

# Moral Anger, Motivation, and Productivity

## Myisha Cherry

### I. Introduction

Moral anger is a subclass of anger. Moral anger arises out of a moral wrong whereas on the other hand anger can arise without the presence of any “moral” injustice at all. For example, I can have moral anger if I believe that I was fired due to racial discrimination but I can only be angry if I believe I was fired because of my own poor performance. Indignation and resentment are examples of moral anger. In this paper, I will defend moral anger as opposed to anger in general.

There has been debate throughout the history of philosophy over whether anger of any kind can ever be a rational, proper moral response to wrongdoing. On one side, there are negative moral accounts of anger. In the fifth century, John Cassian wrote that anger is a vice, is irrational, and achieving justice could be obscured by anger. Seneca did not believe that moderate emotions like moral anger exist. For him, all emotions are irrational and tied to irrational action and cannot be tamed. There are positive moral accounts of anger that describe the morally angry as exhibiting virtue and contributing to the good. Examples of these accounts are present in both recent and traditional moral philosophical works. For instance, Macalester Bell categorizes “appropriate anger” as a virtue because it expresses love of the good and hatred of evil.<sup>1</sup> “Proper indignation” is an emotion that has the ability to help us recognize moral wrongs and it is necessary to retain as we participate in forgiveness according to both Kant and Joseph Butler.<sup>2</sup> I argue for the value of these positive accounts of moral anger by defending it against a recent critique made by Glen Pettigrove, who argues that moral anger is unproductive and ought to be replaced with meekness. In response, I argue for moral anger’s productive and motivational features.

### II. Motivation

Pettigrove believes that we ought to replace moral anger with meekness. Pettigrove defines meekness as an exemplary virtue that governs emotions like anger and rage. Unlike anger, meekness is suggestive of self-control, gentleness, and benevolence. For Pettigrove, there are advantages to this calm disposition in that it does not cause displeasure and those who possess it will benefit society because it allows the agent to be more focused on promoting the common good instead of being preoccupied with

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<sup>1</sup> In Macalester Bell’s “Anger, Virtue, and Oppression” she argues that “appropriate anger” is a virtue not because it allows us to flourish but because it allows us to do as a virtuous person would which is to “love the good and hate evil.”

<sup>2</sup> Their approach to indignation is written within their accounts of forgiveness in Butler’s “Fifteen Sermons” and in Kant’s “Lectures on Ethics and Doctrine of Virtues”.

distracting emotions like anger.<sup>3</sup> However, I believe moral anger ought not to be exchanged or released, but we should keep it for its motivational ability.

One may object by suggesting that people are able to recognize and fight against wrong in the world without moral anger providing this information or fueling the motivation to pursue justice. While other emotions or dispositions like meekness can allow people to become aware of and even fight against injustice, moral anger serves as a stronger motivation to pursue justice. Psychology and neurology supports the idea that emotions like anger have a motivating power that leads people to do something very specific about their anger. Anger is associated with the “relative left frontal hemispheric activation in the brain—this is characteristic of approach motivation”.<sup>4</sup> It also makes one believe that they can influence the situation and provides a desire to change the situation. This is because when angry the brain activates our motivational sensors in our brain, it “literally” fuels us to pursue justice. The fuel of anger is not to divert attention from the anger, but it makes the angry optimistic and motivated to actually do something about it.<sup>5</sup> There are also recent psychological studies that show that anger makes people desire things more. For example, objects associated with an angry face as opposed to a neutral or fearful face, made participants want those objects.<sup>6</sup> In other words, recent studies in psychology are supporting philosophical claims made by philosophers centuries ago and what I argue today, that moral anger helps to motivate more than other less intense emotions.

Anger also motivates because it is uncomfortable. We are motivated to rid ourselves of the discomfort by seeking to pursue justice. This discomfort is not necessarily a bad thing. Usually when we experience discomfort, we become anxious and diligent to rid ourselves of the discomfort. The more intense the discomfort, the more intense is the motivation to release it. Justice alleviates the discomfort of moral anger. This is not to suggest that only removing injustice can remove moral anger. For example, table legs cause the pain of toe stubbing but once I’ve stubbed my toe, removing the table leg does not automatically remove the pain. Similarly, Jim Crow racist policies may not be the law of the land anymore. However, the removal of the injustice does not eradicate all anger about what tragically happened to many African-Americans and their allies. What I am claiming here is that justice alleviates the discomfort even if it does not totally remove it.

One may counter by suggesting that the desire to pursue justice in order to relieve the angry from discomfort is egoistic. We should seek justice for the sake of justice and not for our own pleasure. However, emotions are not purely egoistic. Emotions match with *our* desires.<sup>7</sup> As a result of individuals desiring and the desire being their very own, emotions have at its nature an egoistic quality to them. This is also in addition to the individual possessing the feeling of the emotion; an emotion that may be solely limited to them. However, this egoistic quality is not the main focus of moral anger. For moral

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<sup>3</sup> Pettigrove, Glen. pp. 344-345, 349.

<sup>4</sup> Lerner and Tiedens. “Portrait of The Angry Decision Maker: How Appraisal Tendencies Shape Anger’s Influence on Cognition.” In *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*. 19: (2006) pp. 115-118.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 119

<sup>6</sup> Aarts, Ruys, Veling. “The Art of Anger: Reward Context Turns Avoidance Responses to Anger-Related Objects Into Approach” in *Psychological Science*. 21(10) pp.1406 –1410.

<sup>7</sup> Roberts, Robert. *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*. NY. 2003. pp.162-165.

anger, the intense feeling is only the fuel to accomplish other altruistic goals. Releasing the discomfort bought by moral anger is not the primary goal. The ultimate goal is justice. Only then will the discomfort be alleviated. It is discomfort from the intensity of moral anger that fuels and pushes the individual toward the goal. The goal of justice makes moral anger altruistic at the heart of it.

Joseph Butler makes a similar argument presently known as “Butler’s Stone”, in response to psychological egoism. Egoists argue that people are motivated by self-interest. Butler counters by arguing that our passions are directed toward external objects not toward pleasure (that the object may bring). Although pleasure or relief may come as a result, the motive is not the pleasure but always the object.<sup>8</sup> I agree with Butler. In the case of moral anger, the object is justice. Although one may get relief when justice is achieved, the agent’s primary goal is justice. For egoism to be true, the self must not be a side pleasure but the only one. Because the object and not merely the pleasure is what the morally angry agent seeks, their acts are altruistic.

Another may argue that there are other ways to relieve the discomfort that moral anger brings such as working out or hitting a punching bag. In response, I believe that these activities will not solve the problem. These activities may be ways to deal with the stress of moral anger but they are not ways to satisfy moral anger. Emotions have ends. For moral anger, it seeks its own satisfaction and that satisfaction is only found in justice.

Imagine that I am anxious to purchase a car, and that anxiety comes with wishes of driving it every day and being the envy of everyone that sees me. I may buy magazines with pictures of the car and even go to the dealership to see it. We cannot say that these events are relieving me of the anxiousness to buy the car. Although the actions may relax me or even allow me to express my pleasure, true release of the anxiety will only come about when the car is mine. Likewise, we can also conclude the same about moral anger. Activities may bring us pleasure such as talking about the anger and thinking of ways things can be better; but moral anger fuels us to the point that the only way to satisfy the emotion is to achieve justice.<sup>9</sup>

If moral anger is a source of discomfort, then why shouldn’t we exchange moral anger with meekness, which may in turn get us the same moral result? I think that replacing moral anger with meekness may affect how we view and address the injustice. For example, releasing our anger may force us to revise our judgments about the wrong – a risk that is problematic and not worth taking.<sup>10</sup> One cannot change one’s feelings without also changing one’s judgment about the act that caused the feeling to arise. If we revise our feelings by also revising our beliefs about the injustice, we may instead excuse the injustice as opposed to seeking justice. For example, if I replace my moral anger with meekness I can respond with meekness to the perpetrator but there is no longer any anger against the injustice for now I am exhibiting meekness without any real appreciation of

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<sup>8</sup> Butler, Joseph. 15 Sermons. XI.

<sup>9</sup> Roberts, pp.166-167.

<sup>10</sup> Moran, Kate. “Moving on for Community’s Sake: a (Self-Respecting) Kantian Account of Forgiveness”. Proceedings of the XI Kant Kongress, De Gruyter (forthcoming), p.4-5.

the injustice. My new perspective could in turn excuse the person for the wrong as opposed to pursuing justice for their actions. Instead, moral anger helps to manifest moral judgments about what we witness and experience. Erasing moral anger can cause us to erase the moral judgment, but we need the moral judgment in order to correct the wrong. Therefore, moral anger can aid in not excusing or turning a blind eye toward injustice, but help the morally angry pursue justice. I am not making empirical claims about what people will do. Instead I am arguing that the motivating power of moral anger has the potential to help us view the injustice in a particular way.<sup>11</sup> Joseph Butler argues:

And after an injury is done and there is a necessity that the offender should be brought to justice; the cool consideration of reason, that the security and peace of society requires examples of justice should be made, might indeed be sufficient to procure laws to be enacted, and sentence passed: but is it that cool reflection in the injured person, which, for the most part, brings the offender to justice? Or is it not resentment and indignation against the injury and the author of it? I am afraid there is no doubt which is commonly the case.<sup>12</sup>

I agree with Butler when he suggests that indifference and calm emotion may have a role within the courts of justice, but justice does not always come about through such “cool” actions and in fact such dispositions like meekness can cause us to revise our moral judgments. Instead, justice is first pursued by those who are hot; who become overcome with the recognition of the injustice and the strong, intense desire to work to reach the goal of justice. Moral anger provides this heat. Perhaps this is why Aristotle says, “anger, which arises from perceived injustice, is useful for preventing injustice.”<sup>13</sup>

### III. Productivity

Moral anger helps the morally angry rectify and end unjust, evil acts. Joseph Butler argues:

“The natural object or occasion of settled resentment [moral anger in general], then, being injury, as distinct from pain or loss, it is easy to see, that to prevent and to remedy such injury, and the miseries arising from it, is the end for which this passion was implanted in man. It is to be considered as a weapon put into our hands by nature, against injury, injustice and cruelty.”<sup>14</sup>

Moral anger is productive when anger leads one to *work* towards pursuing justice in ways that are *moral* and focused on reaching the *goal* of justice. This productivity takes place

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<sup>11</sup> For Moran, Kant does not define forgiveness as the release of indignation because of indignation’s purpose in judging wrong. Instead she asserts that Kant defines forgiveness as mercy.

<sup>12</sup> Butler, Joseph. 15 Sermons p.5

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle as cited in Simon Kemp, K.T. Strongman, “Anger theory and management: A Historical Analysis”, *The American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 108, No. 3. (Autumn, 1995), pp. 398.

<sup>14</sup> Butler, Joseph. Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel, Sermon VIII. “Upon Resentment and Forgiveness of Injuries.”, p. 2.

in the form of what Mario Wenning calls “rage projects”; initiatives, movements, and organizing that the angry participates in, in order to allow their anger to be heard and the goal of justice to be reached.<sup>15</sup> It can be said that moral anger can be productive not only by feeling the emotion but by merely having the disposition to be angry.<sup>16</sup> One may argue that this disposition to feel moral anger could perhaps prevent the injustice. What makes the disposition useful is that a person can recognize another’s disposition to be morally angry and as a result will decide not to cause them harm in order to prevent the anger from occurring. One can be afraid of making someone feel angry but they can also be afraid of what that person may do with that anger. However, I think within a non-ideal framework this will not be sufficient to stop injustice from occurring. Injustices do indeed occur in the world. When the disposition to be morally angry does not prevent harm, then *feeling* moral anger and doing something about that anger that disrupts the aims of the oppressor is necessary.<sup>17</sup>

In addressing social injustice, Pettigrove argues against the possibility of moral anger’s productivity. Pettigrove notes that those who are oppressed and angry do not always address their anger at the oppressor but often project their anger onto other oppressed people including their spouses and members of their communities. To support this, he notes that the highest rates of child abuse, domestic violence, and community crime are in homes of those who are systematically oppressed.<sup>18</sup> In light of these rates one ought to consider other factors.

Social service agents such as social workers and police are more likely to report cases of abuse involving the poor and minorities than those involving the middle class. Child abuse cases are high in families when one parent holds majority responsibility for a child’s conduct, where mothers feel guilt and/or inadequacy, and where adults are unable to escape the stress and frustration of parenting through other activities. High rates of domestic violence correlate with high aggressive responses to stress and are usually done when violent behavior is a norm. Both the cases of child abuse and domestic violence may also be higher because blue-collar homes are more authoritative.<sup>19</sup> In neither of the abuse studies I present does violence occur because poor families turn the anger of oppression on each other. Rather these facts exist among diverse families despite anger and oppression. In addition, community crime can be accounted for not as anger against oppressive forces turned inward but as the byproduct of the lack of economic opportunity that leads people to participate in the drug trade and other activities that uses violence as a method of regulation. These alternate explanations points to the fact that Pettigrove’s claim that moral anger at injustice is the source of violence, is not yet well supported. We can attribute this behavior to a slew of other factors.

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<sup>15</sup> Wenning, Mario. “The Return of Rage”. *Parrhesia* Number 8: 2009, pp. 89–99

<sup>16</sup> I am grateful for comments made by Joshua Knobe on an earlier draft of this paper I presented at the New Jersey Regional Philosophical Association Conference 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Note that the disruption that I am referring to is not an unproductive harm as in rioting or violence but I am referring to other productive and moral aims that disrupts the overall oppressive aims of those in power in productive and non-violent ways.

<sup>18</sup> Pettigrove, Glen. pp.369.

<sup>19</sup> Straus and Gelles. “Physical Violence in American Families”. Transaction Publishers. NJ. 1990. pp.181-192; 247-248.

Pettigrove seeks to suggest that emotions like moral anger are a motivating force that does not lead to pursuing justice but to further oppression. However, I argue that those who adhere to positive accounts of moral anger will not participate in acts of violence unless one's life is directly threatened. Otherwise moral anger, when appropriately and effectively exercised, does not promote harm. Moral anger such expressed through violence are not examples of positive accounts of moral anger. These are examples of abuses of anger. "Appropriate" or "proper anger" does not project onto innocent persons; rather, it aims for the correct object and sources of injustice and seeks justice not further pain.

Pettigrove mentions iconic freedom fighters such as Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and Ghandi as examples to support his claim that: "even if anger is one way of doing these things, there are other ways of doing them that are available to the meek."<sup>20</sup> However, if we let the figures speak for themselves it seems that moral anger did more motivational work than meekness. For example, Nelson Mandela once said, "I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities and a thousand unremembered moments produced in me *an anger*, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people." Martin Luther King believed that "... *anger* becomes a transforming force." When writing about Ghandi, Adams notes "As a rule, Gandhi did more than simply restrain *his anger*, instead he 'reserved' it, as he says later, 'to fight bigger battles.'<sup>21</sup> From these examples we can see that it was more of moral anger than meekness that motivated these figures to do activism.

Pettigrove's response to arguments like these is that although anger can lead people to do productive work it has also been shown to lead people towards violence. For Pettigrove, meekness will not fall into this trap because it is a calm response to wrongdoing. I think Pettigrove does not expose moral anger's lack of productive motivation but rather points to the problems of possessing an anger that is violent and not focused on the good. There are accounts of moral anger such as "appropriate anger" and "proper indignation" that adhere to high moral standards in that they are not synonymous with vengeance, repaying evil with evil, or taking ones' anger out on irrelevant others. Rather, these are the opposite of what Pettigrove describes moral anger to be and do and what meekness supposedly corrects. However, Pettigrove only mentions that these accounts "may be" and he "does not preclude the[ir] existence" but he does omit analyzing them.<sup>22</sup> There is a problem with this type of examination. The absence of mentioning positive accounts of moral anger makes his overall objection incomplete for it does not necessarily sustain his argument about moral anger being unproductive but rather it argues against *abuses* of moral anger rather than *proper uses* of moral anger. It would be analogous to my critique of a dysfunctional use of meekness where the agent becomes a punching bag for mistreatment rather than a proper use of meekness as a calm and humble disposition in the treatment of others.

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<sup>20</sup> Pettigrove, Glenn. Pp. 355

<sup>21</sup> Adams, David. "Psychology for Peace Activists". Advocate Press, CT. Pgs. 2, 5, and 159

<sup>22</sup> Pettigrove, Glen. P.370

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Whereas Pettigrove concludes his paper with “Blessed are the meek,” a quote from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, he will benefit from being reminded of another biblical passage, “Be angry and sin not.”<sup>23</sup> It is this passage that references the positive account of moral anger and its motivational and productive possibilities.

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<sup>23</sup> Ephesians 4:26