

THOMAS AQUINAS ON  
THE PASSIONS

*A Study of Summa Theologiae 1a2ae 22–48*

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## Introduction

### WHY READ THOMAS AQUINAS ON THE PASSIONS?

Five of the greatest modern thinkers – Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Hume, and Rousseau – take the passions as a primary theme in their major works. This is required, it seems, by the task of developing a new mechanistic account of human nature that is compatible with the mechanism of the new science and the new politics. But to what conception of the passions are these thinkers responding? What account of the passions do the architects of modernity judge it necessary to criticize and replace? Directly or indirectly, modern thinkers are responding to the non-mechanistic, teleological conception of the passions articulated by Thomas Aquinas in Questions 22–48 of the *1a2ae* of the *Summa theologiae*, the so-called “Treatise on the Passions.”<sup>1</sup> Today we speak more frequently of “the emotions” than of the passions. But contemporary discourses about the emotions, which strongly emphasize their role as the springs of many (if not all) of our actions, descend directly from the fundamental psychological innovations of the seventeenth century (see Rosenkrantz 2005, p. 214). Consequently, Aquinas’ work on the passions constitutes no small part of the background against which both early modern discussions of the passions and recent talk about the emotions must be understood.

The above constitutes one answer to the question: Why study Aquinas on the passions? The answer may satisfy those who sense that the concept of “the emotions” taken for granted by many recent philosophers and psychologists has a history, and cannot be understood apart from that

<sup>1</sup> Here and elsewhere, I occasionally acquiesce in the practice of referring to 1-2. 22–48 as the “Treatise on the Passions.” I hasten to add that I am using “treatise” under erasure, since Thomas does not, strictly speaking, write treatises. Jordan (1994) observes: “The *Summa* is not built out of treatises, but out of clusters of Questions caught up into larger and larger rhythms of investigation” (p. 471).

history. (For one provocative genealogy, see Thomas Dixon's *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* [2003].) But what about those who are convinced that modern neuroscience has uncovered the essential mechanisms of the emotions, and that historical investigation has little to contribute to genuine understanding of the emotions, regardless of its capacity to illuminate pre-scientific thought? It is unlikely that members of this class would be persuaded to read Aquinas, or even Hume, unless they were convinced by a very different argument for the importance of thinking about the passions in a manner that is not dictated by the latest advances in neuroscience. A recent book by Robert Roberts offers one such argument. Modern scientific thinking illuminates the physical substructure of the emotions, often in novel and compelling ways. But information about the physical substructure of emotions does little, if anything, to clarify how, when, why, and by whom humans become angry, jealous, sad, or embarrassed. Roberts makes an analogy to the distinction between the human experience of music and its acoustical substructure. "Physically speaking, music is nothing but temporally extended and divided sequenced mixtures of air vibrations of various frequencies and amplitudes or, alternatively, mixtures of atmospheric compression wave trains of varying wavelengths and amplitudes" (2003, pp. 52–3). A competent physicist can give an exact acoustical account of a piece of music, delineating its mathematical substructure in precise terms. Such an account, while useful for any number of purposes, is not the same as understanding a piece of music as a musician understands it. Musicians "hear and speak of melodies, harmonies and counterpoint, rhythms, themes and their development, musical structure, dynamics, evocation and musical meanings, phrases, cadences, dissonances and resolutions of dissonances, and much more. It is only incidentally and occasionally that they hear and speak of frequencies, amplitudes, and wavelengths" (p. 53). Similarly, a purely neurological explanation of emotions, no matter how advanced and accurate, cannot substitute for, or compete with, an account given "in terms of the person's concerns, beliefs, thoughts, perceptions, personal history, present situation, and other factors" (p. 53).

If Roberts is right about this – and I think he is – it follows that contemporary neuroscience is not an alternative to an account of the form given by Aquinas, that is, one that analyzes the passions in terms of their human significance rather than their physiological mechanisms. This argument eliminates one motive that a contemporary reader might have for avoiding Aquinas. Yet it does little to show that Aquinas merits

particular attention. For Roberts, the demonstration that neuroscientific accounts of emotion are necessarily limited in scope is a way of clearing the ground for “conceptual analysis” of the emotions. As Roberts understands it, conceptual analysis is primarily a matter of attending to experienced emotional phenomena, making appropriate distinctions and generalizations. It proceeds from “observations that ordinary emotional subjects can make simply by being intelligent and observant human beings” (2003, p. 59). For this enterprise, sustained engagement with the history of philosophy is, at best, ancillary. At one point in his book, Roberts notices a proposal by Martha Nussbaum about the Stoic account of emotion, but avoids prolonged discussion on the ground that he is “concerned more with substantive questions than those of historical scholarship” (2003, p. 83).

This neat divide between “substantive questions” and “historical scholarship” is questionable. It assumes a single, stable category of “the emotions” on which the analyst can go to work, without much attention to the concept’s history. Though he interestingly argues that the particular things divided by Paul Griffiths (“affect programs,” “higher cognitive emotions,” and “emotional pretenses”) are interrelated, Roberts assumes the prior existence of “the emotions” as a stable category, invulnerable to historical change, which others can attempt to “fracture.” But what if one was never persuaded that “the emotions” are either historically or transcendently basic? Suppose one takes the more plausible view that “the emotions” are a descendant from seventeenth-century discourses on passions, which in turn are constituted as reactions to medieval conceptions of the *passiones*. In that case, it appears that Roberts and others who take “the emotions” for granted exemplify what Amélie Rorty calls “the historical innocence of most philosophical analyses of the emotions” (1984, p. 522).

Such innocence leads contemporary practitioners of conceptual analysis to assume not only the existence of an unchanging subject-matter designated by “the emotions,” but also the essential value of their own discussions. Both assumptions are questionable. Rorty finds the historical innocence of conceptual analysis of the emotions to carry certain consequences. “To put it bluntly,” she writes,

current philosophical debates about the passions and emotions seem to stand even further away from the phenomena they are meant to illuminate than philosophical discussions normally do. We seem to be engaged in ill-formed and unresolvable polemical debates. What is even more puzzling is that the very questions we address seem, on the face of it, bizarre and factious, guaranteed to

generate arbitrary and factitious discussions. Officially we are preoccupied with determining whether emotions can be evaluated for their rationality; or whether they are voluntary; or whether they can be “reduced” to cognitions; or whether they are interruptions of behavior that is normally purposeful. But in fact we know better: when we are really thinking, rather than making pronouncements, we know that we evaluate the appropriateness of emotions by criteria that are much richer than those of logical consistency: we are interested in determining whether they are inadequate or excessive, crude or subtle; whether they are harmoniously balanced with one another; whether we admire the character traits they reveal and the motives that usually accompany them. And when we are careful, we usually also distinguish passions, emotions, affects, sentiments. (1984, pp. 521–2)

This passage suggests at least two more reasons to read Aquinas on the passions. First, it is not clear how to “distinguish passions, emotions, affects, sentiments.” Aquinas speaks frequently of *passiones* and occasionally of *affectiones*, but never of “emotions.” What is the difference? If “the emotions” emerge only as the end product of a long history that involves multiple transformations of the concepts of *pathe*, *passiones*, and passions (see Rorty 1984, p. 545), one must first know what the passions are. Reading Aquinas on the *passiones* is one way to accomplish this goal. (It should be clear the practice of translating *passiones* by “emotions,” rather than “passions,” is misleading, since it necessarily obscures the question about the relation between passions and emotions.)

Second, one may share Rorty’s sense that despite their technical sophistication, most current discussions of the emotions lack existential interest.<sup>2</sup> One may discover sources of relief from this condition in the history of philosophy. Of contemporary philosophical writers on the emotions, the one who has most illuminated the path toward such relief is Martha Nussbaum. What makes Nussbaum’s writing so powerful is not primarily her powers of analysis, but her ability to draw upon primary texts in the history of philosophy. Precisely because of her deep engagement with such texts, along with her willingness to test their insights with “real-life” examples, Nussbaum’s work escapes Rorty’s charge of sterility and irrelevance. Nussbaum draws liberally from Plato and Aristotle, more heavily from the Stoics, a little from Dante, and not at all from Aquinas. In this work, I wish to draw upon Aquinas, keeping Nussbaum’s work in mind as an exemplary reminder that subtle exegesis of historical texts can

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Roberts 2003: “the defining proposition for romantic love as an emotion is: *She (he) is mine and I am hers (his); she (he) is uniquely wonderful and sexually attractive; we belong together forever*” (pp. 291–2; italics in original).

have both intellectual power and human relevance.<sup>3</sup> Aquinas' view of the passions, I will show, incorporates elements of the Stoic philosophy, whose appreciation Nussbaum urges. Moreover, it has two key advantages over Stoicism. First, Aquinas understands, no less acutely than the Stoics, the central place of intentional apprehension in the activation of the passions. Yet he does not simply identify the passions with judgments, as the Stoics do. Second, whereas Nussbaum has to work very hard to combine the insights of Stoicism with the position that the emotions play an important role in human life and ought not to be eliminated, Aquinas' awareness of Augustine's adjudication of the debates between the Peripatetics and the Stoics enables him to articulate the same position naturally and without strain.

Why should one read Aquinas on the passions? I have given several reasons: to avoid scientific (not scientific) reductionism, to escape historical innocence, to grasp the problematic relation between "passion" and "emotion," to think about the passions without severing the connection to life. I have not mentioned the most obvious reason – to improve our grasp of Aquinas' thought. One might suppose that students of Aquinas, or at least his ethics, would not require a commentary on the "Treatise on the Passions." Yet the surprising truth is that Questions 22–48 of the 1a2ae of the *Summa theologiae* are among the most neglected in his corpus. Nothing is more commonplace for readers of Aquinas, and especially of what has come to be known as his "moral theology," than to pay close attention to the Questions on happiness, virtue, and natural law in the 1a2ae. For many of the same readers, nothing is more habitual than to skim through, or skip entirely, the "Treatise on the Passions." This neglect has not gone entirely unnoticed. Servais Pinckaers observes that the twenty-seven Questions containing 132 Articles on the passions comprise "une oeuvre unique, classique . . . et trop négligée" (1990, p. 379). Pinckaers's observation raises a simple question: Why are Questions 22–48 of the 1a2ae so strangely neglected?<sup>4</sup>

One might propose an answer in terms drawn from Aquinas himself. Ethics is the study of human actions, their ends, and their principles. The passions, as Thomas himself says, are not properly human actions – that is,

<sup>3</sup> Some thoughtful comparisons between Nussbaum and Aquinas may be found in Leget 2003. Solomon 2002 offers an insightful review of Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought*, commenting that "it is the literary and historical dimensions that make the book a special contribution to the now burgeoning literature on the emotions" (p. 898).

<sup>4</sup> See Amis 1954, pp. 14–15.



free acts of the will – but acts that human beings have in common with other animals. However intriguing Thomas’s analysis of the non-rational side of humanity, it has no direct relevance to moral matters, understood as the study of properly human action. D. M. Prümmer, in his *Manuale Theologiae Moralis*, treats the passions under the heading *De hostibus voluntarii*, as “obstacles to the voluntary character of human actions” (quoted in Pinckaers 1990, p. 380). In treating the passions thus, Prümmer undoubtedly took himself to proceed *ad mentem sancti Thomae*.

Is this a genuinely Thomist approach to the passions? As Pinckaers has shown with consummate elegance, the “manualist” adaptations of what is taken to be Thomist moral theology are not so much faithful translations as grotesque distortions of Aquinas’ thinking, usually with a pronounced “Kantian” flavor. Pinckaers contrasts the ancient conception of ethics as a response to the question of happiness with the manuals that “gravely make ethics revolve around the question of obligations” (1990, p. 380). Thomas begins the *12ae* with an inquiry into happiness, considered as the ultimate end for human beings. Ethics is, above all, the study of what human beings need to know in order to attain happiness. Anything belonging to the consideration of moral matters in general that constitutes the *12ae* is meant to serve this end.

Nothing could be more alien to Aquinas than the habit of ignoring the passions because they are (allegedly) irrelevant to morals. Just as modern readers of Aquinas’ doctrines about being and knowing have often approached these doctrines with questions of essentially Kantian provenance, and thus distorted his thinking, so many students of the *pars moralis* of the *ST* have similarly misconstrued his notions about ethics. The error is not limited to readers of fifty years ago who would focus on natural law as though it were a sufficient guide to rational morality. It includes more recent scholars who see the importance of virtue for Aquinas’ conception of ethics, but proceed as though virtue were perfectly intelligible without a prior grasp of the passions.

Does understanding the virtues require a prolonged study of the passions? An affirmative answer to this question is not self-evident. What is clear, however, is that Aquinas does not suppose that the virtues can be approached without a thorough grounding in the passions. There is nothing accidental about the architecture of either the *ST* as a whole, or the *12ae* in particular. The *12ae* treats the end of human life and what is necessary to attain that end. Questions 1–5 treat the end; Questions 6–48 treat the acts required to attain the end; Questions 49–114 treat the

*principia*, interior and exterior, of those acts. Within the consideration of the acts, the main division is between “acts of the will” (Questions 6–21) and the “acts in common with animals” that Aquinas identifies as the passions (Questions 22–48). Why does Aquinas accord twice as many Questions to the acts in common with animals as he does to distinctively human acts?<sup>5</sup> The question is sharpened when one remembers that in the *ST* Aquinas does not devote space to idle Questions. As the Prologue of that work reminds us, he writes with pedagogical concerns in mind. He wants to avoid the multiplication of useless questions, articles, and arguments, as well as the frequent repetition that brings weariness and confusion to the souls of students. Why, then, should a consideration of moral matters *in universali* include so many Questions on the passions, prior to the treatment of the virtues?

By the time Aquinas comes to write the *ST*, he is convinced that knowing the passions is fundamental for understanding the rational creature’s quest for beatitude. But why? We should know about the passions, one might think, because they are powerful forces that impede reason and thereby frustrate the attempts of human beings to live wisely and happily. But Aquinas does not take this line. In his judgment, what kills the progress of the rational creature toward the end is not passion but sin. One may persist – Thomas treats the passions at length because protection against sin requires a knowledge of its causes. Passion can indeed be a cause of sin. But it is not *only* a cause of sin. Moreover, it is neither the unique nor the most potent cause of sin. No reasoning that terminates in a solely negative justification for treating the passions at length can be reconciled with Thomas’s thought.

To understand why Aquinas privileges the passions as he does in the *ST*, the reader must grasp what he teaches about the passions in that text. That is, she must encounter the *ST*’s actual teaching. Such an encounter makes any number of demands on the reader. It requires some knowledge of Aquinas’ *auctoritates*: not only Aristotle and Augustine, but also Dionysius and Damascene, Scripture and Cicero. It requires attention to the four Questions about the passions in general. Finally, and most importantly, it requires a careful reading of the twenty-three Questions that treat of the particular passions.

<sup>5</sup> Uffenheimer-Lippens (2003) accurately observes that the Questions on the passions comprise nearly a quarter of the *12ae* (p. 530). Pinckaers (1990) makes a similar observation, noting that the Questions on the passions outnumber those on happiness and human acts, as well as those on the virtues and the gifts, or law and grace.

The aim of this book is to facilitate an encounter with Thomas Aquinas' teaching on the passions, as we have it in its most detailed elaboration.<sup>6</sup> But what does it mean to grasp any particular teaching of the *ST*? Is it adequate to select isolated passages that appear to offer definitions of the passions, or to focus mainly on passages that seem relevant to contemporary concerns? While such methods may yield some insights, they are not sufficient for an integral reading. In order to perceive what Aquinas is up to in the *ST*, the reader must adopt a different approach. She must attend closely to each Question in the Treatise, following the steps of its articulation. Initially, I was convinced that the natural correlate of close reading was article-by-article exposition of each Question. I still have sympathy with this approach, especially when the goal is to set forth a detailed and comprehensive reading of the text that avoids doing violence to its form. But since contemporary readers will inevitably find some questions more pressing than others, and since there is no reason to believe that the priorities of such readers will correspond to Aquinas' own, I have not strictly adhered to an *articulatum* approach.<sup>7</sup> Instead, I have adopted the following procedure. In Part 1 of the book, I treat topics in a logical sequence that contemporary readers should find intelligible. I ask about the sensitive appetite in general, proceed to a consideration of its acts (i.e. the passions), inquire into the various things that arouse these acts, and conclude with a consideration of Aquinas' thought on the relation between the passions and morality. Here I follow Aquinas' order in a broad sense. The initial delineation of the sensitive appetite focuses on the 1a *pars*; the analysis of the other topics switches to Aquinas' consideration of the passions in general, which comprises Questions 22–5 of the 1a2ae. Since recent commentary on the passions tends almost exclusively

<sup>6</sup> The *ST* is not the only work in which Aquinas addresses the passions. Other texts include the *Scriptum* on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* (bk. 3, dist. 26), the *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* (Questions 25 and 26), the *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, and the *expositio* of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this book, I am not concerned to provide comprehensive readings of these texts; I attend to them only as they are useful for illuminating the teaching of the *ST*.

<sup>7</sup> On this point I am grateful to Robert Pasnau, who convinced me that strict adherence to the *articulatum* approach might limit the audience of this book to the small class of readers who are seeking a literal commentary on 1-2.22–48. Some may still judge that Parts 2 and 3 preserve too much of this approach. But in light of the intrinsic relation between what Aquinas thinks about a particular passion, and the rhetorical form of his treatment, I think the benefits of this procedure far outweigh the liabilities. On the dangers of abstracting the "teachings" of a thinker from the forms of the texts in which those teachings are conveyed, see Jordan 1992b.

to emphasize these questions, the proportion of dialogue with other interpreters of Aquinas' thought and contemporary thinkers who write about "the emotions" is relatively high in the four chapters that comprise Part 1.

Parts 2 and 3 adopt a different approach. I begin Part 2 with an argument for the proposition that in order to achieve any serious understanding of Aquinas' thinking about the passions, Questions 26–48 must be privileged. Part 2 focuses on the "concupiscible" passions treated in Questions 26–39; Part 3 examines the "irascible" passions that Aquinas discusses in Questions 40–8. In both parts, I take the view that grasping what Aquinas thinks about any particular passion, and why he thinks it, requires careful attention to the form and mode of treatment – that is, to the distribution of Questions corresponding to any particular passion, and to the organization of Articles within any given Question. Though not every Question and every Article receives equal emphasis, my basic procedure in these two parts is to follow the thread that informs the individual Questions and Articles devoted to the particular passions. This means that Parts 2 and 3 have a different character from Part 1. Some readers who find Part 1 philosophically interesting may wonder about the importance of Parts 2 and 3. Conversely, those who find Parts 2 and 3 to the point may have reservations about the mode of approach characteristic of Part 1. My hope is that readers will find each part beneficial, recognizing that a treatment of the passions "in general" will naturally have a different character from a serial examination of particular passions. (Some such difference, I think, informs Aquinas' own treatment.)

If Part 1 interacts with a range of contemporary writers, Parts 2 and 3 engage in a sustained dialogue with one commentator in particular, Santiago Ramírez. Ramírez's *De passionibus animae*, the transcript of a series of lectures he gave in Latin during the middle of the last century, is one of the few recent commentaries on the whole of the Treatise. In forming my own interpretations, I have found Ramírez's treatment quite helpful, notwithstanding my disagreement with many of his specific claims. I have especially benefited from his persistent attempts to ferret out the *ordo articulorum* ("order of articles") that comprises the spine of any given Question in the *ST*. Ramírez's attempts in this area typically propose an *ordo articulorum* that coincides with a logical distinction familiar to Thomas (e.g. "per se causes" vs. "per accidens causes"). Eschmann observes that "a strictly 'logical' scheme, such as that of Ramírez, is simply too narrow for the rich and abundant

Thomistic text” (1997, p. 41).<sup>8</sup> He acknowledges, however, that Ramírez is “very keen and not infrequently successful in analyzing the logic of Saint Thomas’s proceedings” (p. 58). I think that Eschmann is right on both counts.

Umberto Galeazzi observes that any present inquiry into Aquinas’ thinking on the passions is “inevitably conditioned” by our relation to “modern and contemporary thought” (2004, p. 548). This is true, I think, yet it remains a worthwhile goal to attempt to understand Aquinas as he understood himself, for reasons not merely antiquarian in character. In asserting the contemporary relevance of Aquinas, I do not mean to suggest that he already says everything that one would want to know about the passions. Some students of Aquinas, impressed by the power of his thought, the amplitude of his interests, and his personal sanctity, suppose that the answer to any significant question is somehow contained within his texts, either implicitly or explicitly. Since I am myself impressed with Aquinas on all three counts, I understand the temptation to make this supposition. But it should be resisted. Aquinas is simply not in a position to address some questions of contemporary interest. What is the precise relation between the distinguishable forms of fear that are manifested in specific autonomic responses and the reactions in various regions of the brain, especially the amygdala? Pressing Aquinas on such questions is not a profitable use of his texts. Modern neuroscience has much to tell us about the passions that Aquinas was unable to know.<sup>9</sup> Yet it remains possible that Aquinas offers a conceptual framework in which the findings of modern neuroscience may be integrated. Despite our distance from the Middle Ages, we have plenty of reasons to encounter Aquinas’ account of the passions, an analysis “*précise, détaillée, bien articulée et reliée à l’ensemble, un petit chef-d’oeuvre à la manière des édifices du temps*” (Pinckaers 1990, p. 381).

<sup>8</sup> On the tendency to assimilate Thomas’s textual structures to a quasi-mathematical order, the following warning of Pascal remains apposite: “Je sais un peu ce que c’est, et combien peu de gens l’entendent. Nulle science humaine ne le peut garder. Saint Thomas ne l’a pas gardé. La mathématique le garde, mais elle est inutile en sa profondeur” (1976, §61, p. 63; see also Pascal 1966, §694, p. 246).

<sup>9</sup> Here Kenny (2004) strikes the right balance. One may admit that some of Aquinas’ views have been “superannuated by the progress of science,” while proceeding to acknowledge (as Kenny does a paragraph later) that “Aquinas was an intellectual giant, and those of us who try to interpret him to a twenty-first century audience are like Lilliputians trying to tie him down with our own conceptual netting” (p. 462).