

The Nature of the Human Soul and its
Faculties:
Philosophical and Anthropological Background
For Moral Theology

La Natura dell'Animo Umano e Le Sue Facoltà:
Contesto Filosofico e Antropologico
per La Teologia Morale

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Chapter Two: The Emotions

The emotions are “movements” of the sense appetite, whereby something is received (hence the classical term for them is *passions*). An emotion is a psychic reaction to any stimulus (either interior or exterior to the agent): either an attraction to something (perceived as good) or an aversion (something perceived as evil). Emotions respond in a corporeal and natural way, and have a physical effect. This *ability to be moved* is said to be a power. Remember that the emotions can also be moved by the intellect and will, and in fact, the will relies on the intellect to interpret the emotion correctly. For example, a 6 year old child spills a glass of milk, and the mother goes into a screaming rage and spansks the child. One should assume that there is a deeper, underlying reason for the mother’s over-reaction of anger (maybe she had a fight with her husband that morning and the anger stewed for hours until it came out this way). By not recognizing where her anger is really coming from, the emotion gets stronger and more out of control. Or suppose that there was no previous event, this outburst of anger is a result of her (warped) thinking – she had just been thinking how she never wanted this child in the first place, this child has cost her so much time and energy, she had to leave her job, change her life, she cannot do anything for herself anymore, she is not free to just go shopping, etc... and suddenly the child spills the milk. This is a clear example of how our reasoning also directs our emotions. The emotions DO in fact respond to our reasoning (which is our perception of reality), whether we like it or not! This fact shows us at once our dignity, and the extent of our fallenness. And we have yet another application of how the truth can set you free. The truth about reality will actually help our emotions to respond according to it.

We do not forget that the will is also a key player in guiding our emotions – the will can conjure up emotions (by commanding the memory to remember something, or to imagine something in order to get certain emotions). And also the will is needed to resist certain emotions (not voluntarily conjured). For example – when fear overtakes a person, her first inclination might be to run away, but by exercising her powers of intellect and will, she can talk to herself (“this is not something worthy of such fear” “it is okay to feel afraid, but love conquers fear”), and she can command herself to remain and endure or fight whatever it is. Thus, St. Thomas Aquinas says that the emotions respond to the cogitative powers (reason and will), as well as the sensations of the body, imagination, memory, instinct, and estimative powers. The emotions can resist reason also, inasmuch as we sense or imagine something pleasant which reason forbids, or unpleasant which reason commands.³ Just because they resist, does not mean that they cannot obey or cannot be guided.⁴ This is not to deny that the sensitive appetites have their own proper power, but only to

³ For more by St. Thomas, see ST I, q. 81, a. 3, especially the reply to objection 2: “...But the intellect or reason is said to rule the irascible and concupiscible by a politic power: because the sensitive appetite has something of its own, by virtue whereof it can resist the commands of reason. For the sensitive appetite is naturally moved, not only by the estimative power in other animals, and in man by the cogitative power which the universal reason guides, but also by the imagination and sense. Whence it is that we experience that the irascible and concupiscible powers do resist reason, inasmuch as we sense or imagine something pleasant, which reason forbids, or unpleasant, which reason commands. And so from the fact that the irascible and concupiscible resist reason in something, we must not conclude that they do not obey.”

⁴ ST I-II, q. 17, a. 7 c: “...Consequently in order to understand in what manner the act of the sensitive appetite is subject to the command of reason, we must consider in what manner it is in our power. Now it must be observed that the sensitive appetite differs from the intellective appetite, which is called the will, in the fact that the sensitive appetite

underline the interaction between the intellectual powers and the sensitive powers in man, which will be described also in the next chapter.

The emotions also respond to **each other** and **the environment**. The emotions respond to good and evil in different ways; and can be divided into categories according to how each emotion is moved, and in turns moves. Before dividing the emotions into the categories of concupiscible and irascible, some things can be said in general of all emotions:

A. Emotions in General:

1. All emotions are caused by love = because love is the emotion whereby we are drawn toward the good (whether it is present or absent). Love is the principle and first emotion, without which no other emotion is possible.⁵ Every emotion denotes either movement toward something or rest in something. All emotions want to rest in the good, and this is also love for the good.

2. The goodness or evilness that we associate with emotions is based on *reason and will* – a judgment is made about the emotions, they are accepted (or rejected). So an emotion can be said to be voluntary either **by being commanded by the reason and will, or from not being checked by the reason and will**.⁶ But generally, the emotions are automatic reactions and are not in themselves voluntary. They are, however, integrally related to voluntariness, as we shall see, and that is why there are virtues (and vices) that govern the emotions themselves.

3. Emotions can increase or decrease the goodness or evilness of an act.⁷ Although it is more praiseworthy to do a work of charity from the judgment of reason than from the emotion

is a power of a corporeal organ, whereas the will is not. Again, every act of a power that uses a corporeal organ, depends not only on a power of the soul, but also on the disposition of that corporeal organ: thus the act of vision depends on the power of sight, and on the condition of the eye, which condition is a help or a hindrance to that act. Consequently the act of the sensitive appetite depends not only on the appetitive power, but also on the disposition of the body.

Now whatever part the power of the soul takes in the act, follows apprehension. And the apprehension of the imagination, being a particular apprehension, is regulated by the apprehension of reason, which is universal; just as a particular active power is regulated by a universal active power. Consequently in this respect the act of the sensitive appetite is subject to the command of reason. On the other hand, condition or disposition of the body is not subject to the command of reason: and consequently in this respect, the movement of the sensitive appetite is hindered from being wholly subject to the command of reason.

Moreover it happens sometimes that the movement of the sensitive appetite is aroused suddenly in consequence of an apprehension of the imagination of sense. And then such movement occurs without the command of reason: although reason could have prevented it, had it foreseen. Hence the Philosopher says (Polit. i, 2) that the reason governs the irascible and concupiscible not by a ‘despotic supremacy,’ which is that of a master over his slave; but by a ‘politic and royal supremacy,’ whereby the free are governed, who are not wholly subject to command.”

⁵ ST I-II, q. 27, a. 4.

⁶ ST I-II, q. 24, a. 1 c: “We may consider the passions of the soul in two ways: first, in themselves; secondly, as being subject to the command of the reason and will. If then the passions be considered in themselves, to wit, as movements of the irrational appetite, thus there is no moral good or evil in them, since this depends on the reason, as stated above. If, however, they be considered as subject to the command of the reason and will, then moral good and evil are in them. Because the sensitive appetite is nearer than the outward members to the reason and will; and yet the movements and actions of the outward members are morally good or evil, inasmuch as they are voluntary. Much more, therefore, may the passions, in so far as they are voluntary, be called morally good or evil. And they are said to be voluntary, either from being commanded by the will, or from not being checked by the will.”

⁷ ST I-II, q. 24, a. 3. Note especially St. Thomas’ example from Scripture, “Accordingly just as it is better that man should both will good and do it in his external act; so also does it belong to the perfection of moral good, that man

of pity, the emotions can increase a good act by resulting from the will's choice, as a sign of the intensity of the will. I give my mother a present for her birthday with no feelings accompanying the gift, or I give her a present with my heart filled with love and gratitude. All else being equal, the first scenario is still good (emotions are not necessary for the act to be good), but the second scenario is more perfect because all the powers of the soul are integrated and united in the good.

4. In fact, the emotions belong to the perfection of moral goodness, by following right reason and will, and by being moved themselves toward the true good.

B. The Division of Emotions:

The 11 emotions are divided into two categories, both categories rely on the distinction between attraction to good and aversion from evil, but the second category adds to these attractions the rational perception of "difficult".

The chart below shows the passions as grouped according to their proper objects (stimuli).

1. Concupiscible – there are 6 concupiscible emotions, based on the simple desire for good and aversion to evil.

2. Irascible – there are 5 irascible emotions, based on the desire for good and aversion to evil with the added distinction that there is a perceived level of difficulty regarding the good or evil perceived.

11 Passions			
(6) Concupiscible		(5) Irascible	
Simple Good	Simple Evil	Difficult Good	Difficult Evil
Love	Hatred	Hope	Courage
Desire	Aversion	Despair	Fear
Joy	Sadness	(Joy)	Anger

The concupiscible emotions respond to a simple good or evil. When a simple good is perceived (whether present or not, the emotion of *love* is experienced. When the simple good is absent, *desire* is the resulting emotion, and when the simple good is possessed, the emotion of *joy* results. Joy results from resting in the good obtained. It is when love is fulfilled.

should be moved unto good, not only in respect of his will, but also in respect of his sensitive appetite; according to Psalm 83:3: 'My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God': where by 'heart' we are to understand the intellectual appetite, and by 'flesh' the sensitive appetite."

When a simple evil is perceived, *hatred* is the resulting emotion. This is not willed hatred, which is sinful. This is the name for the emotion that naturally results from some simple evil (a bad odor, a sprained ankle, flunking a test). It has the psychological effect (or even physical) of making us withdraw from the evil. If the evil is not present, we experience *aversion*. If the evil is present, we experience the emotion of sorrow, or *sadness*. This can also happen due to a good lost (which is perceived as a present evil).

The irascible emotions respond to a difficult good or a difficult evil. Notice that this requires a judgment in the intellect. When a difficult good is perceived, and it is not yet attained but is perceived as possible to attain, the emotion of *hope* results. This is not the same as the virtue of hope, but is related. Hope gives us confidence in the face of obstacles and increases love and strengthens desire. When the difficult good that is not here yet is judged to be impossible to attain, the resulting emotion is *despair*. Again, this is not willed, it is a natural and psychological result of a judgment. It is interesting to note that despair regards a good. One cannot despair about an evil. When a difficult evil is perceived, but is not here yet, and is judged as possible to overcome, the result is daring or *courage*. If the difficult evil, which is not here yet, is judged as impossible to overcome the resulting emotion is *fear*. And when the difficult evil is present, the resulting emotion is *anger*. There is no corresponding irascible emotion for when the difficult good is attained, because the emotion reverts to joy – which is for every perceived good that is attained. Generally, the concupiscible emotions drive the inner sphere of man, and the irascible emotions give man the energy to stay alive, to endure or fight obstacles and to carry out necessary work in order to attain the good he desires.

The irascible emotions can be said to arise from the concupiscible, because they presuppose a desire for good and aversion for evil absolutely (which is the concupiscible).

In joy and sadness, all other emotions have their completion and end – they arise from all the other emotions.⁸ This is because all other emotions have their movements in them: movement begins in love, goes forward in desire, and ends in joy. With respect to evil, movement begins in hatred, goes on to aversion, and ends in sadness. Joy relates to the present good, sadness relates to present evil. Hope regards future good, and fear regards future evil.

Opposites can be regarding term (such as good or evil) – and this can be found in the concupiscible emotions which regard good and evil absolutely, and also the irascible emotions. Since the irascible emotions consider the good and evil not absolutely, but under the aspect of difficulty, they can have another kind of opposition as well – that which regards approach or withdrawal from the same term. One exception is anger, which can have no contrary regarding good or evil as its term, nor in regard to approach or withdrawal. Anger is caused by a difficult evil already present. Either it changes to sadness because it cannot overcome the evil, or it is relieved by some removal of the evil. Therefore, no movement of the soul is in itself contrary to anger. Anger is only overcome by removing the evil present in some way.

Fear is opposite of daring regarding the term; hope is contrary to despair regarding the term, hope is contrary to fear as regards good and evil; love and hatred, desire and aversion, joy or sadness are all contraries in regard to good and evil as such.⁹

⁸ ST I-II, q. 25, a. 4.

⁹ ST I-II, q. 23, a. 4.

Some emotions result from a good or evil disposition of the person, and therefore are considered good or evil in themselves: for example, Pity – when one is moved to a kind of love out of compassion for someone who is suffering (good). Shame – a kind of fear that involves a healthy assessment of one’s guilt (good). Envy – sorrow at another’s good (results from an evil disposition of the person, and therefore is considered evil). Remember that truth is the key – joy is found when one achieves any good desired – so the thief finds joy when he finally steals the 5 million dollars. Even though that is the emotion of real joy, it is not ordered. It results from his evil disposition, and it is considered evil because of the disorder in the will and the lack of truth informing all the other powers.

It is better to direct the emotions toward whatever is good (Phil 4:8) rather than suppress them or ignore them, or to constantly chide them for attraction to false goods. The emotions themselves are neither good nor evil. Their purpose is to keep man alive. A person can never be “wrong” for having emotions. A person only commits evil when he wills what he knows is evil. The emotions are supposed to be integrated, so as to make a person rejoice more completely in the true good, and to reject more easily a true evil. Sometimes the emotions need to be overcome in order to achieve a true good, but that never means that the emotion itself is evil. It is only wounded, or disordered, and will eventually help to attain the true good if gently guided.

Remedies for Sadness, according to St. Thomas

1. Hot bath
2. strong drink
3. friendship
4. study truth

Remedies for Anger according to St. Thomas

1. Humility
2. Play jokes
3. Feast, celebrate
4. Do something successful
5. Enjoy moderate pleasures (body and spirit)
 - a. bath
 - b. drink, chocolate, food
6. Friendship
7. Study the truth
8. Well-founded hope (review the reasons for Hope)
9. Remember death
10. Forgiveness
11. Honesty
12. Prayer
13. Do good for another (acts of mercy)

C. Note on repression

Every emotion is a response to an object, even if that object is another emotion. Because one and the same object can be considered as good, and therefore desirable, in one aspect, and evil or harmful in another aspect, more than one emotion can be aroused in regard to the same object. In fact, a whole series of emotions can be aroused; not only different emotions responding to the same object, but more emotions responding to those emotions. Although it is not impossible for them all to come under the guidance of reason and will, it sometimes happens that they compete or conflict with each other as well as with the will. The healthy resolution of these kinds of conflicts happens when the emotions are rightly subordinated to the intellect and will, such as when a diabetic chooses not to eat chocolate, when one takes unpleasant medicine to improve health, or when one undergoes surgery to preserve his life.¹⁰ The virtuous man directs his emotions according to reason, sometimes making use of a suppression of the emotions in order to direct them to the true good, but not denying the emotion the space and time to run its natural course.¹¹

The unhealthy resolution of these conflicts happens when the choice to deny an emotion its object is a truly good choice, but it is done in a harmful way simply by not acknowledging the emotion, or by not giving the emotion its “right” to respond to reality and run its bodily course. When one emotion overpowers a previously aroused emotion and squashes it down before the intellect and will have a chance to intervene, this is called *repression*. In all cases of repression, the whole process “disables” the free choice by preventing the emotions from obtaining what they really need - the guidance of intellect and will. This neurotic repression deserves some attention in this section not only because these behaviors have a ramification on the relationship of the emotions with the free choice, but also because the incidence of its occurrence in recent decades seems to have increased drastically. Needless to say, whatever escapes the action of intellect and will cannot be willed and therefore cannot be considered moral, even if it appears to be very moral behavior, such as outbursts of anger, addictions to pornography, gambling, and other obsessive-compulsive behaviors.

The most common type (but not the only type) of repression is caused by an irascible emotion repressing a concupiscible emotion. Because it is the nature of the concupiscible appetite to set in motion the irascible appetite, this kind of repression of a concupiscible emotion causes tension in the irascible emotions and leaves the concupiscible emotion “suspended in air” because the object has been repressed. What is restrained is the action, not the emotion itself.¹² So the concupiscible emotions continue to react, and the irascible emotions continue to overtake them and repress them.

¹⁰ Conrad Baars, *Psychic Wholeness and Healing: Using all the powers of the human psyche* (New York: Alba House, 1981), 36: “Consequently, repression is impossible when there is a proper guidance by the intellect and will, nor can there be any question of a subsequent neurosis... It also follows from this that the rules of natural law, provided they are properly understood, can never exert a repressing action. For natural law teaches man how he should act according to reason in every circumstance. Hence, in the natural order moral acts correspond to reasonable acts, for if man is to attain the good that is proper to him, he must conduct himself as man, that is, as a rational being. By acting according to reason, his actions are morally right, because the rules of morality are merely formulations of what is intrinsically rational.” One cannot claim, therefore, that it is repressive of itself to follow rules, especially the rules of natural law.

¹¹ Allowing the bodily reaction is crucial for healthy development of the passions, such as crying, redness in the face, an increase in the heart-rate, a surge of energy, etc.

¹² Conrad Baars, *Feeling and Healing Your Emotions*, ed. Suzanne M. Baars and Bonnie N. Shayne, (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2003), 72.

When the repression is extreme, it renders the will helpless and leads to greater irritability and *excessive activity* for the utility appetite.¹³ Classic examples are cases where fear or anger repress the sexual desire, where fear or courage repress anger, and where courage (sometimes called “energy”) represses fear or sadness, or any unwanted emotion.

If a repressed person has grown up basing his beliefs and actions on his *felt* interpretations of moral teachings, he will have difficulty getting past the emotional reaction to those teachings. When he sees an attractive brunette, he will not allow himself to feel attracted, because he thinks this is wrong. If he lets his fear repress the desire he would normally have felt, he makes those desires inaccessible to reason, and the process goes on without relief:

Because these emotions are buried alive, and are not dead and forgotten even though it may seem so for the moment, they try to rise up in order to get what they need: guidance by reason. However, as soon as they get close to the conscious level, fear is aroused and pushes them back again into the unconscious. The *battle between fear and desire* is on, and goes on without pause, only to break down sooner or later in life.¹⁴

This is the classic example of repressed emotion, which can begin in childhood or adulthood. Both the repressed emotion and the repressing emotion are in need of guidance by the intellect and will and are not able to obtain it.

The proper understanding of the concupiscible and irascible appetites makes it possible to attempt a healthy integration of the emotions. Although they have their own proper objects, the emotions still have a natural tendency to obey the will.¹⁵ The virtuous life is a life that includes the emotions. Intellect, will, and emotions interact in harmony. Correct ordering of the sense appetites does not mean denigrating them to non-existence, as the ideal of the Stoics or Buddhists, but incorporating them in man’s true and creative freedom, the virtuous use of all his faculties. For the voluntarist, “to will” means to be in control no matter how one feels.¹⁶ To force the will in a repressive way clearly debilitates the will rather than makes full use of the real power of the will in desiring the true good. The emotions are intended not only for survival, but for obtaining the highest goods in life, which are to be ultimately enjoyed – friendship, truth, and God Himself. The highest goods are spiritual and intuitive, relating more appropriately to the pleasure appetite, which wants the good in itself. Hence, the importance of understanding the place of the emotions for every aspect of life.¹⁷

¹³ Baars, *Psychic Wholeness and Healing*, 56.

¹⁴ Baars, *Feeling and Healing*, 136.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputatae De Veritate*, q. 25, a. 3.

¹⁶ Baars, *Feeling and Healing*, 75.

¹⁷ See Appendix II for more information about repression of emotions.