

# Author: We're Now Living in an 'Age of Anger'

According to the title of Pankaj Mishra's latest book, we are now living in an ["Age of Anger."](#)

[He writes:](#)

*"[T]he current conflagration [in the world] has brought to the surface what Friedrich Nietzsche called 'ressentiment'—'a whole tremulous realm of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible and insatiable in outbursts... what Hannah Arendt described as a 'tremendous increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else.'"*

Unfortunately, as Mishra argues, 200-plus years of erasing our historical memory and simplistically conceiving of man as *Homo economicus*—a being primarily defined by material self-interest—has left the West intellectually unprepared to deal with this upsurge of anger. Our rationalist age, as Robert Musil has written, has "too little intellect in matters of the soul."

So, in this piece, I thought I would provide a brief synopsis of what our largely forgotten tradition understood about the passion of anger that so dominates our time. In better understanding what it is for, we can hopefully understand what it is *not* for.

In Platonic thought, man's soul is comprised of three parts: the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive. According to Plato's description in [Book IV](#) of *The Republic*, the rational is that "whereby [the soul] reckons and reasons," and the appetitive part corresponds to the bodily desires, that "with which [the soul] loves, hungers, thirsts, and feels the flutter and titillation of other desires." The spirited part

(*Thumos*) is “that with which we feel anger” and other emotions.

Plato argues that it is the proper role of the rational to rule over the spirited and appetitive parts of the soul. In his famous image, he describes the spirited part of the soul as a white horse, the appetitive part as a black horse, and the rational as the charioteer that should be controlling the chariot and the horses.

What Plato’s image implies is that there can be *rational anger*. Anger, properly directed by the intellect, serves the important purpose of helping keep our bodily desires in check by becoming incensed when they seek satisfaction at improper times or in an improper manner. It helps us, [as Thomas Aquinas writes](#), in the “prompt execution of what reason has dictated.”

That’s what anger is for. It is primarily meant to be directed at the enemy *within*, rather than the enemy *without*.

But then, as we can attest, there is *irrational anger*. When the spirited part of the soul acts irrationally, it ignores reason and aligns itself with the desires of the appetitive part—such as lust for power, money, sex, etc.—and seeks vengeance on those people and institutions who seemingly prevent one from satisfying these desires.

We now live in a society filled with people who have been cultivated to have insatiable—and thus, irrational—desires for material success, recognition, equality, and the freedom to do as they please. Predictably, when these desires cannot be fully satisfied, the people with them become angry, and this anger builds.

As Mishra reminds us:

*“One of the first people to notice the disturbing complex of emotions we now see among self-seeking individuals around the world was Alexis de Tocqueville—who was already worried in*

*the 1830s that the American promise of meritocracy, its uniformity of culture and manners, and 'equality of conditions' would make for immoderate ambition, corrosive envy and chronic dissatisfaction. The passion for equality, he warned, could swell 'to the height of fury' and lead many to acquiesce in a curtailment of their liberties, and to long for the rule of a strongman."*

Many of you are well aware that this passion, this anger, is currently swelling in our society. Unless we undertake a largescale effort to rediscover what it means to be a human—how to live virtuously and control our passions with reason—it will reach a “height of fury” and burst.

And God help us when it does.