

Selections from Seneca's *De Ira* (On Anger)
Introduction to Philosophy, UMM

1.1 You have importuned me, Novatus, to write on the subject of how anger may be allayed, and it seems to me that you had good reason to fear in an especial degree this, the most hideous and frenzied of all the emotions. For the other emotions have in them some element of peace and calm, while this one is wholly violent and has its being in an onrush of resentment, raging with a most inhuman lust for weapons, blood, and punishment, giving no thought to itself if only it can hurt another, hurling itself upon the very point of the dagger, and eager for revenge though it may drag down the avenger along with it. Certain wise men, therefore, have claimed that anger is temporary madness. For it is equally devoid of self-control, forgetful of decency, unmindful of ties, persistent and diligent in whatever it begins, closed to reason and counsel, excited by trifling causes, unfit to discern the right and true - the very counterpart of a ruin that is shattered in pieces where it overwhelms. But you have only to behold the expressions of those possessed by anger to know that they are insane.

Moreover, if you choose to view its results and the harm of it, no plague has cost the human race more dearly. You will see bloodshed and poisoning, the vile countercharges of criminals, the downfall of cities and whole nations given to destruction, princely persons sold at public auction, houses put to the torch, and conflagration that halts not within the city-walls, but makes great stretches of the country glow with hostile flame. Behold the most glorious cities whose foundations can scarcely be traced - anger cast them down. Behold solitudes stretching lonely for many miles without a single dweller - anger laid them waste...

2.9 This rather is what you should think - that no one should be angry at the mistakes of men. For tell me, should one be angry with those who move with stumbling footsteps in the dark? With those who do not heed commands because they are deaf? With children because forgetting the observance of their duties they watch the games and foolish sports of their playmates? Would you want to be angry with those who become weary because they are sick or growing old? Among the various ills to which humanity is prone there is this besides - the darkness that fills the mind, and not so much the necessity of going astray, as the love of straying. That you may not be angry with individuals, you must forgive mankind at large, you must grant indulgence to the human race.

If you are angry with the young and the old because they sin, be angry with babes as well; they are destined to sin. But who is angry with children who are still too young to have the power of discrimination? Yet to be a human being is an even greater and truer excuse for error than to be a child. This is the lot to which we are born - we are creatures subject to as many ills of the mind as of the body, and though our power of discernment is neither blunted nor dull, yet we make poor use of it and become examples of vice to each other. If any one follows in the footsteps of others who have taken the wrong road, should he not be excused because it was the public highway that led him astray? Upon the individual soldier the commander may unsheathe all his sternness, but he needs must forbear when the whole army deserts. What, then, keeps the wise man from anger? The great mass of sinners. He understands both how unjust and how dangerous it is to grow angry at universal sin.

Whenever Heraclitus went forth from his house and saw all around him so many men who were living a wretched life - no, rather, were dying a wretched death - he would weep, and all the joyous and happy people he met stirred his pity; he was gentle-hearted, but too weak, and was himself one of those who had need of pity. Democritus, on the other hand, it is said, never

appeared in public without laughing; so little did the serious pursuits of men seem serious to him. Where in all this is there room for anger? Everything gives cause for either laughter or tears.

The wise man will have no anger toward sinners. Do you ask why? Because he knows that no one is born wise but becomes so, knows that only the fewest in every age turn out wise, because he has fully grasped the conditions of human life, and no sensible man becomes angry with nature.

2.1 There can be no doubt that anger is aroused by the direct impression of an injury; but the question is whether it follows immediately upon the impression and springs up without assistance from the mind, or whether it is aroused only with the assent of the mind. Our opinion is that it ventures nothing by itself, but acts only with the approval of the mind. For to form the impression of having received an injury and to long to avenge it, and then to couple together the two propositions that one ought not to have been wronged and that one ought to be avenged - this is not a mere impulse of the mind acting without our volition. The one is a single mental process, the other a complex one composed of several elements; the mind has grasped something, has become indignant, has condemned the act, and now tries to avenge it. These processes are impossible unless the mind has given assent to the impressions that moved it.

"But," you ask, "what is the purpose of such an inquiry?" I answer, in order that we may know what anger is; for if it arises against our will, it will never succumb to reason. For all sensations that do not result from our own volition are uncontrolled and unavoidable, as, for example, shivering when we are dashed with cold water and recoilment from certain contacts; bad news makes the hair stand on end, vile language causes a blush to spread, and when one looks down from a precipice, dizziness follows. Because none of these things lies within our control, no reasoning can keep them from happening. But anger may be routed at our behest; for it is a weakness of the mind that is subject to the will, not one of those things that result from some condition of the general lot of man and therefore befall even the wisest, among which must be placed foremost that mental shock which affects us after we have formed the impression of a wrong committed...

None of these things which move the mind through the agency of chance should be called passions; the mind suffers them, so to speak, rather than causes them. Passion, consequently, does not consist in being moved by the impressions that are presented to the mind, but in surrendering to these and following up such a chance prompting. For if any one supposes that pallor, falling tears, prurient itching or deep-drawn sigh, a sudden brightening of the eyes, and the like, are an evidence of passion and a manifestation of the mind, he is mistaken and fails to understand that these are disturbances of the body...

Anger must not only be aroused but it must rush forth, for it is an active impulse; but an active impulse never comes without the consent of the will, for it is impossible for a man to aim at revenge and punishment without the cognizance of his mind. A man thinks himself injured, wishes to take vengeance, but dissuaded by some consideration immediately calms down. This I do not call anger, this prompting of the mind which is submissive to reason; anger is that which overleaps reason and sweeps it away. Therefore that primary disturbance of the mind which is excited by the impression of injury is no more anger than the impression of injury is itself anger; the active impulse consequent upon it, which has not only admitted the impression of injury but also approved it, is really anger - the tumult of a mind proceeding to revenge by choice and determination. There can never be any doubt that as fear involves flight, anger involves assault; consider, therefore, whether you believe that anything can either be assailed or avoided without the mind's assent.

1.7 Although anger be contrary to nature, may it not be right to adopt it, because it has often been useful? It rouses and incites the spirit, and without it bravery performs no splendid deed in war - unless it supplies the flame, unless it acts as a goad to spur on brave men and send them into danger. Therefore some think that the best course is to control anger, not to banish it, and by removing its excesses to confine it within beneficial bounds, keeping, however, that part without which, action will be inert and the mind's force and energy broken. In the first place, it is easier to exclude harmful passions than to rule them, and to deny them admittance than, after they have been admitted, to control them; for when they have established themselves in possession, they are stronger than their ruler and do not permit themselves to be restrained or reduced. In the second place, Reason herself, to whom the reins of power have been entrusted, remains mistress only so long as she is kept apart from the passions: if once she mingles with them and is contaminated, she becomes unable to hold back those whom she might have cleared from her path. For when once the mind has been aroused and shaken, it becomes the slave of the disturbing agent. There are certain things which at the start are under our control, but later hurry us away by their violence and leave us no retreat. As a victim hurled from the precipice has no control of his body, and, once cast off, can neither stop nor stay, but, speeding on irrevocably, is cut off from all reconsideration and repentance and cannot now avoid arriving at the goal toward which he might once have avoided starting, so with the mind - if it plunges into anger, love, or the other passions, it has no power to check its impetus; its very weight and the downward tendency of vice needs must hurry it on, and drive it to the bottom.

The best course is to reject at once the first incitement to anger, to resist even its small beginnings, and to take pains to avoid falling into anger. For if it begins to lead us astray, the return to the safe path is difficult, since, if once we admit the emotion and by our own free will grant it any authority, reason becomes of no avail; after that it will do, not whatever you let it, but whatever it chooses. The enemy, I repeat, must be stopped at the very frontier; for if he has passed it, and advanced within the city gates, he will not respect any bounds set by his captives. For the mind is not a member apart, nor does it view the passions merely objectively, thus forbidding them to advance farther than they ought, but it is itself transformed into the passion and is, therefore, unable to recover its former useful and saving power when this has once been betrayed and weakened. For, as I said before, these two do not dwell separate and distinct, but passion and reason are only the transformation of the mind toward the better or the worse. How, then, will the reason, after it has surrendered to anger, rise again, assailed and crushed as it is by vice? Or how shall it free itself from the motley combination in which a blending of all the worse qualities makes them supreme?

Again, anger embodies nothing useful, nor does it kindle the mind to warlike deeds; for virtue, being self-sufficient, never needs the help of vice. Whenever there is need of violent effort, the mind does not become angry, but it gathers itself together and is aroused or relaxed according to its estimate of the need; just as when engines of war hurl forth their arrows, it is the operator who controls the tension with which they are hurled. "Anger," says Aristotle, "is necessary, and no battle can be won without it - unless it fills the mind and fires the soul; it must serve, however, not as a leader, but as the common soldier." But this is not true. For if it listens to reason and follows where reason leads, it is no longer anger, of which the chief characteristic is willful disobedience. If, however, it resists and is not submissive when ordered, but is carried away by its own caprice and fury, it will be an instrument of the mind as useless as is the soldier who disregards the signal for retreat. If, therefore, anger suffers any limitation to be imposed upon it, it must be called by some other name - it has ceased to be anger; for I understand this to be unbridled and ungovernable. If it suffers no limitation, it is a baneful thing and is not to be counted as a helpful agent. Thus either anger is not anger or it is useless. For the man who exacts punishment, not because he desires punishment for its own sake, but because it is right to inflict

it, ought not to be counted as an angry man. The useful soldier will be one who knows how to obey orders; the passions are as bad subordinates they are leaders.

1.9

"What then?" you ask; "will the good man not be angry if his father is murdered, his mother outraged before his eyes?" "No, he will not be angry, but he will avenge them, will protect them... The good man will perform his duties undisturbed and unafraid; and he will in such a way do all that is worthy of a good man as to do nothing that is unworthy of a man. My father is being murdered - I will defend him; he is slain - I will avenge him, not because I grieve, but because it is my duty... For a man to stand forth as the defender of parents, children, friends, and fellow-citizens, led merely by his sense of duty, acting voluntarily, using judgement, using foresight, moved neither by impulse nor by fury - this is noble and becoming...

1.16

Aristotle says that certain passions, if one makes a proper use of them, serve as arms. And this would be true if, like the implements of war, they could be put on and laid aside at the pleasure of the user. But these "arms" which Aristotle would grant to virtue fight under their own orders; they await no man's gesture and are not possessed, but possess. Nature has given to us an adequate equipment in reason; we need no other implements. This is the weapon she has bestowed; it is strong, enduring, obedient, not double-edged or capable of being turned against its owner. Reason is all-sufficient in itself, serving not merely for counsel, but for action as well. What, really, is more foolish than that reason should seek protection from anger - that which is steadfast from that which is wavering, that which is trustworthy from that which is untrustworthy, that which is well from that which is sick? Even in matters of action, in which alone the help of anger seems necessary, is it not true that reason, if left to itself, has far more power? For reason, having decided upon the necessity of some action, persists in her purpose, since she herself can discover no better thing to put in her place; therefore her determinations, once made, stand. But anger is often forced back by pity; for it has no enduring strength, but is a delusive inflation, violent at the outset. It is like the winds that rise from off the earth; generated from streams and marshes they have vehemence, but do not last.