
This book concentrates on how Greek philosophers (mainly Plato and Aristotle) understood the limitations of reason as a control on anger and how they thought that anger could be tamed. It begins with a cursory examination of the Homeric framework and ends with a skimming analysis of how the Church Fathers used earlier philosophic ideas to connect anger control with God. There are some good ideas in this book but pervasive shortcomings such as hastiness and lack of serious engagement both with the ancient texts and modern scholarship are bound to disappoint students of ancient Greek culture and of the history of its ideas and emotions.

In the introduction there is a very brief presentation of the central argument, that Plato and Aristotle not only emphasized reason’s limited ability to control anger but also tried to overcome this weakness. Plato thought that this can be achieved through education of citizens as well as the power of music to influence young souls. Aristotle understood the taming of anger as involving friendship (p. 1). These are not novel ideas but we have to wait till page 101 to read that Kalimtzis has no claim to originality. The purpose of this book is vague, to say the least, especially since it is not fully explained and defended in the meagre introduction. The only thing by way of purpose here is the author’s will to embrace “the naïve assumption of shared humanity” (p. 3), a quotation that Kalimtzis fails to locate! Failure either to give specific references to works (both ancient texts and modern literature) or to substantiate claims is pervasive (e.g. pp. 2, 3, 5-6, 13-4, 17, 21, 25-6, 28, 31, 42, 67, 97, 113, 122-3, 127, 133, 140, 146, 151, 153). This is a baffling shortcoming as is the book’s highly selective concentration on some aspects of Plato and Aristotle and failure to give the reader even a brief summary of the rich and complex ancient Greek material concerning anger control and the different perspectives and problems involved in its analysis. For example, evidence from lyric and epic poetry, the presocratic philosophers, classical historical, medical, dramatic, and rhetorical texts, as well as Hellenistic historical, philosophical, or medical texts is very limited, scattered, or non-existent.

“Taming anger”, the title of the book, is potentially misleading for two reasons. First, in Homer the verb ‘to tame’ (damazō) is used with animals (Il. 23.655) and maidens (Il. 18.432) as objects, but not emotions; when emotions are the subject of the verb it denotes their overwhelming power (Il. 14.316: erōs). In Plato taming the anger of the Athenians against Pericles is an inference from a metaphor Socrates uses. Such idioms as ‘toning down’ the spirited part of the soul (Pl. R. 442a) or ‘winding down one’s pitch of anger’ (Ar. V. 574) are another aspect of classical language Kalimtzis does not discuss. An examination of such modes of thinking as analogy, allegory, metaphor and emotion in Plato and Aristotle (including, for example, metaphors related to animals and music) would have made “taming anger” as a title of the book more appropriate. Second, a cursory treatment of Homer, Sophocles’ Philoctetes, and some Church Fathers, with a more detailed discussion of Plato and Aristotle, cannot by any means amount to “the Hellenic approach to the limitations of reason”.

Kalimtzis’ discussion of the language of anger and thumos in chapter one is too meagre to do justice to Homer himself and his legacy to Plato and Aristotle. A fruitful question to be explored in this context would be what kind of Homeric passages are quoted by the two later philosophers. Dating Homer as early as the ninth century BC is erroneous (p. 5). A fuller account of how the soul, the body, and thumos are presented in the Homeric poems is necessary. The issue of restraining and checking Homeric anger and emotions in general is not discussed. As a result, the reader is given a very incomplete picture of Homeric anger language.

In chapter three Kalimtzis claims that the important theme of how to bring measure to anger in Plato’s Republic has perhaps not been “given sufficient emphasis” (p. 33) but without references to recent scholarship to justify his claim. Kalimtzis may be right to say that “Plato locates shame, fear, courage, emulation, grief, jealousy, friendly feeling, and probably religious feeling in the thumos” (p. 40), but

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3) Metaphor from animal keeping: Pl. Grg. 516a-d and Yunis 1996, 146-50. In this context the same word (hémeros) is used to describe tame animals (516b) and gentle citizens (‘the just are gentle’; 516c).
