretical concept. It does not exist in reality, and it cannot be morally good or morally bad, because passion must be specified by an object in order to take on a moral quality. For Aquinas, it is not enough to know that someone is sad to judge the moral quality of the sadness. If someone is sad because a virtuous person suffers unjustly, the sadness has a positive moral quality; if someone is sad because a plan to rob a bank has been foiled by the police, the sadness has a negative moral quality.

However, the standard interpretation of Aquinas on this point can be seriously misleading. It is true that generic passion cannot be either morally good or morally evil, because it does not have a specifying object. But generic passion does have an intrinsic relation to moral value. Generic passion is *normative* for specified passion. Generic passion is the measuring stick for determining whether specific passions are morally good, or morally defective. For Aquinas, moral goodness, psychological health, and human flourishing coincide exactly. And since the passions in their inner structure direct us toward our flourishing, moral goodness is the default orientation of generic passion.<sup>62</sup> When specific passions follow the default orientation of generic passion, they are morally good; when they depart from it, they are morally defective. Consequently, rather than describing generic passion as morally *neutral*, it is better to describe generic passion as morally *normative*.

For example, when it comes to anger, Aquinas does not say: based on these theoretical principles, here are the circumstances when anger is justified. Instead, he looks at how anger works and what kinds of things prompt us to get angry, and he notes that we get angry when we perceive that we have been treated unjustly. Relying on these empirical observations, he concludes that it is virtuous to get angry when we have in fact been treated unjustly, but not when, perhaps due to an inflated sense of self, we perceive injustice where there is no injustice.

---

<sup>60</sup> For example, see Judith A. Barad, "Aquinas on the Role of Emotion in Moral Judgment and Activity," *The Thomist* 55 (1991): 403; Leo Elders, *The Ethics of Aquinas: Happiness, Natural Law, and the Virtues* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005), 98@-99; and Gondreau, "The Passions of Christ's Soul," 392@-393.

<sup>61</sup> For example, see *ST* I-II 24.1@-2, 24.4, 34.1, 39.1.

<sup>62</sup> Aquinas seems to come close to saying this explicitly. In a passage from the *De malo*, Aquinas explains that the sense appetite's natural inclination is not toward sin, and that therefore God, as its creator, is not responsible for causing sin: "Sin does not come from the inclination of the irascible and concupiscible powers as instituted by God, but as the powers depart from the ordination that God himself instituted, for the powers were instituted in human beings to be subject to reason. And so it is not from God when they incline to sin contrary to the ordination of reason" (*De malo*, III.1 ad 5, trans. Richard Regan). Since the passions become disordered, and therefore evil, only if they depart from the ordination instilled in them by God, it seems that, according to Aquinas, their default orientation is toward moral goodness.

The case of sadness provides another example of Aquinas's methodology. Aquinas explains that it is good if someone becomes sad when confronted by a genuine evil. He writes,

If something saddening or painful is present, it is good if someone becomes sad or feels pain because of it. For if someone does not become sad or feel pain in the presence of an evil, either he does not feel it or he does not count it as something repugnant, and, obviously, both possibilities are evils. Consequently, it is good that sadness or pain follows from the presence of an evil.<sup>63</sup>

Aquinas does not think that it is good to be sad about an evil because there is a moral principle that, say, any sentient creature with a body should feel sad in certain circumstances. He thinks that it is good to be sad about an evil because we have a passion of sadness that operates in certain ways, and it is good for the inclinations of our nature to reach their fulfillment. He determines the moral quality of specific instances of sadness by measuring them against generic sadness: that is, against the essential structure of sadness.

Aquinas's treatment of generic passion once again illustrates both his positive evaluation of the passions, and his systematic integration of the passions into his moral theory.<sup>64</sup> Rather than comparing particular movements of the sense appetite to some apodictic system of morality, and then determining the proper ordering of the passions accordingly,<sup>65</sup> Aquinas roots moral judgments about the passions precisely in the appetites and tendencies of human nature.<sup>66</sup> For Aquinas, the passions in their basic tendencies are not just oriented toward virtue and human flourishing; they are

---

<sup>63</sup> ST I-II 39.1.

<sup>64</sup> In a 1990 state-of-the-question overview of the passions in moral theology, William Spohn notes that "in recent years, ethics has become less suspicious of emotion's role in moral experience." In doing so, he suggests, it is beginning to catch up with Aquinas: "Moral theologians who inherited a rationalist natural-law tradition have not paid as much attention to [well-ordered affectivity] as did their supposed patron saint, Thomas Aquinas." See William Spohn, "Notes on Moral Theology 1990: Passions and Principles," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 69-87.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Pasnau seems to interpret Aquinas in just this way, as though he constructs his account of the proper ordering of the passions by weighing them against standards that are independent of their inner structure and derived entirely from reason (Pasnau, *Aquinas on Human Nature*, 263-64). This interpretation does not do justice to Aquinas's explicit foundation of moral norms in the inclinations of human nature.

<sup>66</sup> For an excellent overview and defense of how Aquinas roots ethics in the inclinations of the human person, see Robert Ashmore, "Aquinas and Ethical Naturalism," *New Scholasticism* 49 (1975): 76-86. It is interesting to compare Aquinas and Ashmore to George Terzis's critique of virtue ethics (though Terzis does not specifically criticize Aquinas). Terzi centers his critique on the alleged failure of virtue ethics to provide a foundation for normative ethical standards. See George N. Terzis, "Human Flourishings: A Psychological Critique of Virtue Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (1994): 333-42.

For a discussion of how Aquinas derives morality from ontology, see Aertsen, "Thomas Aquinas of the Good," and Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Being and Goodness," in *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 295-323.

an indispensable norm and measure of natural law. Those choices that direct our passions toward their proper *telos* are morally good, and those choices that misdirect them are not. For Aquinas, natural inclination is law, and therefore so too is generic passion, that is, the passions themselves in their inner structure.

### *Aquinas and Hume on the passions*

At this point, it may now be evident that Thomas Aquinas and David Hume share a certain amount of common ground about the normative role of the passions. Reacting against an exaggerated emphasis on reason among his contemporaries, Hume famously wrote: “Reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any office than to serve and obey them.”<sup>67</sup> Aquinas would have rejected this formulation as it stands, but both Aquinas and Hume see the passions as morally normative. Aquinas, however, allows for more complexity in his conception of both passion and reason. Consequently, his understanding of how the passions relate to ethical norms is more nuanced.

For Aquinas, there is not just passion; there is generic passion and specified passion, and only generic passion is normative. Reason should respect the inner structure of passion, but not necessarily specific instances of it. Moreover, the relationship is reciprocal. Just as reason must respect the inner structure of passion, so too passion must respect the guidance of reason, because passion depends on reason and is oriented toward its guidance. So, for Aquinas, passion has a normative role in ethics, but only generic passion, and only in conjunction with reason.

For Hume, however, there is not generic and specified passion; there is just passion. Furthermore, the impulse of passion “arises not from reason, but is only directed by it” (2.3.3). Consequently, for Hume, passion is normative in an absolute sense, and reason should submit to its guidance without qualification. According to Hume, “‘Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. ‘Tis not contrary to reason for me to choose my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an *Indian* or person wholly unknown to me” (2.3.3). Hume goes on to explain that our “calm passions” incline us toward conventional moral behavior, thus rescuing his system from complete implausibility, but his account is nonetheless weighed down by his counterintuitive claims about the non-irrationality of such strange preferences. Aquinas’s account, however, can explain why such preferences are indeed contrary to reason, even while affirming that the passions have a normative role in ethics.

## **Christology and The Emotions**

The portrait of Christ in the Gospels is another importance source for Aquinas’s evaluation of human emotions. Aquinas holds that Christ took on ordinary

<sup>67</sup> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2.3.3.

human affectivity for our instruction. According to Aquinas, Christ shows us what virtuous affectivity looks like, and therefore what it looks like to be truly human. Aquinas takes the instructive role of Christ's affectivity seriously, and he sometimes mentions it when discussing the passions. For instance, he argues that sorrow must be compatible with virtue, because Christ experienced sorrow in the Garden of Gethsemane.<sup>68</sup> Elsewhere he argues that anger is not always sinful, because Christ was angry.<sup>69</sup>

This Christological influence on his theory of the emotions is not unidirectional. His evaluation of Christ's emotions often refers back to his *Treatise on the Passions*. At one point, for example, he argues that Christ could experience anger because anger is praiseworthy when reasonably ordered.<sup>70</sup> For Aquinas, Christ is the model and exemplar of human affectivity—yet, in order to understand Christ's emotions, he thinks that it is necessary to reflect on ordinary human experience, not just sacred Scripture.

In short, Aquinas's account of ordinary human emotions is in constant dialogue with his theology of Christ's emotions, and each reinforces the other's positive evaluation.

### Why was *The Treatise on The Passions* Written?

With these considerations in mind, we are now in a position to consider an intriguing question. What drove Aquinas to write his *Treatise on the Passions*? Nothing like it had ever been written before, and it is the longest treatise in the *Prima secundae*. What purpose did it serve? What did Aquinas hope to accomplish, and why did he give the passions so much attention?

One of the biggest clues comes in the *Secunda secundae*. In the *Prima secundae*, Aquinas presents an overview of human psychology and its development through virtue and its deformation by sin. In the *Secunda secundae*, he builds on this foundation, offering a detailed description of how specific virtues bring the human person to full flourishing. And throughout the course of the *Secunda secundae*, Aquinas refers explicitly to the *Treatise on the Passions* over forty times.<sup>71</sup> Typically,

---

<sup>68</sup> ST I-II 59.3.

<sup>69</sup> *De malo* 12.1 sc 4.

<sup>70</sup> ST III 15.9.

<sup>71</sup> See ST II-II 2.10, 7.1, 17.1, 17.4, 17.8, 19.2, 23.3 ad 2, 23.4, 28.1, 28.3, 34.1, 34.3, 34.5 obj 2, 36.1 obj 3-4, 41.2, 47.1 ad 1, 47.9 ad 3, 54.2 ad 3, 58.9 obj 1, 123.3, 123.8, 123.10, 123.11 ad 1, 125.1 obj 1, 125.2, 127.1, 128.1 ad 6, 129.6 ad 2, 129.7, 141.3, 141.4 obj 4, 141.7 obj 3, 144.1-2, 147.8 obj 2, 158.1-2, 158.5, 161.1, 168.2, 171.2 obj 1, 180.1, 180.7.

These references include only places where Aquinas *explicitly* refers back to the *Treatise on the Passions*. There are many other places where he reiterates its analysis without explicitly referring back to the *Treatise*.

he will refer the reader back to this *Treatise*, give a short resumé of the structure of a particular passion, and then compare it with the character trait he is discussing. When the character trait respects the passion's inner structure, it is a virtue, and when the character trait departs from the passion's inner structure, it is a vice.

From this clue and many others, we have reason to believe that Aquinas's central purpose in writing his *Treatise on the Passions* was to characterize the varieties of generic passion, precisely so that the morality of specific instances of passion could be evaluated against them. In other words, Aquinas writes so much about the ontology of the passions, not because he is a philosophical overachiever (although he is that), but because he is convinced that the *ontology* of the passions is crucial to the *morality* of the passions.

### **Aquinas's Hidden Influence on Contemporary Philosophy and Psychology**

When I was first exposed to Aquinas's theory of the emotions, it sounded hopelessly medieval, and distinctly unhelpful. But after entering into its inner logic, it started to make so much sense that I wondered why I had not thought of things his way before. Those who study Aquinas on the emotions often end up wanting to see more scholars looking to Aquinas's theory as a resource, or at least engaging him as a serious contender. While that is something devoutly to be wished, we can take comfort in the fact that, to great extent, *it has already happened*. One of the surprising discoveries in my research was that, over the past century, Aquinas has already played an enormous but hidden role in revolutionizing the philosophy and psychology of emotion.

It is well known that over the past fifty years, both philosophy and academic psychology have undergone a cognitive revolution in understanding the emotions. Before, in both fields, emotions were widely considered intrinsically irrational. Today, the reverse is true: most philosophers and psychologists now see the emotions as having an important cognitive element.

What is not well appreciated, however, is that Aquinas played a hidden role in bringing about this cognitive revolution. Magda Arnold, an academic psychologist who taught for many years at Loyola University, is widely credited as being one of the pioneers of cognitive approaches to the emotions. Her massive two-volume work on the emotions, published in 1960, became a founding document of the movement, and Richard Lazarus, another pioneer in psychology, relied heavily on her research. However, few people realize that Magda Arnold, a devout Catholic, was deeply influenced in her theories by Thomas Aquinas and his philosophical anthropology.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Regarding Aquinas's influence on Magda Arnold, see Randolph R. Cornelius, "Magda Arnold's Thomistic Theory of Emotion, the Self-Ideal, and the Moral Dimension of Appraisal," *Cognition and Emotion* 20 (2006): 976-1000.

The cognitivist turn in the study of emotions has naturally paved the way for greater receptivity to Aquinas's theory of the emotions in contemporary philosophy and psychology. If we were still stuck in the theories of the early twentieth century, Aquinas's theory of the emotions would never be getting the hearing it is now, and in so many different academic fields. So, ironically, without anyone realizing it, Aquinas seems to have prepared the ground for his own rediscovery.

## Conclusion

At present, there is no dominant theory of emotion in any discipline. However, the psychology and philosophy of emotion is undergoing a promising renewal, often welcoming rather than rejecting the pre-Cartesian contributions of ancient and medieval thinkers. In addition, many Christians are working to incorporate theology into clinical psychology and pastoral counseling (although as yet little is being done to construct a contemporary theology of emotion). All of these considerations suggest that Aquinas's account of emotion is more relevant than ever.

Few, if any, would maintain that his account as it stands could fill the current vacuum. However, once integrated with modern science and post-Freudian psychology, its inclusive methodology, systematic depth, and holistic approach might provide the basis for a new vision of the human person, culled from millennia of anthropological reflection and yet thoroughly accessible today. Still a gracious host, Aquinas continues to reward those who engage him in conversation, and his writings on emotion deserve a wider readership. ■



Nicholas Lombardo, O.P., is Assistant Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at The Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. He is a member of the Dominican province of the Eastern U.S.A. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge. His book, *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion*, was published by The Catholic University of America Press in 2011. His second book, *The Father's Will: Christ's Crucifixion and the Goodness of God*, is forthcoming from Oxford University Press. He can be contacted at [lombardon@cua.edu](mailto:lombardon@cua.edu).