EMOTIONS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH IN AQUINAS

Nicholas E. Lombardo

This essay aims to reconstruct the views of Thomas Aquinas on the emotions and psychological health. First, Aquinas’s account of the emotions will be presented in its historical context, with special attention to the passions and their relationship to virtue and human flourishing. It will then reconstruct Aquinas’s views on the emotions and psychological health, focusing especially on sadness. For Aquinas, our emotions (even seemingly negative ones such as sadness, fear, and anger) are healthy when they operate according to their inner structure and unhealthy when they do not.

The Emotions in Aquinas

When Aquinas finished the Prima secundae of the Summa theologiae in 1271, questions 22–48 probably constituted the longest sustained discussion of the passions ever written. This Treatise on the Passions, as questions

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3 To my knowledge, the longest sustained discussion of the passions before Aquinas is found in Aristotle’s Rhetoric, and Aristotle’s treatment is neither as long nor as systematic as Aquinas’s. Paul Gondreau states that the Treatise on the Passions “dwarfs the only known historical precedents [for a systematic treatment of the passions], both of which Aquinas draws upon: Nemesius of Emesa’s short treatise on the passions in his De natura hominis and, following this, John Damascene’s treatise on the same in his De fide orthodoxa (Aristotle left us no systematic treatment of the passions).” See “The Passions and the
22–48 of the *Prima secundae* have come to be known, is the culmination of a lifetime of reflection and the centerpiece of a much larger project. Aquinas's attention to the passions spans his entire literary output, beginning with his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, and permeates each part of the *Summa theologiae*. In the *Summa*, he thoroughly integrates his discussion of the passions with his metaphysics and his account of human nature, the desire for happiness, virtue, vice, sin, and grace. Yet most studies of Aquinas on the passions focus almost exclusively on the *Treatise on the Passions* and Questions 80–82 of the *Prima pars*, and do not consider his treatment of the passions vis-à-vis original sin, grace, and specific virtues and vices. In its integration within such an expansive project, the *Treatise on the Passions* is without historical precedent, as is the *Prima secundae*, the section of the *Summa* in which it is found.

Historical evidence suggests that Aquinas began writing the *Summa theologiae* to correct the casuistry prevalent in manuals for confessors and other works of moral theology. He was concerned that the moral theology taught to Dominican students and others had a skewed emphasis on vice and sin and lacked sufficient theological and anthropological context. Consequently, one of Aquinas’s principal objectives in writing the *Summa* was to give a balanced foundation for the study of Christian ethics. For this reason, Leonard Boyle suggests that the *Prima secundae*, Aquinas’s analysis of human actions and passions *par excellence*, is the heart of the *Summa theologiae*. In any case, nothing comparable to the *Prima secundae*...