

Anger and Moral Struggle in Response to Structural Injustice

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“Anger is a form of heartbreak, yes it is.”

—Hayes 2018, 60

“Our anger was a fury sparked by profound injustices. Wrongs that deserved ire. And with that rage we ripped a hole in the status quo.”

—Heumann 2020, 162

“Anger [is] potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. . . . Anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification.”

—Lorde 1984, 118

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the relationship between anger and flourishing in light of structural injustice. Even when anger is an appropriate response to structural injustice, it can carry significant personal cost. In non-ideal circumstances, anger may be morally required even though it detracts from personal flourishing. Drawing on Lisa Tessman's work, I argue that anger at structural injustice, even if we are not among those against whom the injustice is directed, can be a burdened virtue. I extend Tessman's analysis to show how burdened virtues can arise in response to particularly structural injustices, and explicitly note additional burdens that can arise in such instances.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the relationship between anger and flourishing in light of structural injustice. Anger at individual wrongful acts might require reparative work; but it would no longer be proper once the situation has been rectified or the perpetrator of that action has sought forgiveness and made restitution. The situation is far more complex when anger is in response to structural injustices, which cannot be corrected so easily. In a recent paper, Sally Haslanger differentiates between systems and structures as follows: structures are “the networks of relations that hold between the parts” that compose it, while a system is a “historically particular, concrete, dynamic” instantiation of a more general structure (Haslanger 2023, 3). Individuals within a social system, whether it be a family or school, are positioned in light of facts about their identities or perceived identities, as well as contingent hierarchies. Within a particular system, some individuals are especially vulnerable or advantaged relative to their place in the system rather than in virtue of facts about them *qua* individuals. According to Haslanger, “when vulnerability turns into social hierarchy oppression occurs; when hierarchy loops back to create increased vulnerability and further entrench hierarchy, oppression is systemic” (Haslanger 2023, 13). We can thus think, at least at a certain level of generality, of a social structure as unjust when its internal arrangement functions to encourage, reproduce, and reinforce unjust treatment toward one or more individuals or groups in that structure.

Anger aimed at such structures can be an instance of what Myisha Cherry calls ‘political anger’ (Cherry 2022a, 4; see also Lyman 1981). Given the nature of structural injustices, the action that anger may motivate us to take may not be able to right the wrong our anger is responding to.¹ Our anger may nonetheless have a political function in that it leads to a plethora of political goods: solidarity, public love of the good, motivational arousal, political engagement, communicative witness against injustice, holding to account, and resistance. Furthermore, assuming some sort of virtue ethic, it may be that anger in such conditions is morally appropriate. That is, virtue may sometimes demand anger. On such a normative framework, a puzzle arises. For suppose that there is a virtue of appropriate anger directed at structural injustice. Virtue is supposed to contribute to individual well-being, or flourishing,² rather than detract from it.³ Chronically sustained anger in the face of structural injustice, even if appropriate or politically good, looks to be bad for us *qua* individuals insofar as it doesn’t contribute to and plausibly detracts from our well-being given the pain and the burden that result. This might lead us to wonder how we are to be properly angry in the face of structural injustice without that anger undermining individual well-being and getting in the way of personal flourishing. Or, to quote Macalester Bell, “how [can] one could defend a virtue of appropriate anger in the grossly non-ideal conditions that characterize life under oppression” (2009, 165)? This paper argues that under non-ideal circumstances,

the demands of virtue can require anger of us even if that anger detracts from our well-being. Drawing on the work of Lisa Tessman (2005), it argues that anger at structural injustice, even if we are not among those against whom the injustice is directed, can be a burdened virtue. While this paper largely agrees with Tessman's work, it goes beyond her analysis by showing an increased range of cases and nuance of application. Most importantly, the present paper shows how burdened virtues can arise specifically in response to structural injustices. It also explicitly notes a number of additional burdens that arise in such cases.

2. Anger and Love under Non-ideal Constraints from Unjust Social Structures

It will be helpful, as we progress, to have in mind an example of the kind of structural injustice that raises this issue. While examples can be found in a number of social domains, responses to disability provide a plethora of examples. Consider the kinds of systemic hurdles that had to be cleared to make discrimination against disabled people illegal in the United States with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Or consider the difficulties faced to ensure that disabled students in the United States receive a "free appropriate public education," as currently required by federal law. While the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) was initially passed in 1975, it is well documented that many public schools across the country simply fail to follow state and federal law, not to mention best educational practices, with respect to their disabled students. In the 2022 determination report of state implementation of *IDEA* by the federal Department of Education, only 21 were found to meet the requirements of that law. Given the enforcement and corrective procedures laid out in the ADA and IDEA, it is far too easy for school districts to get away with providing less than they are legally required to. This situation is deserving of our anger, not just for particular acts of injustice committed by individual schools but also for the way the whole public educational structure and its incentives are set up. (For discussions of how the US's special education system is problematic in its structure and its reliance on parents for enforcement, see Timpe 2024 and Timpe2022.) The burden to ensure that schools provide the federally required education for disabled students often falls on parents and advocates, working through state complaint processes, given that the disabled students who are treated unjustly are not positioned to do that advocacy work themselves—often at significant temporal, emotional, and financial cost (Wang et al. 2004; Rosetti et al. 2021). The need to advocate for the treatment the ADA and IDEA seek to require, and the way that public schools and accommodations respond to it, can cause significant family distress while also being shown to correlate with the disabled students receiving better educational and public services. According to Priya Lalvani and Chris Hale, parents' efforts to get

their children access to a proper educational environment “was met with institutional barriers . . . or that they had to ‘fight’ for inclusive education” (Lalvani and Hale 2015, 5).⁴ And while this is a widespread problem, the general phenomenon extends much more widely than just special education and disability advocacy. There’s a wide range of social structures that treat vulnerable people unjustly and routinely get away with it. Given the way our world is, anger is at least often a proper response to such structural injustice.

Anger at injustice is often rooted in love; such anger can be a response to the fact that the person we love has been violated in a way, that they have failed to be treated as they ought to be. In an excellent paper, Barrett Emerick argues that certain theoretical accounts of love, if not considered carefully but instead simply as slogans, can “encourage inaction by suggesting that individuals’ responsibility is adequately discharged simply by being differently oriented to oppressed others or by letting things unfold naturally” (2021, 327). These understandings of love, such as sentimentalism or a fate view according to which ‘love always wins,’ can lead to a quietism that won’t do the hard work to address the injustice faced by those we love. Such inaction, Emerick writes, “is totally understandable: there is so much injustice in the world that having to take on the task of working to make it better is terribly overwhelming. It is therefore very tempting to adopt a world-view that relieves you of that responsibility” (2021, 339–40). Though he doesn’t explicitly consider it, we might also worry that these approaches to love free us from the responsibility of anger. But if we think of love as involving union, where “you share in the fate of the one love” (Emerick 2021, 329) then love can require us to be at least disposed to work on behalf of those we love. If we are united with them in love, their concerns become our concerns. In an important sense, what happens to them happens to us given our love. On this view, Emerick suggests, we are to be deeply implicated in work on behalf of those we love, including the work of moral anger. I’m inclined to think that such anger isn’t enough even if it’s sometimes necessary. If we’re angry, even appropriately, but not moved by that anger to address the injustice then we’re not loving in the way that we should. Love should motivate us to action. Love’s demands are not impersonal, or at least not purely impersonal. We need to address injustice, not only but especially towards those we love and have an obligation to care for: “This is a special obligation that I bear to those that I love in particular, rather than an impersonal obligation that I bear to others in general, because it is within loving relationships that I can satisfy the obligation” (Emerick 2016, 4). So, if I recognize that a school system is failing to give a child the educational opportunities they deserve and the power dynamics between the school staff and family are being leveraged to prevent the student and parents from playing an equal role in deciding what’s best for the student, anger can be part of the virtuous response.

One can see that anger might be a morally appropriate response to injustice by drawing on Robert C. Roberts' account of emotions as 'concern-based construals.'

To say that emotions are concern-based construals is to say that they are states in which the subject grasps, with a kind of perceptual immediacy, a significance of his or her situation. Emotions are interpretative. . . . They are affected by what the subject cares about, what is important to him or her; and many emotions tend to move their subjects to action in a way that is suggested by the concern that is basic to the emotion, along with the particular way of construing the situation that the emotion involves. (Roberts 2009, 11)

Suppose that we grasp, in the way Roberts describes, the presence of a pattern of action or treatment by a social structure and interpret it, accurately, as indicative of injustice. Moral anger, like other emotions, can serve as a 'moral messenger' that things are not as they should be, a way of registering the injustice (MacLachlan 2010, 342; and Srinivasan 2018, 32). Our concern with the recipient of that injustice helps move, or motivate, us toward action. This way of thinking about the connection between appropriate anger and injustice also resonates with Cherry's view that love "is not only compatible with [moral] anger, but finds valuable expression in such anger. . . . Anger can be used in the serve of agape [love]; for in desiring resistance to injustice through agape, anger can help achieve this goal" (Cherry 2019, 157 and 163).⁵ Love, on her view, "desires the common good, resistance to injustice, and restoration of the beloved community" (Cherry 2019, 158) that has been harmed. Many of the parents who need to do the kind of advocacy work being explored here do so because their children's learning environments position them as other. Parental love for their children involves a concern that their worth be recognized, rather than devalued, by the systems that are supposed to support them (Lalvani and Hale 2015, 7). Anger is rooted in the conviction that these students deserve better and are being treated unjustly (Spelman 1996, 266). Failure to be angry as an outgrowth of love is an instance of what Lisa Tessman calls a 'meta-vice: a dispositional "indifference to the (preventable and unjust) suffering of certain others" (2005, 77), namely the beloved.

There are certainly moral dangers involved with the emotion of anger, which have been well explored by scholars within the virtue ethics tradition.⁶ Even when anger results from unjust social structures, it can become excessive in a number of ways: too strong, directed at the wrong agent, too slow to forgive, etc. . . . While I affirm these ways that anger can go wrong morally, I also agree with Zac Cogley that "virtue can require great anger" (2014, 200),⁷ and think that unjust social structures are plausible candidates of a morally appropriate target of such virtuous anger.

While we need to take steps to avoid our anger from becoming vicious even when directed at unjust social structures, in what follows I want to set aside the ways that anger can go wrong and restrict my discussion to what Myisha Cherry refers to as 'moral anger' (2019, 160), instances of anger that are the result of the

exercise of a virtue.⁸ (Since later I focus primarily on instances of moral anger that are directed at unjust structures, such anger will also be political anger as described before.) Moral anger, so understood, is “a *fitting* response to how things are” (Srinivasan 2018, 127) for intrinsic and not merely instrumental reasons.

Moral anger thus is an important source of motivation to work toward moral improvement, to engage in activities that fight against injustice. As Ruth Groenhout notes, it can be the case that “the emotional response provides the impetus for calling for social change. . . . If we care about these issues, we will be motivated to work for social change” (2004, 114). In such cases, misguided fear of political anger gone wrong can prevent us from taking actions that could lead to the correction of structural injustices. Along these lines, Black activist Rachel Ricketts writes that “I channel my righteous rage into action” (2021, xviii). Anger motivates not only for individual moral progress, but for political progress as well (if the two can, in fact, be separated).⁹ Moral anger is often needed as a necessary contributor to communal or social goods in non-ideal circumstances. Numerous feminist scholars (Cherry 2019; Bell 2009; Spelman 1996; Lorde 1984; and Frye 1983) have noticed how moral anger can often also be political anger that contributes to political improvement. Anger can serve as a form of resistance to structural injustice. And that anger, when felt by collectively by a group, can contribute to group efforts to “organize collectively to dismantle systemic injustice and working to set right particular harms caused by agent injustice” (Delmas 2018, 16). Cherry, for instance, gives anger a central role to play in collective anti-racism activism and resistance in *A Case for Rage*. Céline Leboeuf (2018) holds that anger can awaken people to the presence of oppression, helping bring about reflection on oppressive conditions. Similarly, many disability advocates also attest to the role of anger in achieving progress, even if incomplete, for disability-based civil rights (see, for instance, Heumann 2020, Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, Barnes 2010, Baynton 2001, and Shapiro 1994).

Anger at structural injustice then is not only not always vicious, but sometimes an expression of virtue. Anger can be a morally appropriate response to injustice because of both its expressive and motivational roles in moving us to work against the injustice. Since the injustice is a function of the social structure and not just individual actors or behaviors, the actions that our anger motivates us to do might not actually fix the problem. Social structures are hard to overthrow. And so the situation we find ourselves in, both with regard to the injustice and the anger, may be chronic.

Thinking about unjust social structures in this way puts us in the realm of non-ideal theory, at least in some senses of that phrase. According to Charles Mills, “what distinguishes ideal theory is the reliance on idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual” (2005, 166). Laura Valentini differentiates three distinct meanings given to the ‘ideal’ vs. ‘non-ideal’ contrast: full compliance vs. partial compliance, utopian vs. realistic, and end-state vs. transitional (2012,

654; she primarily has political philosophy in mind, though much of what she says also applies to issues in ethics). In each of these three contrasts, there's a sense in which the first option is a kind of 'idealization' that may not be able to properly guide our theorizing or actions in real-world scenarios. Each of the three contrasts is best understood as delineating a range or spectrum of approaches, being more or less idealistic along a continuum. Particular theories can be more or less idealized than others, even if neither is a perfect idealization. Among realistic views, we can differentiate between the degree to which relevant considerations should be restricted by real-world constraints.

It's the second and third of these types of idealization that Valentini differentiates that are most relevant here. As she further describes the second contrast, "the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory focuses on the question of whether feasibility considerations should constrain normative political theorizing and, if so, what sorts of feasibility constraints should matter" (2012, 654). Clearly structurally unjust institutions are not utopian. But under non-ideal circumstances, we can't ensure that virtues, particularly those required to push back against unjust social structures, will always contribute to the agent's well-being (see Tessman 2005, 107). Here someone might object that 'we should be angry, but not let it negatively affect us.' Such a response strikes me as utopian in a problematic way. And as I address in the next section, a key role for anger to play is in motivating transitional work to get our social structures to be more just than they are at present. While ideal theory might have its place, especially as a needed element to help establish the goal that we're working toward, in working to achieve that goal we're "inevitably constrained by the empirical reality that already defines the practices" (Kittay 2009, 125). If we want our end-state social structures to be just, we have to pay attention on how to move them closer to that goal even if we'll ever get there (see Norlock 2018). Advocacy can be "the point of entry" for the work to bring about, or at least try to, the transition toward justice.¹⁰ And that point of entry will often involve and be motivated by anger.

3. The Challenge: Anger that Detracts from Well-being

I argued that having the proper disposition toward moral anger, and being motivated by it to engage in building more just social structures, can thus plausibly be understood as a virtue. However, for the virtue tradition, the virtues, as kinds of excellences, are supposed to be intrinsically good for the individuals that have them, and not just good for their communities. And while this aspect of virtue is often stressed when theorizing about the nature of the virtues, thinking about the virtues in non-ideal contexts highlights that we can't always take this for granted. Roberts notes this tension when he writes that

while I think an easy case can be made that the community's well-being is improved by virtuous members of that community (and individual vice detracting from the community's flourishing), I want to focus on the well-being of the individuals themselves. (Roberts 2015, 36)

In struggling for justice, we care for the well-being of those whose lives we're seeking to make better. But presumably we also care for our own well-being, for we too are part of the moral community. The kinds of unjust social structures that I have in mind, and the need for long-term sustained moral anger as a morally appropriate response, seem to threaten the well-being of the person who is in a state of long term or chronic anger at them in terms of one's mental health and threats to one's physical and moral health. In the course of writing about the need for her to engage in advocacy for the value of her daughter Sesha along with other cognitively impaired individuals, Eva Kittay notes that there are "specific challenges facing someone in my position" (2010, 398f). Among these challenges is the need to "overcome the anger and revulsion that one feels when encountering the view that one's disabled child—or child with a particular disability—is less worthy of dignity, of life, of concern or justice than others" (Kittay 2010, 398f). What we can recognize in such situations is that "the traits that enable resistance [to ableism and other forms of disability-based injustice] and the traits that enable human flourishing often fail to coincide" (Tessman 2005, 114). Given the structural injustice, failing to be pained and angered by the situation would involve a failing of virtue. But, as Lisa Tessman's work importantly highlights, "the demand to cultivate a virtue that is intrinsically painful produces quite a burden" (Tessman 2005, 95; I engage Tessman's work on burdened virtues more in the next section). The anger that accompanies such advocacy brings with it, among other things, stress, insomnia, heightened blood pressure, increased risk of illness, the demands for increased emotional labor, etc. . . . In addition, in order for the agent to ensure that their anger doesn't become inordinate and thus vicious, the agent must take additional steps to engage in moral self-evaluation and constraint. One of the reasons that anger can so easily go wrong is that it has a kind of inertia, where it feeds itself and can cloud our judgment precluding prudence. In order to ensure that one's anger, even if morally justified, doesn't continue to grow to a vicious extent or shift from a deserving object to another, the agent may need to take additional steps including the design and implementation of scaffolding to prevent this possibility from becoming actual. Such steps take time and concerted effort, which are often already stretched too thin for individuals involved in such advocacy work. Realistically, all of this can have a significant negative impact on an agent's well-being even if they are not the primary recipient of the structural injustice.

4. Moral Damage from Moral Anger at Systemic Injustice

The risk or detriment to the individual's flourishing in these cases is an instance of moral residue. Virtue might require anger, both in terms of the emotion and as a proper motivation for pushing back against unjust and ableist structures; but this demand isn't a 'morally clean result' insofar as being virtuous in such a situation can be harmful to the individual. While this result may not arise in idealized situations, we shouldn't expect the demands of morality in non-ideal contexts to always align. And in such contexts, virtue might require that we open ourselves up to moral damage, forming and acting out of the virtue even if it will interfere with our own flourishing.

Tessman is primarily concerned with two kinds of cases in which oppression can undermine flourishing.¹¹ In the first kind of case, "the self under oppression can be morally damaged, prevented from developing or exercising some of the virtues. . . . Moral damage occurs when there is a certain sort of a self that one ought to be, but the uncondusive conditions of oppression bar one from cultivating this self" (2005, 4). The kind of situation I've been exploring in this paper in which advocacy is needed given the ableist structures of public education isn't an instance of Tessman's first kind of case. Unlike this sort of case, it's not that the agent isn't able to form or exercise the relevant virtue. In fact, it's precisely because they have the virtue that the moral damage arises.

In the second kind of case, individuals under oppression are able to develop and exercise the virtues, but don't emerge unscathed; the virtue or virtues that they need to resist the oppression come with a cost. Here Tessman introduces the concept of "*burdened virtues*, virtues that have the unusual feature of being disjointed from their bearer's own flourishing" (2005, 4).¹² While most forms of virtue ethics claim that the virtues will always contribute to an individual's flourishing, Tessman's view is that not all virtues will in all contexts. A virtue can be burdened in at least two ways. In the first, the virtue in question might be "a trait whose exercise is commendable but inherently painful" (Tessman 2005, 108). The second way involves a situation in which resistance to some kind of injustice or other form of oppression causes the burden. Especially in non-idealized contexts such as oppression, we shouldn't expect all virtues to always contribute to well-being. Burdened virtues are 'mixed' in that "the character traits recommended [or needed] for resistant often *disable* resisters themselves from flourishing" (Tessman 2005, 8) and are thus a burden to the well-being of those who have them. The moral damage caused by burdened virtues, that is their 'cost', may affect the agent "so deeply that their bearer may be said to lead a wretched life" (Tessman 2005, 95).

Tessman specifically suggests that not just anger but specifically rage may be morally called for:

Unrelenting anger or rage . . . may help the politically resistant self pursue liberatory aims while meanwhile being corrosive to the self. . . . It is far from likely that raging political resisters can metabolize their anger; instead, I contend, they themselves suffer from the level of anger [morally] prescribed for them, even if such a high level best serves their liberatory struggles. (Tessman 2005, 96 and 124)

A response weaker than rage runs a risk of being inappropriate by failing to register the seriousness of the injustice that it's responding to. Such strong anger (or rage) carries with it its own "very refusal to be toned down or moderated" (Tessman 2005, 123). Audre Lorde and Myisha Cherry both note how the call to 'tone down one's anger' is often itself a component of the oppressive structures the marginalized face.

Tessman's claim about some virtues being burdened isn't merely that the virtues are not sufficient for flourishing; that's already presupposed by traditional eudemonistic approaches. Rather, the claim is that having the virtue of moral anger might be good for the agent in one sense insofar as it's a characterological excellence, but having that virtue in conditions of structural injustice might be bad for the agent in other ways that override or outweigh the excellence of the virtue itself. Tessman admits that "as necessary as anger may be, anger also can function as a burden on its bearer, especially when the level of anger that is called for is great" (Tessman 2005, 30). This can be true not only for individual episodes of the emotion of anger but also the general disposition to having morally appropriate anger. It is demanding to keep such anger, especially long term, from becoming vicious at moral cost to one's self. Even if one is able to contain their anger to the demands of morality, it comes with cost to the advocate's flourishing. Living in the liminal space between the demands of justice and one's one well-being is a sacrifice. And while the threat to the agent's flourishing is ultimately caused by the unjust social structures that their anger is rightly oriented against, without the virtue they would be insulated from at least negative effects of those social structures and thus, in this way, are made worse-off by the virtue in a particular circumstance. Amia Srinivasan refers to situations of this type as 'affective injustices': "the injustice of having to negotiate between one's apt emotional response to the injustice of one's situation and one's desire to better one's situation" (2018, 135; by 'apt,' Srinivasan seems to have something in mind like fittingness; see 126–31).

We can understand that kind of case I have in mind, in which the need for disability advocacy results in sustained moral anger, then as an instance of a burdened virtue. But beyond merely being an application of Tessman's view, I think this kind of case helps build on her work in a number of ways. To begin with, it's important to note that this kind of advocacy work increases the range of cases where moral anger is a burdened virtue. Even though Tessman focuses mainly on cases where an agent's anger is a result of how that agent is treated, her discussion of burdened virtue in chapter 4 does allow for the burden to come from what others

are going through, as her discussion of being sensitive to the suffering of others makes clear. If a person is appropriately sensitive to the full range of suffering others are undergoing, they will be anguished and their own flourishing can be impaired. If, in order to protect their own well-being, they are indifferent to that suffering, then they're not virtuous. "Every point [between these two options] sacrifices either the other-regarding virtues or the self-regarding virtues or both" (Tessman 2005, 87). The kind of situation I have in mind, like Tessman's discussion of indifference and anguish, involves navigating between a lack of an other-regarding virtue (sensitivity to others' suffering, in her case, and moral anger at the injustice others suffer in mine) and the moral damage to the self caused by being virtuous. As I've suggested earlier, such anger can be an outgrowth of one's love for those who are being mistreated. But such cases can be burdened in different ways than the cases where the anger is a response to one's own mistreatment.

In her paper on anger, Srinivasan recognizes that the burden of moral anger can arise in both first-person situations (that is, in cases where the injustice causing the anger is against the person who is getting angry) and in second-personal cases as well: "Here the conflict [between the demands of justice and the costs that come with moral anger at injustice] is raised acutely, with all the sting (perhaps more) of the first-personal conflict" (Srinivasan 2018, 134). In second-personal cases, the evaluation of whether to act on or express the anger comes with a different set of considerations, relating to both dangers and costs.

A primary danger of the second-personal cases that doesn't arise from first-person cases has to do with the nature of being angry on behalf of another.¹³ We can understand this as involving a kind of allyship or, as I'll discuss below, advocacy.¹⁴ We can think of advocacy as work done with or for an individual or group in the attempt to remedy the injustices they face. Advocacy will involve solidarity. Emerick's view of love as union requires more than just an assertion of allyship; it requires doing the hard work of securing what will help them flourish. Cherry describes the primary focus of solidarity as correcting and eliminating mistreatment (2020, 5; see also Emerick 2021, 333–34). There are also specific second-personal costs. The first of these is rooted in the fact that one might be willing to tolerate injustice towards one's self that they wouldn't be as inclined to tolerate when directed at a loved one. If the agent is worried that their anger might be counter-productive or problematic in one of the ways discussed above but they're not sure, they may feel the need to put in additional effort to sorting out the situation because their love for the mistreated demands it. Furthermore, even if they rightly judge that in this particular case their anger is potentially productive but it ends up being ineffective, they might feel the weight of failure. If they're not able to improve the situation, the agent can be left with concerns about failing to secure what they're beloved deserves. They may feel as if they'd only tried harder, advocated longer or better, been more forceful or clever—then perhaps their efforts could have made

the situation better for the one or ones they're advocating for. Such self-doubt can carry a heavy psychological price. While this is consistent with Tessman's view, it extends beyond what she explicitly considers.

Relatedly, since second-personal cases involve advocating or speaking on behalf of others against unjust systems, there is a danger that one's efforts can result in additional mistreatment even if not explicit retaliation from those systems. Those individuals involved in the structural unjust system need not be at individual moral fault for the functioning of that system. One can, for instance, think that a disabled student is not receiving the education they are entitled to without thinking that the school staff bear individual responsibility for that failure. But criticism of the system is often taken as criticism of individuals in that system by those very people. And the need to make sure that this doesn't result in further harms to those for whom one is advocating requires a great degree of prudence, care, and sometimes emotional labor. All of this work is extremely taxing.

Another specific danger in second-personal advocacy cases motivated by anger at structural injustice on behalf of another arises from the power dynamics at work in such cases, and how those dynamics can lead to the marginalization of the advocate themselves. Lalvani and Hale's paper "Squeaky Wheels, Mothers from Hell, and CEOs of the IEP: Parents, Privilege, and the 'Fight' for Inclusive Education" captures many of the struggles that parents face in advocating for their disabled children's education. While parents are supposed to be equal partners and team members in the IEP process, that is decidedly not the experience of many of them, who describe the process as one of conflict in the context of asymmetrical power dynamics.

Despite the existence of these laws [such as IDEA] and educational discourses focused on 'equal partnerships,' the literature on parents' experiences with the special education system tells a different story; a body of research underscores the tensions between professionals and parents, and reveals many parents' perceptions of uncertainty, disenfranchisement, confusion, or frustration as a result of navigating the system. Some parents' narratives indicate that they believe they are merely tolerated rather than viewed by professionals as partners in the decision-making process. They also reveal the extent to which many feel alienated from the system, [and] hold beliefs that they are in adversarial relationships with professionals. (Lalvani and Hale 2015, 24; citations omitted)¹⁵

Granted, similar results can also happen in first-person cases; but when one's efforts of love result not in progress for the advocated-for but a further devaluing of the advocate, there's an emotional toll. Anger in second-personal cases affirms that the one on whose behalf we get angry is worth advocating for, but then the pain is all the more severe when our advocacy work is unsuccessful. The uncertainty, disenfranchisement, confusion, and frustration are themselves part of the burden brought about by advocacy rooted in moral anger. But the very love that leads to

the anger on behalf of their children leads such parent advocates to think that they need to redouble their efforts rather than accept the present failure. There is pain in failing to make things better for one's disabled children who deserve better than they are given. Living with the feeling that you're not enough is a heavy weight to carry long-term. And this too can be understood as a form of moral damage. The degree of this damage can range from merely taxing to nearly debilitating. But, for reasons already discussed, the anger and the work it motivates need to continue.

So advocacy will include the disposition to work to address the hardships faced by those one is advocating for. Advocacy work takes seriously the vulnerability individuals face at the hands of others. Second-personal concerns are a likely result of specifically structural injustices. It is here, when we look at specifically moral anger in response to structural injustices, that Tessman's work is extended. While Tessman's analysis of burdened virtues canvassed so far provides crucial insights into how oppression can undermine flourishing, the specific case of anger at structural injustice reveals additional dimensions of moral burden that extend beyond her explicit treatment. Structural injustices—those systematic patterns of harm embedded in our institutions, practices, and social arrangements—create distinctive conditions that make moral anger particularly costly to bear. The very nature of a structural injustice, as described above, is that they encourage, reproduce, and reinforce unjust treatment toward one or more individuals or groups within the structure in question. Second-personal cases are all but guaranteed to arise in structural cases. But in such cases, anger is likely to be particularly burdensome for a number of interrelated reasons. To begin with, structural injustices are harder to escape than are mere interpersonal injustices. They also resist individual solutions, thereby resulting in a web of interconnected second-personal cases. The work of resisting structural injustices can rarely be carried out by an individual. Resisting such structures will require a number of individuals to bear at least some of the work needed to resist those injustices. This can often be done alongside those who are being mistreated. However, in some cases, advocates might be required when the individual is not socially positioned or otherwise able to resist the harms of the structural injustice. This will often be the case for disabled students, especially those below a certain age. If advocacy by others is needed, then sitting on the sideline out of a fear of mis-stepping is to prioritize one's own moral purity over the vulnerability of others. Retreating from a problem rather than addressing it, Linda Alcoff notes, may be rooted in the desire to avoid criticism; but our inaction on behalf of others suffering a structural injustice can itself be a moral failing worthy of criticism (1991, 22).

But as with allyship, advocacy in response to structural injustice is risky and can go wrong. Even accurate and well-meaning instances of "speaking for" can contribute to the marginalization of those for whom the agent is advocating, further reinforcing structural problematic patterns of silencing (Lygones and Spelman

1983) or increased oppression (Alcoff 1991; Emerick and Yap 2024, chapter 2). But in some cases, including many of the kinds of disability advocacy for disabled children this paper focuses on, speaking for cannot be avoided without the advocacy being abandoned. Most children in schools, especially those not on the threshold of adulthood, are simply unable to do the kinds of advocacy work they require and deserve. Without sustained advocacy by those positioned to provide it, disabled students are at the mercy of schools and districts that systemically fail them. Furthermore, allowing individuals to be treated unjustly without resistance reinforces the structures of injustice. To push back against these pressures, advocacy work should involve both individualize advocacy on behalf of those affected but also systemic advocacy to encourage better structures. Yet social structures are hard to change and take time and continued effort even when they can be improved. Unlike discrete instances of wrongdoing that can more easily be addressed and resolved, structural injustices are pervasive and self-perpetuating. They are woven into the fabric of institutions we must navigate daily, including schools that systematically harm disabled students. This pervasiveness means that anger at structural injustice cannot be episodic—it must be sustained across time and particular circumstance. And these features will combine to increase the burdened anger.

For these reasons, there will be increased, if not unique, burdens for moral anger in such cases responding to structural injustices. We often cannot “step outside” of the systems in which we are embedded. Structural injustices create a specific type of burden, namely the impossibility of fully extricating oneself from the structures we oppose. Unlike discrete instances of injustice, structural injustices create ongoing moral demands that are extremely hard to fully resolve while those structures remain. Moral damage comes from being forced to choose, over long stretches of time, between one’s integrity and one’s well-being within unjust systems that offer no clean options. These systems perpetuate harm even as we oppose them, and cannot creating ongoing moral tension between our complicity and our resistance. This embeddedness means that moral anger cannot achieve the resolution it seeks—we remain entangled in unjust systems we oppose. Furthermore, structural injustices are sometimes unnoticed or normalized within dominant social arrangements. Recognizing and resisting them requires constant vigilance, which comes with additional emotional labor, the continued recognition of injustice that others dismiss or ignore. The anger appropriate to structural injustice must often be sustained in the face of social denial, institutional gaslighting, and the interpersonal pressure to normalize what should be intolerable. These considerations show how structural injustice makes moral anger an ongoing condition rather than episodic responses, thereby intensifying the burden.

5. Conclusion

Even if virtue requires chronic and systemic anger in the light of unjust social structures, as I have argued in section 3, the moral damage that results can interfere with the agent's flourishing. As Hursthouse writes, "what follows from this [kind of case] is not the impossibility of virtue but the possibility of some situations from which even a virtuous agent cannot emerge with her life unmarred" (1999, 74). Moral anger can be a burden to its bearer because it is disconnected from the agent's own flourishing. I'm not claiming that moral damage is guaranteed by moral anger in response to unjust social structures. But it is possible, and perhaps even likely. Accepting the risk of moral damage is one way of taking responsibility for the flourishing of others in one's community, for loving others and being willing to work toward their good even at substantial, and perhaps eudaimonistic, cost to one's self. The burdened nature of some virtues is yet another social cost that unjust social structures impose on communities. We might be called to "[prioritize] a virtue that is unlinked from its bearer's well-being" (Tessman 2005, 128). But the cost to our well-being doesn't mean that we can prioritize ourselves over advocacy. If we ignore the demands of moral anger, "then we all [may] face tragic dilemmas as a regular condition of our lives: unless we are completely indifferent (in which case we clearly lack virtue), we must always be asking ourselves whose suffering to tend to and whose to turn away from, which injustices to try to remedy and which to ignore" (Tessman 2005, 89). This is a worthwhile question, but one that I haven't set out to address in this paper. Perhaps the answer to it will be something along the following general lines: direct your work, and the resulting suffering, where you have the best shot at bringing about individual or, even better, structural change. But recognize, in doing so, that in such situations virtue may not contribute to your flourishing. Be virtuous anyways.¹⁶

Notes

1. For an excellent discussion of how even apt anger might be counterproductive, and how a person in such a situation should balance the competing moral demands, see Srinivasan 2018.
2. In this paper, I use 'well-being' and 'flourishing' interchangeably.
3. Nancy Snow (2008) differentiates a conceptual claim about the relationship of virtue and well-being from an empirical claim regarding virtue's contribution to our flourishing. I'm primarily interested in the conceptual claim, though I think the empirical claim could be used to call the conceptual claim into question.
4. It should not be surprising that this sort of advocacy is closely related to a range of social privileges; see Ong-Dean 2009. For a further discussion of what such advo-

cacy can look like and how the public educational system is structured in a way that requires it, see Laviano and Swanson (2017).

5. Rachel Ricketts similarly writes that she has “a rage that includes love and compassion. For ourselves and others” (2021, 148; see also Kauppinen 2018). It should be noted that Cherry has a narrower understanding of anger than I do given her particularly requirement of the aim of anger; see Cherry 2019, 70. However, I don’t think this difference is important in the present context.

6. See, among others, DeYoung 2020 and 2021; Roberts 2003 and 2007; Kristjansson 2018; Cogley 2014; Nicolas 2017. Daphne Bradenburg raises some challenges, both empirical and theoretical, to the purported valuable effects of anger in Bradenburg (2025).

7. Not everyone agrees; see Nussbaum (2016) and Pettigrove (2012).

8. I’m stipulating that what I refer to as moral anger avoids the two ways that anger can go wrong according to Tessman (2005, 120) in terms of being mistargeted or excessive in degree. Srinivasan (2018) talks about how anger can be “a *fitting* response to how things are” for intrinsic and not merely instrumental reasons” (127). D’Arms and Jacobson 2000 is a key discussion of the fittingness of emotions. There they argue that the moral wrongness of an emotion doesn’t entail that it’s therefore unfitting; it can be morally wrong to feel fitting emotions. While the examples I explore later in the paper strike me as involving fitting anger, my focus in the present paper is on whether it is sometimes virtuous to feel moral anger at social structures and not primarily with fittingness.

It may also be that structural injustice interferes with our ability to know when our anger aligns with the virtue of moral anger or when it is vicious; that is, structural injustice can interfere epistemically with our ability to know what the demands of virtue are.

9. See, for instance, MacLachlan 2010. Cherry notes how anger at injustice can motivate not only toward the good of those who are unjustly treated and the community in general, but can also motivate one to act for the good of the unjust person themselves; see Cherry 2019 and Cherry 2021.

10. As Kittay describes it, “the point of entry for a care ethic is an *actuality*—one party is in need of care and another is in the position to meet that need” (Kittay 2009, 125).

11. Tessman connects these circumstances to constitutive and systemic luck, which many of those eudaimonistic traditions who think that virtue is necessary but not sufficient for flourishing admit. Structural oppression interferes not only with the flourishing of those subject to it and those who commit it, both of which Tessman’s treatment addresses, but also to a third group: those for whom virtue requires that they struggle against the oppression, even if it’s not directly oriented against them.

12. For Tessman, “the conditions of oppression disrupt the usual pattern of an Aristotelian virtue and lead some to be traits to be burdens on their bearer must be disturbing if one is committed to some form of eudaimonism” (2005, 107).

13. Much of Cherry’s discussion of rage focuses on that which is felt by those within an oppressed group, and seeks to explore how we can flourishingly live *with* rage not

despite it, in part by metabolizing it toward flourishing, fueling care, empowering solidarity, and perhaps joy. While acknowledging the importance of such jointly felt rage, the kind of case I focus on here is one in which the person or persons treated unjustly are not the ones whose anger is at issue and those that feel the anger in question need not share the relevant status with those treated unjustly. Love can be the grounds to justify moral anger on behalf of others, and not only sameness of unjust experience.

14. Allyship in general has recently come under criticism. Kurt Blankschaen, for instance, raises the concern of ‘false allies’ (Blankschaen 2016; see also McKinnon 2017). And Cherry 2021 notes how allyship can go astray when it focuses on the ally’s anger rather than addressing the injustice, or when it degenerates into ‘white saviorism’. Certainly allyship can go wrong. But I don’t think that the concept of ‘being an ally’ is doing any substantive work in what I’m arguing.

15. A specific cost of the advocacy work Lalvani and Hale discuss is that many of the narratives about parent advocacy pathologize parents engaged in such work (2015, 29).

16. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Society for Philosophy of Emotion at the 2022 Eastern American Philosophical Association, as part of the 2022 Killeen Chair Lecture Series at St. Norbert’s College, at the 2022 North American Society for Social Philosophy, at the 2022 Non-Ideal Philosophy of Religion Workshop, and at the 6th Theistic Ethics Workshop. I have benefitted from input, discussion, and disagreement with many folks on these occasions. I am especially grateful for extensive conversations with Celeste Harvey and Barrett Emerick, and for detailed feedback from two reviewers for the journal.

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