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PASSION AND RESPONSIBILITY: THE PUZZLE OF ASYMMETRY

*To what extent – if at all – acting in passion diminishes the agent’s responsibility for his/her deed? Some new aspects of this classical problem have been discovered by experimental psychologists (Pizarro, Uhlmann, Salovey) whose research has revealed a puzzling asymmetry in assigning responsibility for morally bad and morally good actions, performed under the influence of emotions (people tend to regard the blameworthiness of an immoral act as being diminished by the fact that it was performed in passion, but do not regard passion as influencing the praiseworthiness of a moral act). The article discusses the puzzle’s explanation proposed by the authors of the experiment (based on the concept of “metadesires”) and offers an alternative explanation, drawing on the distinction between *passio antecedens* and *passio consequens*, proposed by Thomas Aquinas. The paper also provides some reflections on the normative aspects of the problem of acting under the influence of emotions.*

Key words: *Act of passion. – Meta-desires. – Antecedent emotion. – Consequent emotion. – Thomas Aquinas.*

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1. THE PUZZLE OF ASYMMETRY IN ASSIGNING RESPONSIBILITY FOR GOOD AND BAD “PASSIONATE” ACTIONS

To what extent – if at all – does acting in passion diminish the agent’s responsibility for his/her deed?¹ Given that the philosophical debate on this problem has been pursued since antiquity, one might think that few novel insights into it can be provided.² But this pessimistic expectation has, fortunately, proven to be false. Experimental research in moral psychology has revealed an interesting asymmetry in assigning responsibility for morally bad and morally good actions: the asymmetry consists in that people tend to deem an agent less blameworthy if his/her morally bad action was made under the influence of emotions (passions), but if the agent’s action was morally good then the fact that he or she acted under the influence of emotions does not lead to diminishing its moral value (cf. Pizarro, Uhlmann, Salovey 2003; Knobe, Doris 2012). How is this asymmetry to be explained?

The authors of the experiments that revealed the asymmetry argue that the asymmetry “arises because individuals judge agents on the basis of their metadesires (the degree to which the agents embrace or reject the

1 For the sake of terminological clarity, it should be noted that in this paper the terms “passion” and “emotion” are used interchangeably and employed with references to a specific type of mental states, viz. such which combine affection (i.e., a psycho-physiological arousal), the resulting tendency to action, as well as certain beliefs. Thus, the analysis assumes that a passion/emotion is a certain “force” (mental arousal) which “pushes” us to a certain type of action, and this action-tendency may be different from the action prescribed by “reason” (calm reflection). This is a general definition that passes over the issue of whether beliefs play an important role in generating this mental state (as the adherents of the so-called “cognitive theories” of emotions assert), or only a minor role (as the so called “non-cognitive theories” imply). Yet it would not be exact to say that nothing in my analysis depends on how this issue is ultimately resolved. In fact, in my analysis I assume some middle-ground position. On the one hand, I reject an extreme version of the cognitive theories, which implies that since emotions are in fact reducible to beliefs, we have full control over our emotions; this version would eliminate the very notion of “crimes of passion” (or more specifically, would prohibit passion as a mitigating circumstance). On the other hand, I reject the claim that our beliefs have no causal role whatsoever in generating our emotions, and thus we cannot consciously elicit them (as we will see, the opposite assumption is made by Thomas Aquinas in his characterization of “consequent passion” – a notion which plays an important role in my analysis). One may also remark that the above account of passions/emotions is fully consonant with the scholastic definition of *passio* as a movement of the sensitive part of the human soul (the part which receives sense impressions and reacts to them by means of affections, and which, to some extent, can be influenced by the soul’s rational part).

2 For an overview of this debate see, e.g., Dressler 1982 or Kahan, Nussbaum 1996.

impulses leading to their actions). Individuals assume that an agent would embrace an uncontrollable positive impulse, and reject an uncontrollable negative impulse" (Pizarro, Uhlmann, Salovey 2003, 267). This explanation in fact consists of two components. The first one is normative (specifically, descriptive-normative): it implies that participants endorse a certain normative theory regarding responsibility for actions performed in passion – the theory according to which the more strongly an agent identifies himself/herself with his/her action performed in passion (i.e., has a metadesire/second-order desire corresponding to his/her first-order desire leading to an action), the greater the degree of his/her responsibility for this action. The explanation of the asymmetrical judgments is obtained by adopting the second – purely descriptive – component, viz. that participants' hypotheses regarding agents' metadesires are optimistic, i.e., they assume that "impulsive negative acts are accompanied by conflicting (positive) second-order desires, but that impulsive positive acts are accompanied by consistent (positive) second order desires" (Pizarro, Uhlmann, Salovey 2003, 270). This is an interesting, but, of course, not the only possible explanation. The authors of the experiment themselves consider two other explanations.

The first one is that "praise may be offered instrumentally, whereas blame may be offered on the basis of just deserts. According to this view, what is important about moral praise is the overall promotion of good deeds via the mechanism of social rewards" (Pizarro, Uhlmann, Salovey 2003, 271). According to the second one, "the lack of difference in praise for voluntary versus involuntary actions may arise because individuals confronted with prosocial acts simply do not expend the cognitive energy necessary to calculate a discount in praise; this would lead to differential patterns of discounting for behaviors for which control is compromised" (Pizarro, Uhlmann, Salovey 2003, 271). However, these two explanations are – as it seems, rightly – rejected by the authors of the experiment, since, as they argue, *they do not account for a decrease in moral praise when participants are informed that the agent does not endorse his/her first-order positive impulses*; the authors also note that "under some conditions, positive acts are scrutinized more carefully than negative acts, because engaging in positive behaviors might be due to a blind following of societal norms or to self-presentational concerns (i.e., trying to appear moral when one is not)" (Pizarro, Uhlmann, Salovey 2003, 271).

It is interesting to note that these two explanations imply that the asymmetry proves to be, as one may call it, *deep*, as it depends on the *moral quality of a "passionate" action* (viz. on whether it is good or bad). By contrast, assuming the explanation proposed by David Pizarro, Eric L. Uhlmann, and Peter Salovey is correct, the asymmetry proves to be, as

one may call it, *superficial*, as it has nothing to do with the moral quality of an action, but simply flows from a specific application (given a certain descriptive presupposition made by the participants) of a certain general normative rule which *is exactly the same for morally bad and morally good actions* (viz. that only the occurrence of a conflicting metadesire diminishes responsibility for a passionate action). Accordingly, if the participants' optimistic belief – the aforementioned presupposition – that people usually have positive metadesires (i.e., identify themselves with their good actions performed in passion but do not identify themselves with their “passionate” bad actions) were shown to them to be false, they would not make an asymmetric judgment (and if they did, it would not be morally justified, given the above rule).

In this paper I would like to propose one more explanation, derived from Thomas Aquinas's account of the responsibility for “passionate” actions. It bears stressing that this account is first of all normative in nature (it is intended to guide our normative judgments of actions performed in passion), but, arguably, it can also be interpreted psychologically (i.e., as explaining the participants' asymmetric judgments). The layout of the further part of this paper is as follows. Section 2 provides Aquinas's account and will apply it to the “asymmetry” problem, and section 3 provides a comparative evaluation of both solutions in their two roles: that of a descriptive explanation of why people manifest asymmetry in their judgments, and that of a normative theory of how people ought to assess responsibility of good and bad actions performed in passion.

2. AQUINAS ON RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACTIONS PERFORMED IN PASSION

In *Summa Theologiae* (I-II, Q. 78, Art. 4) Aquinas defends the standard (dominant) view that the gravity of an immoral action – a sin (*peccatum*), in Aquinas's terminology – is greater when the sin is committed through malice than when it is committed through passion.³ He points at three subtle

³ The minority view is that acting in the heat of (justified) passion does not decrease the degree of moral or legal responsibility for a morally bad action. As already mentioned in note 1, this view can be motivated, for instance, by a cognitive theory of emotions, implying that emotions are, to a full or substantial extent, under our voluntary or intellectual control (see, e.g., Załuski 2021, 122–127), or by a critical examination of the type of emotions that are behind a crime of passion. As for the latter motivation: for example, Léon Rabinowicz maintained that these crimes do not flow from noble, romantic motives (deep love), as it was commonly

differences between sins committed through passion and those committed through malice, which substantiate ascribing more gravity to the latter. The first one is that “a sin committed through malice [...] belongs more to the will, which is then moved to evil of its own accord, than when a sin is committed through passion, when the will is impelled to sin by something extrinsic, as it were” (ST I-II, Q. 78, Art. 4). The second reason is connected to the fact that “the passion which incites the will to sin, soon passes away, so that man repents of his sin, and soon returns to his good intentions; whereas the habit, through which a man sins, is a permanent quality, so that he who sins through malice, abides longer in his sin (ST I-II, Q. 78, Art. 4)”. The third reason is that: he who sins through certain malice is ill-disposed in respect of the end itself, which is the principle in matters of action; and so the defect is more dangerous than in the case of the man who sins through passion, whose purpose tends to a good end, although this purpose is interrupted on account of the passion, for the time being. Now the worst of all defects is defect of principle [...] It is one thing to sin while choosing, and another to sin through choosing. For he that sins through passion, sins while choosing, but not through choosing, because his choosing is not for him the first principle of his sin; for he is induced through the passion, to choose what he would not choose, were it not for the passion (ST I-II, Q. 78, Art. 4).

Yet Aquinas stresses that from the thesis that a sin committed through malice is more grievous than one committed through passion, one should not infer that the latter type of sin cannot be “mortal”⁴; as he writes “that which is contrary to the last end can happen not to be a mortal sin, only

believed in the 19th century, but from low and savage ones, such as “la haine atroce, l'égoïsme effréné, l'esprit vil de la vengeance” (Rabinowicz 1931, 150). He claimed that the type of love that is behind crimes of passion is of the lowest kind: it is sexual love (as opposed to affective or platonic), which is egoist, jealous, and possessive. Accordingly, crimes of passion are not crimes of love but sexual crimes. As a result, he postulated the elimination of a category of crimes of passion (as more leniently treated than other crimes) from penal codes. Of course, this is a very controversial – arguably, one-sided – view of crimes of passion.

4 In the Christian moral theology mortal sin is understood as a moral disorder with regard to the last end, the principle of human life (i.e., eternal law); it is much graver (it is in fact a sin in the strict sense) than what is called “venial sin”, which is only a defect in the selection of the things referred to the end, not a defect of the order to the last end (cf. ST I-II, Q. 88, Art. 1); in other words, in the case of mortal sin man loves mutable good more than eternal law, and in the case of venial sin, man loves mutable good less than eternal law (cf. ST I-II, Q. 88, Art. 2). This distinction is, of course, defined by means of categories characteristic of classical philosophy; for those who find them antiquated or unconvincing, the distinction can be expressed in more neutral terms (though, at the cost of some simplification – of losing some subtleties), viz. that mortal sin is a much graver type of sin than venial sin, and the difference in their gravity is qualitative rather than quantitative.

when the deliberating reason is unable to come to the rescue, which is the case in sudden movements” (ST I-II, Q. 77, Art. 8); in all other cases of sins of passion, the deliberating reason can “come to the rescue”, the result of which is that these sins are – or can be – mortal.

Aquinas further refines his analysis of the sins of passion by making the following remark, which, as we will see in the next section, can be gainfully invoked in the context of analysis of the puzzle of asymmetry:

Sin consists essentially in an act of the free will, which is a faculty of the will and reason; while passion is a movement of the sensitive appetite. Now the sensitive appetite can be related to the free-will, antecedently and consequently: antecedently, according as a passion of the sensitive appetite draws or inclines the reason or will [...]; and consequently, in so far as the movements of the higher power [if they are vehement] redound on to the lower, since it is not possible for the will to be moved to anything intensely, without a passion being aroused in the sensitive appetite. Accordingly if we take passion as preceding the sinful act, it must needs diminish the sin: because the act is a sin in so far as it is voluntary, and under our control. Now a thing is said to be under our control, through the reason and will: and therefore the more the reason and will do anything of their own accord, and not through the impulse of a passion, the more is it voluntary and under our control. In this respect passion diminishes sin, in so far as it diminishes its voluntariness. On the other hand, a consequent passion does not diminish a sin, but increases it; or rather it is a sign of its gravity, in so far, to wit, as it shows the intensity of the will towards the sinful act; and so it is true that the greater the pleasure or the concupiscence with which anyone sins, the greater the sin (ST I-II, Q. 77, Art. 6).

Two quick remarks are necessary here. First, even though Aquinas does not state it in an explicit manner, there is no doubt that *by a “consequent passion” he does not mean merely a passion which comes after the action made*; for a passion to be “consequent” in the relevant sense, it *must be also consonant in its “action-tendency” with the act after which it follows*; this should be clear from Aquinas’s (above quoted) statement that, the consequent passion “shows the intensity of the will towards the sinful act.” Accordingly, he would not refer this term to, say, feelings of guilt or shame; for even though they temporarily come after the act, they attest the agent’s regret of having performed this act; thus, the required consonance between the act and the consequent passion is therefore absent here. Second, Aquinas does not deal in the above quoted passage with the degree of responsibility for morally good actions; he applies here the distinction between “antecedent” and “consequent” passions only to sins, i.e., morally bad actions. But there seem to be no obstacles to invoking it also in the broader context – of passionate actions in general, i.e., also in the analysis of the role of *morally good or at*

least morally neutral passions in the evaluation of good deeds. In fact, as we will presently see, Aquinas himself applies this distinction in precisely this context in a different *quaestio* of *Summa Theologiae*. But prior to presenting the Aquinas-inspired solution to the asymmetry problem, it may be advisable to draw a broader context in which his account of the responsibility for actions performed in passion can be located.

The issue of the role of morally good or at least morally neutral passions in the evaluation of good deeds is notoriously contentious. Some thinkers (Kantians) believe that the merit of a good act is diminished if it is propelled by a passion (even a good passion, let alone a bad one). Others (sentimentalists) defend the opposite view: that an agent merits more, as he/she is moved by a more intense (good) passion (e.g., compassion or love). With Aquinas's distinction, we obtain a more complex and nuanced picture, to the effect that the degree of merit to be granted for a morally good and "passionate" action depends on whether the passion is antecedent or consequent:⁵ if the passion is antecedent, it diminishes the praiseworthiness of action, because the action is then not fully under the agent's control (he/she is moved by passion rather than by the judgment of reason); but if the passion is consequent, then it increases the action's praiseworthiness. The exact way in which this increase in the actions' moral value occurs depends, according to Aquinas, on whether the consequent passion is consequent "by way of redundance" (*modus redundantiae*), in which case the lower part of the soul automatically follows the higher part, or "by way of choice" (*modus electionis*), in which case the agent chooses to be additionally moved by passion in order to do good more promptly. In both cases the effect is positive (the increase of the action's moral value), though Aquinas describes it somewhat differently; in the former case (passion being consequent "by way of redundance") the passion "indicates greater moral goodness" (*indicat bonitatem moralem majorem*), and in the latter case (passion being consequent "by way of choice"), the passion "increases the goodness of an action" (*addit ad bonitatem actionis*)" (cf. ST I-II, Q. 24, Art. 3). Yet Aquinas does not make it clear in which case the increase is greater (which means that his analysis does not exclude the option that the increase may be equal in both cases).

5 Aquinas analysis proceeds on the (implicitly made) assumption that the passion in question is in itself morally praiseworthy or at least morally neutral, and thereby is not morally blameworthy (e.g., envy or hatred). This assumption is fully convincing: since morally good actions are very rarely (if ever) accompanied by evil emotions (antecedent or consequent), the problem of the role of such emotions in the evaluation of morally good actions can be passed over as purely speculative.

Before turning to the problem of asymmetry as revealed by the experimental research, I would like to stress two more general points. The first one is that, as already mentioned, Aquinas's analysis is first of all normative: it tells us how the evaluation of actions performed in passion *ought to proceed*. The second one is that it implies that there is no deep asymmetry (in the sense explained in Section 1) in assigning responsibility for morally good and morally bad actions done in passion: in both cases there functions the same rule based on the distinction between antecedent and consequent passions. In other words, the role of emotions is exactly the same in the context of the evaluation of morally bad and morally good actions: the crucial variable determining this role (viz. whether the emotion in question is consequent or antecedent) *has nothing to do with the moral quality of the action*. In this respect it is similar not only to the normative theory presupposed in the explanation proposed by Pizarro, Uhlmann and Salovey, but also to the Kantian and the sentimentalist solutions: they all imply that there is no asymmetry in the role that emotions ought to play in the evaluation of morally good and morally bad actions. Of course, the rules they introduce are different from Aquinas's and different from each other (to recall: the Kantian rule says that passions decrease merit or demerit for a, respectively, good and bad action, as they decrease control over the action; the sentimentalist rule says passions increase merit or demerit for a good and bad action, respectively, as the passion by itself adds to or subtracts from the moral value of an action; and the rule assumed by the authors of the experiment asserts that the role of the agent's passion in the evaluation of his/her action depends on the content of his/her metadesires). A theory implying a deep asymmetry would have to require, e.g., that conditions necessary for assigning full moral responsibility for morally bad actions be stricter than those required for assigning responsibility for morally good actions: the former would embrace full self-control, while the latter would allow deviations from full self-control.

The normative significance of Aquinas's distinction between antecedent and consequent passions should be entirely clear by now. However, the distinction can also be interpreted psychologically (i.e., as being in fact used by agents in their evaluation of actions performed in passion), and in this interpretation it can provide an alternative explanation of the puzzle of asymmetry (which, let me recall, consists in that the experiments' participants seem to assume that passion does not make a morally good action less praiseworthy but makes a morally bad action less praiseworthy). This explanation would simply imply that the experiment's participants make the assumption that morally bad actions performed in passion are propelled by *antecedent* passions, and morally good actions performed in passion are propelled by *consequent* passions. It is noteworthy that if this

assumption were correct, the asymmetry discovered by the researchers in the judgments of the experiment's participants would be also morally justified (within Aquinas's normative framework). However, clearly, such an assumption could be wrong, for emotions connected to a morally bad act may be consequent, and emotions connected to a morally good act may be antecedent, in which case the participants' asymmetric judgments would be morally incorrect: the asymmetry should be the reverse one, i.e., a "passionate" bad act should be regarded as more blameworthy, and a "passionate" good act as less praiseworthy (and, obviously, if emotions are of the same type – consequent or antecedent – there should be no asymmetry both in the case of morally good and morally bad actions). It should also be recalled that any asymmetry generated by Aquinas' rule is only superficial in nature, not deep (for, as already mentioned, the rule itself is blind to the moral quality of an action).⁶ But is this Aquinas-inspired explanation of the asymmetry, revealed by the experimental research, plausible?

3. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As was argued in the preceding section, Aquinas's precious distinction between antecedent and consequent passions provides resources to analyze with much subtlety, first, what participants *may have assumed* when they made the "asymmetric" judgments revealed by the abovementioned experiments, and, second, whether their judgments are morally justified. However, one can reasonably question whether the Aquinas-inspired explanation of the experimental results is in fact plausible. For even though the distinction between antecedent and consequent passions is very simple, it is also a subtle one, which is why it is by no means certain that it is deeply ingrained in our conceptual framework, as it should be if it were to provide

6 Let me note, on the margin, that the deep "emotional asymmetry" may be the one described by Adam Smith: "To show much anxiety about praise, even for praise-worthy actions, is seldom a mark of great wisdom, but generally of some degree of weakness. But, in being anxious to avoid the shadow of blame or reproach, there may be no weakness, but frequently the most praise-worthy prudence. (...) This inconsistency, however, seems to be founded in the unalterable principles of human nature. The all-wise Author of Nature has, in this manner, taught man to respect the sentiments and judgments of his brethren; to be more or *less* pleased when they approve of his conduct, and to be *more* or less hurt when they disapprove of it" (Smith [1759] 2007, 164). However, analysis of this purportedly deep asymmetry – of the fact that we are (at least according to Smith) more concerned with avoiding blame than with obtaining praise – goes beyond the scope of this paper, for it is not directly related to the problem of the evaluation of actions performed in passion.

an explanation of the experimental results. Furthermore, what constitutes a strong argument for the explanation proposed by Pizarro, Uhlmann and Salovey is the fact that “informing participants that an agent rejected his own positive impulses (thus violating the assumption that agents want positive impulses) significantly reduced the praise that agent received” (Pizarro, Uhlmann, Salovey 2003, 271). One could, of course, hypothesize (and test the hypothesis empirically) that if participants were explicitly acquainted with the distinction between consequent and antecedent emotions, and were informed, e.g., that those who committed bad actions experienced consequent emotions, then the participants would not regard their actions as less blameworthy. Yet, overall, it seems that the Aquinas-inspired hypothesis is empirically less plausible than the one proposed by the authors (even if, arguably, more plausible than the hypotheses explicitly rejected by the authors). However, even if Aquinas’s theory of responsibility for actions in passion may be not encoded in our conceptual framework as deeply as the idea of “identification” with one’s action performed in passion (the idea conceptualized by Pizarro, Uhlmann and Salovey in the terms “metadesires” and “first-order desires”), it does not (substantially) reduce its normative value. Indeed, the theory is very convincing: the simple distinction between antecedent and consequent passions seems to be a crucial variable in the course of the evaluation of the degree of merits and demerits of actions performed in passion. Furthermore, given the simplicity of this distinction, it could easily become a part of our moral conceptual framework.

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