Chapter 12
Mildness
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This chapter focuses on virtue with respect to the emotion of anger within a broadly Aristotelian framework. Although some of the moral virtues perfect our desires, shaping us to want excellently, others perfect our emotions, shaping us to *feel* excellently.

I understand the emotions to be concern-based construals (Roberts, 2013), usually directed at objects or situations, and which have a certain feel or affect. By concern-based construals, Robert Roberts means that our emotional reaction involves how we understand or interpret that situation. Suppose I'm seven minutes late to pick-up a child from school because I was helping a student with a job reference. Perhaps my child takes this tardiness as indicative of how I feel about them and tells me "It's clear you care more about your students than your own children!" The way we construe the situation depends upon the things we care about and how we judge their value. I can care more about the perceived insult to my affection from my child or about the exchange as a learning opportunity about balancing various responsibilities. Which of those construals wins out will shape how I feel in response. If I take it as a slight to my parenting, I may feel the familiar burning of anger.

There's a long tradition, going back to at least Plato, that understands the emotion of anger to be a response to a perceived wrongdoing or injustice by another. Since emotions such as anger are concern-based construals, anger's paradigmatic construal is that an injustice has occurred. And its concern is that we want injustice not to occur; if the perceived injustice continues, we want it to cease. If I respond to my child's accusation with anger in the case

above, it's because I think they've wrongly devalued my love for them. But not all anger needs to be oriented toward a person. Perhaps I get angry that my car breaks down when I need to drive to an important meeting. Such anger seems more like a form of goal frustration (cf. Shoemaker, 2018).

Putting these pieces together, there's a virtue that disposes us to feel anger properly. The disposition toward excessive anger is commonly referred to as wrath, while the disposition toward too little anger doesn't have quite as good of a name—maybe complacency or indifference to the demands of justice.

In what follows, I agree that it is common for anger to be vicious due to its being excessive. But I also argue that anger is not always a morally inappropriate reaction. In fact, I argue that it's also possible for us to be vicious when we don't get angry enough. That is, one way to fail to be virtuous with respect to anger is to be complacent or indifferent to injustice. The virtuous mean will sometimes require us to be angry. Aristotle famously says that the person who is virtuous with respect to their anger is "the person who is angry at the right things and toward the right people, and also in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time" (Aristotle, 1999, IV.1125b31–33). We should also add that proper anger is "for the right reason."

Excessive Anger

Anger is a natural human emotional response to a perceived injustice or wrongdoing. I might get angry, for instance, that my co-worker stole my leftover paneer masala from the office refrigerator. But we can get angry even when we incorrectly judge that an injustice has occurred. For example, if I already ate the paneer masala and forgot about it, my anger at my co-worker is misplaced.

Most of us are quite familiar with a range of ways that anger can be excessive. Anger is easily misdirected toward those who don't deserve it, as in the case of a worker who comes home after a frustrating day and yells at the dog. A person can respond in anger too quickly, as in the case of seeming to hear resentment in the voice of one's partner. Or it can be too intense, as in the case of a parent who overreacts to her child breaking a dish. Anger can last too long by harboring resentment, as in the case of a child who never forgives her parents for moving her away from her friends when she was young. When any of these kinds of excessive anger becomes a character tendency, it has become a vice.

Angry outbursts are the more recognizable form of wrath as a person reacts to a situation out of proportion to the cause. Early Confucians, such as Mengzi and Xunzi (Lewis, 2020), and early Christians, such as Evagrius and Cassian (DeYoung, 2020), noted how anger can lead to excessive punishment

or other forms of violence. The moral perceptions of the person in the grip of wrath are altered so that she cannot grasp situations as they really are; her construal of the situation is distorted by her anger. Anger, like other emotions, can interfere with our making good judgments about the situation.

Hidden resentment is also a kind of wrath. This form accumulates gradually over time. Instead of giving free rein to my anger in violent and obvious verbal or physical demonstrations, I might prefer to keep this vice hidden from others by nursing it privately. The Confucian tradition sees this kind of wrath as a poison that harms the self by its constant attention to the alleged harm.

Why Anger Isn't Always Vicious

Anger is sometimes described as inherently vengeful, seeking retaliation or payback. As Martha Nussbaum (2016) writes, "Anger involves, conceptually, a wish for things to go badly, somehow, for the offender, in a way that is envisioned, somehow, however vaguely, as payback for the offense" (p. 23; cf. Hartman, 2025). And anger certainly can be this way. If I perceive that another player has slashed at me in a lacrosse game in a way that both hurt and wasn't called as a foul by the referees, I may engage in a retaliatory cross-check.

Additionally, Nussbaum (2016) asserts that anger almost always goes wrong, and so it's better to do without it: "Anger does nothing to solve ... a person's real problems, and it positively impedes progress" (p. 125). Nussbaum's view is similar to that of many Stoics, who tended to think that anger, as well as other emotions, were unreasonable. Seneca was an ancient Greek Stoic who thought that even if we have in fact been wronged and the wrongdoer has no excuse, it is better if we don't feel anger. His reasoning here is that it's just too easy for anger to go wrong: "it is easier to banish dangerous emotions than to rule them .... Extirpate root and branch ... what can moderation have to do with an evil habit?" (as quoted in Flanagan, 2018, pp. xix, xx). This view is also shared by many in the Buddhist tradition, which takes anger, along with greed and illusion, as poisonous to human nature.

But anger can be oriented toward justice or vindication, not only vengeance. Here the anger is impartial, not personal, and so need not be poisonous. Confucians such as Mengzi and Xunzi, mentioned earlier, also thought that not all anger is morally wrong, praising some of the first kings of the Zhou Dynasty for their virtuous anger (Lewis, 2020). And Al-Ghazali, in the Islamic virtue ethics tradition, says that anger is often a helpful tool. This seems to get things right, recognizing that just because an emotion or desire *can be* vicious doesn't mean that it *always* is. In a similar way as the mere desire for wealth or material possession is not greedy, so too the emotion of anger should not be identified as wrathful.

If we return to the connection between anger and perceived injustice, we discover another reason to think that anger isn't always morally wrong. Anger is prompted by what we take to be wrongdoing. Often the wrongdoing we react in anger toward will be injustice. While we can be wrong about what justice requires, correct construals track the relevant facts. The world is not as it should be in some way, and an emotional response, with all the qualifying "rights" from Aristotle, is appropriate. This is why Aristotle was not only concerned with excessive anger but also thought that the failure to get angry could be an unreasonable and cowardly resistance to upsetting others.

Sometimes our anger burns in response to injustice perpetrated against us. And if others matter to us, then anger on behalf of another can also be appropriate. Anger can function as a legitimate protest against wrongdoing or injustice found in larger social and political patterns. Leboeuf (2018) puts it this way: "If anger ... can enable a person to respond to his or her oppression, then there is a place for anger in responding to injustice" (p. 16). African American theologian Willie Jennings (2020) gives the example of how anger can be a proper response toward racism "Living the discipline of hope in this racial world, in this white supremacist-infected country called the United States of America, requires anger." Racism should make us angry if we're the racialized minority that's harmed by it. But it should also make us angry if we're the beneficiaries at others' expense; even those who benefit should recognize that humans deserve not to be treated in racist ways. Anger toward others' oppression can be a sign of love, a concern for their flourishing.

Anger can empower and energize us to address wrongdoing. Myisha Cherry (2021) says that this kind of anger "tends toward metabolization and aims for change.... It is morally, politically, and epistemically useful for transformative ends" (pp. 5, 20). Here, we can think of two specific functions that anger plays in response to injustice. The first of these is a communicative or declarative function. Pamela Hieronymi (2001) characterizes anger's communicative function this way: anger affirms "both [the offense's] wrongfulness and the moral significance of both herself and the offender" (p. 530). Anger, when expressed, lets others know when we think an injustice has been done. It is a way of recognizing that things are not as they are supposed to be: "this should not be so!" Building on this declarative role, anger can also be motivational. Anger can motivate *doing* something to resist injustice. It can lead us to engage in political activism and advocacy, engaging in actions that we think might release or mitigate the feeling. The aim of such anger isn't retaliation; it's to repair wrongs. Putting together the communicative and motivational functions of anger, Lewis and Bock write that "anger, which in response to oppression, has the potential to be, not a vice, but a virtue.... Anger toward oppression can both galvanize political change and enable its wielder(s) to live a flourishing life in the midst

of oppression" (Lewis & Bock, 2020, p. 3). In this way, anger can contribute to political change insofar as we work to improve the system, pushing toward the ideal of justice.

Virtuous Anger

If, as I've suggested, it is sometimes virtuous to feel anger, then anger is not only sometimes morally acceptable and "not just rational and reasonable, but also a morally necessary response" (Thomason, 2020, p. 83). The virtue tradition typically holds that the disposition to do, including to feel, what is morally necessary contributes to our flourishing, in part because flourishing requires resisting injustice.

What is distinctive about the vice of wrath is that it exceeds what is appropriate, given the circumstances, and thus works against our flourishing. There are two common ways this happens: angry outburst and seething resentment. Becoming virtuously angry while avoiding the excessive anger of wrath requires fostering a patient and gentle self-control. As philosopher Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung (2020) notes, the cultivation of a humble gentleness restrains the urge to give free rein to one's wrath. The person who can master their anger responds appropriately, or proportionately, to genuine provocations. They have two important qualities that the wrathful person does not. The first is an ability to know what kinds of provocations deserve an appropriately and virtuously angry response. Here, we may have to reconstrue how we think about the perpetrator, away from being a mere perpetrator and construe them instead as a person worthy of being a giver and receiver of justice. Second, the virtuous person also has the habituated ability to control their own anger so that it does not undermine the flourishing of themselves or others. But this way of thinking about mildness implies that anger in either feeling or action is not always morally wrong.

The person who is virtuous with respect to anger will be the one who is disposed to have the right amount as called for by the situation. Aristotle says it is not easy to say how much anger is appropriate because "the judgement depends on particular cases" (Aristotle, 1999, IV.1126b3–4). It is the role of prudence, or what was referred to as "right reason" above, to help us figure out how much anger is appropriate.

How much anger we should feel, and for how long, will also depend on whether the angry person has been reconciled with the person they're angry at. Here, we can think of this as involving forgiveness in response to repentance. One influential approach is that forgiveness is, at its core, a change in our emotional reaction to another. Forgiveness, on this view, involves overcoming or forswearing our negative emotions, including anger. If forgiveness aims at reconciliation between the wrong-doer and the wronged,

prudence can help us figure out if anger is no longer appropriate because the situation that called for it has been addressed.

But what should we call the virtue of appropriate anger?[1] This virtue doesn't have a standard name. Following Terence Irwin's well-known and influential translation of πραΰτης (prautés) in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the chapter title refers to the virtue as mildness. But mildness seems to suggest something more passive than the virtue. Others translate it as good temper, meekness, calmness, gentleness, or even patience. None of these obviously carry the connation in English that Aristotle is going for. Aquinas calls the virtue "zealous anger" in his *Summa Theologiae* (1920, IIaIIae q158 a1 ad 2). In her book *The Case for Rage*, Myisha Cherry (2021) sometimes refers to it as "virtuous anger" (p. 13), and I think this is perhaps the best locution to use. Referring to it this way can not only help us from conflating anger with its all too frequent vicious expressions through excess, but can remind us that learning how to properly feel anger when it is called for, and for the right reasons, can help habituate us out of wrath into loving and valuing properly.

Conclusion

I've argued that both the dispositions to too much and too little anger are vicious, while virtuous anger involves being disposed toward feeling just the right amount of anger as called for by this situation for the right reason. Virtuous anger should translate into action in the name of justice. Even if it is sometimes virtuous to feel anger, there may still be practical reasons to not express it. Perhaps one's anger toward a friend is justified, but it would be best not to express it given current challenges they are facing. Feminists like Cherry, Audre Lorde, and Emily McRae, for instance, discuss how black women's expression of anger is fraught and can lead to double-binds. Failing to express their anger can lead to their needs being denied or ignored, but expressing their anger can cause others to dismiss them as "angry black women." The norms surrounding the expression of anger are complex, and we need to pay attention to how social status and dominance play a role in limiting socially allowable expressions of anger (see Cogley, 2014). This shows, however, not that such anger is inappropriate but rather that prudence will play a key role in both the proper having of anger and its proper expression.[2]

[1] In an excellent paper, Ryan West suggests that it might be best to think there are multiple virtues pertaining to anger or that, if in fact there is only one, it is constituted by a number of other virtues (see West, 2016).

[2] This chapter borrows from some of my earlier work, most notably *The Virtues: A Very Short Introduction* (with Craig Boyd, Oxford University Press 2025) and "Anger and Moral Struggle in Response to Structural Injustice," in *Social Philosophy Today*. I am grateful to Rebecca DeYoung, Mike Austin, and Bob Hartman for extremely helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

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