



## Aquinas on the Moral Neutrality of the Passion of Despair

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Michael Miller, in his thought-provoking article, “Aquinas on the Passion of Despair,” argues that St. Thomas Aquinas is incorrect in his understanding of the passion of despair. Miller maintains that Aquinas’s account of the passions as morally neutral is not true in the case of despair. Despair, according to Miller, is a passion that can never be in accord with right reason and thus is not morally neutral but, “always works to an evil end and never is felt rightly.”<sup>1</sup> While Miller has many profound insights into the passion of despair, I will argue that his position that “Aquinas erred in claiming that all of the passions are morally neutral”<sup>2</sup> is problematic, and this for two reasons.

First, Miller’s argument is founded upon a misunderstanding of the way in which the passions are morally neutral in Aquinas’s thought. For Aquinas, the passions are morally neutral according to their natural genus, rather than their moral genus. Thus, even if a particular passion were, objectively speaking, never in accord with right reason (as Miller argues is the case with despair), this would not prevent it from being morally neutral according to its *natural genus*. For, simply considered as a movement of the essentially non-rational sensitive appetite, no passion can have any specifically human moral value. It is only when the passions are considered as they exist in man—as subject to the control of reason and will—that they are morally qualifiable. This, however, is to consider the passions in their moral, rather than their natural genus.

Second, even if Miller’s understanding of the moral neutrality of the passions is granted, his argument that despair “always works to an evil end and never is felt rightly,”<sup>3</sup> I will argue, is not true. Despair can be in accord with right reason; it can lead to some good end; and further, when voluntary, it can be morally good. Aquinas is right on both accounts: The passions are morally neutral in the way in which

<sup>1</sup> Michael Miller, ‘Aquinas on the Passion of Despair’, *New Blackfriars* 93 (2012), p. 396.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 390.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396.

he understands them to be, and despair is a passion that can be felt rightly. I will address these two points in order, but before doing so, it is necessary to give a brief account of precisely what the passions are in Aquinas's thought.

## I. WHAT ARE PASSIONS?

In Aquinas's account, "the passions are movements of the sensitive appetite."<sup>4</sup> A human being has two ways of coming to know things: through sensation and through intellectual apprehension.<sup>5</sup> Sense knowledge of the particular and intellectual knowledge of the universal each have a corresponding appetitive power: the sensitive appetite and the intellectual appetite, or will, respectively. The sensitive and intellectual appetites are distinct powers because the knowledge that is the active principle that presents the objects to the appetites is generically different.<sup>6</sup> The sensitive appetite is one generic power that is divided into two distinct powers—the irascible and the concupiscible—which are species of the sensitive appetite.<sup>7</sup> The irascible and concupiscible appetites are distinguished by different aspects of their objects. The object of the concupiscible faculty "is sensible good or evil, simply apprehended as such," while good and evil considered as "arduous or difficult . . . is the object of the irascible faculty."<sup>8</sup> The passions, then, are simply movements of the sensitive appetite toward individual sensible goods. In humans, inasmuch as we are composed of body and soul, the movement of the soul's sensitive appetite produces an effect on the passable body. Anger, for example, according to Aquinas, causes the heating of the

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 23, a. 1, sc: "Passiones sint motus appetitus sensitivi." N.B. All English citations of the *Summa theologiae*, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the translation provided by the English Dominican Province published in 5 volumes, now available as *Summa Theologica* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981). The Latin text may be found on the Web, <http://www.corpusthomicum.org>. Some of the more important texts of Aquinas concerning the passions are: *STh* I, qq. 75–82, I-II, qq. 22–48; *Summa contra Gentiles* I, chaps. 89–91; and *De Veritate*, qq. 25 and 26.

<sup>5</sup> For a precise and thorough treatment of Aquinas on the passions, see Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 22 to 48* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); see also Diana Fritz Cates, *Aquinas on the Emotions: A Religious-Ethical Inquiry* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009). For a briefer introduction, see Kevin White, 'The Passions of the Soul', in Stephen J. Pope, ed., *Essays on Aquinas's Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press), pp. 103–15.

<sup>6</sup> See *STh* I, q. 80, a. 2.

<sup>7</sup> See I, q. 81, a. 2.

<sup>8</sup> I-II, q. 23, a. 1. "Obiectum potentiae concupiscibilis est bonum vel malum sensibile simpliciter acceptum . . . bonum vel malum, secundum quod habet rationem ardui vel difficilis, est obiectum irascibilis."

blood around the heart.<sup>9</sup> It is from this effect of the sensitive appetite on the passible body that the movement of the sensitive appetite of the soul receives the name “passion.”<sup>10</sup> In man, the passions are, to some extent, subject to reason and will, and are therefore voluntary.<sup>11</sup> Insofar as passions are voluntary, they are morally qualifiable, and a crucial subject for moral inquiry.

## II. THE WAY IN WHICH THE PASSIONS ARE MORALLY NEUTRAL

In order to properly evaluate Miller’s argument that Aquinas was wrong to hold that the passion of despair is morally neutral, I will first examine the way in which Aquinas understands the moral neutrality of the passions in general. In trying to determine whether moral good and evil can be found in the passions of the soul, Aquinas explains that the passions may be viewed in two ways. The first is to consider them in their natural genus. In this way, the passions are “considered in themselves.”<sup>12</sup> They are considered simply as movements of the sensitive appetite, which is common to the irrational animals and man. The second is to consider the passions more specifically as they are found in man, that is, “as subject to the command of the reason and will.”<sup>13</sup>

Insofar as the passions are movements of the essentially non-rational sense appetite, they are neither morally good nor evil. For, considered simply as movements of a non-rational faculty, the passions are not voluntary. To consider the passions as such is to consider them in their natural genus, and as common to both irrational and rational animals.

Yet in man, the passions are, to some degree, subject to the rational powers of reason and will. Because of this, the passions in man can be voluntary “either from being commanded by the will, or from not being checked by the will.”<sup>14</sup> The will has some control (a political rather than a despotic rule) over the passions. It can command them

<sup>9</sup> See I-II, q. 48, a. 2. We need not agree with the particular example to see Aquinas’s general point here—namely, the passions have an effect on the passible body.

<sup>10</sup> For a treatment of some of the various and related uses that Aquinas makes of the term *passion*, see: Shawn Floyd, ‘Aquinas on Emotion: A Response to some Recent Interpretations’, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 15 (1998), pp.161-75, esp. pp.162-64.

<sup>11</sup> The passions are voluntary, Aquinas explains, “either from being commanded by the will, or from not being checked by the will.” *STh* I-II, q. 24, a. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* “Passiones animae dupliciter possunt considerari, uno modo, *secundum se.*”

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* “Alio modo, *secundum quod subiacent imperio rationis et voluntatis.*”

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* “Dicuntur autem voluntariae vel ex eo quod a voluntate imperantur, vel ex eo quod a voluntate non prohibentur.”

and it can check them.<sup>15</sup> Thus, even though passions considered in their natural genus are movements of an essentially non-rational appetite, in man, they are, to some extent, voluntary. To the degree that they are voluntary in man, the passions are morally qualifiable. Aquinas's claim that the passions are morally neutral is a claim about the natural genus of the passions. This moral neutrality simply follows from the fact that, according to their natural genus, the passions are movements of an essentially non-rational appetite.

*A) Did Aquinas in Fact Err in Claiming the Moral Neutrality of the Passions?*

Miller claims that Aquinas erred "in claiming that all of the passions are morally neutral."<sup>16</sup> He supports this claim by arguing that the passion of despair "is not morally neutral" insofar as "it always works to an evil end and never is felt rightly."<sup>17</sup> Yet, Aquinas's claim that all of the passions are morally neutral, as we have seen, concerns the natural genus of passions, and does not immediately have a bearing on whether or not the passion of despair always goes against the order of right reason in the objective order. For Aquinas, the passions are morally neutral in their natural genus because they are movements of an essentially non-rational appetite: "If then the passions be considered in themselves, to wit, as movements of the irrational appetite, thus there is no moral good or evil in them, since this depends on the reason."<sup>18</sup> It is another and further question whether or not any of the passions, if followed, would always direct man in a way that is not, objectively speaking, in accord with right reason. If this were the case, such a passion would always be morally wrong, *if it were voluntary*. Because of the complexity of Miller's

<sup>15</sup> Aquinas spells out more clearly how the sensitive appetite obeys reason in *Questiones Disputate de Veritate*, q. 25, a. 4. He says that there are three ways that the irascible and concupiscible appetitive powers are subject to reason. The first is on the part of reason itself. Reason can consider the same object in various ways, and move the sensitive appetite accordingly through the medium of the imagination. For example, the reason may present a dish of food as delightful, or knowing it to be poisoned, as repulsive. The second is on the part of the will. An intense movement of the will can cause an overflow in the lower sensitive powers such that they follow the movement of the will. The third is with respect to the actual execution of the act to which the sensitive appetite inclines. Because humans are rational, we can check a movement of the sensitive appetite by not carrying out the action that the sensitive appetite inclines us toward.

<sup>16</sup> Miller, 'Passion of Despair', p. 390.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396.

<sup>18</sup> *STh* I-II, q. 24, a. 1: "Si igitur secundum se considerentur, prout scilicet sunt motus quidam irrationalis appetitus, sic non est in eis bonum vel malum morale, quod dependet a ratione, ut supra dictum est."

argument to show that Aquinas erred in claiming the passions are morally neutral I will quote him at length.

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

But if it could be determined that some passions are always contrary to the order of reason, would it not follow that these passions, according to their natural genus, are evil? Conversely, if it could be determined that some passions are always properly governed by right reason, would that not mean that these passions are naturally good? And if it were shown that a naturally good or bad passion actually exists, it would, of course, also show that Aquinas erred in claiming that all of the passions are morally neutral.<sup>19</sup>

The bulk of the rest of Miller’s paper is directed at showing that despair is a naturally bad passion and thus “Aquinas is wrong when he states that none of the passions are essentially good or bad.”<sup>20</sup> It is true that Aquinas, in some way, “rejected the christening of ‘good or bad’ passions.” But he did not do this *precisely insofar* as he thought that every passion could, objectively speaking, either be in accordance with, or go against the order of reason. Rather, Aquinas maintained the moral neutrality of the passions only when they are considered in their natural genus. Considered according to their natural genus, the passions are not understood as voluntary, but simply and precisely as movements of the essentially non-rational sensitive appetite. It is therefore impossible to give any passion, considered in its natural genus, an essential moral qualification because this depends on something being voluntarily and freely chosen—which is to say that it depends on the passions being considered in their moral rather than their natural genus. It is only when the passions are considered as they exist in humans, that is, insofar as they are subject to reason and will, that they can be understood as morally good or evil in the strict sense.

<sup>19</sup> Miller, ‘Passion of Despair’, p. 390.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396.

Aquinas's claim that the passions are morally neutral is not identical to the claim that every passion can, in certain circumstances, either be in accord with, or contrary to, right reason. It rather follows from Aquinas's understanding of the sensitive appetite as an essentially non-rational faculty. This is not to say that Aquinas did not in fact think that the passions could either be in accord with or contrary to reason, but simply that this is not what he meant by the passions being morally neutral.<sup>21</sup>

A sign of this is that Aquinas argues for the moral neutrality of the passions in question 24, of the *prima secundae*, which is part of his general consideration of the passions and precedes his particular consideration of them.<sup>22</sup> If the moral neutrality of the passions that Aquinas is considering in question 24 is based upon each of the passions being sometimes in accord with, and at others contrary to the order of reason, it would seem that he would have waited until the end of his particular treatment of the passions to pass judgment on their moral neutrality. This suggests that the moral neutrality of the passions, at least in Aquinas's mind, does not depend on each of the passions being able to be at times in accord with, and at others contrary to the judgment of right reason.

If the argument advanced thus far is indeed the case, it is problematic when Miller adds "only" before his quotation of Aquinas in the preceding lengthy passage where he says: "The passions are morally good or bad *only* 'in so far as the object to which a passion tends, is, of itself, in harmony or in discord with reason.'"<sup>23</sup> The difficulty in adding "only" is that a passion simply being in harmony or discord with reason in the objective order is not enough to establish that it is morally good or evil.

The quotation that Miller takes from Aquinas is from an article that argues that there is such a thing as a passion that is morally good or evil in its species. Yet in this same article Aquinas is careful to explain that this does not apply to the natural genus of the passion, but only to its moral genus. Aquinas explains:

<sup>21</sup> It does seem quite probable that Aquinas held that each of the eleven main species of passion could, depending on the circumstances, either be in accord with or go against the order of reason. Miller argues that this is not the case for despair. This question will be taken up in section III of the essay.

<sup>22</sup> Aquinas treats the passions in questions 22-48 of the *prima secundae*. Aquinas divides the treatise into a general consideration of the passions in qq. 22-25, and a particular consideration of each of the eleven passions in qq. 26-48. It is in the general consideration of the passions that Aquinas argues that they are morally neutral considered in themselves, or according to their natural genus.

<sup>23</sup> Miller, 'Passion of Despair', p. 390 (emphasis added). Miller is here quoting *STh* I-II, q. 24, a. 4. My contention is that this is not the only condition in determining the moral quality of a passion, for it must also be voluntary.

The species of a passion, as the species of an act, can be considered from two points of view. First, according to its natural genus; and thus moral good and evil have no connection with the species of an act or passion. Secondly, according to its moral genus, inasmuch as it is voluntary and controlled by reason. In this way moral good and evil can belong to the species of a passion, in so far as the object to which a passion tends, is, of itself, in harmony or in discord with reason: as is clear in the case of “shame” which is base fear; and of “envy” which is sorrow for another’s good.<sup>24</sup>

Miller’s understanding of the article is that “the passions are morally good or bad *only* ‘in so far as the object to which a passion tends, is, of itself, in harmony or in discord with reason.’”<sup>25</sup> Aquinas, however, far from saying that the *only* thing necessary to morally qualify the passions is whether or not they are objectively speaking in accord or not with reason, explicitly gives a second qualification, or rather a precondition. We must first be speaking of passions that are voluntary and controlled by reason: We must be speaking of passions according to their moral, rather than their natural genus. There are thus two conditions given in the article, and not one, which are necessary to morally qualify the species of passion. Passions are morally good or evil when they are 1) “voluntary and controlled by reason,” and 2) insofar “as the object to which a passion tends, is, of itself, in harmony or in discord with reason.”<sup>26</sup>

Miller asks the leading question: “If it could be determined that some passions are always contrary to the order of reason, would it not follow that these passions, according to their *natural genus*, are evil?”<sup>27</sup> The answer to the question is *no*. The reason Aquinas gives for the moral neutrality of the passions considered in their natural genus is that when “the passions be considered in themselves, to wit, as movements of the irrational appetite . . . there is no moral good or evil in them, since this depends on reason.”<sup>28</sup>

As we have seen, Aquinas’s claim that all of the passions are morally neutral in their natural genus does not depend on the fact

<sup>24</sup> *STh* I-II, q. 24, a. 4. “Species actus vel passionis dupliciter considerari potest. Uno modo, secundum quod est in genere naturae, et sic bonum vel malum morale non pertinet ad speciem actus vel passionis. Alio modo, secundum quod pertinent ad genus moris, prout scilicet participant aliquid de voluntario et de iudicio rationis. Et hoc modo bonum et malum morale possunt pertinere ad speciem passionis, secundum quod accipitur ut obiectum passionis aliquid de se conveniens rationi, vel dissonum a ratione, sicut patet de verecundia, quae est timor turpis; et de invidia, quae est tristitia de bono alterius.”

<sup>25</sup> Miller, ‘Passion of Despair’, p. 390 (emphasis added).

<sup>26</sup> *STh* I-II, q. 24, a. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Miller, ‘Passion of Despair’, p. 390 (emphasis added).

<sup>28</sup> *STh* I-II, q. 24, a. 1 (emphasis added). “Si igitur secundum se considerentur, prout scilicet sunt motus quidam irrationalis appetitus, sic non est in eis bonum vel malum morale, quod dependet a ratione, ut supra dictum est.”



that every species of passion can be either in accord with or opposed to the order of right reason in some particular case, as Miller's argument supposes, but is based on the fact that passions considered simply as movements of an essentially non-rational sense appetite cannot be morally qualified without reference to the way in which they are voluntary in man. It is in this sense that Aquinas claims that all of the passions are morally neutral in their natural genus. It is a further question whether or not any passion always tends to its object in a way that is not in accord with reason.

Aquinas, in fact, explicitly argues that there are some passions that are good or evil in their moral species. Envy, for example, always goes against the order of right reason. It is therefore evil in its moral species, that is, when "voluntary and controlled by reason."<sup>29</sup> Yet it is important to note that Miller is likely correct in thinking that Aquinas does not wish to extend this to any of the eleven passions which differ specifically according to their objects. Aquinas seems to hold that it is only true for certain subspecies of passion—such as envy, which is a species of sorrow. Miller is correct, in short, to hold that love, hate, desire, aversion, joy, sorrow, hope, despair, fear, daring, and anger, are seen by Aquinas as being in some cases in accord with right reason, and in others contrary to it. It therefore remains a legitimate and poignant question whether or not Aquinas is correct in thinking that despair can be in accord with right reason in some cases. It is to this question that I now turn.

### III. CAN DESPAIR EVER BE IN ACCORD WITH RIGHT REASON?

Miller argues astutely that Aquinas is correct to hold that "no passion is naturally good; every passion can harm the one who has it, if it is directed irrationally to or away from some object."<sup>30</sup> Miller is right to point out the "creativity" of fallen human nature, which is able to make bad use of each of the eleven passions.<sup>31</sup> He disagrees, however, with "Aquinas's confident claim that all the passions can likewise 'increase the goodness of an action,'"<sup>32</sup> but this he holds only in the case of despair. Before considering despair, Miller gives an insightful account of how each of the other ten passions can make men better in the right circumstances. Some, as Miller notes, are relatively easy to see: "For example, it is easy to imagine that the

<sup>29</sup> See I-II, q. 24, a. 4. "Alio modo, secundum quod pertinent ad genus moris, prout scilicet participant aliquid de voluntario et de iudicio rationis."

<sup>30</sup> Miller, 'Passion of Despair', p. 391.

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



passions of love, desire, pleasure, hope, and courage could make the soul better since these passions move the soul toward some perceived good.”<sup>33</sup>

Miller argues further that such passions as hatred, aversion, sorrow, fear, and anger, although their direct object is an evil, can lead us to some good. Each of these passions can “at least in one situation”<sup>34</sup> be in accord with reason. Miller skillfully traces back each of these passions to a prior impulse of love. He does this first with the concupiscible passions of hatred, aversion, and sorrow.

It is important to note that all three examples of the so-called “bad” concupiscible passions—hatred of sin, the aversion of some evil object, and sorrow for sin—all come about because one is fundamentally actually attracted (moved) by the previous impulse of love. That is, the one hating correctly loves right order; the one avoiding rightly loves some good instead of the perceived evil; and the one correctly feeling sorrow for past sins loves the time in which he felt no pain. In fact, Aquinas believes that all of the concupiscible passions, even when not ordered rightly to reason, find love to be their “primary root” for love is the first cause in the order of execution. Hence, given the salvific nature of love, it should come as no surprise that Aquinas believes that none of these three passions, in their nature, are inherently “bad.”<sup>35</sup>

Miller is equally skillful in explaining Aquinas’s position that fear and anger can lead to some good. “It is important to stress,” Miller concludes, “that Aquinas believes that hope and love are at the root of all the other passions. That is, even fear and anger are primarily motivated by hope, the ‘first of all the irascible passions,’ which is, in turn, primarily inspired by love. When felt rightly, those that feel hatred, aversion, sorrow, fear or anger are simultaneously feeling hope or love, although differently from when they feel hope or love alone.”<sup>36</sup>

Miller then, at this point of his argument, has made a good case that none of the eleven species of passion is good in itself, but fallen man can take even “good” passions, such as love, and make a bad use of them. Miller, following Aquinas, has also made a strong case that the “bad” passions of hatred, aversion, sorrow, fear, and anger are ultimately rooted in the passion of love, and can, therefore, in at least some cases, be in accord with right reason.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Miller lists courage among the passions that “move the soul to some perceived good.” In fact courage, or daring (*audacia*), in Aquinas’s account, has an evil object, and is an irascible passion that attacks a looming (absent) evil. See *STh* I-II, q. 45, a. 1. Nevertheless, if one follows Miller’s explanation of how fear and anger can lead to some good, it is rather easy to see how courage can as well.

<sup>34</sup> Miller, ‘Passion of Despair’, p. 391.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 392.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 393.

Nevertheless, for Miller, the question about the passion of despair is still a live one. Although he argues that even the “bad” passions can be in accord with reason because, when rightly felt, they increase hope and love, he then asks, “But what about despair? If rightly ordered hatred, aversion, and sorrow can increase one’s love, and rightly ordered fear and anger increase one’s hope, can despair, like the other ten passions, be rightly ordered and thus lead to correct thinking or right action? That is, can despair be of benefit [to] the soul, if it leads one to hope or love the more? Or is despair somehow different in Aquinas’s system of the passions since it is a movement away from hope?”<sup>37</sup>

Although I disagree with his ultimate conclusion that despair can never be in accord with right reason, and is never felt rightly, Miller is right to single out despair as having something unique, and we might even say, dangerous about it. There *is* something different about despair. It does stand alone from the other ten passions insofar as it is the only passion that is a movement away from a good object. This is not the case for any of the other passions. But the way in which the various passions direct us toward or away from objects both good and evil ought to be attended to more closely in order to see the unique place of despair among the passions more clearly.

### A) *The Various Ways the Passions Relate toward Their Objects*

The concupiscible passions that have a good object (love, desire, and joy) all relate positively to it. Love gives a certain connatural aptitude for or complacency in the object loved.<sup>38</sup> This complacency is the principle of both the desire for the loved object when it is absent, and the joy taken from the object when present. Conversely, as one might expect, the concupiscible passions that have an evil object (hatred, aversion, and sorrow) all relate negatively to their object.<sup>39</sup> Hatred causes aversion for the hated object when it is absent and sorrow when it is present. Thus, none of the concupiscible passions, which consider their object absolutely, relate negatively toward a good object or positively toward an evil one. Because the concupiscible passions tend to their object absolutely considered, they cannot tend toward an evil or away from a good. It is only the irascible passions, which tend toward their object under the *ratio* of the arduous or difficult

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See *STh* I-II, q. 26, a. 1 and 2.

<sup>39</sup> For Aquinas’s derivation of the eleven passions in terms of their objects see: *STh* I-II, q. 23, a. 4.

that might have reason to approach an evil object or withdraw from a good one.<sup>40</sup>

There are three irascible passions that tend to their objects in ways contrary to what we would naturally expect—either by tending toward an evil object or away from a good one. Daring tends toward a looming evil in order to repel it; anger tends to a present evil in order to attack it; and despair tends away from a future (absent) good owing to the difficulty involved in attaining it.<sup>41</sup> Yet in some sense it is easy to see the reasonableness of a movement toward evil when, as in the case of anger and daring, the movement is only toward an evil in order to attack it. This kind of movement toward an evil object, as Miller explains, if felt rightly, is rooted in love of the good that the evil opposes.<sup>42</sup> It is much more difficult to see the reasonability, if any there be, of despair's movement away from some good.

Miller is correct in this: despair is unique among the passions. It is the only passion that turns away from a good object. This makes it a legitimate, a poignant, question whether the passion of despair can ever be in accord with right reason. It is my contention that the passion of despair can be in accord with right reason and that when it is both in accord with right reason and voluntary, the passion of despair is morally good. In arguing for this position, I will first present the positive case that the passion of despair can be in accord with right reason, and then I will address Miller's main arguments to the contrary.

### *B) How Despair Can Be in Accord with Right Reason*

In trying to elucidate the ways in which the passion of despair can be in accord with right reason, perhaps the first thing to note is that despair is not a movement away from the good *as good*, but *as difficult*. The object of hope is a future good that is difficult but possible to obtain.<sup>43</sup> The goodness of the object is the reason for its attraction. Yet difficulty and arduousness are not pleasant. Because

<sup>40</sup> Aquinas explains the difference between the concupiscible and irascible passions as follows: "Whatever passions regard good or evil absolutely, belong to the concupiscible power; for instance, joy, sorrow, love, hatred, and such like: whereas those passions which regard good or bad as arduous, through being difficult to obtain or avoid, belong to the irascible faculty; such as daring, fear, hope and the like." "Quaecumque ergo passiones respiciunt absolute bonum vel malum, pertinent ad concupiscibilem; ut gaudium, tristitia, amor, odium, et similia. Quaecumque vero passiones respiciunt bonum vel malum sub ratione ardui, prout est aliquid adipiscibile vel fugibile cum aliqua difficultate, pertinent ad irascibilem; ut audacia, timor, spes, et huiusmodi." *STh* I-II, q. 23, a. 1.

<sup>41</sup> Aquinas treats despair in I-II, q. 40; daring in I-II, q. 45; and anger in I-II, q. 46-48.

<sup>42</sup> See Miller, 'Passion of Despair', pp. 392-93.

<sup>43</sup> See *STh* I-II, q. 40, a. 1.

of this, an object considered precisely as difficult does give some reason for turning away from it. A good that is difficult, considered precisely as difficult, Aquinas says, “makes us turn from it; and this pertains to the passion of *despair*.”<sup>44</sup> To move away from good as such, assuming that this were even possible, would indeed imply some kind of grave depravity—yet, this is not the case with despair. Despair is indeed a movement away from some sensible good, but this movement from the good is not on account of the good, but on account of the evil of the difficulty in attaining the good. Thus, while despair is a movement away from a good object, its movement from the good is accidental. Aquinas explains, “Despair is a movement away from good, a movement which is consistent with good, not as such, but in respect of something else, wherefore its tendency from good is accidental, as it were.”<sup>45</sup> It remains to be seen if turning from some sensible good owing to the difficulty involved in obtaining it can ever be in accord with reason.

Is it ever reasonable to despair of some good? In common speech, despair often carries with it the notion of an inordinate passion. When we say that someone “despaired,” we generally mean that they gave up on some good that they should have perused but, overcome by a downcast spirit, did not. Aquinas, at times, uses the term “despair” in this way, as when he says, “But despair results from fear: since the reason why a man despairs is because he fears the difficulty attached to the good *he should hope for*.”<sup>46</sup> Yet there is a crucial distinction that Aquinas makes in this regard. He says, “Anger, daring and all the names of the passions can be taken in two ways. First, as denoting absolutely movements of the sensitive appetite in respect of some object, good or bad: and thus they are names of passions. Secondly, as denoting besides this movement, a straying from the order of reason: and thus they are names of vices.”<sup>47</sup>

The mere fact that anger, daring, and the names of other passions, including despair, are sometimes used to denote vices does not mean that this is their only meaning. Indeed, this meaning departs from their strict notion as passions insofar as it adds the notion of straying from the order of reason. Yet this brings us back to our main question,

<sup>44</sup> I-II, q. 23, a. 2. (emphasis added): “Et ut ab ipso recedatur, in quantum est arduum vel difficile, quod pertinet ad passionem desperationis.”

<sup>45</sup> I-II, q. 25, a. 3. “Desperatio autem est recessus a bono, qui non competit bono secundum quod est bonum, sed secundum aliquid aliud, unde est quasi per accidens.”

<sup>46</sup> I-II, q. 45, a. 2. “Ad timorem vero sequitur desperatio, ideo enim aliquis desperat, quia timet difficultatem quae est circa bonum *sperandum*” (emphasis added).

<sup>47</sup> I-II, q. 45, a. 1, ad 1. “Ad primum ergo dicendum quod ira et audacia, et omnium passionum nomina, dupliciter accipi possunt. Uno modo, secundum quod important absolute motus appetitus sensitivi in aliquod obiectum bonum vel malum, et sic sunt nomina passionum. Alio modo, secundum quod simul cum huiusmodi motu important recessum ab ordine rationis, et sic sunt nomina vitiorum.”

can the passion of despair ever be in accord with right reason, and thus rightly felt?

The simple fact is that some goods that the sensitive appetite inclines us to are, according to the judgment of right reason, either unobtainable, or so difficult that they are not worth the effort involved in obtaining them. Suppose a starving man were to come upon a massively tall apple tree, loaded with many luscious apples, some of which are hanging low in the tree, while one particularly delightful apple hangs from a small branch at the very top of the tree. There are too many branches in the way for the man to have any chance of knocking the apple down with a rock or stick, and besides, the fall would damage the fruit. Suppose further that the man who sees the delightful apple is actually physically unable to climb the tree without grave danger of falling and the serious injury that would come from it. What is the proper response of the starving man in this situation? Would it not be to despair of the delightful yet impossible apple and partake of some of the more accessible fruit?

Yet this despair ought to be in accord with the bounds of right reason. That is, the one who despairs of the best apple owing to the great difficulty, or impossibility, of obtaining it ought not to let the passion of despair leave him in an insensible stupor caused by an irrational downcast spirit. Rather, the one who despairs of obtaining the best apple ought to work for another good apple that is reasonably obtainable. In this way, the passion of despair, moderately and reasonably felt, can free us from what would be an unreasonable preoccupation with some impossible or even unreasonably difficult good. Freed from an unreasonable hope, one is able to obtain another good that is reasonable to hope for.

Examples of despair being a proper response in accord with right reason can also be seen in the sensitive movements of animals, which are directed by the wisdom of the Creator.<sup>48</sup> A cheetah, for example, does not always catch its antelope. It would be unreasonable, and lead to the death of the cheetah, if it continued to chase an antelope after it became evident that it was impossible to catch. The antelope that is impossible to catch does not cease to be a sensible good, yet if the cheetah continued the hopeless pursuit, death from heat exhaustion would be the inevitable result. It is better to turn away

<sup>48</sup> For Aquinas's fascinating and insightful treatment of the way hope and despair are found in animals, see I-II, q. 40, a. 3. It is of great importance here that it is God's apprehension that moves the sense appetite of irrational animals. Thus, when they are moved to despair, it is certainly in accord with reason. Aquinas says, "In irrational animals the sensitive appetite does not obey reason. Nevertheless, in so far as they are led by a kind of estimative power, which is subject to a higher, *i.e.*, the divine, reason, there is a certain likeness of moral good in them, in regard to the soul's passions." I-II, q. 24, a. 4, ad 3.

from this kind of sensible good by attending to its difficulty than to peruse it foolishly looking only to its desirability. God has endowed the cheetah with the estimative power to act “reasonably” in this regard. Despair can be a good thing for a cheetah—it can save its life. It can also be a good thing for a man—it can save him from breaking his neck falling from an apple tree.

In his treatment of the passion of hope, Aquinas asks a very pertinent question for our inquiry: “Whether Hope Abounds in Young Men and Drunkards?”<sup>49</sup> He answers in the affirmative. Youth and drunkards are not generally full of hope in a way that is in accord with right reason. Aquinas concludes the body of the article saying, “Two of these causes [of hope abounding in the youth] are also in those who are drunk—*viz.* heat and high spirits, on account of wine, and heedlessness of dangers and shortcomings. For the same reason all foolish and thoughtless persons attempt everything and are full of hope.”<sup>50</sup> When it is the judgment of right reason that a sensible good is impossible or unreasonably difficult to obtain, one ought to despair rather than hope for it. It is not virtuous to hope for a good that is actually impossible, or for a good whose attainment necessitates reckless activity. Folly, drunkenness, and inexperience are causes of hope indeed, but not hope that accords with right reason. Aquinas explains, “Folly and inexperience can be a cause of hope accidentally, as it were, by removing the knowledge which would help one to judge truly a thing to be impossible.”<sup>51</sup> If it is the foolish and inexperienced that hope in a way that is not in accord with reason, what would the wise and experienced do? It seems reasonable to suggest that they would despair. Yet not in a way that is in discord with right reason and casts down their spirits, but in a way that frees them to seek and attain goods that are truly possible. Yet one may press the question further: It may be true that there are some goods that are impossible to obtain, but is it not a sad situation, and does this not make despair in some way still an evil? Would not this evil found in despair make it vicious?

Aquinas offers an important distinction that helps in sorting through these types of questions. In question 39, article 1 of the *prima secundae*, Aquinas asks, “Whether All Sorrow is Evil?” In answering this question, Aquinas says that “sorrow considered simply

<sup>49</sup> I-II, q. 40, a. 6.

<sup>50</sup> I-II. “Duo etiam istorum sunt in ebriis, scilicet caliditas et multiplicatio spirituum, propter vinum; et iterum inconsideratio periculorum vel defectuum. Et propter eandem rationem etiam omnes stulti, et deliberatione non utentes, omnia tentant, et sunt bonae spei.”

<sup>51</sup> I-II, q. 40, a. 5, ad 3. “Ad tertium dicendum quod stultitia et inexperientia possunt esse causa spei quasi per accidens, removendo scilicet scientiam per quam vere existimatur aliquid esse non possibile.”

and in itself” is an evil. Yet he also notes that something can also be considered good or evil “on the supposition of something else.”<sup>52</sup> In this way, “supposing the presence of something saddening or painful, it is a sign of goodness if a man is in sorrow or pain on account of this present evil.”<sup>53</sup> Although sorrow considered simply is an evil,<sup>54</sup> if there is in fact an evil present, the passion of sorrow is good. It is in accord with the reality of the situation and right reason. This distinction is crucial for discerning whether or not despair is in accord with reason. Despair, like sadness, “considered simply and in itself” is an evil. But if there is some good that is indeed impossible to obtain, it is good for a man to respond in kind and despair of obtaining it.

### C) *Does Not Aquinas Himself Speak Out Against Despair?*

The real core of Miller’s argument starts in the last section of his article: “What about Despair?” He begins by noting, “At first glance, it appears as if Aquinas can see no benefit to despair, even rightly ordered despair. Over and above other sins contrary to the theological virtues, Aquinas notes that despair is especially grievous because it implies a withdrawal from God.”<sup>55</sup> Miller continues to quote Aquinas concerning the hatefulness, harmfulness, evil root, and evil consequences of despair.<sup>56</sup> Miller concludes, “Given the severity of these warnings, it appears unlikely that the *passion of despair* would ever be of benefit to someone.”<sup>57</sup>

Miller’s conclusion is about the *passion* of despair. Yet the quotations that he takes from Aquinas in this section<sup>58</sup> are taken from the *secunda secundae*,<sup>59</sup> where Aquinas is speaking of despair not as a passion, but an act of the will—a sin against the theological virtue of hope.<sup>60</sup> The passion of despair is quite distinct from the despair that is a sin against the theological virtue of hope. Despair as a sin opposed to the theological virtue of hope is certainly to be avoided

<sup>52</sup> I-II, q. 39, a. 1. “Ex suppositione alterius.”

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. “Sic igitur, supposito aliquo contristabili vel doloroso, ad bonitatem pertinet quod aliquis de malo praesenti tristetur vel doleat.”

<sup>54</sup> This refers to natural evil rather than a moral evil.

<sup>55</sup> Miller, ‘Passion of Despair’, p. 393.

<sup>56</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 393-94.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394 (emphasis added).

<sup>58</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 393-94nn25-29.

<sup>59</sup> Nn. 25-29 are improperly cited as belonging to the *prima secundae* in Miller’s piece. Miller is citing, or referring to, articles from the *secunda secundae*.

<sup>60</sup> Aquinas argues explicitly that the theological virtue of hope is in the will as subject in *STh* II-II, q. 18, a. 1. The sin of despair, which is a vice contrary to the theological virtue of hope, would also be in the will as subject.



at all times, can never work to any good, and is not to be defended in any way.

To despair of our eternal salvation as if it were an impossible good is wrong because it is not true for any living human being that salvation is impossible. Aquinas explains:

Every appetitive movement which is conformed to a true intellect, is good in itself, while every appetitive movement which is conformed to a false intellect is evil in itself and sinful. Now the true opinion of the intellect about God is that from Him comes salvation to mankind, and pardon to sinners . . . while it is a false opinion that He refuses pardon to the repentant sinner, or that He does not turn sinners to Himself by sanctifying grace. Therefore, just as the movement of hope, which is in conformity with the true opinion, is praiseworthy and virtuous, so the contrary movement of despair, which is in conformity with the false opinion about God, is vicious and sinful.<sup>61</sup>

It is not true that eternal salvation is impossible for any man, it is therefore wrong to despair, as it is not in accord with the truth of the situation.

Despair, considered as a sin against the theological virtue of hope, is not a passion; it is not a movement of the sensitive appetite, but the rational appetite, or will.<sup>62</sup> The sinfulness of despair comes from the fact that it is a movement of the will that is not in accord with the truth of the matter. The one who despairs no longer sees eternal life as a good that is possible. This is against the truth of the situation made known to us through revelation. God is infinitely merciful, turns sinners toward himself, and is willing to forgive even the most grievous of sins.<sup>63</sup> Miller is, therefore, misguided in taking quotations about despair as a sin against the theological virtue of hope and concluding that it seems “unlikely that the *passion of despair* would ever be of benefit to someone.”<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> II-II, q. 20, a. 1: “Et ideo omnis motus appetitivus conformiter se habens intellectui vero, est secundum se bonus, omnis autem motus appetitivus conformiter se habens intellectui falso, est secundum se malus et peccatum. Circa Deum autem vera existimatio intellectus est quod ex ipso provenit hominum salus, et venia peccatoribus datur . . . Falsa autem opinio est quod peccatori poenitenti veniam denegat, vel quod peccatores ad se non convertat per gratiam iustificantem. Et ideo sicut motus spei, qui conformiter se habet ad existimationem veram, est laudabilis et virtuosus; ita oppositus motus desperationis, qui se habet conformiter existimationi falsae de Deo, est vitiosus et peccatum.”

<sup>62</sup> This is not to say that the passion of despair could not in some cases lead to the despair that is a sin against the virtue of hope, but that they are essentially distinct, and should not be equated.

<sup>63</sup> See *STh* II-II, q. 20, a. 1.

<sup>64</sup> Miller, ‘Passion of Despair’, p. 394 (emphasis added).

*D) Does Despair Lead Only to Paralysis?*

It is true that despair can easily exceed the limits of right reason and lead to an overly morose spirit. Miller puts it this way: “Despair, however, kills hope; the destruction of hope—by its very nature—is the effect of despair. Despair, therefore, leads to paralysis and nothing more.”<sup>65</sup> But is it true that it can only lead to paralysis? Experience, it seems, would say no. It may take great effort and virtue at times, but abandoning a good that is truly impossible can actually free one’s energies to work toward some good that is possible. In this way, despair can lead to some good. We have perhaps all known someone who just cannot get over some old love interest, even when it is fairly evident to any outside observer that it is time to move on. It takes prudence to know when to despair, and it takes great virtue to rouse one’s freed energies after a disappointment in order to go after other truly obtainable goods. Yet this can be done, and at times ought to be done.

## CONCLUSION

Miller offers many insights in his study of “Aquinas on the Passion of Despair.” He is right to see despair as somehow different from the other passions. It is the only passion that turns us away from some good. Because of this, despair is a passion that can easily go wrong. We are prone to despair too soon and too often. Further, even when some good is not possible for us, our despair often leads us to be overly downcast or even paralyzed. For these reasons we ought to be particularly vigilant that despair does not lead us in a direction contrary to right reason. In addition, despair considered as a sin against the theological virtue of hope can, in fact, never lead to good, and always goes against right reason and the truth of God’s mercy and love. Nevertheless, the passion of despair can in some cases be experienced moderately and rightly. Some sensible goods are not possible for us to obtain. We ought to despair of such goods and muster our freed energies to go after something that is truly good and possible to attain. The passion of despair, no matter how dangerous, does not *always* work to an evil end. It can be in accord with right reason, and when it is both voluntary and in accord with right reason, the passion of despair is morally good.

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395.