

Fr. Perozich comments —

I learned how to think and speak from the people around me. Jesus teaches me to think and to speak differently from those experiences.

Since I live in this world with so much interaction with others in person or in media, I continue to be influenced negatively by the weakness or sinfulness of others.

When I bring my whole self, intellect (thoughts and learning), desires, and will before Jesus in prayer, He can bring me peace, reason, and charity with others who may be acting in sincerity or even those who act out of evil.

Dr. Edward Feser fleshes out how right judgment should be formed and expressed.

It is impossible without the grace of Jesus Christ, so I bring to Him in prayer what is in my mind and on my heart that He calm me and purify my soul in order that I allow Him to express true charity to all.

Aquinas on the sin of rash judgment

Christ our Lord “forbids rash judgment which is about the inward intention, or other uncertain things, as Augustine states... Or again according to Chrysostom, He forbids the judgment which proceeds not from benevolence but from bitterness of heart.”

September 29, 2022 [Dr. Edward Feser The Dispatch 1](#)

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Christ famously taught: “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matthew 7:1). As Aquinas points out, **Christ by no means intended to rule out all judgments about another person’s actions or character. Rather, he was condemning judgments that were defective in certain ways, for example:**

In these words **our Lord forbids rash judgment which is about the inward intention, or other uncertain things,** as Augustine states... Or again according to Chrysostom, **He forbids the judgment which proceeds not from benevolence but from bitterness of heart.** (*Summa Theologiae II-II.60.2*)

Similarly, in the same article, Aquinas says that when a **judgment “lacks certainty, as when a man, without any**

solid motive, forms a judgment on some doubtful or hidden matter... then it is called judgment by ‘suspicion’ or ‘rash’ judgment.” He goes on in the two articles that immediately follow to say a fair bit about the nature of the suspicious frame of mind that leads to rash judgment.

First, **Aquinas identifies three causes of this frame of mind.** One of them is **“long experience”** of the kind that older people have, and Aquinas indicates that in this case the resulting judgments can have less of the character of mere suspiciousness insofar as **experience yields greater certainty.** However, the other two causes involve **“perversity of the affections.”** These sources of the suspicion that leads to rash judgment are:

First, from a man being evil in himself, and from this very fact, as though conscious of his own wickedness, he is prone to think evil of others... Secondly, this is due to a man being ill-disposed towards another: for when a man hates or despises another, or is angry with or envious of him, he is led by slight indications to think evil of him, because **everyone easily believes what he desires.** (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.60.3)

In such cases, **“suspicion denotes a certain amount of vice, and the further it goes, the more vicious it is.”** The sin involved can be venial if a person merely too rashly **doubts the goodness of another.** However, **“when a man, from slight indications, esteems another man’s wickedness as certain [then] this is a mortal sin, if it be about a grave matter,** since it cannot be without contempt of one’s neighbor.”

Even if left unexpressed, this judgment is sinful. **“From the very fact that a man thinks evil of another without sufficient cause,”** Aquinas says, **“he despises him unduly, and therefore does him an injury.”** But public expression is, naturally, worse still: **“Since justice and injustice are about external operations... the**

judgment of suspicion pertains directly to injustice when it is betrayed by external action, and then it is a mortal sin.”

Second, Aquinas teaches that a morally healthy frame of mind requires that we afford others a presumption of innocence, as it were:

From the very fact that a man thinks ill of another without sufficient cause, he injures and despises him. Now no man ought to despise or in any way injure another man without urgent cause: and, consequently, **unless we have evident indications of a person’s wickedness, we ought to deem him good, by interpreting for the best whatever is doubtful about him.** (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.60.4)

And again, **“we ought, in this kind of judgment, to aim at judging a man good, unless there is evident proof of the contrary.”** To be sure, we might frequently be misled as a result. However, argues Aquinas, this is preferable to the outcome that would follow if we did not give others a presumption of innocence:

He who interprets doubtful matters for the best, may happen to be deceived more often than not; yet it is better to err frequently through thinking well of a wicked man, than to err less frequently through having an evil opinion of a good man, because in the latter case an injury is inflicted, but not in the former.

Needless to say, the presumption of innocence is not only good morals, it is good law. And it is, to boot, good logic. As students of critical thinking are taught, when evaluating an opponent’s argument, we ought to interpret it according to the “principle of charity.” This says that **if the argument can be given a more reasonable or less reasonable interpretation, we should presume that the more**

reasonable one is what the speaker intended, unless we have solid grounds for judging otherwise. This is in part a matter of basic fairness to the other person. But it is also sound methodology. The point of logic is not to win a debate, but to discover what is true. If we dismiss an argument too quickly on the basis of an uncharitable interpretation, we might miss some important truth we could have learned from it had we considered it more carefully.

Obviously, one can go too far. **A virtue is a mean between extremes, and just as one can be too *quick* to attribute evil to others, so too can one be too *slow* to do so. Aquinas does not say that we should *never* judge another to have a bad motive. He says that we should not do so *if* we lack sufficient evidence to make a certain judgment about the matter, *if* our judgment tends to be clouded by dislike of the person, and so on. **But with some people, it is possible dispassionately and objectively to judge from their patterns of behavior over time that they are indeed acting from bad motives.** There is no sin in making such a judgment under such circumstances. On the contrary, a habitual refusal to do so can be a vice. As **I have discussed elsewhere**, Aquinas argues that just as one can sin by being excessively angry or insufficiently affable or friendly, **so too can one sin by being *insufficiently* angry and *excessively* affable in the face of grave evil.** Dogmatic non-judgmentalism would be a similar moral failing. It is not Christ's teaching, but a distortion of that teaching.**

All the same, in the context of contemporary mass media, the more common sin by far is that of rash judgment. Indeed, social media exchanges and political discourse sometimes seem to consist in little more than rash judgment as Aquinas characterizes it – that is, judgment about “the inward intention, or other uncertain things” about another person, which “proceeds not from benevolence but from

bitterness of heart.” **Opponents are routinely demonized, condemned as wicked rather than merely wrong.** Their claims and arguments are not evaluated by way of a dispassionate consideration of evidence and logical strength, but dismissed *a priori* as stemming from bad motives. **Policy differences are attributed,** not to sincere but mistaken opinions about what is best for the country, but **to cynical political calculation.** The very idea that there is a common good transcending partisan disagreements, and shared standards of rationality by which those disagreements might be discussed in good faith, seems to be held suspect as entailing a sell-out to the enemy.

Naturally, this is not to deny that **some people really are wicked.** The point is that partisanship has become so rancorous, and electronic media so central to modern social and political interaction, that many people are unable to see and judge others as concrete individuals. They form a cartoonish general conception of the beliefs and motivations of those they disagree with, and project this conception onto the particular people with whom they engage. Because they do not deal with these opponents in a personal way, but only with electronic representations (television sound bites, tweets, blog comments, and the like), the cartoon is difficult to dislodge. Whatever the other person says, it is assumed that what he “really” thinks is what the cartoon represents people like him as thinking. And because he is likely to react to this sinister caricature with anger and insults of his own, his behavior will even seem to confirm it.

The failing here is in both the intellect and the will. It is in the intellect insofar as this way of dealing with others typically involves the committing of several **logical fallacies.** **For example, there is the *circumstantial ad hominem* fallacy of pretending to refute what someone says by claiming to identify some suspect motive on his part. There is the fallacy of *poisoning the well*, which involves casting aspersions on another’s character rather than**

addressing his claims or arguments. There is *guilt by association*, in which one attributes view X to a person who believes Y simply because other people who believe Y have been associated with X. There is the *abusive ad hominem*, which involves simply flinging a pejorative label at a person (“racist,” “fascist,” “communist,” etc.) as if this sufficed to rebut his claim or argument. And there is what seems to compete with the circumstantial *ad hominem* for the status of most popular fallacy on social media – the *tu quoque*, which involves accusing someone of hypocrisy and supposing that one has thereby refuted his claim or argument.

There is a failing here in the will insofar as it is not directed at the *good* of the other person. **Even if the other person is wrong, charity requires considering the possibility that he is nevertheless acting in good faith, and trying one’s best to interact with him in a way that might get him to reconsider his error rather than harden him in it.** Furthermore, there may be at least some truth in what he is saying, and it is unjust to reject that possibility out of hand out of hostility to him. Human beings are rational animals, and naturally regard it as unjust when what they (rightly or wrongly) take to be strong rational considerations in favor of their opinions are not addressed. **We sin against charity when we ignore *what they actually say* and instead impute bad motives or opinions to them that they may not actually have.**

Again, the point is not to deny that people sometimes really do have bad motives and opinions. Nor is it to deny that **it is in some cases justifiable to be harsh with such a person, when his opinions are dangerous and he puts them forward in an obnoxious or irrational way.** The point is that **this should be a last resort, not the first, and in modern mass media people tend instead to be too “quick**

on the trigger.” As Aquinas says, “when a man hates or despises another, or is angry with or envious of him, he is led by slight indications to think evil of him, because everyone easily believes what he desires.” We like to think that the reason we dislike a person is that he has bad motives or irrational views. But **sometimes we attribute bad motives or irrational views to him precisely because we dislike him.** If we kept our dislike from coloring our opinion of him, we might find that he is not in fact as bad or unreasonable as we have supposed.

A good rule of thumb is that when someone whose opinions you disagree with tries to engage with you in a civil and reasonable manner – or, if he doesn’t, at least will do so after you try to turn the temperature down by engaging civilly and reasonably with *him* – then it would be contrary to reason and charity not to give him the benefit of the doubt. There are definitely lots of people online who are *not* like this – who remain obnoxious and irrational no matter how patient and civil you are with them. But there are also lots of people who would behave more reasonably if only others behaved more reasonably toward them.

Another good rule of thumb is to consider, before posting some comment on Twitter, Facebook, a blog, or wherever, how it will look at the Last Judgment, when, Christ warns, “men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:36-37, RSV).

*(Editor’s note: This essay originally appeared on **Dr. Feser’s blog** in a slightly different form and is reprinted here with the author’s kind permission.)*

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