Review: Taming Anger: The Hellenic Approach to the Limitations of Reason

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This book is an ambitious study of Ancient Greek understandings and treatments of anger. The author successfully illustrates the literary, cultural and especially the philosophical development of the nature of anger and how anger might be tamed. While Kalimtzis's project joins many other similar works, it deserves to be part of the debate as it is a concise yet thorough study that advances arguments more than it echoes the works of others.

Chapter one offers a profound investigation of the concept of anger found in the poems of Homer and its relation to two aspects of soul—thumos and phrene. Kalimtzis explains that thumos is a kind of life force that is often responsible for extreme passions. phrene is the deliberative aspect of the mind that calmly considers and calculates what is to be done. Kalimtzis adds that a well-ordered person in Homeric texts is one whose thumos is kept inside his phrene as if the latter were the receptacle of the former. Kalimtzis argues that anger is related to one’s perception of the integrity of his honor. However, anger is not simply directed at the damage done, but rather at the person who deigns to cause such damage. That is why sincere apologies can assuage anger even if the damage is irreparable and why repairing damage means nothing without an apology. From here, Kalimtzis convincingly argues that anger is related to friendship throughout the Homeric tradition. One is most angry with a friend for dishonor, though one is most likely to forgive a friend if he apologizes. One also seeks honor and praise from persons admired and respected (i.e., not enemies). While anger is about perceived slights and dishonors, honor is about being held in esteem among friends. This connection between anger and friendship resonates throughout the book.

In his second chapter, Kalimtzis describes anger’s movement from the poetic arena to philosophical and political conversations. Unlike prior Homeric representations of anger, the philosophical treatment of anger sought to identify its causes. Kalimtzis begins with the paradox of anger, which is essentially the quandary of how it could be the case that anger is that which mobilizes one to fight, yet it is difficult for one to fight one’s own anger. Additionally, one of anger’s functions is to preserve the angry agent; however, anger often leads to self-destruction. Kalimtzis’s main point here is that philosophers recognized a purpose for anger; anger was not merely a nuisance that needed to be suppressed. The Pythagoreans held that inappropriate anger was limitless, and that order must be restored to the angered soul. However, the Pythagoreans held that anger could be tamed by introducing calming harmonious influences. Logos restores order. However this force is not the agent’s reason, but rather cosmic order, suggesting that the target of reform is not solely the agent. One’s situation might be in disorder and that flaw causes anger. Therefore, the solution may involve making things right again.

In chapter three, Kalimtzis examines Plato’s various discussions of thumos, which Kalimtzis claims Plato used as an exact synonym for anger. In this section, Kalimtzis indicates that Plato’s unique contribution was a critique of the appropriate function of anger and keen description of aberrant expressions of anger. While Plato seems optimistic about the possibility of harmonizing the soul, says Kalimtzis, the harmonizing requires conditioning over time. Kalimtzis focuses on how anger is portrayed in Republic. Towards enemies, anger can be appropriate. However, towards one’s own countrymen, anger is only justified if expressing it has educational value. Kalimtzis observes that anger is the only emotion that can be sparked by other emotions, thought the converse is not the case. He writes, “Anger is thus not just one of many emotions in the thumos; figuratively speaking it grows sensory tentacles that link it to all the emotions over which it stands as a potential chastiser” (40). Anger not only affects other emotions, but judgment as well. Kalimtzis illustrates how a disharmony of the soul can lead to anger’s rogue justification of our most irrational desires. When anger is not in line with reason, it invents reasons to justify indulging in pleasures. This phenomena, Alazoneia, is a way that anger impersonates and takes over reason.

In his fourth chapter, Kalimtzis argues that, while Plato did believe that anger could be tempered and that thumos could be educated, such education is “pre-cognitive” and “aesthetic-based.” He explains that Plato maintained the need for aesthetic-based education of the thumos because this education must begin prior to the full development of the youths’ reason. Therefore, the thumos must be reached on its own terms.

A second aim of this chapter is to illuminate what Kalimtzis diagnoses as a political shift. In Homeric times, such an education was instilled in a son by his father. The power differential was essential to the cultivation of the youth. In Plato’s thinking, says Kalimtzis, the relationship is one between an individual and his polis. Therefore, the goal is not to please a paternalistic authority, but rather to be worthy of participating and serving in civic activities, which include the appropriate nurturing of the thumos of others.
Chapter five examines Aristotle’s picture of anger. For Kalimtzis, Aristotle’s view of anger is a process view. Since Aristotle viewed anger as a process, he was able to explain various phases of anger. Aristotle considers anger’s character from the moment of arousal through to achieving retribution. In such descriptions, Aristotle manages to relate anger to the body, pleasure, pain, cognition, and mental states synergistic of a subset of these phenomena.

Beginning with an in-depth examination of orthogonal anger according to Aristotle, Kalimtzis structures the sixth chapter around a comparison between the person of complete practical wisdom (phronimos) and the gentle-tempered person (praos). Turning to the practical process of taming anger, Kalimtzis reminds us of Aristotle’s instructions to aim at the extreme most like the mean. For this reason, we are to consider the praos, since anger and a desire for justice are more natural to men. At the end of this chapter, Kalimtzis synthesizes earlier discussions of Plato on taming anger with these recent insights into Aristotle’s prescriptions to show how, since the thumos is the site of both anger and affection, anger is related to friendship.

In Chapter 7, Kalimtzis considers hatred and how it is related to anger. Kalimtzis argues that hatred is born of inappropriate and excessive anger. Drawing on Aristotle’s distinction between the particular and general nature of the objects of anger and hatred, Kalimtzis explains how perverted anger can change into an emotion with no particular target — making it reckless and, oftentimes, inaccurate.

In his final chapter, Kalimtzis tells of how the early Hellenic picture is abruptly overthrown by a competing view of anger stemming from a notion of a just deity. First, Kalimtzis reviews teachings of various Stoic philosophers who maintain that Logos guides nature. Since Logos is divine, anger or frustration with its determinations is indicative of poor judgment and a lack of understanding. From here, the Judeo-Christian view of anger and God are introduced. Kalimtzis notes that the subjects are not to experience anger whereas a just God is justified in being angry towards His subjects. The result is a notion of anger void of any goal of taming it since the new goal is to eradicate anger among men. In his closing, Kalimtzis provides a brief commentary on social repercussions that such an extreme view of righteous anger yields.

Kalimtzis has successfully analyzed the meaning and role of an emotion central to ancient Hellenic societies. Kalimtzis synthesizes philological analyses of shifts in terminology, political history, philosophical texts and common sense phenomenological reflection to paint a convincing picture of how anger was viewed throughout ancient times. At a time when philosophy of emotion is rightfully enjoying a great deal of attention from scholars of ancient philosophy, Taming Anger is a welcome and meaningful contribution to ancient philosophical scholarship.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing Taming Anger is competition from many similar works. Works such as Leonard Mueller’s The Anger of Achilles: Mênis in Greek Epic highlight the presentation of anger in poetry. However, Kalimtzis situates his own ideas as responses to such works. In addition, Kalimtzis’s study spans all of the ancient period and pays close attention to philosophies as well as poetry. Susanna Braund's and Glen W. Most’s edited volume Ancient Anger: Perspectives from Homer to Galen does the same, but Kalimtzis’s approach is that of a single perspective with a coherent argumentative thread throughout the entire work. Perhaps the closest pre-existing work is William Harris’s Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity, to which Kalimtzis responds. In particular, Harris presents anger as something the Ancients sought to eradicate, suppress, or at least conceal. I agree with Kalimtzis that such a perspective is incorrect when applied to several of the thinkers that both authors address. For example, concealing one’s anger was never Aristotle’s aim. While the Stoics indeed advocated attempts to eradicate anger altogether, the mere burying of it was unacceptable. Kalimtzis’s account offers an alternative to Harris’s view that these ancient thinkers were overly concerned with appearances for political and social reasons. This is evidenced by the fact that Kalimtzis considers anger’s role in friendship of primary importance and its concern with politics as epiphenomenally relevant. Just as the titles suggest, to restrain rage is to contain and conceal it. Taming anger involves the cultivation of an emotion that easily goes awry without proper education. Taming Anger has earned a spot among the many high-quality recent works on similar subjects. In fact, Taming Anger is evidence that the issues have not yet been settled and that we can expect continued attention to ancient perspectives of emotions in general, and anger in particular.

Notes:
For example, recent annual philosophy conferences have been themed on issues concerning emotion and virtue, such as the inaugural conference of the Center for the History of Philosophy at York University in 2011 and the 39th Conference on Value Inquiry and the Eighth Annual Marquette Summer Seminar on Aristotle and Aristotelianism. With the advent of Antonio DeMasio’s seminal 2005 book, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, philosophers working in emotion theory began to reconsider ancient perspectives on the relationship between emotional and cognitive function. DeMasio convincingly demonstrates how the early modern views of the separation of reason and affect are not supported by modern science.