

The History and Historiography of Anger: Some Preliminary Thoughts

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That anger is an emotion is almost universally accepted. Indeed, it may be called a paradigmatic emotion, a constant in almost every consideration of the passions. It is the first word of Homer's *Iliad* in the form of *menis*; it appears in Plato as *thumos*, the spirited part of the soul; it comes up in Aristotle as *orge*.¹ It was something of an obsession in Stoic thinking (Nussbaum 1994, 387 n. 65).

Seneca's book on anger, *De ira*, may seem to have reduced the concept to a single word, but the tradition of multiplicity continued thereafter.² Thomas Aquinas noted various kinds of anger: *fel*, *furor*, *ira*, *mania*, and so on, while Hobbes considered it less a major emotion than one of many forms of aversion (Rosenwein 2016, 156-157 Table 5.1 for Thomas; and 294-295 Table 9.1 for Hobbes). In fact, considering anger to be *one* emotion is very recent, the result of efforts of psychologists keen to make emotion studies into a science, with each emotion functioning as an independent variable. The work of Paul Ekman in the 1970s furthered this cause greatly because he argued that emotions were universal and that a few of them, such as anger, were "basic" and expressed on the face (Ekman and Friesen 1971, 124-129).³ That appeared to give psychologists license to use pictures of people with the prototypical "anger expression" on their faces in order to create experiments that were reproduceable—the scientific gold standard. Neuroscientists have generally ratified this procedure; they too use photographs and typically identify the amygdala as the site of its corresponding brain activity (Carvajal *et al.* 2007, 23-29). Only in the last few years has this view been challenged by "psychological constructionists," who deny that emotions come in tidy units that may be found on the face or in any particular anatomical structure of the brain (Feldman Barrett and Russell 2015).

The history of anger must also be considered in the light of different *theories* of emotions, which further complicate the story. To simplify radically, there have been two persistent theories: one, offered by Plato, conceives of emotions as hydraulic forces that press for release and must be "tamed" by something—by reason or society or internal restraints, for example.⁴ The other theory, advanced by Aristotle, says that emotions are judgments that may be correct or incorrect depending on the critical abilities and training of the individual (Aristotle 1926, 2.1.8-2.3.1 1377b-1380a). The former, hydraulic view may be said to inform Ekman's theory of faces, for (to give one example) no one can fully suppress the applicable facial expression when angry. The latter, cognitive view, is prevalent among therapists, developmental psychologists, and cognitive psychologists. Increasingly both groups argue that cognition and emotion exist on a continuum (Labouvie-Vief 2015, chap. 5).

1 See Rosenwein (2006) chapter 1 for a brief discussion and further references.

2 See Seneca (1928), *De ira*, text at <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2007.01.0014>

3 For the background see Leys (2017).

4 For example, in Plato, *Phaedrus* (1914, 248a-256a), where the black horse signifies uncontrollable emotions.

All of this is part of the history of anger. Yet it leaves out two issues that are key from a historian's point of view: the historiography of the topic (how anger has been accounted for in the past by those who study the past), and how those scholars *should* treat anger in the light of the new theories of the constructionists and "continuumists" (if I may coin a word). The older view, still prevalent today, is that anger has undergone a "civilizing process" in the history of the West.⁵ Closely tied to Europe's sense of superiority to "primitive" cultures and to a hydraulic view of emotions, it makes the Middle Ages the West's childhood—when impulses reigned and ego controls were inadequate. The modern world (or rather modernity) created the conditions for the internalization of restraints on the expression of anger.

That teleological view cannot stand scrutiny in the light of both new theories of anger as well as new current cultural assumptions. These hard-won cultural assumptions dictate that we may claim *differences from* other cultures, but not superiority *over* them. The older assumptions continue today and may even be gaining in force, but the new ones are beginning to make their mark. They mesh with the new psychological movements that make emotions part of the continuum that includes words and ideas. In short, anger is part of a moral, intellectual, and sensory whole that must be considered together. The history of anger thus conceived must include theories, uses, standards, manipulations, ethical evaluations and all the other things in which emotions partake.⁶

As readers of this issue absorb the many disparate topics treated in the articles that follow this very brief introduction, they may find it helpful to consider that anger is probably not one thing; that its different meanings do not necessarily perform the same interpersonal, communicative, and moral functions; and that it may be a component of—or lead to, or be associated with—many other feelings as disparate as love, hope, and sorrow.

References

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5 For a summary of this historiography, see Rosenwein (2002, 821-845).

6 See my attempt to do this in Rosenwein (2020).