

ANGER

by

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When I returned from New York after Ayn Rand's funeral in 1982, my husband made a curious remark. He said sadly, "What will happen to the world now, without her anger?"

Today, eleven years later, anger and aggression are a dominant feature of the world. Individuals react with violent anger at the slightest frustration in their lives, and anger is always present, though in different degrees, in family discord, in divorces, and in domestic violence, including child abuse. In the world at large, anger is so acute that Moslems, Christians, Bosnians, Serbians, and others are slaughtering one another in the name of religion or nationalism. At the same time, racial animosities, terrorism, and crime, also expressions of anger, are on the rise almost everywhere. In addition, there is worldwide anger at the rich, currently manifested in the United States in the assault on capitalism emanating from the White House.

In view of all this anger and aggression, does the world need still another source of anger? Does it need Ayn Rand's anger? Indeed it does, as you will see. More today than ever.

My talk today will focus on two main topics: 1) the nature of anger, including whether it is a destructive or a valuable emotion, and 2) the role anger plays in a person's psychology and in his relationships with other people.

Anger has intrigued and fascinated philosophers and psychologists since antiquity. Discussion has usually centered on whether or not anger is inborn and on whether it is a valuable or a destructive emotion. Not surprisingly, the different analyses reflect the various theorists' fundamental view of man. A brief historical survey of views on the subject will provide a background for the presentation of my own view.

Plato viewed anger as basically an animal "passion," but one in proximity to reason. He arrived at this by dividing the psyche into three parts. The animal part, filled with irrational passions, or emotions, resided in the trunk of the body; the immortal, rational part, resided in the head; a third part, reserved just for anger, resided in and around the chest and neck, and belonged both to the passions and to reason. He viewed anger as a mixed blessing, sometimes good, when rightly provoked, but often a great danger to the state if it caused the individual irrationally to defy the state's authority.

Aristotle, on the other hand, believed that anger was based on judgment, hence, was closely aligned with reason. He held that anger was a natural response to painful situations, and that it involved both the body and the soul. Anger was valuable, according to him, and a virtuous person was one who could “feel anger at the right time, toward the right people, for the right motive.” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b.20)

In contrast, Seneca, a Stoic philosopher, viewed all emotions as diseases of the mind, and anger as sheer madness. And on the basis of his belief that only impartial judges, not influenced by emotions, should determine punishments for the wrongs committed by individuals, he concluded that there was no need for anger.

St. Augustine defined anger as judgment by which punishment is inflicted on sin; Aquinas as a desire to punish another by way of just revenge.

Whatever their errors, all of these ancient and medieval thinkers believed that anger bore at least some connection to man’s reason, because it involved a judgment of a wrong, which could only be exercised by human beings.

Subsequent to Aquinas, down to the present, the analysis of anger becomes less and less cogent as modern theorists obliterate the connection between reason and anger. They do so because they deny the role of reason in emotion of any kind.

Modern theories, with few exceptions, are of three types. First, those of the *materialists*, who are represented by Descartes and who believe that emotions have only physical causes. This view of emotions, including anger, is completely mechanistic: according to it, all emotions are biologically based and have no connection to reason. The body, and all its functioning, is a complex machine moved by animal spirits. The materialist view is also present in the biological approach and the biochemical approach.

The biological approach, based on the philosophy of Descartes, was initiated by Darwin, and continues in existence today. It views all emotions as innate and human anger as similar to animal anger. The biochemical approach, a species of the biological approach, says that emotions originate in the limbic or primitive part of the brain. Thus, it does not take into account any of the subsequent development of the human brain, such as man’s ability to think abstractly, to make objective judgments, and to discriminate conceptually.

The second type of modern theory is the *social approach*. This approach, represented by the so-called anthropological view, treats anger as a social variable. The experience and expression of anger depends, in this view, on the particular culture’s socialization of children. Its supporters firmly believe that upbringing can eliminate emotions, and they write with admiration about primitive tribes that allegedly have completely eliminated anger.

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The third type of modern theory is the *psychoanalytic or Freudian approach*. Its three-part division of consciousness into the Id, the Ego, and the Superego, is reminiscent of Plato's three-part division of the psyche. Freud dealt with aggression only. He believed that anger is subsumed under aggression and is an integral part of the "death instinct." Aggression, according to Freud, is found in the Id, and is an inborn, destructive drive, always ready and waiting to express itself by hurting others.

Dollard's frustration-aggression hypothesis follows the Freudian approach in equating anger with aggression. In vogue for many years, it held that once a person experiences frustration, aggression will automatically follow.

In addition to these three main types of modern theories, there is the recent development of the *cognitive approach*, which distinguishes between the emotion of anger and its expression in action. James R. Averill and Carol Tavris, social psychologists, also connect the emotion of anger with cognitions.¹ Unfortunately, although this approach is currently gaining in influence, it does not have a large following; also, it is confused on many issues—for example, it more or less ignores the subconscious and denies the role of repressed anger in human behavior.

Now let me tell you my own view of anger.

I am sure you will agree that it is not difficult in most cases to recognize that a person is angry. Depending on the particular individual, and on the degree of anger, eyes may be bulging; a scowling or threatening expression may be evident; and blushing, teeth clenching, a raised voice, protruding veins, and so forth, may occur.

Physiologically, though this is not evident to the casual observer, there usually is an increase in the pulse and respiration rate. In addition, blood pressure is elevated, and a powerful thrust wells up in the individual which generates in him a desire to defend himself and an urge to strike out at the cause of his anger. This powerful feeling is also accompanied by a sense of agitation that cannot be alleviated until the source of the anger is dealt with, removed, or repressed.

It is this evidence, observable and to some degree measurable, which gives some plausibility to the theory that anger is an inborn, biological reflex, no different from what is found and observed in animals. Of course, such a conclusion focuses only on the superficial similarities between human beings and animals and ignores the fundamental differences between them. In addition, this conclusion confuses the fact that while the capacity to feel emotions is inborn, emotions themselves are not, as I will show shortly. Moreover, the

1. James R. Averill, *Anger and Aggression: An Essay on Emotion* (New York: Springer Verlag, 1982); Carol Tavris, *Anger, the Misunderstood Emotion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).