Chapter 10

Anger and the Unity of Philosophy: Interlocking Discourses of Natural and Moral Philosophy in the Scottish Enlightenment

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Summary

By exploring various theoretical discourses of anger in Enlightenment Scotland I intend to show that various branches of philosophy exploited the same conceptual resources while discussing phenomenon in natural, moral and religious contexts. Relying on the same concepts, various branches of theoretical inquiry were intertwined so that different layers of discourse exerted a mutual influence on one another: physiological discourses were filled with hidden moral meaning and religious content, and vice versa. Therefore, the discourses of the natural, psychological, social and transcendent aspects of human beings exhibited a remarkable conceptual unity in this period, just before they started to develop into specialized fields of knowledge. The present paper offers a case study as to how these conceptual interconnections worked within the Scottish Enlightenment’s sphere of intellectual influence in the particular case of anger.

1 Introduction

Anger is at the forefront of theoretical interest in eighteenth-century natural and moral inquiry in Scotland: it serves as a standard illustration in the medical, moral and theological discussions of fevers and violent active passions. As such it receives acute attention in connection with various physiological phenomena, like e.g. circulation, the animal spirits and raging fevers. In the descriptive and explanatory “science of man”, which can be understood as a

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1 It is also in the forefront of interest in the Enlightenment in general. For a discussion of the developments on the Continent, one however that leaves out the physiological context, see Coleman P., Anger, Gratitude, and the Enlightenment Writer (Oxford: 2011). However, the Scottish context deserves special attention, because as Coleman (ibidem 417) points out ‘we do not find French equivalents to Hume’s or Smith’s reflective analysis of particular passions as part of an overall moral philosophy’.
middle-range theory mediating between physiological and normative (ethical and theological) considerations, anger is discussed in connection with benevolence, love, and other passions motivating actions, tempers and various appetites, as well as its role in art and poetry. In ethical contexts it is discussed, in a typically condemning manner, as a moral fault, in the context of corrupting the mind; and in theological contexts, it is considered as a passion demolishing humility. But sometimes it is also painted with more appealing colours as a state of mind necessary for the exercise of certain social virtues and self-preservation.

In this paper I will argue that these discourses of the Scottish Enlightenment are not independent of one another, quite to the contrary: various moral and natural philosophical discourses penetrate each other, linking moral philosophies to then-contemporary medical theories, and vice versa, lending medical theories moral and theological significance. Therefore the discourses of anger in this period are eminently suitable to illustrate the thesis that there is an intimate and remarkable connection between the discourses of natural and moral philosophy in the period.

This thesis has significance in the context of present-day historiographies of both science and philosophy that are still inclined to treat their canon separately. By exploring the interconnections of various discourses of anger, I wish to illustrate by a case study the fundamental unity of natural and moral philosophies in the early modern period. As I will argue, the discourses of anger in these different fields are conceptually congruent and these discourses frequently merge in a rather intricate manner: physiological theories are influenced by implicit normative and religious motivations, the phenomenological psychology of the “science of man” is informed by physiological considerations and also by implicit normative agendas.

2 Visions of Disciplinary Unity and Interaction

Ever since C.P. Snow’s famous essay on the ‘Two Cultures’ (1959), it has become a commonplace to refer to the divide separating the sciences and the