

Evaluating Anger: Aristotle and Seneca on the “Doctrine of the Mean”

Aristotle believes that man, with his inherent rational will to align his soul with the most excellent attributes, must find a “middle ground” of each emotion. By exercising that emotion in neither deficiency nor surplus, one follows his “Doctrine of the Mean” to remain naturally mild-mannered, and, therefore, virtuous. The appropriate amount of this emotion is regulated by factors, including one’s environment, and it also varies from person to person. This means that one expressing anger in excess shows irascibility, but one without anger will “appear to be without feeling or invulnerable, and in not turning to anger he will not protect himself” (11). Man needs a bit of anger to seek justice for those who have wronged him, but not too much that he himself commits insolent deeds. Therefore, man must find the appropriate amount of every emotion to achieve virtuousness.

Seneca, on the other hand, holds that one should avoid anger altogether, rather than making an attempt to control it. This belief stems from three fundamental arguments: insanity, human nature, and control. First, he argues that the state of anger is akin to insanity. He compares the attributes of anger, such as biting teeth, boiling blood, threatening demeanor, to the characteristics of a ferocious, wild animal, and, therefore, anger is the “enemy of reason” (15). Because of this, a man in rage cannot make rational decisions in madness and, therefore, should avoid anger. Secondly, though Seneca agrees with Aristotle that people are naturally inclined to be mild-mannered, Seneca argues that the mild-mannered nature results from the expulsion of harmful emotions, rather than regulation of them. Finally, anger can become largely uncontrollable. Though one might reason that the mind universally governs anger, it is common for anger to prevent the mind from realizing the true potential of anger. In this way, anger thwarts man from making rational, safe decisions, and, therefore, puts him at danger. Thus, Aristotle and Seneca differ in that, while Aristotle argues it is wise to moderate anger, Seneca argues that it is better to avoid it.

Seneca’s argument that man must suppress anger is more convincing than Aristotle’s because Aristotle makes the mistake of how people make judgments to take action. For example, if Jon’s friend steals money from him, Jon may feel disrespected and angry; he would want to seek vengeance towards that person. However, seeking justice is inherently rational and moral. Therefore, it is not Jon’s anger that causes him to seek justice and protect himself; rather, it is his judgment that he was violated and unlawfully hurt. Jon’s rational sense of justice causes him to protect himself. One might argue it is possible that Jon’s anger at least, in part, motivated his initiative to seek justice. However, in this situation, anger would be unnecessary because there are other more rational reasons to take action. More rational reasons to take action could include that his rights to security and possession were breached. Seeking vengeance out of anger would, as Seneca put it, “completely overcome reason” (18). Therefore, anger is trivial to the action, and it only creates the potential for harm. From this analysis, we can conclude that Seneca’s argument that anger must not be expressed in any amount is more reasonable than Aristotle’s view of anger.

Works Cited

Solomon, Robert C. *What Is an Emotion?: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. N. pag. Print.