




Revisiting Aquinas on the Passion of Despair

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Abstract

The passion of despair, according to Thomas Aquinas, is an appetitive movement away from a future arduous good that is impossible to attain. Criticism of his account of despair abounds. Nicholas Lombardo argues that despair cannot be proper passion because the appetite cannot move away from a good. Eric D'Arcy and Susan James argue that Aquinas's description of passions as movements casts doubt on his understanding of some passions, including despair. Michael Miller and John Patrick Reid deny that despair can be morally praiseworthy and conducive to action. In this paper, I defend Aquinas's account of the passion of despair from these criticisms.

Keywords

Thomas Aquinas, despair, passion

In his highly influential treatment of the passions, Thomas Aquinas classifies hope and despair as contrary irascible passions. Hope is an appetitive movement toward a possible future good that is arduous to attain (ST I.II.40.2c), while despair is an appetitive movement away from a future arduous good that is impossible to attain (*impossibilitate obtinendi*) (ST I.II.40.4c).¹ At first glance, this seems right. I do not hope that the sun will rise tomorrow, for I take this to be more or less certain. By contrast, I do hope to pass a difficult math test or summit a mountain by midday, both of which are recognized by me to be possible, future, difficult goods. Hope energizes me to attain these hoped-for goods; it is a motivating passion. Likewise, I do not despair of getting a drink out of the refrigerator, for this

¹ References to Aquinas are as follows: ST = *Summa Theologiae*; QDV = *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*. All citations are from *Opera Omnia S. Thomae* (edited by Enrique Alarcon, 2001), which is available at Corpusthomicum.org. I translate “*passio*” and “*passiones animae*” as “passion” and “passions”. Although some scholars disagree with this choice of translation, the argument of the paper does not depend on whether *passio* is translated as “emotion” or “passion”. I use the term “passion” to refer to Aquinas's understanding of *passio*, which is discussed below and should be kept in mind.

is something that I take to be more or less under my control and easy to attain. If I sprained my ankle, however, I would despair of summiting the mountain by midday, for this desirable state of affairs is now considered to be beyond my ability to attain. Despair stultifies my desire to summit, dulling activity toward this end; it is a paralyzing passion.

Nevertheless, various scholars have challenged Aquinas's account of the passion of despair.² Nicholas Lombardo (2011) argues that Aquinas cannot adequately classify despair as a movement away from a good, given his metaphysics of appetitive movement. Lombardo concludes that despair should not be considered a distinct passion. Eric D'Arcy (1967) and Susan James (1997) argue that Aquinas's account of the passions as being movements is problematic, for some passions—e.g., despair—do not evidently involve physical movement. Although they do not focus on despair *per se*, it can be concluded from their discussion that despair is in conflict with Aquinas's account of the passions as movements. Michael Miller (2012) John Reid (1965) argue that Aquinas is wrong to claim that despair can be morally good, for it, unlike all of the other passions Aquinas discusses, is always morally bad. Both scholars also argue that, since despair paralyzes the agent, despair cannot move agents toward good things. Because moving toward good things is integral to action, despair is always to be avoided. If these criticisms are apt, then Aquinas's account of despair is wrong, and this has ramifications for his broader account of the passions. Aquinas would have to rethink his understanding of the morality of the passions, the classification of the passions, and the nature of the passions.

In this paper, I defend Aquinas's account of the passion of despair from the aforementioned criticisms.³ I argue that Aquinas's account of despair is defensible, once properly understood and situated in context. This paper proceeds as follows. In section I, I offer an overview of Aquinas's account of the passions. In section II, I respond to Lombardo's criticism that despair cannot fit neatly into Aquinas scheme, showing that Aquinas's understanding of the irascible power's object

² To be sure, there has not been much focus on the passion of despair. Although Miller (2012) and Froula (2015) focus on the passion of despair, most discussion of despair occurs in broader discussions of the passions (e.g., Lombardo 2011; Miner 2009; Knuutila 2004). For discussion of theological despair, see De Young (2015).

³ There is another challenge to Aquinas's account of despair, namely, he sometimes writes that despair causes fear (see ST I.II.25.3c) and sometimes he writes that fear causes despair (see ST I.II.45.2c). I do not address this challenge here, for others have—in my opinion—adequately addressed it. I agree with Lombardo, who writes: “The apparent contradiction between these statements can be interpreted in different ways. It seems plausible that Aquinas is describing the relationship between fear and despair from different angles and therefore, in their context, his descriptions are not intrinsically contradictory” (2011: 71-72; see Knuutila 2004: 246).

allows for movement away from a good. In section III, I address the possible criticism that, since despair is a kind of agential paralysis, and passions are movements, despair is not a real Thomistic passion. In section IV, I respond to Miller and Reid's criticism that despair cannot be morally good by offering clear cases in which despair can be morally good. In section V, I respond to the criticism that despair, being a paralysis of the soul, is always bad because it cannot move agents toward what is good.

I. Thomistic Passions

I start by presenting the broadly agreed-upon tenets of Aquinas's account of the passions. Aquinas identifies passions as moved-responses of the sensory appetite (QDV 26.3; ST I.II.22).⁴ These responses have both a passive and active component. Passions are passive because they need to be actualized: the sensory appetite needs to be presented with a particular good or evil object in order for the passion to occur. To be clear, that which actualizes a passion is not a material object. Aquinas recognizes that while Joe experiences fear upon seeing a lion, Suzy may experience delight. What actualizes a movement of Joe and Suzy's sensory appetite is their sensory cognition of the lion as good or threatening. Sensory knowledge is received through the five external senses and the raw data is cognized with the help of the four internal senses (ST I.78.3). Common sense, one of the interior senses, assembles the various elements into a whole, which is then evaluated according to the interests of the perceiver via the cogitative power in humans and estimative power in animals. Aquinas refers to these evaluative cognitions arising from the cogitative and estimative power as 'intentions', and they are evaluative judgments that enable one to cognize a sensible object relative to one's interests: they present a sensible object as good or bad for the agent (ST I.78.4.c; I.II.22.2.ad3; QDV 26.4). In order for Joe to experience fear of a lion, an intention of the lion as dangerous needs to be presented to his sensory appetite. In the absence of this intention, he will not experience fear.

Once an intention is presented to the sensory appetite, the sensory appetite responds by either moving toward the object if it is pleasant or away from the object if it is harmful. Because the sensory appetite is a bodily power, passion-movements necessarily involve a bodily alteration: "Acts of the sensory appetite," Aquinas claims,

⁴ For in-depth work on Aquinas's account of the passions, see Miner (2009), Cates (2009: chapters 3-5), Brungs (2005), King (1999), White (2002), James (1997: chapter 3), Lombardo (2011) Uffenheimer-Lippens (2003), and Manzanedo (1983). For historical focus, see Knuuttila (2004), Rosenwein (2016), and Gondreau (2002).

“are always accompanied by some bodily change” (ST I.20.1.ad2; see also I.II.22.1.c and QDV 26.1.c). This highlights an important feature of Thomistic passions—they are experienced by the soul-body composite. As Aquinas describes it, every passion involves a material change (bodily alteration) and a formal change (movement of soul): “just as movement of the appetitive power is the formal element, so also transmutation of the body is the material element, of which one is proportioned to the other” (ST I.II.44.1.c). Joe’s fear of the lion involves, formally, the alteration of his sensory appetite away from the lion. Materially, there is an increase in the flow of blood around his heart, resulting in a higher heart rate, perspiration, and so on. Passions, accordingly, are not movements of the sensory soul that cause bodily alteration: they are movements of the sensory soul *mediated* by bodily alteration.

Following tradition, Aquinas divides the sensory appetite into two powers—the irascible and the concupiscible—and thereby divides passions into two classes (ST I.81.2c, QDV 25.2). Passions of the irascible power move the creature toward arduous goods and away from arduous evils, while passions of the concupiscible power move the creature toward non-arduous goods and away from non-arduous evils (ST I.81.2c). The concupiscible power responds to good and evil, taken simply, while the irascible power responds to good and evil qualified as arduous. Aquinas identifies eleven basic passions, six concupiscible passions and five irascible passions. The concupiscible passions are love and hate, desire and aversion, and pleasure and sorrow; the irascible passions are hope and despair, courage and fear, and anger.

While there is a lot more than can be explained regarding the passions, I turn my focus to despair. Despair’s formal object, that which differentiates *it* from every other passion, is a cognition of a future arduous good that is impossible to attain (*impossibilitate obtinendi*) (ST I.II.40.4c). When confronted with such an object, the agent ceases to move toward the desired good. As Miller explains, “despair draws the soul away from some object when it is thought the cost necessary to obtain the object is too great or the likelihood of successfully obtaining it is too small” (2012: 389). For example, I despair of winning a one-on-one game of basketball against LeBron James. Despite thinking that winning a one-on-one game against LeBron James is a desirable good, I recognize this good as being beyond my abilities, even on a good day in my prime. In this case, as Rebecca Konyndyk De Young describes it, the attractive good of winning “looks sufficiently daunting as to deflate significantly one’s desire to try, even to the point of complete resignation” (2015: 831).

II. Classifying Despair

The first challenge to Aquinas's account of despair is that it seems to be in conflict with his moral psychology. According to Aquinas good is metaphysically prior to evil. Evil is nothing other than a lack of goodness, and human beings have a basic motivation to seek what appears to be good (ST I.48.1c). Accordingly, humans never act for the sake of attaining some apparent evil, and it is because human beings seek what is good that they withdraw from what is harmful (ST I.19.9c; I.20.1c; I.II.25.2c). Given that despair is a movement away from an object—"despair is a movement away from the good" (ST I.II.25.3c)—and appetite is always toward the good, it would seem to follow that despair's object must be an evil. If so, then despair's object would either be a simple evil, and have the same object as aversion, or be an arduous evil, and have the same object as fear. Nicholas Lombardo explains the challenge:

The intentional object of despair must be an evil, since despair moves away from its object, and movement away from an intentional object implies that the object is an evil. Despair's intentional object can be either an arduous evil or a simple, non-arduous evil. Either possibility presents difficulties. If despair's intentional object is an arduous future evil, there would be nothing to distinguish despair and fear, since fear moves away from an arduous future evil. If despair's intentional object is a simple, non-arduous evil, then there would be nothing to distinguish despair and aversion, since aversion moves away from a simple, non-arduous evil. According to the principles of Aquinas's system, therefore, it does not seem possible to maintain despair's status as a passion distinct from either fear or aversion. (2011: 71)

Lombardo's solution is to jettison Aquinas's claim that despair is a distinct passion, and instead, posit that the phenomenon called "despair" is really a complex instance of "the passion of sadness (*tristitia*) in not being able to attain some future good, and second, the experience of the fading of the passion of hope" (2011: 72fn104). Despair, according to Lombardo, is the "loosing of hope combined with the experience of sadness" (2011: 72fn104).

However, we do not need to go to such revisionary lengths to understand Aquinas's account of despair. We need only to revisit the text, and once we do, we notice that Aquinas is aware of the problem. On the topic of the contrariety of the irascible passions at ST I.II.23.2, he considers the objection just raised to despair, namely, how could we classify irascible passions in such a way that some are contrary in terms of approach and withdrawal from the same end? Passions consist in approach or withdrawal, and, he writes in the third objection, "approach is caused by cognition of good, withdrawal is caused by cognition of evil, for good is that which all desire,

as stated in Aristotle's *Ethics* I, and evil is that which all flee" (ST I.II.23.2ob3). Thus, there cannot be passions that incline one toward evil (e.g., daring) or away from good (e.g., despair). Another objection he considers is that "there is no other contrariety of the passions except of objects, and the object of the appetite is good or evil. Thus, there can be no other contrariety of the passions other than good and evil" (ST I.II.23.2ob2). By implication, there cannot be a passion like despair. In the article's *Sed Contra*, he appeals to Aristotle's claim that fear and daring are contrary movements in response to an arduous evil:

As Aristotle states, fear and daring are contraries, but fear and daring do not differ according to good and evil, for both regard an evil. Thus, not every contrariety of the irascible passions is according to the contrariety of good and evil. (ST I.II.23.2sc)

Daring, which is an appetitive movement toward an arduous evil, is subject to the same problem as despair: how can the appetite move toward an evil when it is fundamentally oriented away? Thus, Aquinas is aware of the classificatory challenge of how despair can be a movement away from a good object.

In response, Aquinas notes that passions are a kind of motion (*quidem motus*) and that their contrariety is grounded in the contrariety of motion or mutation (*motuum vel mutationum*). Following Aristotle (*Physics*, bk.5, chp.5), Aquinas distinguishes two kinds of contrariety of movement (ST I.II.23.2c). First, there is contrariety according to approach and withdrawal from the same term. Generation and corruption exemplify this kind of contrariety—generation is change to being, while corruption is change from being. Second, there is contrariety according to opposition of terms, which belongs properly to movements or processes—whitening, which is movement from black to white, is contrary to blackening, which is movement from white to black. Given that passions are kinds of movements and there are two kinds of movement, Aquinas argues "there is found a twofold contrariety in the passions, one according to contrariety of objects (i.e., good and evil), the other according to approach and withdrawal from the same term" (ST I.II.23.2c). The challenge, of course, is to make sense of how passions, *qua* motions, approach or withdraw from the same end or term in a way that is compatible with his moral psychology and metaphysics of appetite.

Given that the concupiscible passions regard good, *qua* good, and evil, *qua* evil, it follows that they cannot be contrary according to approach and withdrawal from the same term, for there can be no movement of the soul away from a sensible-good without qualification and no movement toward evil without qualification. The concupiscible passions can thus be contrary only based on contrariety of objects—good and evil. Aquinas explains:

Good, *qua* good, cannot be a term from which, but only to which [one moves] because nothing flees a good insofar as it is good, but everything desires it. Similarly, nothing desires evil, *qua* evil, but everything flees it. Because of this, evil does not have the nature of a term to which, but only a term from which. (ST I.II.23.2c)

Love is a kind of affective resonance between the appetite and appetible object, while hatred—the contrary of love—is an affective dissonance between the appetite and object (ST I.II.29.1c). Sorrow arises in response to a present evil, while delight or joy—the contrary of sorrow—arises in response to a present good (ST I.II.35.3c). Desire regards future goods, while aversion regards future evils (ST I.II.23.2c). Some irascible passions are classified this way. Hope regards an arduous good, while fear regards an arduous evil. However, and here is the important point, Aquinas thinks there is another way to classify the irascible passions. Irascible passions have a distinct intentional object—good or evil considered as arduous or difficult—and such an object may elicit contrary movements, as Aquinas explains:

An arduous or difficult good, insofar as it is *good*, has a nature such that it is sought after, as happens with hope. An arduous or difficult good, insofar as it is arduous, has a nature such that it is withdrawn from, as happens with despair. (ST I.II.23.2c)

He goes on to give the example of fear and daring: arduous evil, *qua* evil, elicits withdrawal (fear); arduous evil, *qua* defeasible or conquerable, elicits daring. Thus, the same object may elicit hope or despair, depending on how the object is presented to the appetite (ST I.II.23.1ad3).

We are now in a position to see how Aquinas would respond to Lombardo. The appetite is oriented toward good and away from evil. Not all objects are good or evil without qualification, however. Despair's object is an *arduous* good, with special emphasis on the arduous part. More specifically, despair's object is an impossibly arduous good, and Aquinas maintains that no one moves to attain something that is recognized as impossible:

But insofar as an arduous good is thought to be impossible to attain it has nature of being repulsive, for, as Aristotle writes in *Nichomachean Ethics* 3.3, when people come to something impossible, they disperse. (ST I.II.40.4c)

Aquinas makes the general psychological point in another passage that “nothing is moved to anything except under the aspect of possibility, for no one is moved to that which they cognize to be impossible to attain” (ST I.II.40.1ad3). If I think that, no matter what I do, I will not pass the math test, I will experience despair, and I will not deliberate over how to pass the test since people do not deliberate over impossible matters or act to bring about the impossible.

Similarly, no one who understands shapes or the distance of the sun from earth would seriously try to square a circle or shoot the sun with a pistol. Such actions are recognized to be futile, not possible to us. Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that “no one deliberates about things he despairs of (*Rhetoric* II.5), nor about impossible matters (*Nicomachean Ethics* 3.3)” (ST I.II.44.2ad3). Accordingly, while the appetite always seeks unqualified goods and avoids unqualified evils, it does not seek to attain goods or avoid evils that are thought to be impossible.

It is on account of the impossibility of attaining the desired good that despair moves away from the desired good. Aquinas writes explains that “despair is a movement away from a good, which is not fitting to good as good but according to some other aspect; hence, it’s withdrawal from a good is, as it were, accidental” (ST I.II.25.3c). He explains that, although despair moves us away from a good, this is in virtue of the impossibility of attaining the good, not on account of any evil (ST I.II.25.4ad3). Notice, this is perfectly compatible with Aquinas’s general thesis that we are naturally inclined to (attainable) goods and are naturally inclined away from (avoidable) evils. While we naturally seek goods, we do not naturally seek impossible goods: we recoil from seeking impossible goods, as is the case with despair. Therefore, the metaphysical principle that appetite always seeks the good is consistent with the claim that the appetite does not seek the *impossible* good. Thus, despair can be a movement away from a good, namely, an impossible good.

In sum, Aquinas need not claim that despair’s object is evil nor jettison any of his metaphysical claims. He is clear that despair’s object is not an evil but an impossible good (ST I.II.40.4ad3), and this allows us to understand why Lombardo is wrong to claim that the “intentional object” of despair must be “an evil” (2011: 69): despair’s object is an impossible good, and the appetite naturally shuns away from impossible things.

III. Despair and Movement

While scholars have criticized Aquinas understanding of the passions as motions (e.g., D’Arcy 1967: xxvii; James 1997: 62-62; Knuuttila 2004: 248–253), so far as I am aware none have focused explicitly on how his understanding the passions as motions might challenge despair’s status as a passion. This is surprising, for there seems to be a tension here. Aquinas writes that “appetitive movement is similar to natural movement” (ST I.II.36.2c), which seems to suggest that passionate movements are akin to physical movements. Eric D’Arcy claims that it is “physical movement, involving local motion in the ordinary sense” that is meant when Aquinas describes passions as

kinds of movements (1967: xxvii). Similarly, Susan James writes that Aquinas describes passions as motions in order to “blend the physical with psychological . . . [by] describing the soul in terms whose most transparent applications are to the physical world” (1997: 62). If Aquinas understands appetitive movement as being akin to physical movement, then despair seems problematic, for it seems to entail a paralysis, not movement, of the soul-body composite. To despair of something is to lack motivation to act. Accordingly, it would seem that despair is not a passion, for it is not a physical-like motion.

The problem with this challenge is that it assumes an incorrect understanding of the kind of motion that passions are. Toward clarifying the matter, it is instructive to note that Aquinas refers to Aristotle’s account of movement when discussing appetitive movement (ST I.II.23c). Aristotle defined motion in the *Physics* as the actualization of a power or capacity from passivity to act: “the fulfillment of what exists potentially, insofar as it exists potentially” (*Physics*, 3.1, 201a10). Suzy has the capacity to raise her arm; when she does so, her capacity moves from passivity to activity. When her arm is resting at her side, her capacity to raise her arm is passive, i.e., not actualized. Likewise, Suzy has the capacity to see flowers. When she opens her eyes and sees flowers, her power or capacity to see is being actualized: she goes from a state of passivity (i.e., not seeing) to a state of activity (i.e., seeing). When she closes her eyes, her capacity to see is no longer actualized and motion ceases.

Aristotle further distinguished three kinds of motion, or ways a power or capacity can be actualized (*Physics*, 5.2, 226a23-34). First, there is movement of alteration, which occurs when an agent’s capacity to receive a quality is actualized, i.e., the agent receives one quality or form and loses a contrary one. Water being heated in a kettle is an alteration since the water’s capacity for being heated is being actualized. It loses one quality (cold) and acquires its contrary (hot). The second kind of movement is movement of quantity or, as Aristotle claims, increase or decrease. This occurs when an object goes from an imperfect state to a perfect state (increase), or vice versa (decrease). The movement from being an incomplete building to a complete building is a movement from an imperfect state to a perfect one; the movement from a complete building to an incomplete building is a movement in the opposite direction. The final kind of movement is one of locomotion, or change of place. This is the kind of movement that we are most familiar with, e.g., the movement of a dog from outside to inside.

Aquinas claims that the movement of passions is the movement of alteration. He writes in *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate* that “*passio* in this [proper] sense is found only in the movement of alteration,” when one quality or form is removed from a person and its contrary is acquired (26.1c). He reiterates this understanding at

Summa Theologiae I.II.21.c, where he argues that the most proper understanding of *pati* (suffering or undergoing) and *passio* involves the loss of one quality and the reception of a contrary: a person who goes from health to a state of sickness (or vice versa) is said to suffer (ST.I.II.21c). The movement of a passion, therefore, occurs when the sensory appetite's capacity to be altered from one qualitative state to its contrary state is actualized, e.g., from love to its contrary of hate. This notion of movement is evident in Aquinas's discussion of delight, where he himself considers the objection that delight (*delectatio*), which is a rest of the appetite in an attained good, is not a passion because it is not a movement:

Delight does not consist in being moved, but in having been moved since it is caused by a good already attained. Thus, it is not a passion. (ST I.II.31.1ob2)

Since the sensible good is already possessed by the agent, *delectatio* does not appear to involve movement of any kind. In reply, Aquinas clarifies the following:

For though *delectatio* is a certain rest of the appetite, considered as the presence of the pleasurable good which satisfies the appetite; nevertheless there remains an immutation of the appetite by the appetible object, by reason of which pleasure is a kind of motion. (ST I.II.31.1ad2)

Aquinas's point is that *delectatio* is a movement, namely, the movement of alteration by which the soul is altered from a state of non-pleasure to a state of pleasure via an immutation.

Importantly for present purposes, it is not physical movement that is relevant to passionate movement, but rather the movement of alteration. To experience despair is to experience an alteration of the soul from hope—despair's contrary—to despair that, in turn, hinders physical motion toward an object. Stated differently, despair is a movement of alteration that, in virtue of its object—an impossible good—naturally inclines the agent away from the object. In one sense, it is a motion and in another sense, it is not a motion. That despair is a kind of agential paralysis does not entail that despair is not a Thomistic passion.

IV. The Moral Praiseworthiness of Despair

The third challenge arises from Aquinas's claim that passions are morally neutral and become morally good insofar as they are "subject to the command of reason and will" (ST I.II.24.1c) and morally bad insofar as they are contrary to reason (ST I.II.24.2c). Michael Miller objects to Aquinas's passion that despair, *qua* passion, can be morally good. He explains:

I think Aquinas is wrong to claim despair, in its nature, is not morally good or bad. That is, Aquinas does not understand that despair is always to be avoided, for its effect, unlike the other ten passions, never leads to even a mutable good . . .

Despair, in itself, never benefits the person experiencing the passion. Unlike the other ‘negative’ passions – sorrow, aversion, fear, anger, and hatred – which are often harmful but occasionally beneficial to the soul when felt in the right manner, despair can never be felt rightly *because it always eradicates hope*, which along with love is the engine of the passions. . . . Despair, therefore, leads to paralysis and nothing more. (2012: 394–395; emphasis added)

John Reid, similarly, describes despair as an “aberrant” passion, one that is “particularly problematic”, especially when felt in excess (1965: 160). In another place he describes despair as “never appropriate or gratifying” (1965: 76fna), and explains that despair is always “futile”, never serving a “useful purpose” (1965: 77fnc).

At first glance, this objection is misguided, for it overlooks the observation that hope may be improper. Consider a stalker who has an excessive hope that a particular celebrity will fall in love with him, if only the celebrity repeatedly sees him in public and private. This person has an inordinate hope and he should despair of having a relationship with this celebrity. Indeed, despairing of having a relationship with this celebrity would be beneficial to the stalker, as it would help free him from paying too much attention and giving too much energy to a highly unlikely end. Likewise, consider a gambler who spends an excessive amount of money on lottery tickets at the expense of his family obligations. Such a person would benefit from experiencing despair over the chances of winning, for he would lose the drive that inclines him to spend money inordinately. It would be good, intuitively, for both the gambler and the stalker to experience despair. Therefore, Miller and Reid are wrong to claim that despair is always bad and never useful or appropriate in virtue of eradicating hope, for sometimes hope needs to be eradicated.

There is ample textual evidence that Aquinas thinks that the passion of hope can be improper and in need of eradication. First, he writes that hope abounds in drunkards and youth, people who presumably should not be as hopeful as they are (ST I.II.40.6c). Hope abounds in youth, in part, because they have not experienced much difficulty in life, and therefore, they tend to overestimate what is possible. Hope abounds in drunkards, in part, because they overestimate what is possible to them in virtue of being drunk (ST I.II.40.6c). Presumably, youth and drunkards should experience less hope and would benefit from experiencing despair. A drunk person should despair of driving home safely or reconnecting with an ex-lover while at a bar in the early morning. As Jeffrey Froula notes (2015: 321), that youth

and drunks experience excessive hope in various settings suggests that mature and sober-minded people experience despair in the same settings. Second, Aquinas thinks that hope needs to be regulated by the moral virtues of humility and magnanimity. Sometimes we find ourselves hoping for something that is beyond our ability to attain, and so we need a virtue that restrains such hope and ensures that it does not influence our reason and will. Aquinas calls this restraining or tempering virtue ‘humility’, and since it concerns the moderation of a strong passionate hope, it is a subsidiary virtue of temperance (ST II.II.161.4c). Other times, however, we ought to experience hope, specifically in situations when great honor is at stake, and so we need a virtue that disposes us to feel hope in appropriate difficult situations. Aquinas calls this promoting virtue ‘magnanimity’ and identifies it as a subsidiary virtue of fortitude (ST II.II.129.5c; II.II.129.4ad2.). That hope needs to be regulated by moral virtues reveals that hope is not always good or beneficial for a person. Consequently, Miller in particular is wrong to claim that, in virtue of eliminating hope, despair is always wrong, and Reid is wrong to claim that despair never serves a useful purpose.

Nevertheless, both scholars insist that despair is always bad. Miller claims that despair “always works to an evil end and is never felt rightly” (2012: 396), while Reid claims that despair is “never appropriate or gratifying” (1965: 76fna). However, it is difficult to see their reasoning for this claim. That despair paralyzes the soul and eradicates hope does not entail that it is always directed to an evil. Passions, considered in themselves, are movements of the non-rational sensory appetite. In humans, passions gain moral standing depending on their relation to reason and will (ST I.II.24).⁵ That despair paralyzes the soul and eradicates hope is irrelevant to its moral standing; what is relevant to its moral standing is whether it relates in the right way to judgment and will. Aquinas writes, “it belongs to the moral perfection or human good that the passions ought to be ruled by reason” (ST I.II. 24.3c). When discussing the sin of theological despair, he explains that “every appetitive movement conformed to a true cognition is good in itself, while every appetitive movement conformed to a false cognition is bad in itself and sinful” (ST II.II.20.1c). The reason why theological despair is a sin is that it results from the false judgment that divine mercy is unavailable to the repentant sinner or that God does not provide sanctifying grace to sinners (ST II.II.20.1c). The passion of despair, similarly, can be morally good as far as it is subject to the command of right reason. As the cases of the stalker and gambler above indicate, this is not

⁵ For discussion of how passions can be controlled by reason and will, and thereby contribute to the moral goodness of an action, see Ferry (2011), Gondreau (2007), Butera (2006), and Jensen (2013).

at all implausible. Indeed, life is often difficult and, as Robert Miner explains, regarding “the attainment of any particular, finite good, it is always possible that despair is a legitimate response” (2009: 220).⁶ If my reason tells me that a desirable good is impossible to attain, and I will to no longer pursue that good in virtue of it being impossible, I should experience despair in my sensory appetite, for despair is the appropriate passion to experience given the judgment and willing. Morally praiseworthy despair can result in one of two ways: I can choose (*electio*) to experience despair or I will experience despair in virtue of the intensity by which I judge and will (ST I.II 24.3ad1). Importantly for present purposes, to continue to hope after I judge the hoped-for good to be impossible creates discord between my rational capacities and my sensory appetite. Consequently, so long as despair responds to a right cognition that a good future object is impossibly arduous to attain, and the will ceases to seek after it, experiencing the passion of despair in the sensory appetite is in accord with reason and thereby morally praiseworthy. Neither Miller nor Reid has shown that despair is always morally bad and to be avoided, and Aquinas’s insistence that *all* passions are morally neutral remains plausible.

V. Despair and Action

Reid and Miller, however, seem to think that despair is bad and to be avoided because, if it alone were felt, a person would never be able to seek the good, and indeed, never be able to act. Reid writes that, “without hope there is a drain on the motivation required for positive, constructive mental and physical activity” (1965: 160). Miller writes:

[I]f someone retains even a trace amount of hope the soul retains the power to move itself toward some good. However, if one despairs, this hope is gone, and he is completely unable to seek any good; the depressed soul is paralyzed. (2012: 395)

Although Reid does not elaborate, Miller correctly notes that theological despair is “especially grievous [for Aquinas] because it implies a withdrawal from” (2012: 393). By implication, “it appears unlikely that the passion of despair would ever be of benefit to someone” (2012: 394). In support of this claim, he criticizes what he takes to be Aquinas’s claim that despair can be conducive to action. Aquinas claims that “despair is dangerous in war because of some adjoining hope” (ST I.II.40.8ad3). A soldier who despairs of escaping will fight

⁶ Froula explains: “The simple fact is that some goods 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 attaining them” (2015: 320).

more vigorously in the hope of avenging his death. Miller argues that it is hope, not despair, that makes the soldier a greater threat:

Admittedly, the pressure of some likely danger . . . can motivate a passionate flurry of activity. But this activity is not the result of despair itself, but of some other passion that/which is rooted in love or hope. So he [the soldier] now acts because he hopes that if he fights well the enemy may retreat and he will survive another day. But, if the soldier truly has no hope—if he is filled with despair—the soldier would not fight. Overcome with despair he would have no hope to even achieve the end of every battle – to harm his enemy – and he would simply sit down and wait for his death. (2012: 396)

Given that it is hope that makes the soldier a threat, not despair, it appears that hope, not despair, is a benefit to the soldier in this situation. Miller believes that despair is bad because it always hinders actions, and hence, prevent agents from pursuing goods.

The problem, however, is that Miller overlooks Aquinas's goal in offering the soldier example. The soldier example is intended to show, not that despair promotes action, but that hope does. The objection Aquinas is responding to argues that *hope* is not conducive to action because it is contrary to despair and despair is conducive to action:

Despair is contrary to hope, as noted. Now despair, especially in matters of war, assists actions, for it is stated in Kings 2, chapter 2 that “despair is a dangerous thing.” Thus, hope has a contrary effect, namely, impeding action (ST I.II.40.8ob3).

Aquinas's response to this objection is to show that hope conduces to action, even in cases where it appears as though despair is promoting action. Aquinas therefore agrees with Miller (and Reid) that, if an agent experiences *only* despair, then of course she is going to experience a kind of general paralysis: despair hinders action. He also agrees with Miller that it is the soldier's hope that promotes action when the soldier despairs of fleeing. There is, accordingly, no disagreement between Miller and Aquinas about the soldier example.

Aquinas would object, however, to Miller's claim that experiencing despair renders one “completely unable to seek any good”. Once we understand Aquinas's soldier example in context, we see that Miller's argument falls apart. The soldier experiences despair, namely, despair of fleeing, but he also experiences hope, namely, hope of avenging his death. The soldier despairs of one thing and hopes for another. Aquinas is sensitive to the fact that agents experience various passions at once, and his account can accommodate this. Passions are appetitive responses to particular, sensible goods and evils, and an agent can attend to different goods and evils in a setting (ST I.II.30.1ad3; QDV 25.1c). If an agent hopes to win a game and then despairs to win, it does not follow that the agent is “completely unable

to seek any good”, as Miller claims. All that follows for Aquinas is that the agent despairs of winning the game. Perhaps the agent still hopes to win the series, eat a nice dinner, enjoy a good book, and so on. Experiencing despair is compatible with experiencing other passions, and so it does not follow that experiencing despair entails a general paralysis. Moreover, experiencing despair in the right way in the right setting does benefit a person. The soldier who despairs of fleeing is able to attend to other possible goods; having recognized and responded appropriately to the impossibility of fleeing, he is able to direct his attention to bringing about hoped-for vengeance.

Conclusion

I conclude that the challenges raised against Aquinas’s account of the passion of despair are unfounded. Aquinas has the resources to explain how despair can incline us away from an impossible good, how despair can be morally good and praiseworthy, and how despair can contribute to action. Although excessive despair can lead to depression and hinder one’s overall well-being, there are instances where despair can be good. Addicts, gamblers, stalkers, drunkards, youth and so on can benefit from experiencing despair in certain ways. Just because theological despair is always bad, it does not follow that the passion of despair is always bad—sometimes passionate despair is good. By analogous reasoning, just because theological hope is always good, it does not follow that the passion of hope is always good—sometimes passionate hope is bad.

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