

St. Thomas Aquinas

The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 72](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

(C) BY WORDS UTTERED EXTRAJUDICIALLY (Questions [72]-76)

OF REVILING (FOUR ARTICLES)

We must now consider injuries inflicted by words uttered extrajudicially. We shall consider (1) reviling, (2) backbiting, (3) tale bearing, (4) derision, (5) cursing.

Under the first head there are four points of inquiry:

- (1) What is reviling?
 - (2) Whether every reviling is a mortal sin?
 - (3) Whether one ought to check revilers?
 - (4) Of the origin of reviling.
-

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 72](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Article: 1](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Whether reviling consists in words?

Objection 1: It would seem that reviling does not consist in words. Reviling implies some injury inflicted on one's neighbor, since it is a kind of injustice. But words seem to inflict no injury on one's neighbor, either in his person, or in his belongings. Therefore reviling does not consist in words.

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS072.html](#)
slighted by deeds more than by words. Therefore it seems that reviling consists, not in words but in deeds.

Objection 3: Further, a dishonor inflicted by words is called a railing or a taunt. But reviling seems to differ from railing or taunt. Therefore reviling does not consist in words.

On the contrary, Nothing, save words, is perceived by the hearing. Now reviling is perceived by the hearing according to Jer. 20:10, "I heard reviling [Douay: 'contumelies'] on every side." Therefore reviling consists in words.

I answer that, Reviling denotes the dishonoring of a person, and this happens in two ways: for since honor results from excellence, one person dishonors another, first, by depriving him of the excellence for which he is honored. This is done by sins of deed, whereof we have spoken above ([Question \[64\]](#), seqq.). Secondly, when a man publishes something against another's honor, thus bringing it to the knowledge of the latter and of other men. This reviling properly so called, and is done in some kind of signs. Now, according to Augustine (De Doctr. Christ. ii, 3), "compared with words all other signs are very few, for words have obtained the chief place among men for the purpose of expressing whatever the mind conceives." Hence reviling, properly speaking consists in words: wherefore, Isidore says (Etym. x) that a reviler [contumeliosus] "is hasty and bursts out [tomet] in injurious words." Since, however, things are also signified by deeds, which on this account have the same significance as words, it follows that reviling in a wider sense extends also to deeds. Wherefore a gloss on Rm. 1:30, "contumelious, proud," says: "The contumelious are those who by word or deed revile and shame others."

Reply to Objection 1: Our words, if we consider them in their essence, i.e. as audible sound injure no man, except perhaps by jarring of the ear, as when a person speaks too loud. But, considered as signs conveying something to the knowledge of others, they may do many kinds of harm. Such is the harm done to a man to the detriment of his honor, or of the respect due to him from others. Hence the reviling is greater if one man reproach another in the presence of many: and yet there may still be reviling if he reproach him by himself. in so far as the speaker acts unjustly against the respect due to the hearer.

Reply to Objection 2: One man slights another by deeds in so far as such deeds cause or signify that which is against that other man's honor. In the former case it is not a matter of reviling but of some other kind of injustice, of which we have spoken above ([Questions \[64\]](#), 65, 66): where as in the latter case there is reviling, in so far as deeds have the significant force of words.

Reply to Objection 3: Railing and taunts consist in words, even as reviling, because by all of them a man's faults are exposed to the detriment of his honor. Such faults are of three kinds. First, there is the fault of guilt, which is exposed by "reviling" words. Secondly, there is the fault of both guilt and punishment, which is exposed by "taunts" [convicium], because "vice" is commonly spoken of in connection with not only the soul but also the body. Hence if one man says spitefully to another that he is blind, he taunts but does not revile him: whereas if one man calls another a thief, he not only taunts but also reviles him. Thirdly, a man reproaches another for his inferiority or indigence, so as to lessen the honor due to him for any kind of excellence. This is done by "upbraiding" words, and properly speaking, occurs when one spitefully reminds a man that one has succored him when he was in need. Hence it is written (Ecclus. 20:15): "He will give a few things and upbraid much." Nevertheless these terms are sometimes employed one for the other.

Whether reviling or railing is a mortal sin?

Objection 1: It would seem that reviling or railing is not a mortal sin. For no mortal sin is an act of virtue. Now railing is the act of a virtue, viz. of wittiness {eutrapelia} [*Cf. FS, Question [60], Article [5]] to which it pertains to rail well, according to the Philosopher (Ethic. iv, 8). Therefore railing or reviling is not a mortal sin.

Objection 2: Further, mortal sin is not to be found in perfect men; and yet these sometimes give utterance to railing or reviling. Thus the Apostle says ([Gal. 3:1](#)): "O senseless Galatians!," and our Lord said ([Lk. 24:25](#)): "O foolish and slow of heart to believe!" Therefore railing or reviling is not a mortal sin.

Objection 3: Further, although that which is a venial sin by reason of its genus may become mortal, that which is mortal by reason of its genus cannot become venial, as stated above ([FS, Question \[88\], Articles \[4\],6](#)). Hence if by reason of its genus it were a mortal sin to give utterance to railing or reviling, it would follow that it is always a mortal sin. But this is apparently untrue, as may be seen in the case of one who utters a reviling word indeliberately or through slight anger. Therefore reviling or railing is not a mortal sin, by reason of its genus.

On the contrary, Nothing but mortal sin deserves the eternal punishment of hell. Now railing or reviling deserves the punishment of hell, according to Mt. 5:22, "Whosoever shall say to his brother... Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire." Therefore railing or reviling is a mortal sin.

I answer that, As stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)), words are injurious to other persons, not as sounds, but as signs, and this signification depends on the speaker's inward intention. Hence, in sins of word, it seems that we ought to consider with what intention the words are uttered. Since then railing or reviling essentially denotes a dishonoring, if the intention of the utterer is to dishonor the other man, this is properly and essentially to give utterance to railing or reviling: and this is a mortal sin no less than theft or robbery, since a man loves his honor no less than his possessions. If, on the other hand, a man says to another a railing or reviling word, yet with the intention, not of dishonoring him, but rather perhaps of correcting him or with some like purpose, he utters a railing or reviling not formally and essentially, but accidentally and materially, in so far to wit as he says that which might be a railing or reviling. Hence this may be sometimes a venial sin, and sometimes without any sin at all. Nevertheless there is need of discretion in such matters, and one should use such words with moderation, because the railing might be so grave that being uttered inconsiderately it might dishonor the person against whom it is uttered. In such a case a man might commit a mortal sin, even though he did not intend to dishonor the other man: just as were a man incautiously to injure grievously another by striking him in fun, he would not be without blame.

Reply to Objection 1: It belongs to wittiness to utter some slight mockery, not with intent to dishonor or pain the person who is the object of the mockery, but rather with intent to please and amuse: and this may be without sin, if the due circumstances be observed. on the other

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS072.html](#)g
as he makes others laugh, this is sinful, as stated in the passage quoted.

Reply to Objection 2: Just as it is lawful to strike a person, or damnify him in his belongings for the purpose of correction, so too, for the purpose of correction, may one say a mocking word to a person whom one has to correct. It is thus that our Lord called the disciples "foolish," and the Apostle called the Galatians "senseless." Yet, as Augustine says (De Serm. Dom. in Monte ii, 19), "seldom and only when it is very necessary should we have recourse to invectives, and then so as to urge God's service, not our own."

Reply to Objection 3: Since the sin of railing or reviling depends on the intention of the utterer, it may happen to be a venial sin, if it be a slight railing that does not inflict much dishonor on a man, and be uttered through lightness of heart or some slight anger, without the fixed purpose of dishonoring him, for instance when one intends by such a word to give but little pain.

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 72](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Article: 3 [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Whether one ought to suffer oneself to be reviled?

Objection 1: It would seem that one ought not to suffer oneself to be reviled. For he that suffers himself to be reviled, encourages the reviler. But one ought not to do this. Therefore one ought not to suffer oneself to be reviled, but rather reply to the reviler.

Objection 2: Further, one ought to love oneself more than another. Now one ought not to suffer another to be reviled, wherefore it is written ([Prov. 26:10](#)): "He that putteth a fool to silence appeaseth anger." Therefore neither should one suffer oneself to be reviled.

Objection 3: Further, a man is not allowed to revenge himself, for it is said: "Vengeance belongeth to Me, I will repay" [*Heb. 10:30]. Now by submitting to be reviled a man revenges himself, according to Chrysostom (Hom. xxii, in Ep. ad Rom.): "If thou wilt be revenged, be silent; thou hast dealt him a fatal blow." Therefore one ought not by silence to submit to reviling words, but rather answer back.

On the contrary, It is written ([Ps. 37:13](#)): "They that sought evils to me spoke vain things," and afterwards ([Ps. 37:14](#)) he says: "But I as a deaf man, heard not; and as a dumb man not opening his mouth."

I answer that, Just as we need patience in things done against us, so do we need it in those said against us. Now the precepts of patience in those things done against us refer to the preparedness of the mind, according to Augustine's (De Serm. Dom. in Monte i, 19) exposition on our Lord's precept, "If one strike thee on thy right cheek, turn to him also the other" [*The words as quoted by St. Thomas are a blending of Mt. 5:39 and Lk. 6:29]: that is to say, a man ought to be prepared to do so if necessary. But he is not always bound to do this actually: since not even did our Lord do so, for when He received a blow, He said: "Why strikest thou Me?"

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS072.html](#) we are bound to hold our minds prepared to submit to be reviled, if it should be expedient. Nevertheless it sometimes behooves us to withstand against being reviled, and this chiefly for two reasons. First, for the good of the reviler; namely, that his daring may be checked, and that he may not repeat the attempt, according to Prov. 26:5, "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he imagine himself to be wise." Secondly, for the good of many who would be prevented from progressing in virtue on account of our being reviled. Hence Gregory says (Hom. ix, Super Ezech.): "Those who are so placed that their life should be an example to others, ought, if possible, to silence their detractors, lest their preaching be not heard by those who could have heard it, and they continue their evil conduct through contempt of a good life."

Reply to Objection 1: The daring of the railing reviler should be checked with moderation, i.e. as a duty of charity, and not through lust for one's own honor. Hence it is written ([Prov. 26:4](#)): "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou be like him."

Reply to Objection 2: When one man prevents another from being reviled there is not the danger of lust for one's own honor as there is when a man defends himself from being reviled: indeed rather would it seem to proceed from a sense of charity.

Reply to Objection 3: It would be an act of revenge to keep silence with the intention of provoking the reviler to anger, but it would be praiseworthy to be silent, in order to give place to anger. Hence it is written (Ecclus. 8:4): "Strive not with a man that is full of tongue, and heap not wood upon his fire."

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 72](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Article: 4](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Whether reviling arises from anger?

Objection 1: It would seem that reviling does not arise from anger. For it is written ([Prov. 11:2](#)): "Where pride is, there shall also be reviling [Douay: 'reproach']." But anger is a vice distinct from pride. Therefore reviling does not arise from anger.

Objection 2: Further, it is written ([Prov. 20:3](#)): "All fools are meddling with revilings [Douay: 'reproaches']." Now folly is a vice opposed to wisdom, as stated above ([Question \[46\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#)); whereas anger is opposed to meekness. Therefore reviling does not arise from anger.

Objection 3: Further, no sin is diminished by its cause. But the sin of reviling is diminished if one gives vent to it through anger: for it is a more grievous sin to revile out of hatred than out of anger. Therefore reviling does not arise from anger.

On the contrary, Gregory says (Moral. xxxi, 45) that "anger gives rise to revilings."

I answer that, While one sin may arise from various causes, it is nevertheless said to have its source chiefly in that one from which it is wont to arise most frequently, through being closely connected with its end. Now reviling is closely connected with anger's end, which is revenge:

Reply to Objection 1: Reviling is not directed to the end of pride which is excellency. Hence reviling does not arise directly from pride. Nevertheless pride disposes a man to revile, in so far as those who think themselves to excel, are more prone to despise others and inflict injuries on them, because they are more easily angered, through deeming it an affront to themselves whenever anything is done against their will.

Reply to Objection 2: According to the Philosopher (Ethic. vii, 6) "anger listens imperfectly to reason": wherefore an angry man suffers a defect of reason, and in this he is like the foolish man. Hence reviling arises from folly on account of the latter's kinship with anger.

Reply to Objection 3: According to the Philosopher (Rhet. ii, 4) "an angry man seeks an open offense, but he who hates does not worry about this." Hence reviling which denotes a manifest injury belongs to anger rather than to hatred.