



Aptness Isn't Enough: Why We Ought to Abandon Anger

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Abstract

According to the Fittingness Defense, even if the consequences of anger are overall bad, it does not follow that we should aim to avoid it. This is because fitting anger involves an accurate appraisal of wrongdoing and is essential for appreciating injustice and signaling our disapproval (Srinivasan 2018; Shoemaker 2018). My aim in this paper is to show that the Fittingness Defense fails. While accurate appraisals are *prima facie* rational and justified on epistemic grounds, I argue that this type of fittingness does not vindicate anger because there are alternative modes of recognizing and appreciating wrongdoing that can generate the benefits of anger without the harmful effects. Moreover, anger involves more than its appraisal of wrongdoing—it also consists of attitudes and motivations that are arguably of intrinsic disvalue.

Keywords Anger · Fittingness · Aptness · Emotions

Kindness is invincible.
Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 11.18

Philosophers are divided over the value of anger. While some believe that we should aim to eliminate or at least minimize our proclivity for anger, others claim that properly honed anger is among the most valuable elements of our emotional repertoire.¹ This lack of consensus is partially explained by the fact that the consequences of anger are mixed. Sometimes anger has good effects. If a loved one insults or betrays us, an angry outburst can effectively communicate our thoughts in a way that may help them to understand the significance of the harm and initiate a reconciliation. Anger can also galvanize us into fighting against injustice

¹ Contemporary defenses of anger include Cherry (2021), Cogley (2014), Kauppinen (2018), Lepoutre (2018), McBride (2018), Murphy (2003), Nichols (2007), Reis-Dennis (2019), Srinivasan (2018), Shoemaker (2018), and Wolf (2011). Recent critiques of anger are found in Flanagan (2017), Holmgren (2014), Nussbaum (2016), Pettigrove (2012), and Pereboom (2014).

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and standing up for the vulnerable (Cherry 2021; McBride 2018; Leboeuf 2018). On the other hand, anger can overwhelm us and impair our decision-making (Litvak et al. 2010; Lerner and Tiedens 2006). It can also lead to deepened animosity between individuals and groups, and it is a common precursor to violence and cycles of revenge.

While skepticism about anger is motivated by a variety of considerations, including metaphysical worries about free will (Pereboom 2014) and personal identity (Flanagan 2017), the most common motivation is the negative consequences mentioned above. While it's always possible to insist that anger's good effects outweigh the bad, a more interesting line of defense has emerged in the literature. Philosophers such as Srinivasan (2018) and Shoemaker (2018) argue that, even if it were true that the effects of anger are overall bad (including from the perspective of the aggrieved), it would not follow that anger is altogether unjustified or that we ought to cultivate it away. This is because anger can still be a fitting affective response to wrongdoing. Just as grief and fear can be fitting responses to loss and danger respectively, so anger can be an apt response to moral wrongs. And as with these other emotions, there seems to be an important sense in which apt anger is rationally justified independently of its effects. The basic idea is that apt anger is a means of recognizing and appreciating that wrongdoing has occurred. Critics of anger thus face the burden of showing that consequence-based reasons always trump reasons of fit, and defenders of anger are skeptical that this burden can be met.

My aim in this paper is to show that anger cannot be vindicated by its aptness. Within recent philosophical discussions, anger is said to be apt whenever it constitutes an accurate appraisal of wrongdoing. While accurate appraisals are *prima facie* rational and justified on epistemic grounds, I shall argue that this is not sufficient for overall vindication because there are alternative modes of recognizing and appreciating wrongdoing that can do the useful work of anger without the harmful effects. Moreover, anger involves much more than its appraisal of wrongdoing—it also consists of attitudes and motivations (e.g., hostility and animosity) that are arguably of intrinsic disvalue. Hence, it is a mistake to frame the debate as a matter of weighing the instrumental reasons for avoiding anger against the intrinsic reasons of fittingness—we must also consider the grounds for believing that anger is disvaluable independently of its consequences. The upshot is that, although tokens of anger can be fitting in the sense of comprising an accurate appraisal of injustice, we ought to try to jettison our anger.

1 The Elements of Anger

In order to make a normative assessment of anger, we need a clear grasp of its basic elements.² While emotions are strongly associated with their phenomenology, they are widely held to have other features including physical symptoms, appraisals, and motivational

² Following Strawson's influential article "Freedom and Resentment" (1962), philosophers sometimes use "resentment" to refer to anger at moral wrongdoing done to oneself or a group to which one belongs, and "indignation" to describe anger directed at moral wrongdoing done to some other individual or group. Resentment and indignation are claimed to be "cognitively sharpened" forms of anger in that they involve judgments about the distinctively moral responsibility of the target (D'Arms 2013). For present purposes, it is not necessary to focus on these terms and the associated distinctions. The arguments for and against anger would not be affected by restricting our focus to resentment or indignation.

tendencies.³ The elements of anger that are most important for present purposes are its appraisal and motivational tendencies.

The appraisal of anger includes a target and a focus (Nussbaum 2016, p. 17). The target is the agent who is perceived to have engaged in wrongdoing. The wrong in question need not be a *moral* wrong in the sense of involving the violation of a moral principle or duty. It is enough that the target harmed or threatened something that one cares about and did so willfully (or negligently) without a legitimate excuse. The valued object could be another person or a possession, but it can also be an abstract principle or ideal that is important to the aggrieved. The focus of anger is the act attributed to the target that ostensibly caused the damage. While anger's appraisal typically takes the form of a robust judgment, it sometimes manifests as a mere seeming or "seeing-as," perhaps even beneath the level of conscious thought (Nussbaum 2016, p. 263).⁴

The motivational tendency of anger is widely held to be retaliation, which can take many forms including desires for the target to experience physical harm, emotional pain, lowered social status, or financial hardship (Shaver et al. 1987; Keltner et al. 1993; Izard 1997; Barlow 2002; Haidt 2003; Nussbaum 2016; Kauppinen 2018). However, some philosophers have challenged the common view that the primary action-tendency or "aim" of anger is retaliation (Cherry 2019; Srinivasan 2018; Shoemaker 2018). Srinivasan argues that the true aim of anger is often not revenge but rather recognition. More specifically, she claims that anger manifests a desire for the transgressor to recognize the harm she has caused and to appreciate its moral significance. She illustrates this idea with the following example:

Suppose my friend betrays me, and I am angry with her. I might want revenge. But might I not want—have we not all wanted—the friend to recognize the pain she has caused me, the wrong she has done me? It might be that this sort of recognition itself involves suffering. If so, then in a sense, I want my friend to suffer. But I don't want her to suffer willy-nilly; my anger hardly calls out for her to break her leg, or fall ill. Rather I want her to experience that suffering that comes precisely from taking part in my own. (2018, p. 129)

It is true that when a friend betrays us, we typically desire for that person to fully understand the wrongness of what they have done. But this by itself is not sufficient to undermine the claim that anger essentially involves an attitude of animosity and a retaliatory impulse. When we are wronged, we tend to adopt a negative stance towards the offender that extends across time. During this period, we are prone to experience a variety of psychological states. In addition to anger, we may also experience disappointment, confusion, denial, embarrassment, disapproval, sadness, frustration, and regret. The desire for recognition that

³ The question of which features are essential is a matter of controversy. For an overview of the various competing views, see Scarantino and de Sousa (2018).

⁴ Here one might object that the targets of anger are often inanimate objects or naturally occurring events, such as when a person curses at a tree branch that fell on their car during a storm. A related worry is that human babies seemingly experience anger before they are cognitively developed enough to make attributions of wrongful conduct. In light of such concerns, Shoemaker (2018, p. 73) suggests that there are two distinct types of anger. Anger experienced by infants and adults responding to non-agential obstacles is dubbed "goal-frustration anger." This is contrasted with the type of anger that involves an appraisal of wrongdoing and inclines the agent towards confrontation or retaliation. The latter type is dubbed "blaming anger." Without taking a stand on whether these are two distinct types of anger, I shall follow the recent literature by focusing on anger directed at other agents.

Srinivasan describes can arise through these other responses, especially disappointment and disapproval. A key question, then, is how to distinguish anger from these other states. The most straightforward answer is that anger involves hostility and retaliatory motives. These hostile feelings and desires might be vague and fleeting, and we may not endorse them upon reflection (especially when the target is a loved one), but they are present nonetheless.

Srinivasan attempts to distinguish anger from disappointment by noting that anger presents its object as involving the violation of a normative expectation as opposed to a mere failure to act as one had hoped: “When I say that I am disappointed that you betrayed me, I imply that I wish you hadn’t; when I say, by contrast, that I’m angry that you betrayed me, I imply that you shouldn’t have” (2018, p. 128). But note that our disappointment can be accompanied by non-angry disapproval that implies that the agent acted wrongly. “I’m not angry with you, but I am extremely disappointed. You really shouldn’t have done that.” The best way to understand such statements is that while the agent is disappointed and disapproving of the other person’s wrongful conduct, she wants to stress that she does not harbor any animosity or desire for payback; in other words, she is not in a state of anger.

Shoemaker presents a similar challenge to the notion that anger essentially involves retaliatory motives. He appeals to psychological research to support the view that the fundamental action tendency of anger is communication. One study suggests that angered subjects care more about delivering a message to the offender than they do about merely seeing the offender suffer (Gollwitzer and Denzler 2009, p. 843). Another study found that the actions most closely associated with anger are to “say something nasty” and to “want to hurt someone” (Roseman et al. 1994). As Shoemaker notes, both of these action tendencies involve an expressive element that serves to communicate one’s anger to the transgressor (2018, p. 74).

While it is true that saying something nasty and causing injury are both means of communication, they are also means of retaliation. That a hostile desire for payback is at least as central to anger as the desire for communication is made evident by the fact that it is not just any method of communication that the angry individual desires. If I am in the throes of anger, I am not likely to be satisfied by the opportunity to, say, deliver a note that thoughtfully and objectively outlines the nature of the offense. This would not seem as satisfying because it is unlikely to harm the other person. Now, it is true that I would not be entirely satisfied by seeing the offender suffer from some peripheral cause; I would much prefer to “deliver the message” myself, even if the externally caused harm would have been more severe. Hence, there is indeed a communicative element to the motivations of anger. But given that the degree of satisfaction provided by the act of communication is tied to its harmfulness, we still have good reason to believe that retaliation is an essential goal of anger.

This brings us back to the crucial issue of how to distinguish anger from other responses to harmful or offensive behavior. As we have seen, it seems that the most plausible test involves asking whether the agent experiences any feelings of animosity or urges to retaliate. If the wronged agent experiences no such feelings, we have most reason to conclude that she is manifesting other attitudes or emotions such as disapproval, disappointment, sadness, regret, etc. If someone is genuinely angry, then the likelihood that their communicative act will discharge their anger increases precisely to the degree that it will feel like a form of retaliation. Hence, while Srinivasan and Shoemaker are right that anger typically involves a desire to communicate (which often includes a desire for recognition), the distinguishing

motivational tendency of anger (during the precise moments in which anger is being experienced) is a hostile desire for retaliation.⁵

In sum, anger is distinguished from similar states by its appraisal of wrongdoing and hostile feelings and motivations (which typically include a communicative desire alongside the desire for payback). With this characterization in mind, we can now turn to the normative assessment of anger.

2 The Consequences of Anger

Critics of anger are keen to point to its harmful effects. The consequence-based critique is perhaps most forceful in the work of Seneca:

With regard now to its damaging effects: no pestilence has been more costly for the human race. Butchery and poisoning, suits and countersuits, cities destroyed, entire nations wiped out, leading citizens sold on the auction block, dwellings put to the torch, then the blaze, unchecked by city walls, turning vast tracts of land bright with the attacking flame. Consider the cities of vast renown whose foundation stones can now hardly be made out: anger cast these cities down...Anger turns everything from what is best and most righteous to the opposite. It causes whoever has come into its clutches to forget his duty; make a father angry, he's an enemy; make a son angry, he's a parricide. Anger makes a mother a stepmother, a fellow citizen a foreign enemy, a king a tyrant. (2010, p. 15)

Proponents of anger respond by claiming that even if anger does play a causal role in so many horrible outcomes, properly harnessed anger can be beneficial. Anger can motivate us to stand up for ourselves or others who are victims of wrongdoing, and it signals our disapproval in a way that can have a deterrent effect (Cherry 2021; Wowra and McCarter 1999; Murphy 2003). Angry outbursts can also foster a sense of dignity and self-respect within the aggrieved (Reis-Dennis 2019). Hence, rather than jettisoning anger, we may be better off learning to control it so that it can be used for good rather than evil.

One worry about this line of response is that it relies on a very optimistic view of our ability to govern anger and reliably direct it towards good ends. Anger is among the emotions that most easily overwhelm us, and its distorting effects on judgment are well-documented. Anger introduces pronounced cognitive biases into our thinking, such as heuristic processing (i.e., relying on stereotypes), uncharitable construal (e.g., attributing malicious intent in

⁵ Some will insist that one can feel anger without experiencing any animosity or hostility towards the target. Cherry (2019) argues that anger is compatible with loving the target of one's anger and can even be an expression of that love. It is certainly true that we can be angry at people we love. But in the precise moments when we are experiencing a bout of anger, our attitude is colored by animus, even if we generally love the person at whom our anger is targeted. If there is no trace of animus, hostility, or momentary withdrawal of goodwill, it would be very strange to describe the emotional state as one of anger. That being said, I do not wish to quibble over whether one could legitimately apply the term 'anger' to such a state. For those who maintain that a non-hostile, animus-free emotional response can still qualify as anger, my arguments can be taken as applying narrowly to tokens of anger that do involve animosity. Even on this narrower construal, the project would still be of interest, as anger's defenders are typically happy to defend anger in its characteristically hostile form as long as it is fitting in the sense of comprising an accurate appraisal of wrongdoing.

ambiguous situations), outgroup prejudice, and hasty decision-making.⁶ These features of anger make it a blunt and unwieldy tool that often leads to misguided judgments and regrettable behavior. This isn't to say that every experience of anger leads to faulty decisions or loss of self-control. But given the very nature of anger, including its effects on judgment and problem solving, relying on anger as one's primary mode of responding to wrongdoing is an inherently risky strategy.⁷

This leads to the second and more important problem with the suggested reply to critics like Seneca, which is that the beneficial effects of anger are obtainable without it. An angry outburst may be one way of fostering self-respect in response to being wronged, but it is not the only way. As spiritual teachers and political leaders such as Gandhi, King, and Mandela argued and demonstrated, we can signal our disapproval of injustice and be motivated to fight against it without relying on feelings of animosity or a desire for revenge.⁸ Of course, not everyone has cultivated the sort of character that will allow them to effectively confront wrongdoers and unjust circumstances without a motivational boost from anger. In some cases, we may be glad that the agents in question are equipped with anger. But this is only because they are in the unfortunate circumstance of not having developed traits that would allow them to respond effectively without taking on the risks associated with anger.

Even if it is true that the overall effects of anger are a net negative, that is not enough by itself to settle the debate. As mentioned at the outset, the most compelling attempt to vindicate anger within recent philosophical discussions appeals to intrinsic merits rather than consequences. The next section outlines the central elements of this strategy.

3 The Fittingness Defense

Proponents of the Fittingness Defense do not challenge the claim that the effects of anger are overall bad. Instead, they argue that the aptness of anger is sufficient for vindicating the emotion even if it does lead to more harm than good. To assess this claim, we must first get clear on what it means for a token of anger to be fitting.⁹

The notion of fitting emotions is modeled on epistemic warrant. Emotions are similar to beliefs in that they involve appraisals that aim to accurately represent some state of affairs. As we have seen, anger involves an appraisal of wrongdoing. Such appraisals are not always correct. Consider the proverbial tyrant who angrily shoots the messenger upon receiving

⁶ For an overview of the research on these effects, see Litvak et al. (2010). See also Keltner et al. (1993) and Lerner and Tiedens (2006).

⁷ Refusing to acknowledge or express one's anger can lead to further problems down the road. Hence, the recommendation from anger's critics is not suppression but rather prevention. The goal is to become the sort of person for whom anger tends not to arise in the first place (and is quickly squelched if it does). Becoming immune from anger is no easy task, and complete inoculation is beyond the reach of most of us. But progress on this front is certainly possible. The anti-anger position argued for in this paper does not depend on the possibility of complete eradication; the claim is only that an ideally virtuous agent would not be prone to anger and that we should strive to approximate this ideal.

⁸ This is not to suggest that these figures were completely immune from anger. They did, however, recognize the power of non-angry responses to injustice and they successfully cultivated a general capacity to rely on alternative sources of motivation such as compassion, love of justice, and generosity of spirit. I revisit this point in Sects. 4 and 5 below.

⁹ For helpful discussion of the significance of the fittingness of emotions for ethics see D'Arms and Jacobson (2000).

bad news. The tyrant's anger comprises the judgment (or at least the "seeming") that the messenger is guilty of wrongfully harming the tyrant. But since the messenger was merely doing his job and did not do anything wrong, the appraisal is incorrect. This incorrectness renders the anger unjustified, but the lack of justification has nothing to do with consequences. Even if getting angry at the messenger for bringing bad news would have led to peace and prosperity throughout the world, there is still a sense in which the tyrant's anger would have been unwarranted.

One way of describing this lack of justification is to say that such anger is not fitting. Like beliefs, emotions such as anger aim to "fit" the world through an accurate appraisal. Hence, we can say that one's anger towards another is fitting (or apt) only if that person did in fact engage in wrongdoing (Srinivasan 2018, p. 129).

The fact that emotions can be evaluated in terms of their fittingness opens the door for a seemingly plausible defense of anger. For even if the overall effects of anger are bad, it remains true that many instances of anger are fitting in the relevant sense. We are thus left with the question of how to weigh consequence-based reasons against reasons of fit.¹⁰ Proponents of the Fittingness Defense concede that there will be some circumstances in which it is all-things-considered better for an agent not to experience anger in response to genuine wrongdoing—sometimes the costs to the agent or society are simply too great. They deny, however, that consequentialist considerations are decisive in all cases. Shoemaker puts the point as follows:

Suppose someone has harmed my child, or perhaps some egregious injustice has occurred. Yes, I may become a bit out of control, but here the strength of the fittingness reason in favor of blaming anger far outweighs the strength of the prudential reasons against it. Egregious injustice, we might think, demands righteous indignation, and this defeats wrong kinds of reasons [i.e. consequentialist reasons] otherwise in virtue, perhaps, of the degree to which the offender's quality of regard was poor. (2018, p. 77)

More generally, proponents of the Fittingness Defense maintain that the aptness of some tokens of anger is sufficient for undermining claims that anger is generally vicious and something that we ought to cultivate away. Indeed, it is claimed that anger "ought to play a key role in our interpersonal lives" (Shoemaker 2018, p. 84).

The argument for this conclusion begins with the claim that consequence-based reasons are not the only reasons that are relevant for the normative assessment of anger. Just as we should not focus on the practical effects of a particular belief in order to determine whether it is justified, neither should we focus exclusively on the practical effects of an emotion when

¹⁰ Some might argue that the very notion of weighing consequence-based reasons against reasons of fit makes no sense because the different types of reasons are incommensurable. However, what's at issue in the debate over anger is whether one ought to aim to be the type of person who experiences anger in response to wrongdoing. In answering this question, we must consider not only the effects of anger but also the importance of having fitting emotional responses. If anger is the only fitting emotional response to wrongdoing, then one might reasonably claim that this consideration tells in favor of cultivating anger rather than jettisoning it, even if doing so will lead to bad consequences. On the other hand, one might argue that when deciding which emotions to cultivate, consequences are all that matter (fittingness be damned). While I reject both of these claims, their coherence illustrates the point that a general comparison between fittingness and consequences makes sense in the present context.

considering whether it is justified.¹¹ Rather than looking solely at instrumental reasons for and against anger, we should also focus on the relevant intrinsic reasons. And, according to the Fittingness Defense, the intrinsic reasons for and against a token of anger are determined by the accuracy of the appraisal. When the target of one's anger did not do anything wrong, the intrinsic reasons render the anger unjustified. But when the target did in fact act wrongly, the anger is fitting in the sense that it involves an accurate appraisal.¹²

The value inhering in apt anger is best categorized as epistemic. As in the case of knowledge and true belief, the accurate appraisal of apt anger is claimed to be good in and of itself. But there is more to it than that. Srinivasan (2018, p. 132) argues that apt anger does not merely involve propositional knowledge that a normative violation has occurred, it also involves an *appreciation* of this fact. This is said to be analogous to aesthetic appreciation. Just as there seems to be an important difference between knowing that a work of art is beautiful and appreciating its beauty, so too is there an important difference between knowing that injustice has occurred and fully appreciating this fact. A properly cultivated aesthetic sense allows one to appreciate beauty, and, similarly, a properly cultivated capacity for anger is (ostensibly) what allows one to fully appreciate injustice. And just as someone who cannot experience appreciation when they encounter true beauty is missing something important, someone who does not experience anger in response to injustice is likewise missing something important: “[It] would be better, *ceteris paribus*, if [the agent] were capable of feeling anger towards the injustice she knows to exist” (2018, p. 132).

In sum, the Fittingness Defense is based on the idea that fitting emotional responses have a type of normative justification that stands independently of their effects. Since apt anger is a means of perceiving and appreciating wrongdoing, we cannot assume that instrumental reasons tell the whole story regarding the normative status of anger. Indeed, given the importance of recognizing and appreciating injustice, it would be a mistake to try to eradicate our capacity for anger. There may be some cases where the consequences of apt anger are so bad that it would be better not to experience it. But apt anger always has something significant counting in its favor, and this significance is likely to outweigh negative effects in some cases. While this argument raises important considerations, it faces significant problems. I shall now outline the primary reasons why I believe that the Fittingness Defense is unsuccessful.

4 Alternative Modes of Appreciation

The first problem with the Fittingness Defense is that its initial plausibility depends on the tacit assumption that anger is the only means by which we can accurately perceive and fully appreciate injustice and wrongdoing. While it's true that anger is the typical mode of perceiving and appreciating injustice, and that some tokens of anger are fitting in the sense

¹¹ On a strong interpretation of the Fittingness Defense, the suggestion is that consequentialist reasons are the “wrong kind of reasons” for having (or not having) an emotional response like anger. For discussion of the so-called wrong kind of reasons problem, see Rabinowicz and Ronnow-Rasmussen (2004).

¹² While recent discussions emphasize the correctness of appraisal as the central requirement for apt anger, there are additional plausible requirements such as that the intensity of the anger is proportional to the seriousness of the wrongdoing and that the aggrieved party is not guilty of similar wrongdoing and thus exhibiting hypocrisy.

outlined above, this does not imply that anger is the only available means of appreciating injustice or that anger is the sole fitting response to wrongdoing.

Consider first the suggestion that perception of wrongdoing requires anger. While the view that emotions are necessary for moral judgment is widely held, there are good reasons for skepticism. Recent empirical findings suggest that emotions such as anger are often absent when subjects make moral judgments about cases where the perpetrators and victims of wrongdoing are all strangers rather than valued others (McAuliffe 2019). These findings should not be all that surprising. The experience of making a moral judgment about a thought experiment without feeling emotions is familiar to most philosophers. Likewise, most people have had the experience of judging the wrongdoing of ancient historical figures, such as Nero or Caligula, without feeling anger. Or consider a case in which you judge that an action was wrong, but you are uncertain about the agent's motives. Such examples demonstrate that we do not need anger to recognize that wrongdoing or injustice has occurred.

But what about the claim that emotions such as anger are necessary for *appreciating* injustice and wrongdoing? The first question to ask regarding this claim is what exactly the notion of appreciation is meant to convey. In the case of aesthetic judgment, what does it mean to not only know that a painting is beautiful but also to appreciate its beauty? Presumably, this is largely a matter of being disposed to have certain feelings and motivations. When I appreciate the beauty of a painting, I experience certain pleasurable sensations and I feel motivated to spend time observing it and thinking about it. I might also be inclined to purchase the painting and I will likely be disposed to protect it from being damaged should a threatening circumstance arise (e.g. if someone intends to steal or destroy it).

There are a few different candidates for intrinsic value here. First, the pleasurable feelings associated with aesthetic appreciation are plausibly valuable in and of themselves. Second, there may be some intrinsic value in the attitude of caring about something important and the associated motivational dispositions. Third, there may be some special epistemic value inhering in the appreciation. In appreciating the beauty rather than merely knowing that the painting is beautiful, I seem to have a more complete understanding of the aesthetic facts, and this more complete understanding is perhaps valuable in and of itself.

Returning to the case of anger, we must ask: in what does the alleged appreciation of injustice consist? As we have seen, the angry individual experiences certain feelings, physical symptoms, and motivations, in addition to the appraisal of wrongdoing. Presumably, the reason why anger constitutes appreciation as distinct from the mere judgment of wrongdoing is that it involves distinctive phenomenology and motivational tendencies that do not arise within non-angry moral judgment. Here, again, the most plausible candidate for intrinsic value is the caring that is manifested by the motivations associated with the emotion. There is certainly value in one's caring about injustice and being motivated to do something about it that would not be present if one merely made the judgment that something unjust has occurred. And like the case of aesthetic appreciation, one might think that anger manifests a more complete understanding of the relevant ethical facts and that this epistemic feature is valuable for its own sake.

One reply to these considerations is simply to deny that there is anything valuable missing in the person who makes accurate judgments of wrongdoing without anger. There is no evidence that such a person's understanding of the ethical facts must be incomplete. Further, someone who is low in affect could conceivably still be motivated to fight injustice, perhaps out of a sense of duty similar to that of Kant's famous "cold philanthropist" (1996, p. 53).

In light of this, it is not obvious that there is any intrinsic value missing in the agent who correctly perceives injustice without experiencing emotions.

But suppose it is true that a cold and detached agent could not be reliably motivated or could not have a complete understanding of injustice. Even if this were the case, it would not follow that anger is necessary for appreciation. Anger is not the only affect-laden mode of responding to injustice and wrongdoing. Someone who has successfully cultivated away her anger is not left with mere cold cognition. She can, after all, feel deep compassion for the victims and a strong desire to help them recover. She can be motivated to express strong disapproval of the wrongful action and issue normative demands to the offender (e.g., demanding an apology and a commitment to not repeating the offense).¹³ At the same time, she can also feel sympathy for the transgressor, recognizing that (at least at the time of the transgression) he was in a seriously defective state and that this was likely at least partly the result of bad luck. She can also be motivated to help the transgressor improve and take measures to prevent similar wrongs in the future.¹⁴ It would be strange to insist that someone who experiences these emotions and desires does not appreciate the significance of what happened or that they are missing something of intrinsic value.¹⁵

Here one might object that it is unrealistic to expect someone to be fully capable of experiencing sympathy and compassion for victims without also being disposed to feel anger towards those who harmed them. While I grant that the relevant combination of affective dispositions is neither common nor easily achieved, we should not assume that it is impossible. There is ample empirical evidence showing that we are capable of diminishing our susceptibility to anger through various forms of spiritual practice, philosophical reflection, and psychotherapy (Wright et al. 2009; Henwood et al. 2015; Robertson 2019). Such emotional training often involves learning to pay closer attention to one's mental states and thinking carefully about one's values. It also involves remaining mindful of one's own flaws as well as the role that luck and happenstance play in leading anyone (including oneself) to engage in wrongdoing. There is little reason to believe that when this sort of training is successful in minimizing or eradicating one's proclivity to anger it must also result in decreased love and concern for other people.

A second objection is that, even if emotions such as sympathy and compassion can motivate us to take action in response to wrongdoing, anger is often the only adequate means of communication. Srinivasan claims that we need anger to effectively signal our disapproval to the transgressor and to publicly call for others to share in our negative appreciation of the wrongdoing (2018, 132).

Here, again, there is a danger of sliding from the fact that anger is the typical means of obtaining an important good to the conclusion that it is the only effective means of obtaining

¹³ Nussbaum describes an emotion called "transition-anger" in which the entire content of the emotion is, "How outrageous! Something must be done about this" (2016, pp. 35–37). While Nussbaum's label is somewhat misleading since the emotion in question seems not to be a type of anger, her discussion is helpful nonetheless.

¹⁴ Pereboom (2009, p. 173) appeals to the emotion of "moral sadness" to illustrate the point that anger is neither optimal nor required for communication in interpersonal relationships. See also Pettigrove (2012).

¹⁵ None of these remarks imply that the victim of wrongdoing must maintain their relationship with the transgressor. One can maintain an attitude of goodwill towards another person while also deciding that it would be better to sever the relationship (Holmgren 2014). Nor am I advocating pressuring victims of wrongdoing into showing compassion towards those who wronged them. Being a victim of significant harm is difficult, and it takes a significant amount of effort (as well as good fortune) to become the sort of agent who can effectively respond to wrongs without any withdrawal of goodwill. But I do believe that such efforts are worth making.

that good. Anger may be our default mode of marking moral disvalue and calling for shared negative appreciation from others, but that does not imply that there are no good alternatives. To take a historical example, when Marcus Aurelius was preparing to confront his top general, Avidius Cassius, who had betrayed Marcus and jeopardized the stability of the empire, he informed his legions that his greatest desire was to show clemency towards Cassius and his men. If they did not surrender, blood would have to be spilled. But this was to be done not from vengeance but rather from a desire to protect Rome (Robertson 2019, pp. 226–27). This commitment to avoiding anger did not inhibit Marcus's ability to express his disapproval and to call for others to share in it—he was still preparing his men for a bloody confrontation. The same can be true for any of us, whether we are facing serious atrocities or more mundane transgressions. In the famous words of Gandhi, “When I say we should not resent, I do not say we should acquiesce” (Mishra 2015, p. 46). If someone betrays, robs, or assaults us, we should express to that person, as well as any witnesses, that such behavior will not be tolerated. In some cases, it may be necessary to use physical force. But there is nothing to prevent us from taking such actions in a spirit of compassion and clemency rather than enmity.

A third objection holds that anger is necessary for showing proper respect towards the wrongdoer (Murphy 2003; Kauppinen 2018). The suggestion is that respecting another person requires a willingness to hold them accountable, and that anger is the means by which this is accomplished. If you fail to get angry and instead treat the other person as a mere nuisance to be managed, you reveal that you do not respect them.

Treating someone as though they are akin to a mosquito or inclement weather is certainly disrespectful. But a non-angry response to wrongdoing need not manifest such a dismissive attitude. Recall the earlier example of an anger-free expression of disapproval and disappointment: “I’m not angry, but I am disappointed. You really shouldn’t have done that.” Such a response does not indicate a lack of respect—the acknowledgment of disappointment implies that the agent expected more from the other person, which is a sign of respect. Likewise, the attribution of wrongdoing shows that the other person is viewed as an agent. Further, note that the speaker might add “I’m not happy about what you did, but I still love and respect you. I know that you are a good person, and I haven’t lost my faith in you.” Despite the lack of anger, nobody could seriously claim that this sort of response shows a lack of respect.¹⁶

Taking stock, we have seen that defenders of anger posit a normative conflict between the aim of producing good outcomes (which is often made easier by avoiding anger) and the aim of appreciating and marking the world as it is (which ostensibly requires anger). This is a false dichotomy. We can appreciate and acknowledge injustice perfectly well without anger. Since we can get the relevant epistemic, motivational, and communicative benefits without anger, it seems wise to pursue these alternatives and avoid risking the bad outcomes associated with anger. But this isn’t the end of the case against anger and the Fittingness Defense. Proponents of the Fittingness Defense rely on a second faulty assumption, which is that the only considerations against fitting anger are instrumental. As I explain in the next

¹⁶ One might think that anger is a necessary element of having proper respect for the victim of wrongdoing. This is also misguided. If someone is seriously wronged, I can exhibit respect by providing emotional and physical support while also denouncing the wrongful act (publicly as well as privately) and taking whatever steps that are necessary to ensure that it does not happen again. None of this requires anger.

section, there are reasons for believing that even fitting anger has *intrinsic* disvalue. If this is right, then we have even more reason to cultivate away our anger.

5 Intrinsic Disvalue

One way of seeing that fitting emotions can be disvaluable independently of their effects is to consider examples of other emotions traditionally viewed as negative such as envy. The appraisal of envy is that another person possesses something desirable (e.g. wealth, social status) that one would like to possess oneself. Hence, my envy is fitting in the relevant sense just so long as the other person really does possess the desirable object or attribute that I lack.

Obviously, the fact that my appraisal is accurate is not sufficient to vindicate my envy—few would attempt to defend envy on these grounds. And note that envy strikes us as problematic primarily because of its *intrinsic* qualities. Envy reflects an orientation towards other people that is self-centered rather than generous and loving. Rather than delighting in the success and good fortune of others, the envious person focuses on her relative lack of success while wishing that the target of her envy was not so fortunate. This combination of self-centeredness and lack of goodwill is something that everyone is susceptible to, yet most of us still consider it an ugly response that we should aim to eliminate.¹⁷ The fact that we reject envy as unjustified on intrinsic grounds, even when it appraises correctly, shows that aptness alone does not ensure the vindication of an emotion.¹⁸

A key question, then, is whether anger is like envy in being objectionable due to its intrinsic qualities. I believe that a strong case can be made for an affirmative answer to this question. Before outlining this case, I should clarify that my central argument does not depend on anger being intrinsically disvaluable. If the problems with anger are only in its effects, then the fact that we can attain the benefits of anger via other responses that don't have the associated risks is a sufficient reason to opt for those other responses. The aim of the present section is thus twofold: (1) to provide additional reasons for jettisoning anger that some readers will find persuasive (though some may not); and (2) to illustrate the point that anger's defenders are mistaken in framing the debate as a matter of weighing anger's harmful effects against its intrinsic merits while ignoring the reasons for believing that anger is intrinsically problematic.

The first and most obvious respect in which anger might seem intrinsically disvaluable is that it involves a degree of animosity towards its target. Recall that what distinguishes anger from states like disappointment and disapproval are feelings of hostility and the desire for payback. These attitudes can be fleeting and may not be endorsed upon reflection. But even a fleeting and unendorsed attitude of ill will towards another human being is arguably

¹⁷ For a qualified defense of envy, see Protasi (2021).

¹⁸ Shoemaker's distinction between "blaming anger" and "goal-frustration anger" (see note 4) is instructive for the present discussion. A token of goal-frustration anger is fitting (in the relevant sense) just when it is true that the target of the emotion (some object, agent, or event) has frustrated the agent's goal. But few would argue that goal-frustration anger can be vindicated by the fact that it involves an accurate appraisal. Presumably, everyone would agree that we ought to cultivate away the childish tendency to get angry whenever things do not go our way. And as with envy, we do not need to appeal to bad effects to see that goal-frustration anger is objectionable. This further illustrates the point that aptness is not enough for justification, and that the reasons against certain emotions are not just instrumental but also intrinsic.

of intrinsic disvalue (even if they really have done something wrong). If another person has wronged me, I should certainly disapprove of her conduct, and I may reasonably make the continuing of our relationship conditional upon her disavowing the transgression and committing to not repeating it. I might even desire that she undergo a process of rehabilitation that will likely be unpleasant. But this desire is plausibly justified only if it is part of a general desire for the other person's flourishing and perhaps also for the mending of the relationship. If I experience feelings of animosity or a withdrawal of goodwill, I manifest an attitude that is arguably disvaluable independently of its consequences (Holmgren 2014).¹⁹

Here one might object that if a person has done something seriously wrong or has displayed corrupt character over an extended period, there is nothing problematic about having genuine hostility towards them. It is tempting to think that those who commit grave acts of injustice or cruelty have forfeited their status as beings for whom goodwill and sympathy ought to be directed. If so, then presumably there would be nothing intrinsically disvaluable about anger.

To see why we might reasonably judge anger to be of intrinsic disvalue even in the case of the worst offenders, we can start by considering all the anxiety, confusion, and insecurity that afflicts bad actors simply by virtue of their being human. Psychological suffering is an inherent feature of human existence, and any given transgressor has undoubtedly endured emotional pain regularly during their lives (as all of us have). Consider also how undesirable it is to end up being the sort of individual who commits depraved acts or has a vicious character. No reasonable person would seek to trade places with such an individual, regardless of how much power, status, or wealth they possess. To feel animosity towards those who are already in such a wretched condition seems excessive and cruel. With these points in mind, the idea that transgressors could completely lose their status as beings towards whom we ought to extend sympathy and goodwill seems highly suspect. Again, we may desire that they be punished as a matter of deterrence or rehabilitation. But this is compatible with maintaining a strong desire for their flourishing and never feeling anger towards them.²⁰

A second respect in which anger may be intrinsically disvaluable is that it manifests a lack of psychological harmony and self-mastery. Many of the world's great wisdom traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Taoism, place a premium on maintaining a state of inner peace. Such tranquility is not a matter of being entirely devoid of thoughts and feelings, and it does not require apathy or inactivity. The virtuous agent, according to this type of view, can still experience states like loving kindness, joy, gratitude, compassion, respect, disapproval, forgiveness, perspective-taking, love of justice, a sense of duty, etc. What such agents are not susceptible to are psychological disturbances in the form of emotions such as grief, envy, fear, and anger.²¹

¹⁹ My anger would still be fitting in the sense of involving an accurate appraisal of wrongdoing. What I am suggesting here is that even fitting anger can be objectionable on *non-instrumental* grounds.

²⁰ Epictetus articulates these points better than I can: "Try putting the question this way: 'Shouldn't we rid ourselves of people deceived about what's most important, people who are blind – not in their faculty of vision, their ability to distinguish white from black – but in the moral capacity to distinguish good from bad?' Put it that way, and you'll realize how inhumane your position is. It is as if you were to say, 'Shouldn't this blind man, and this deaf man, be executed? Because if loss of the greatest asset involves the greatest harm, and someone is deprived of their moral bearings, which is the most important capacity they have – well, why add anger to their loss? If you must be affected by other people's misfortunes, show them pity instead of contempt'" (2008, p. 46).

²¹ I present an argument for jettisoning fear in Paytas (2021).

Preserving equanimity is obviously valuable from a hedonic point of view, especially insofar as it is still compatible with positive emotions like joy and gratitude. But the value of serenity need not be understood solely in these terms—there is also a case to be made that it is a mark of human excellence. The individual who does not respond to events or the actions of others by becoming despondent, envious, anxious, or angry is someone who has successfully cultivated an admirable form of self-mastery that makes them resilient against the chaos of human existence. Just as such equanimity seems valuable for its own sake, the failure to maintain one's inner peace by experiencing anger is arguably a source of intrinsic disvalue (even if the anger involves an accurate appraisal of wrongdoing).

One might resist these claims of intrinsic disvalue by noting that anger is a way of hating the bad and that hating the bad is a manifestation of virtue. According to credible theories of virtue championed by philosophers such as Adams (2006) and Hurka (2001), virtue is a type of excellence in being positively disposed towards the good and negatively disposed towards the bad. But while it is plausible that the virtuous person will be negatively oriented towards the bad, this does not mean that the virtuous person will be disposed to experience anger. The suggestion that hating the bad is part of virtue needs to be qualified.

A virtuous agent will strongly disapprove of wrongful actions, and she will be motivated to fight against injustice. But this does not require having animosity towards the person who committed the transgression. Indeed, when we consider some of the historical figures who are widely considered to have exemplified virtue—Siddhārtha Gautama, Socrates, Jesus of Nazareth, Marcus Aurelius, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela—one thing they have in common is that they seemingly made progress in eradicating (or at least mitigating) their susceptibility to anger, and they urged others to try to do the same. And note that the negative assessment of anger expressed and exhibited by these individuals did not prevent them from having the appropriate degree of disapprobation towards wrongdoing and injustice; nor did it make them passive or inactive. These exemplars actively sought to eradicate injustice and promote the general good either through spiritual teaching, political action, or both.

In sum, there are reasons for believing that the problems with anger are not restricted to harmful effects—there is also a case for intrinsic disvalue in the angry person's hostility and lack of equanimity (even if the anger is fitting in the sense of involving an accurate appraisal of wrongdoing). That being said, attributions of intrinsic value and disvalue are inevitably controversial, and I do not expect everyone to be convinced that anger is disvaluable for its own sake. What I hope to have made clear in this section is that it is a mistake to assume that the only relevant non-instrumental consideration pertaining to the normative status of anger is the correctness of the appraisal. The normative debate over anger is not merely a matter of weighing harmful consequences against the epistemic value of angry appreciation of injustice. We must also consider what at least appear to be intrinsically disvaluable features of anger.

Given that anger is not necessary for appreciating and responding effectively to injustice, we have strong reasons to cultivate away our anger so as to avoid its harmful effects. Further, by learning to respond to wrongdoing with a type of moral concern characterized by compassion, respect, and humility rather than anger, we can take the necessary actions without exhibiting attitudes and motives that may be disvaluable in themselves.²²

²² To be clear, I am not arguing that the bad consequences of anger and its (ostensible) intrinsic disvalue bear on its fittingness. My central claim is that fittingness itself is not sufficient for vindicating anger.

6 Conclusion

I have outlined three important mistakes that motivate the Fittingness Defense and the general pro-anger outlook that is prevalent among contemporary philosophers. First, anger's defenders mistakenly suggest that hostility is not a distinguishing feature of anger. This mistake arises partly because human responses to wrongdoing are diachronic and multifarious, and we often misleadingly describe our stance towards an offender as one of anger even when what we are experiencing at that moment is a different state such as disappointment or disapproval. Second, there is a general error in the assumption that, since anger is the typical mode of appreciating and responding to wrongdoing, it must be the only effective mode. As I have argued, there are numerous affect-laden responses available that can allow us to appreciate injustice and be motivated to fight against it without having to experience any withdrawal of goodwill towards our fellow human beings. Third, there is a general tendency among ethical theorists and moral psychologists to assume that if an emotion is fitting in the sense of involving an accurate appraisal, the only reasons which could count against it are instrumental. As we have seen, the case against anger is not limited to an appeal to bad consequences.

There is one motivation for the Fittingness Defense that I have not addressed. As Srinivasan rightly points out, critiques of anger are sometimes used for pernicious purposes. Those who occupy a position of power typically aim to maintain it, and one strategy for keeping others subjugated is to convince them that an angry revolt would only make their situation even more unfavorable. What's worse is that such "counterproductivity critiques" are often accurate in their assessment of the ineffectiveness of anger. Srinivasan suggests that, in such cases, oppressors commit a distinctive type of injustice. By forcing the oppressed to choose between prudentially avoiding anger or having a fitting emotional response to their circumstances, the oppressors are guilty of "affective injustice" (2018, 135).

While I share in the condemnation of those who utilize critiques of anger as a means of manipulating and subjugating marginalized individuals, in the context of a normative evaluation of anger, the focus on these duplicitous motivations is a red herring. First, note that of the moral exemplars who were most critical of anger, a majority were victims of social or political oppression—Socrates and Jesus were wrongfully executed, Epictetus was a former slave, and King and Mandela were targets of racial violence and discrimination. This directly undermines any suggestion that anti-anger arguments are merely a tool used by the powerful to maintain their dominance. What is perhaps even more damning to this notion is the fact that the most politically powerful among anger's critics, Marcus Aurelius, directed his stern critique of anger not at the citizens over which he ruled but rather at himself in his private journal.

Second, and more to the point, our reasons for eradicating anger from human relations are not about those in power maintaining their dominance over the oppressed. As we have seen, the philosophical case against anger comprises a variety of considerations, both instrumental and intrinsic. Anger is harmful not only to its target but also to the aggrieved and society as a whole. It also comprises attitudes and motivations that are plausibly understood as inherently disvaluable (even when it makes an accurate appraisal of wrongdoing). Moreover, it is simply not true that we must rely on anger in order to appreciate injustice and be motivated to resist it. No matter what position in society we happen to occupy, our goal should be to maintain a spirit of respect, generosity, and kindness, even towards those who

have harmed us. But this does not mean that we must be docile and afraid to take action. Kindness is not weakness.²³

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