

Anger

Anger as a Natural and Unavoidable Part of Life in the World?

We tend to think of anger as something natural that, due to circumstances, just boils over sometimes and we just can't help it.

We also tend to think of aggressiveness (which underlies anger) as a necessary part of our human nature that is just necessary to live life, stay in the game and get ahead.

Both of these pictures treat anger as something obviously valid and objective. In either case, what is natural (and therefore ultimately unavoidable) is thought to be morally neutral.

Evagrius' approach is different.

Evagrius thinks some anger is sinful and ultimately avoidable, being opposed to the supernatural life offered in the Gospel, which makes possible acts (like forgiving enemies) that go beyond what we are currently able to do by ourselves.

Evagrius' Assumptions

As mentioned last week, Evagrius thinks there are three powers or capacities within us, each of which has a different character and a different function.

- (1) Bodily desires that demand immediate satisfaction, with some pleasure/gratification attaching to the satisfaction of these desires but not lasting long.
 - a. These are rooted in original created mechanisms arising from appropriate self-love/self-care (e.g. my hunger, thirst, and shivering remind me that I need the created goods of food, drink and warmth and that I need to attend to myself and care for myself accordingly).
 - b. These present themselves as straightforward bodily needs, which don't need much reflection or analysis (or at least reflection does not go beyond the practical, instrumental level of figuring out how to get these things quickly and most easily). (Unwilling/resistant to invoking reason and can stubbornly resist reason's claims)
 - i. Some of these desires are actually more complex and conflicted than they first seem. For example, sexual desire or a desire to protect oneself through economic independence tend to conceal as much as they reveal and aren't always what they seem to be. Thus, sexual desire can be about a need for intimacy which is not necessarily insightful or worked out; a desire for economic independence can mask a great deal of fear and mistrust of other people.

- ii. Force of immediate demand can be lessened by practicing voluntary self-limitation/abstinence/forms of generosity toward others (which prevent one from attending first and primarily to one's own needs).

(2) One's mind rises up toward God through the understanding of what he has made and how he has ordered it, exploring the reasons and causes of things.

- a. We were made to be looking outward and when we turn in upon ourselves and focus our attention upon ourselves,
 - i. we see ourselves as larger and grander than we actually are ("Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought")=arrogant pride/vainglory
 - ii. our perception is distorted and we claim to be able to understand reasons and causes relating to ourselves, but we are often seriously mistaken and are merely rationalizing.

(3) There is a part of us that gives energy (forward movement) and persistence.

- a. Because it responds and reacts to one's environment, it can set one in relation to outward world.
- b. It particularly responds to people, seeing us as already in relation to other people in a way that an obligation exists between us.
 - i. The other person has an obligation toward me, which must be satisfied if justice is to be maintained.
 - ii. Subsequently, I will respond to the other person in way that reflects whether the obligation was met and justice satisfied.
 - 1. When I am rightly attending to the good and justice, this power will move me to courage and heroism (extraordinary persistence in the good in the midst of struggle and conflict).
 - a. In this way, energy can support and reinforce reason and reason's projects, since knowing the truly good can only come to us through reason.
 - 2. Since this power is bound up with the heart and with my sense of who I am and what I am owed, when these things are false and corrupted, I will respond out of a sick self and heart and can be violent, aggressive, hostile and controlling.

Thus, according to Evagrius:

- Some deadly sins have to do with the short-term pleasure associated with possessing and using/consuming tangible objects (gluttony, lust), essentially the immediate satisfaction of a bodily craving.
- Others are more nearly intellectual in character (vainglory and pride).
- The sins that are most difficult to understand (and come to terms with) occupy an intermediate position (anger, akedia). They are connected with interpersonal relationships.
 - Although the responsive power can be supportive of reason, when it is misused, the result will be similar to what we saw in the case of sins of bodily desire, i.e. both types of sins use a picture of sensible things and suggest a pleasure/gratification in pursuing a related outcome, but the force of these emotions can be so overwhelming that
 - the underlying interpretation(s) they depend upon can hardly even be seen (much less examined) at the time of the event (they seem so objective that there seems to be no interpretation to discuss) and
 - the felt need (provocation) to move quickly into action is perhaps even stronger than any pleasure connected with the action itself.

The goal is for all three powers/capacities to be restored to health.

- For the part of us that desires, that we should desire and yearn for God, Christ and what is good (“As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you”)
- The responsive power fights to obtain this good.
- The mind is turned outward again in a healthy way, to contemplate the divine good which can be seen in and through created things and by their ordering.

The Nature of Anger

Anger is a reaction that depends upon a certain way of looking way of looking at world.

- Pride is an action that can happen on its own, apart from anything else and before anything else.
- Anger, by contrast, is only a reaction to what one thinks one sees.

More specifically, **anger**

- **is a reaction to something one sees as unfair or unjust** and
- **makes one want**
 - **the unjust thing punished and**
 - **the unfair thing set right.**

This is why Scripture can speak of God as being angry when he looks at sin—he hates injustice and wants to see wrongs set right.

Anger therefore can be natural, an original created faculty that aims at justice (and, being guided by love for the other and restrained by prudence and meekness, aims to achieve what is required without exceeding the mark)—“righteous anger.”

Since we were made in the image of God, it is not surprising that, like God, we too resent injustice, wanting to see wrongs pushed back and overturned and things set right. Because we were made in this way, it is possible for human beings to have a righteous anger when we see real injustice (for example, God being mocked or God’s creatures being abused.)

Jesus himself shows us what right anger looks like when he goes into the Temple to pray and finds the Temple filled with people arguing, each trying to get a good deal at another’s expense as they buy and sell things. The Temple was made to be a place of silence, prayer and worship; now it is filled with loud, angry voices, each trying to get one’s own way and God is increasingly forgotten. Jesus sees the wrongness of this and, in a moment of right anger, he drives out the moneylenders and the people selling things.

The question, then, is not how we can get rid of anger (because some anger is right), **but how we can recognize when our anger is right and when our anger is wrong** (because what was created good has been distorted by sin).

- Cf. Ps.4:4 (quoted in Eph. 4:26): “In your anger do not sin,” which shows that anger is not in itself a sin, but can be either right or wrong.

Anger can be right when

- it looks to the honor of God, apart from one’s own honor and one’s own projects (e.g. Moses coming down from the mountain and finding the Israelites worshipping the golden calf);
- it rejects the abuse of people who are truly helpless and unable to defend themselves (1 Sam. 11:6; 20:34; 2 Sam. 12:5; Ne. 5:6).

Here anger **preserves the measure of justice** and doesn’t go beyond this

- to assert and defend some false, inflated picture of one’s own self and
- to diminish and tear down the other (precisely as wholly other and of no other relation or concern to us)
 - Here
 - the duty of love remains undiminished and
 - reason (where love must be embodied) has not been submerged and displaced by the more primitive, bestial powers of the fallen soul (and the rage, hatred, grudges, slander, etc. that follow when those powers are dominant).

This kind of anger is a function and fulfillment of our humanity.

Discerning Right Anger and Wrong Anger

It is very easy to start with right anger and fall downward into wrong anger.

It is even easier to start with wrong anger.

Right anger starts with a **sense of wrong(s) done to God and to the more vulnerable among God's creatures.**

Wrong anger starts with **resentment at not being treated in the way we think our personal honor deserves** (a sense of entitlement arising from one's love of a false self).

- Despite occasional claims to the contrary, this sense of personal honor is in reality not closely connected with the honor of God or God's will that vulnerable people should be protected from abuse.
- This sense of personal honor has more to do with an inflated picture we have of ourselves. If others do not see us as being as important and superior as we think we are, then we become resentful and hit back in a very personal way.
- Instead of being about God, it is primarily about me (and how I will deal with you because you have not dealt rightly with me).
 - The energy we should have devoted to pursuing and *loving* God is thus dissipated in *wrath* against other sinful people
 - This energy can only be redirected at the love of God when wrath toward other people is replaced by a meekness that loves; this opens us up to God and makes us receptive to God.
 - Where meekness is absent, anger will remain in motion (by its nature, it tends to remain in motion) and one will descend further through anger into sinful, bestial thoughts which are appropriate to demons and can make us most like demons.

The Effect of Wrong Anger

The goal of human life is to be oriented toward God, not mistaking him for an idol by looking at created things when we pray, but looking to him as the Blessed Trinity which comes to us now in the form of previously unapproachable light and invites us into an intense communion of love that is shared by all other rational beings (e.g. the angels).

Anger clouds and darkens the mind with violent images of tangible things that immediately threaten us (or those we must protect). This moves us to devote all of our energies to preparing for an equally forceful and violent defense/response. In this state, little or nothing can be seen of God and love is readily lost. The relation to God is now broken and God is replaced in the mind by violent images and one descends toward the bestial and even the demonic. The soul is now a desert where only the beasts

and demons live. Or, to use another image, the soul that, through anger, gives place to the Devil begins (like Judas) to breathe out murderous thoughts and words.

Anger that is sinful can be recognized by its

- irrationality/disproportionate responses
 - tolerance shatters at the refusal of others to follow one;
 - hatred for any who are perceived to stand in one's way, especially unremitting hatred in response to the perception that one has been thwarted or opposed;
 - an unwillingness to receive a correction or reprimand with a desire for retaliation a disdain that leads to disproportionate harm (endangers even those who are entrusted to one's care/protection)
- concealment of harmful action (talking ill of a person behind their back, slandering and diminishing to others when the person is not present; deceitfulness and passive-aggressive behavior when confronted)
 - When one has a false self, love of self becomes love of a self that is false, then a love of falsity.
- ceasing to desire right relationship and leaving obstacles in the way to block reconciliation (affirming what divides to prevent reconciliation).
 - Satan does desire the death of a sinner and not that he should turn from his ways and live). This is the difference between Peter and Judas; Peter returned, Judas could not and even found death preferable.
 - The other person becomes just that—wholly other and not someone we share anything in common with or have any obligation to.

Causes of Wrong Anger

Wrong anger can arise from pride. Jonah did not want to preach a message of repentance to the people of Nineveh, because he believed that his own people were better and people of Nineveh were less. Because he thought less of them, Jonah thought it would be better for the people of Nineveh to be punished and destroyed for the wrongs they had done, rather than to repent and receive forgiveness. Therefore when the people of Nineveh repent and God forgives them, Jonah is angry (Jonah 4:1).

The book of Jonah also shows us how we can recognize wrong anger that arises from pride:

- We think that because we are better and others are less, they should not have good things, but deserve--and should suffer--bad things.

- A life where lesser people who have wronged us do not suffer is unbearable to us (Jonah 4:3,8).
 - When the Lord sees us thinking this way, he asks this question: “Do you do well to be angry?” (Jonah 4:4,9).

Other signs of anger that arises from pride:

- “Our sense of our own merits and rights is generally far in excess of our sense of the corresponding claims of others” (James Stalker, *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Cardinal Virtues*, New York: American Tract Society, 1901-1902; repr. Colorado Springs, NavPress, 1998, 68)
 - In other words, when step back and look at our account of what is going on, we see
 - a lot about us (our needs, our rights, our claims) and
 - much less about other people, their needs and the claims they could rightly make on us.
- One’s honor is very quickly and easily offended (e.g. Naaman the Syrian in 2 Kings 5:10-11, who arrives at the prophet Elisha’s house with a great display of his power and wealth and is offended and gets angry because Elijah does not come out to see him and attend to him).
- One does not like to be called into question and gets angry and hit back verbally when this happens (2 Sam. 3:8).
- One gets angry at any resistance (even a difference of opinion) or sense of being thwarted, because pride makes one believe that one should be able to do whatever one wants whenever one wants to do it (2 Chron. 26:19).
- One can’t bear to hear the truth and reacts to shut people down (2 Chron. 16:10; cf. Num. 24:10).

Wrong anger can also arise from envy.

- When wrong anger arises from pride, one wants lesser people not to have the good things we ourselves have (we prop a false self with worldly resources and cannot bear for others also to have these things or attain to this position).
- When wrong anger arises from envy, one wants what another has (the honor that belongs to another), but which one does not have oneself (Gen. 4:4-5; 1 Sam. 17:28; 18:8; 1 Kings 21:4; Lk. 15:28).

Whatever its origin, **it is always the nature of wrong anger to go past the mark and become sinful by excess** (i.e. sinful by being too much=more than is reasonable or justified).

- Wrong anger claims that it is just giving back in proportion to the wrong received, but this is never true. Anger does not stop at any one point and say “Enough!” **Anger always keeps going** and, as it grows, it **wants to inflict more harm**.
- Wrong anger claims to be justified and reasonable, but in reality it wants to **move us quickly to action**, before reason can ask questions or moderate the way we act (so that we stay within the bounds of justice).
- Wrong anger wants to vent itself by using **uncontrolled abusive language**.
 - The focus moves quickly from the issues to the persons involved (wanting to show one’s own rightness by contradicting others, conceding nothing to them, and exposing and listing their faults).
 - As anger builds, one increasingly moves from
 - non-verbal behavior that is a sign of repressed anger (sulking, pouting, holding grudges) to
 - verbal behavior that openly expresses one’s anger toward the other person
 - sarcasm (conceals resentment/envy)
 - cutting words
 - jokes that are “at the person” and invite others to mocking laughter and
 - cursing and swearing.

When we have some degree of power or authority over others, we need to be especially careful how we speak to them.

- Eph. 6:4: “Do not exasperate your children”
 - We must treat those who depend on us fairly, so that they do not feel
 - betrayed or hurt by the way we speak to them or treat them
 - when we are the very people they turn to for help and protection.
- We will sometimes say things to family members which we would not say to others (and, in some cases, should not be said at all); cf. Mt. 5:21-22, where Jesus talks about being angry and saying to one’s brother “You airhead!” (*Raca*) and “You fool!”

When we are gripped by anger, we should not agree (assent) to what anger proposes.

- When we are tempted, it remains within our power whether we agree with anger's suggestion or refuse it.
 - Cf. Luther: If a bird flies over you and its droppings land on you, it is not in your power to stop this. But if birds want to build a nest in your hair, this is something that is within your power to allow or to refuse. In the same way, it is not in our power whether we are tempted (inwardly feel moved by anger), but what happens next (accepting or refusing what anger suggests) is up to us.

When we are gripped by anger, we should not act quickly, since anger is always strongest at its beginning; **when we are in doubt, we should be slow to act or speak and should get some distance from the situation** (e.g. walk away) **until we can see what is really going on and what needs to be done.**

When gripped by anger, we need to take our feelings to the Lord.

- Since we should be slow to speak when we feel anger, the best way to talk with the Lord about how we feel is to journal, writing down, "This is what I don't like...This is what I hate...This is what I resent...I felt hurt and rejected because..."
- When we write these things down, it helps us look at what is going on and after a while God will begin interacting with us on these issues. In talking back to God, we will often notice places in which we seem to be justifying ourselves or trying to bargain with God. Often by the end of this time of interacting with God, he will remind us of one or more of his promises and will send us a measure of peace that stabilizes us and helps us to moderate our anger so that we are not quickly moved to assent to sin.
- Augustine, writing to his friend, the bishop Auxilius, put it this way: When the winds and waves of anger rush down on the soul, we should do what the disciples did in the boat when the wind and waves were against them—call on Christ, asking him to come in and stand as the buffer between our anger and our action. Even if our anger seems beyond our control, it is not beyond his control.
- Jesus knew all about anger and hatred, because these led him to the Cross, where he was wounded in every part of his body and died mocked and forsaken.
- When wounded by anger and hatred, it is interesting to note that Jesus did not hit back at his enemies with words or deeds.
 - "When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23)

- The same can be seen in the way Jesus handled other's anger, hatred and opposition.
 - He would not allow James and John to call down fire on the Samaritans who had rejected them and refused them hospitality (Lk. 9:54).
 - He healed the high priest's servant when one of his disciples had struck him with a sword to prevent the arrest of Jesus (Lk. 22:50-51).
 - He accepted Peter back after Peter had committed the ultimate betrayal by denying him three times.
 - Jesus did not discard Peter or seek revenge, but restored justice by returning good for evil.
 - By the way Christ treated his enemies, he put to death the Devil's old lie that anger, impatience and retaliation are signs of strength.
 - Wanting to destroy what God has made is not a sign of authority, but a mark of sin.