It's Okay to be Angry: A Functionalist Perspective of the Dangers of Over-Regulating Anger

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the view that anger is bad, even *wrong*, to feel and express has gained popularity. Philosophers like Martha Nussbaum and Derk Pereboom posit that anger is fundamentally tied to a desire for retribution (i.e. getting even for past events), which they argue is immoral, counterproductive, and irrational. Thus, they argue, we should try our best to stop ourselves from feeling and expressing anger whenever it arises. I argue that anger is not inherently retributive, and that feeling and expressing anger are sometimes the most adaptive response to unfairness in one's environment. I draw on robust psychological literature to characterize the dangers of over-regulating anger in terms of the practical, psychological, and humanitarian costs associated with *not* feeling and expressing anger. In the appropriate contexts, anger is crucial to prepare people to communicate disapproval, motivate necessary confrontation, and change wrongdoers' harmful behaviors. Thus, the functions of anger are not focused on getting even for past events, but rather on protecting individuals from future harm. Importantly, the over-regulation of anger is likely to cause the most harm to individuals and communities that experience routine unfairness, thereby reinforcing social injustices. By adopting a functionalist perspective of emotions, we can shift our focus away from policing experiences of anger and towards enhancing its functional qualities through thoughtful reflection on the sources of peoples' anger and resolutions for that anger.

Keywords: anger, retribution, justice, communication, confrontation, functional

Anger often arises as a natural response to the perception of unfairness in one's environment (Haidt, 2003). We start to feel and express anger as infants (Stenberg et al., 1983) and continue to experience it throughout our lives, for many people as often as every day (Averill, 1983). Sometimes we experience smaller fleeting bouts of anger, like when a neighboring car refuses to let us in to their lane, or when a friend cancels plans at the last minute. Other times, we experience larger more enduring forms of anger, such as anger towards certain political figures or institutions that we see as perpetuating harm against others. While anger feels as natural as and occurs as commonly as any other emotion we experience, anger is often seen as bad, even *wrong*, to feel and express.

The notion that feeling and expressing anger are generally bad – both for us and for those around us – is common amongst scholars dating back to early Greece, including Aristotle and the Sophists. This perspective continues to maintain popularity today, and it is not hard to see why. Anger feels unpleasant, and it can lead to risky behaviors like aggression that have the potential to escalate disagreements (Haidt, 2003; Van Dijk et al., 2008). Politicians and journalists have even pointed to anger as a probable root of the current political and social unrest across the nation and globe, contributing to increased polarization and hostility between groups (Moss, 2016; Green, 2016; Dann, 2019).

It's clear that anger has the potential to exacerbate conflict and fuel dangerous circumstances, but it is also part of a repertoire of human emotions that are thought to help us navigate the world around us (Keltner & Gross, 1999; Keltner & Haidt, 1999). There is a reason why people become angry. But the question is, *should* they? Given the risks and dangers associated with anger, should we try to avoid feeling and expressing

anger whenever possible in favor of less arousing or less negative emotions? Would society be better off without anger?

Many present-day scholars answer yes, proposing that we have an obligation to minimize the extent to which we feel and express anger. Under such views, what I call "anti-anger" views, anger retains some useful characteristics, like signaling to ourselves and others that a wrong has occurred and deterring harmful behavior (Nussbaum, 2016, pp. 5-6, 38-39). However, under such views, the utility of anger does not justify feeling and expressing anger because, they claim, anger is fundamentally tied to a desire for retribution, or equal payback for past events (Nussbaum, 2016, pp. 5, 15; Pereboom 2014, pp. 134-135; Aristotle, *Rh.*, 2.2.1378a31-3). For anti-anger theorists, this desire for retribution makes anger inherently harmful from a moral perspective, counterproductive from a pragmatic perspective, and incoherent from a rational perspective.

Ultimately, what anti-anger views propose is to find ways to communicate disapproval and change unfair circumstances without feeling and expressing anger, for example by fostering other emotions like disappointment in place of anger (Pereboom, 2009, pp. 171). In other words, expressing disappointment may sufficiently communicate disapproval and deter a wrongdoer from future harm, without fostering a desire for retribution that results in immoral, unpractical, and incoherent thoughts and behavior. Thus, under such views, we can and should do without the feeling and expression of anger: we should try our best to stop ourselves from feeling and expressing anger whenever it arises.

In this paper, I argue that anger is not inherently retributive, and that feeling and expressing anger are sometimes *the most adaptive response* to unfairness in one's

environment, without which we would be worse off as individuals and as a society. I draw on robust psychological literature to characterize the dangers of over-regulating anger in terms of the practical, psychological, and humanitarian costs associated with *not* feeling and expressing anger. Importantly, I argue, the over-regulation of anger is likely to cause the most harm to individuals and communities that experience routine unfairness, thereby reinforcing social injustices.

In the first section, I expand on the argument against anger from a moral, pragmatic, and rational perspective, and discuss the anti-anger proposal to replace anger with disappointment in response to wrongdoing (Nussbaum, 2016; Pereboom, 2009; Pereboom, 2014). I show that these arguments all crucially rely on the claim that anger is fundamentally tied to a desire for retribution, which focuses on getting even for past events rather than facilitating positive future outcomes. I will ultimately reject this claim, and argue that a desire for retribution can be regulated without eliminating anger.

In the second section, I provide a functionalist account of anger to show that, in certain situations, anger uniquely prepares individuals to adaptively respond to injustice, facilitates productive social interactions, and changes wrongdoers' future behavior. Thus, I argue, the functions of anger, like those of disappointment, are *forward-looking* because they aim to facilitate adaptive future outcomes for the target(s) of harm (Haidt, 2003; Keltner & Haidt, 1999). This account challenges the claim that retribution is an essential feature of anger, and demonstrates that disappointment cannot universally replace anger. In the appropriate contexts, anger is both justified and uniquely instrumental, such that over-regulating it would have maladaptive consequences for individuals facing harm (Ford & Tamir, 2012; Tamir & Ford, 2012; Tamir, 2016).

In the third section, I highlight additional dangers of over-regulating anger in terms of how it can adversely affect individuals' psychological health (e.g. Perez & Soto, 2011; Ford et al., 2017) and hinder social justice movements (e.g. Ford et al., 2018). Here, I draw attention to the particular danger of over-regulating anger for vulnerable communities. Since anger tends to arise in response to the perception of unfairness in one's environment, individuals that disproportionally experience unfairness would also disproportionally shoulder the costs of such over-regulation. Thus, I argue, the over-regulation of anger is likely to perpetuate harm against vulnerable communities and reinforce social injustices.

There is often good reason to regulate anger, even when we are justified in being angry. Sometimes it can be for our own peace of mind, and other times it can be for instrumental reasons related to a particular situation. But anger is as central an emotion to the human experience as fear or sadness, without which we would limit our ability to adaptively respond to our environments. Moreover, people who are the angriest often have the most to be angry about, and prescribing them to eliminate their anger would ultimately cause them more harm than feeling and expressing that anger. By adopting a functionalist perspective of emotions, we can shift our focus away from policing experiences of anger and towards enhancing its functional qualities through thoughtful reflection on the sources of peoples' anger and resolutions for that anger.

Is Retribution Justifiable? The Argument Against Anger

While there is some variability in how we experience and express anger, it is typically accompanied by a feeling of emotional pain, some motivation to retaliate (Haidt 2003, pp. 856), and bodily changes including increased heart rate, elevated blood

pressure, and increased adrenaline and noradrenaline (Levenson et al., 1990). This host of physiological, subjective, and behavioral changes can be unpleasant to feel and are commonly associated with subsequent reckless or violent behaviors.

Given such risks, several prominent current-day philosophers, from philosopher of freedom and responsibility Derk Pereboom to philosopher of ethics and law Martha Nussbaum, have argued against the justifiability of feeling and expressing anger. While Nussbaum (2016) and Pereboom (2009; 2014) approach this topic from different angles, their collective arguments against anger can be classified into three different types of concerns all critically related to the desire for retribution.

Notably, these concerns are meant to undermine not only the justifiability of *expressing* anger, which involves behaving in a particular way towards wrongdoers, but also the justifiability of *feeling* anger, which involves certain thoughts and beliefs. Below, I summarize their moral, pragmatic, and rational arguments against the justifiability of anger, as well as a suggested alternative to feeling and expressing anger (i.e. disappointment). I characterize "anti-anger" views as views that argue against the justifiability of feeling and expressing anger using one or more of these arguments.

The moral argument against anger

If anger is inherently tied to retribution, then feeling anger is only morally justifiable insofar as desiring retribution is morally justifiable, and expressing anger is only justifiable insofar as seeking retribution is morally justifiable. However, there are several issues with the justifiability of retribution from a moral perspective. For simplicity, I will focus here on Nussbaum's moral argument the justifiability of desiring

retribution, and Pereboom's moral argument against the justifiability of seeking retribution, although both target the feeling *and* expression of anger in their views.

Retribution entails harming another person in response to their wrongdoing. Specifically, the purpose of retribution is to get even with the wrongdoer, or harm them for the harm they have caused. First, in order for desiring retributive punishment to be justified, wanting to harm a wrongdoer must be a morally permissible response to a wrongdoing. Second, in order for seeking retributive punishment to be justified, individuals who commit wrongdoings must be genuinely responsible for their actions in a sense that justifies such punishment.

With regard to the first question relating to the ethics of retributive punishment, Nussbaum has argued that desiring to harm someone for what they've done is itself morally wrong insofar as it stems from a desire to restore status (2016, pp. 5-6). In other words, even if someone is responsible for what they have done, the only outcome of retributive punishment is raising one's status relative to the wrongdoer because it allows the person who has been wronged to restore their dignity by lowering the dignity of the wrongdoer. Nussbaum calls this desire to restore status a "narcissistic error" (2016, pp. 38), insofar as it treats one's own dignity as more important than the dignity of others. If anger entails such a desire to restore status through retribution, and prioritizing one's dignity over the dignity of others is immoral, then feeling anger is also immoral.

With regard to the second question relating to punishment and responsibility, Pereboom has argued that individuals are not genuinely responsible for their actions to such an extent that justifies causing them harm (2009; 2014). As a simplified example, if an individual steals to survive, then do they deserve to be punished for their wrongdoing?

In such a case, you might imagine that the circumstances in one's life that can lead someone to steal are beyond their control, so you may question whether the person is genuinely responsible for the crime they committed. If they are not genuinely responsible for their crime, then they may not deserve punishment for it, and they should instead be rehabilitated or otherwise prevented from causing future harm.

While this example is more intuitively straightforward than cases of people with less obviously compelling circumstances, some philosophers of responsibility have argued that because every person has preexisting conditions, including genetics and situational factors, that contribute to their actions, no one is genuinely responsible for their wrongdoings in a sense that justifies harming them as payback for what they have done (Pereboom, 2014, pp. 1; 2009, pp. 170). Pereboom has argued that even the expression of anger through verbal means is retributive in nature because it intends to make a wrongdoer feel bad or scared (Pereboom 2009, pp. 178). Thus, if seeking retributive punishment is not justified from a responsibility perspective, then neither is expressing anger with a wrongdoer because it *aims* to inflict harm on them.

In sum, these arguments posit that because desiring and seeking retribution is immoral, and anger is inextricably tied to retribution, feeling and expressing anger is also immoral. Notably, if this definition of anger is false, then this moral argument against the justifiability of anger does not hold. In other words, if retribution is not an inherent component of being angry, then anger is not necessarily immoral. In the next section, I turn to consider the pragmatic argument against anger in terms of whether feeling and expressing anger is helpful, regardless of whether it is moral.

The pragmatic argument against anger

Regardless of whether anger is morally permissible from a responsibility or harm perspective, some argue that it is helpful in communicating disapproval, motivating action against wrongdoers, and deterring wrongdoers from causing further harm, and that this utility justifies feeling and expressing anger (Nichols, 2007). Anti-anger views reject this conclusion, arguing that anger's retributive nature problematizes its practical utility as a guide to action. If anger is fundamentally tied to retribution, then it is likely to cause harsh retaliation against the wrongdoer, which can lead to escalation rather than reconciliation.[1] To illustrate this point, anti-anger views claim that there are several historical examples of peaceful social justice movements that achieved change without anger, thereby circumventing some of the risks associated with dissent and mass protest. Thus, they argue, there must be reasonable alternatives to anger that effectively communicate disapproval, motivate action, and change wrongdoers' behavior.

In line with the suggestion that anger is more likely to cause retaliation than reconciliation, research suggests that acting on anger has the potential to escalate situations (Van Dijk et al., 2008). Anger has been associated with the motivation to insult, attack, or humiliate the target of one's anger, and research suggests that we often take pleasure in the expectation or act of revenge (Haidt, 2003, pp. 856). Philosophers and psychologists agree that because anger promotes aggressive behavior, it is a costly strategy for addressing social challenges (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011, pp. 720; Nichols,

[1] While both Nussbaum and Pereboom reject the justifiability of anger from a pragmatic perspective, they also claim that it can be helpful to display anger without actually being angry, and that this display of anger is not as problematic as expressing genuine anger because it is not accompanied by retributive feelings (Nussbaum, 2016, pp. 141, 153; Pereboom, 2009, pp. 174). However, it is unclear why such displays of anger are not susceptible to their moral concerns about causing undue harm to the target of anger, or pragmatic concerns about escalating disagreements.

2007, pp. 417; Pereboom 2009, pp. 172), and risks backfiring when trying to change a wrongdoer's behavior (Wubben et al., 2011; Van Dijk et al., 2008).

Additionally, if social justice movements can be achieved without anger, then there would seem to be some reasonable alternative to feeling and expressing anger that can still adequately respond to wrongdoings and push for reform. Anti-anger views often point to the successes of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) as examples of resisting injustice through peaceful, non-retributive means (Pereboom, 2014, pp. 149; Nussbaum, 2016, pp. 36-37). According to such views, these movements were fundamentally built on the elimination of anger, allowing for a focus on how to change future outcomes as opposed to achieving payback for the past.

Since retributive behaviors have the potential to cause irreparable damage to a relationship or provoke retaliation from wrongdoers that would lead to further conflict, anti-anger views argue that we should seek out reasonable alternatives to anger for communicating disapproval and deterring wrongdoings. Crucially, this argument relies on the notion that anger necessarily manifests in retributive behaviors, and that forms of protest that do not involve retributive behaviors do not involve anger. In the next section, I build on this pragmatic argument against anger to describe the rational argument against anger before turning to discuss emotional alternatives to feeling and expressing anger.

The rational argument against anger

Anti-anger views suggest that anger is not only practically unhelpful, but also incoherent from a rational perspective. Nussbaum argues that this incoherence stems from the fact that retribution cannot undo the harm that has been caused by the wrongdoer. In other words, if the goal of retribution is to repair a wrongdoing, but

retribution cannot undo a past harm, then, retribution does not actually repair wrongdoings, and it is therefore irrational to desire and seek (Nussbaum, 2016, pp. 5-6). Meanwhile, Pereboom argues that this incoherence stems from the fact that wrongdoers are not truly morally responsible for their actions. In other words, it is irrational to feel anger towards wrongdoers, in the same way that it is irrational to feel angry towards a fallen tree for destroying property, since neither the wrongdoer nor the tree is truly to blame for the wrongdoing (Pereboom, 2014, pp. 152). In other words, if feeling anger necessarily entails retributive blame towards a wrongdoer, and it is always irrational to blame wrongdoers for their actions, then anger is also always irrational.

The arguments outlined above posit that anger is fundamentally immoral, unhelpful, and irrational because it strives for retribution in response to a wrongdoing. Consequently, anti-anger views suggest that we should eliminate the feeling and expression of anger as best as possible. However, we still need to acknowledge wrongdoing and attempt to change wrongdoers' behavior. To fill this gap, scholars have proposed a range of emotional responses that do not involve a desire for retribution. In the next section, I will summarize the argument in favor of what seems to be the most reasonable alternative to anger in response to wrongdoings: disappointment.

An alternative response to wrongdoing: disappointment

Anti-anger views vary in terms of their suggestions for what to feel and express in place of anger when you or someone you care for has been wronged. Nussbaum has suggested replacing anger with unconditional love and forgiveness (2016, pp.11-12, 84), but this suggestion may be practically difficult to implement, and difficult to argue in favor of from a psychological perspective. Positive emotions (i.e. love, joy, awe) are

thought to serve very different functions from negative emotions (i.e. anger, fear, sadness) in terms of their differential impact on how we process and respond to environmental stimuli (Fredrickson, 2004; Fredrickson, 2001). Specifically, love is thought to facilitate caregiving through a host of physiological, cognitive, and behavioral changes (O'Neil et al., 2018; Shiota et al., 2014) – a response that is unlikely to be helpful in communicating disapproval and changing a wrongdoer's behavior (Tamir & Ford, 2012; Ford & Tamir, 2012).

While these positive emotional alternatives to anger don't seem particularly plausible, Pereboom puts forth a reasonable negative emotion replacement for anger that we can and often do naturally feel in response to wrongdoing: disappointment. He argues that disappointment is a less aroused state than anger, and that because it feels calmer, it is less disruptive to rational deliberation (2014, pp. 175). Since disappointment entails some degree of sympathy between the wrongdoer and the person who was wronged, he argues that it facilitates sympathetic communication (2014, pp. 180) rather than condemnation (2009, pp. 172). Since disappointment allows for the communication of disapproval in interpersonal relationships without aggression and intimidation (2009, pp. 173), he argues that it is less likely to provoke retaliation, and more likely to change the wrongdoer's behavior, ultimately benefitting relationships.[2]

In the psychological literature, disappointment is characterized as a response to wrongdoing that arises when the wrongdoer fails to meet positive expectations, and

[2] This form of disapproval aligns with what Nussbaum calls "Transition-anger" (2016, pp. 31, 93). According to Nussbaum, Transition-anger is the only form of anger that is a rational response to wrongdoing because it focuses solely on changing future outcomes as opposed to getting even for the past. She describes this anger as the type of anger that a parent might feel towards a child, because a parent does not wish to harm their child, but instead to change their future behavior. Importantly, Nussbaum claims that Transition-anger is an atypical form of anger since most anger, she argues, is inherently retributive. Thus, she argues that even Transition-anger should be avoided because of its potential to develop into a more 'garden-variety' form of anger that comes with retributive desires (2016, pp. 35-37, 151).

which entails a feeling of sympathy between the wrongdoer and the person that was wronged (Lelieveld et al., 2013). In this sense, disappointment can be considered a hybrid of anger and sadness insofar as it is a natural response to a wrongdoing, but it does not involve a strong judgment of blame or responsibility. For example, when a child does something wrong, you might feel disappointed with them, and they may feel bad about what they did, but you would not necessarily blame or punish them for their misstep. Such disappointment would be accompanied by some emotional pain, but is less likely to be associated with a motivation to retaliate.

While disappointment seems like a reasonable alternative to anger in response to wrongdoing, I will argue that it cannot always effectively replace anger. In the next section, I build on a multi-level analysis of the functions of emotions (Keltner & Haidt, 1999) to argue that anger serves functions that are inherently forward-looking, or focused on future outcomes, rather than retributive, i.e. focused on punishment for the past. Thus, I argue, anger is not susceptible to the moral, pragmatic, and rational concerns about the justifiability of retribution. In the appropriate contexts, anger is both justified and uniquely instrumental, such that universal replacement of anger with disappointment would be costly for individuals facing harm.

Is Anger Inherently Retributive? A Functionalist Comparison of Anger and Disappointment

Prior to the 1990s, many emotion theorists described emotions as maladaptive because they can disrupt peace of mind (Skinner, 1948, pp. 92) and interfere with reason and rationality in social contexts (Keltner & Gross, 1999, pp. 468). This view of emotions coheres with anti-anger views that position anger opposite rational deliberation and moral

behavior. Recently, however, most emotion theorists have adopted a functionalist perspective of emotions under which emotions are adaptive responses to social and physical problems in our environments (Keltner & Gross, 1999, pp. 468). This theoretical shift was inspired by a growing body of work demonstrating the crucial role that emotions play in structuring relationships and guiding social interactions, as well as increasing interdisciplinary work demonstrating how emotional experiences interact with and guide sociocultural norms (Keltner & Haidt, 1999, pp. 506).

A functional view of emotions posits that emotions are the "intelligent interface" between environmental input, such as a social challenge, and adaptive output, such as a particular behavior or set of behaviors (Scherer, 1984, pp. 127). Theorists differ with respect to whether they define emotions and their functions in terms of evolution (Ekman, 1992) or social construction (Barrett & Campos, 1987), but they generally agree that the functions of emotions can be inferred by attending to the specific causes and consequences of emotions in our current environment (Keltner & Gross, 1999, pp. 470).

Since anger is typically caused by "a negative event for which another person is held responsible" (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), motivates approach-related behavior,[3] such as verbal or physical threat, and enables high-energy expenditure to defend individuals from an offensive act (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011, pp. 733), researchers often characterize the function of anger as *the reparation of injustice* (Solomon, 1990). Whereas retribution is focused on payback for the past (i.e. punishment), reparation is focused on improving outcomes for those who have been wronged (i.e. making amends).

[3] Anger has been associated with both approach and avoidance behaviors, but in both cases it is associated with high-energy expenditure (Averill, 1983). Approach behaviors include confronting the wrongdoer, and avoidance behaviors include going out of your way to avoid the wrongdoer. Researchers thus generally characterize the avoidance behaviors associated with anger as active, compared to the passive avoidance behaviors associated with sadness (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011, pp. 733).

Thus, anger promotes behaviors that help individuals respond to and repair, or fix, injustices in their environment, thereby enabling them to protect themselves from continued harm.

In this section, I expand on this functional account of anger to challenge the assumption that anger is inherently tied to retribution. I argue that in considering the circumstances surrounding the wrongdoing and the relationship between the individual and the wrongdoer, anger is sometimes a more adaptive response to wrongdoing than disappointment. First, I describe the intrapersonal functions of anger in terms of how it informs and prepares an individual to respond to wrongdoing. Next, I describe the interpersonal functions of anger in terms of what it communicates about an individual's beliefs and intentions. Finally, I discuss the transformative function of anger in terms of how it can change other peoples' behavior.

Intrapersonal functions of anger

In evaluating the intrapersonal functions of emotions, researchers focus on the physiological underpinnings, subjective feelings, and behavioral motivations associated with specific emotions. Anti-anger views suggest that since the physiological, subjective, and behavioral changes associated with anger are unpleasant and aggressive, they disrupt peace of mind and decrease overall wellbeing. By fostering emotions like love or disappointment in place of anger, these views claim that we can avoid retributive thoughts and behaviors, and thus maintain rationality and goodwill in the face of injustice.

However, research indicates that disappointment does not always feel better than anger. Disappointment also disrupts peace of mind, since it informs individuals that their

positive expectations have not been met. This realization feels unpleasant, and has the potential to be more painful than anger. For example, imagine you learn that two of your friends lied to you. One person (Person A) was someone you had low positive expectations from, and the other (Person B) you had high positive expectations from. You may be angry with both people because of their wrongdoings, and this anger will likely feel unpleasant. However, based on the conditions that tend to elicit disappointment, you are more likely to feel disappointed with Person B than Person A, because you had greater expectations from this friend. The violation of these expectations can result in feeling let down or betrayed, such that your feelings towards Person B likely cause more pain than your feelings towards Person A. Furthermore, research suggests that disappointment tends to last longer than anger (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011, 730), resulting in more enduring disruption of an individuals' emotional state.

Additionally, disappointment is not associated with physiological, subjective, and behavioral changes that prepare individuals to actively confront a wrongdoer. On the contrary, research suggests that disappointment is associated with feeling disengaged and powerless (Lieleveld et al. 2013, pp. 605). Meanwhile, anger is associated with feeling confrontational and powerful (Roseman, Antonious, & Jose, 1996). Thus, anger is more likely to be helpful in overcoming feeling afraid or discouraged as a target or witness of injustice. For example, if someone makes a racist remark, disappointment can cause the target or witness of that remark to emotionally withdraw from the wrongdoer, and disengage from positive expectations of that person. In contrast, anger motivates individuals to actively confront wrongdoers to communicate that certain behaviors are unacceptable (Tamir & Ford, 2012).

Research indicates that anger tends to motivate an active response until the injustice has been remedied. Importantly, this "remedy" need not involve retributive punishment. Rather, research suggests that anger diminishes if a wrongdoer simply apologizes or tries to make amends (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011, pp. 732), suggesting that the goal of anger is not to get even, but rather to minimize future harm by communicating disapproval and eliciting behavioral changes in the wrongdoer. While aggression can feel bad, it can ultimately protect targets of injustice from continued harm. Notably, while such aggression does involve confrontation, it does necessarily entail equal payback, physical aggression, or even an intention to harm the wrongdoer, and thus does not inherently entail retributive thoughts or behaviors.

Anti-anger views argue that we can maintain a motivation to approach wrongdoers without anger, but if individuals cultivate genuine disappointment in place of anger, they will have to work against the bodily and subjective changes associated with this emotional response. Indeed, research suggests that individuals must overcome feelings like sadness and become angry, or feel a combination of both emotions, in order gain the motivation necessary to confront someone (Levine, 1996). Researchers have even argued that when confrontation is unavoidable, getting angry is the most emotionally intelligent response, because it best prepares individuals to navigate those situations (Ford & Tamir, 2012; Tamir & Ford, 2012).

Hence, while anger can incur short-term costs to happiness, it can differentially benefit individuals in the attainment of their goals, protect them from present and future harm, and thereby support their ability to attain lasting peace of mind and wellbeing. Notably, the intrapersonal functions of anger described in this section are not focused on

retribution: anger prepares individuals to confront wrongdoing without necessarily invoking retributive thoughts and feelings. In the next section, I turn to discuss the interpersonal functions of anger in terms of how it can promote reconciliation and benefit relationships, providing further support for the view that anger is not inherently retributive, but rather forward-looking and instrumental.

Interpersonal functions of anger

At the interpersonal level of the functions of emotions, researchers examine how emotional expressions convey information about peoples' emotions, beliefs, and intentions (Keltner & Haidt, 1999, pp. 511). Emotional expressions are relatively involuntary, and therefore provide a fairly reliable source of information about individuals' mental states and how they are likely to behave (Wubben et al., 2011, pp. 490). Such information can in turn guide others' emotions and behaviors towards them. For example, emotional expressions can evoke complementary or reciprocal emotional responses in others, such as fear in response to anger (Keltner & Haidt, 1999, pp. 511), guilt in response to disappointment (Lelieveld et al. 2013, pp. 606), or empathic responses (i.e. understanding how the other person feels) (Eisenberg et al., 1991). Thus, emotional communication rapidly coordinates social interactions and can promote understanding between individuals.

Anti-anger views argue that since the expression of anger is aggressive and intimidating, and aims to inflict emotional pain on the wrongdoer, it is likely to lead wrongdoers to retaliate rather than try to understand the harm caused by their actions. Such retaliation could lead to escalation, rather than resolution, and therefore has the potential to damage relationships. Since disappointment is calmer and entails sympathy

with the wrongdoer, it promotes understanding and allows people to convey their dissatisfaction without offending the wrongdoer. Thus, anti-anger views posit that emotions like disappointment may be effective in communicating disapproval with the aim of maintaining the relationship.

Research confirms that the expression of anger has the potential to escalate an argument (Van Dijk et al., 2008), and that such expressions are generally costly and risky (Hutcherson & Gross 2011). However, anger is also proactive in the sense that it motivates high-energy expenditure to overcome an obstacle (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011, pp. 733). Meanwhile, disappointment is accompanied by passive behaviors and persisting judgments that can lead an individual to give up on a relationship rather than seek to repair it. Thus, while anger runs the risk of being too confrontational, disappointment runs the risk of not being confrontational enough and failing to clearly express how a wrongdoer can change their behavior to maintain the relationship.

Typically, individuals feel and express both anger and disappointment in their relationships, depending on the particular context surrounding the wrongdoer's action and how close the individual feels to the wrongdoer. For example, when a friend breaks a promise, one is likely to feel upset that the promise was not fulfilled, but still sympathize with the friend, thinking that the harm was probably not intended. However, when the friend repeatedly breaks promises, demonstrating a lack of regard for the friendship, feelings of sympathy may diminish, and disappointment can develop into anger.

Indeed, research investigating the communication of anger in negotiation contexts show that when a negotiator gets angry, it signals that they have reached their limits and will not accept a lower offer, alerting the other negotiators of potential conflict escalation

if they do not attempt to compromise (Lieleveld et al., 2013, pp. 607). Thus, expressing anger in relationships can signal that individuals have reached their limits in terms of accepting certain behaviors, and provide wrongdoers with a salient reminder to change the behavior before it permanently harms the relationship. These expressions can be non-verbal (i.e. facial expressions) or verbal (i.e. a strong statement of disapproval), but notably, they do not need to involve retributive behaviors, such as insulting, shaming, or otherwise attempting to harm the wrongdoer, in order to be effective.

Furthermore, research suggests that anger is often focused on temporary situations, such that it easily diminishes following attempts by the wrongdoer to make reparations (Hutcherson & Gross, 2013, 733). Thus, anger seems to be closely tied to the function of repairing and even improving relationships through active communication and urgent resolutions. Since these interpersonal functions of anger are not retributive in nature, anger is not inherently harmful for relationships, and depending on the context, it can be more communicatively effective and beneficial for relationships than disappointment. In the following section, I build on this communicative role of anger to consider how it shapes wrongdoers' behaviors.

Transformative functions of anger

Expressions of anger and disappointment can change a wrongdoer's harmful behavior by triggering complimentary or reciprocal emotional reactions in a wrongdoer. As a target of anger, people tend to feel fear, which is unpleasant. To avoid feeling fear, people often avoid the harmful behaviors that cause people to be angry. Anti-anger sometimes suggests that since anger only changes a wrongdoer's behavior through fear of punishment, disappointment is a better emotion to express when trying to change

someone's behavior because it appeals more to their sense of morality and rationality than to their desire to avoid punishment (Pereboom, 2009, pp. 176). In other words, they argue, anger only changes a wrongdoer's behavior by making them feel bad, whereas disappointment changes a wrongdoer's behavior by inspiring them to morally reflect on their behavior and choose how they should behave in the future.

However, both anger and disappointment tend to influence a wrongdoer's future behavior causing wrongdoers to feel bad for their actions (Van Dijk & Van Harreveld 2008; Van Dijk & Zeelenberg, 2002). As the target of disappointment, people tend to feel guilt, which some research suggests is more unpleasant than feeling fear (Hutcherson & Gross, 2013, pp. 729). To avoid feeling guilty, people often avoid the harmful behaviors that can cause people to be disappointed. Additionally, both anger and disappointment can inspire someone to reflect on their actions, and thereby change their behavior by appealing to a sense of morality.

Emotional expressions provide information to wrongdoers that can be used as feedback to make inferences about their past behaviors, and motivate them to correct their future behavior (Van Kleef, 2009). For example, when an individual expresses anger with someone for breaking a promise, the expression of anger can lead the wrongdoer to reflect on whether breaking the promise was morally wrong. When we infer that someone's anger towards us is appropriate, this inference can motivate us to apologize and avoid the wrongful behavior in the future (Van Kleef et al., 2006). Thus, emotional expressions can change someone's behavior by triggering emotional reactions, inferential processes, or both.

Importantly, while being the target of anger or disappointment can cause wrongdoers to feel emotional distress, this distress is not the aim of such expressions. For example, if someone you wronged says, “What you did made me disappointed/angry”, this can make you feel bad, but that does not mean the person intended to cause harm with this expression. Rather, the goal of such statements is to solicit behavioral changes in the wrongdoer that indicate they understand their wrongdoing, and will avoid certain actions in the future. Thus, the distress associated with being the target of anger or disappointment is not a result of the emoter’s retributive intention, but rather a result of realizing one’s own wrongdoing, which can facilitate behavioral reform.

Building on this idea, research suggests that in the absence of guilt, the expression of disappointment does not usually lead people to improve their behavior, and it can instead make their behavior worse. The expression of disappointment tends to communicate weakness and a need for support (Lieleveld et al. 2013), and this information can trigger different responses in the wrongdoer depending on how the wrongdoer feels about the person who was wronged.

When a wrongdoer feels compassion for or affiliation with someone they wronged, expressions of disappointment tend to make them feel guilty (Baumeister et al., 1995), providing them with some motivation to change their behavior. However, when the wrongdoer does not feel any compassion for or affiliation with the person they wronged, they do not feel guilty, and they are more likely to take advantage of perceived weakness to exploit the wronged individual (Lelieveld et al., 2013, pp. 615). In such cases, expressions of disappointment are counterproductive, and rather than correcting the wrongdoer’s behavior, it can potentially encourage the wrongdoer to behave in more

harmful ways. In such cases, anger is more likely to lead to behavioral reform than disappointment, since these emotions differentially shape wrongdoers' responses to those they harmed.

Thus far, I have argued that anger serves important intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transformative functions that often cannot be served by other emotions like disappointment. It is practically beneficial to feel and express when individuals need to actively confront a source of injustice, particularly when there are no positive expectations from the wrongdoers, and the wrongdoers do not sympathize with those they have harmed. In such cases, down-regulating anger in favor of disappointment would likely backfire by preparing individuals to withdraw from necessary confrontation, signaling weakness, and potentially eliciting additional harmful behavior from the wrongdoers. Below, I argue that the functions of anger are thus forward-looking since they aim to improve future outcomes rather than get even with wrongdoers for past actions. In other words, anger is not inherently retributive.

Anger is not inherently retributive

Anti-anger views posit that anger is, by definition, retributive because it focuses on getting even for past events rather than changing future outcomes. In other words, they claim, anger is *backward-looking*, and thereby not justified from a moral, pragmatic, or rational perspective. Meanwhile, disappointment is considered to be forward-looking because it expresses disapproval of someone's wrongdoings with the *aim* of reconciling with the wrongdoer or helping them change their future actions. In this view, the function of disappointment is to facilitate positive future outcomes following a wrongdoing: it is

moral because it doesn't harm the wrongdoer, pragmatic because it is not offensive, and rational because it focuses on the future rather than the past.

A functional account of anger and disappointment, however, undermines the anti-anger claim that disappointment is forward-looking but anger is not. The function of anger is not retribution itself, but rather the reparation of injustice, which is focused on improving outcomes for those who have been wronged by enabling them to protect themselves from continued harm. While disappointment can also achieve reparations, it does so by instilling guilt in a sympathetic wrongdoer. Meanwhile, anger does not rely on wrongdoers' feelings of sympathy: it demands reparations by communicating a readiness to defend oneself. Thus, while anger and disappointment can both adaptively respond to wrongdoings, they do so in different ways, and are effective in different contexts.

This functional comparison of anger and disappointment suggests that, in the appropriate contexts, anger is the most effective emotion for protecting individuals from harm, repairing relationships, and incentivizing wrongdoers to change their harmful behavior. Like disappointment, anger promotes future safety and stability, and encourages future cooperation and good behavior. Thus, anger, like disappointment, has forward-looking aims, so it is not inherently tied to retributive thoughts and feelings. I thereby reject the anti-anger definition of anger as something we feel and express with the goal of punishing wrongdoers. While anger can manifest in retributive thoughts and behaviors, I have shown that these are not essential components of anger, such that these thoughts and behaviors can be regulated without eliminating the feeling and expression of anger altogether. In the next and last section, I build on this empirical account of anger and disappointment to show that over-regulating anger has significant costs for

individuals' psychological well-being, as well as social justice movements. While the goal of anti-anger views is to reduce harm caused by angry individuals, I argue that the over-regulation of anger ultimately causes individuals, particularly those who face routine injustice, greater harm.

Can We Do Without Anger? The Costs of Over-Regulating Anger

Anti-anger views posit that we can and should do without the feeling and expression of anger. But such views, if widely accepted, could have serious consequences for those who experience unfairness, and need it to adaptively navigate their environments. In this section, I build on the functional costs of over-regulating anger described in the previous section to show that over-regulating anger can have additional psychological and humanitarian costs that disproportionately affect vulnerable communities. In doing so, I discuss historical figures that anti-anger views often draw upon, including Gandhi and MLK, to illustrate their case against anger. I show, contrary to what anti-anger views posit, that these figures have repeatedly made the case that anger is a force for change, without which they could not have pursued their goals for systemic reform. Based on these arguments, I conclude that we would be worse off, as individuals and as a society, without the feeling and expression of anger.

Psychological costs

While the over-regulation of anger can result in maladaptive behavioral responses to physical or social threats, some may argue that reducing anger could at least benefit individuals at the experiential and psychological level since getting angry feels bad and routinely feeling bad could inversely affect individuals' long-term mental health. However, research suggests that down-regulating negative emotions like anger can

sometimes *increase* psychological harm (Ford & Troy, 2019). One proposed reason for this consequence of over-regulation is that consistently trying to change genuine feelings about a situation can feel invalidating. A second proposed reason for this consequence is that consistently trying to reduce negative affect is challenging, thereby increasing individuals' cognitive burden.

To expand on the first reason relating to invalidation, emotions like anger often verify peoples' beliefs and values (Tamir, 2016), such that becoming angry in response to a specific act of injustice can demonstrate an individual's value for fairness in that context (Swann, 1987). Thus, trying to eliminate anger in unfair situations can threaten an individuals' identity and invalidate their experience. For example, a study examining emotion regulation in Latinx individuals living in high versus low oppression contexts in the United States found that for only the individuals living in a high oppression context (i.e. perceived high racial oppression in their environments), more frequent attempts to reduce negative feelings were associated with greater depressive symptoms (Perez & Soto, 2011). Attempts to eliminate negative affect may have caused individuals living in the high oppression context to feel like they were not able to acknowledge the oppressive circumstances they were living with, or their desire for more fair circumstances, resulting in increased feelings of invalidation or inauthenticity (Ford & Troy, 2019). In other words, for those who experience more injustice, attempts to eliminate anger may just increase other negative feelings, leading to further downstream consequences for psychological health.

To expand on the second reason relating to cognitive burden, trying to change how one perceives and genuinely feels about a situation is cognitively taxing (Ochsner &

Gross, 2008). This challenge is particularly prominent when individuals experience hardship on a regular basis, because they have fewer cognitive resources leftover to direct towards this type of emotion regulation, resulting in increased failures to regulate. Research suggests that routinely trying and failing to change how one feels about negative events has been shown to be associated with greater depressive symptoms (Ford et al., 2017), and that such failures are themselves a source of cognitive burden and stress that are counterproductive (Ford & Troy, 2019). Moreover, research suggests that accepting negative *emotional experiences* (i.e. accepting emotions without judgment or attempts to change the emotion) is associated with greater psychological health, and that this effect is not observed for just accepting negative *situations* (Ford et al., 2018).

Importantly, research in this area suggests that the psychological costs associated with over-regulating negative emotions like anger are greatest for those who experience the most harm, not simply because they experience the most anger, but because their anger may be the most meaningful. Because individuals and communities that experience high oppression are not able to escape that oppression, attempts to change feelings that respond to that injustice may be particularly invalidating at an experiential level and taxing at a cognitive level, resulting in an increased threat to well-being over time. Thus, attempts to eliminate anger can directly increase harm for those who experience the most injustice.

Humanitarian Costs

Anti-anger views claim that we can maintain the motivation to fight injustice in the absence of anger, in large part because figures like Gandhi and MLK led peaceful non-retributive social justice movements that resulted in meaningful change. While

research suggests that anger is associated with more willingness to engage in political action (Groenendyk & Banks, 2014; Valentino et al., 2011; Van Zomeren et al., 2004), anti-anger views suggest that political action is still possible in the absence of anger. However, recent work found that successfully reducing anger by changing how one thought about the situation reduced recent and intended political action, suggesting that even if political action is possible without anger, such action would significantly decrease in the absence of anger (Ford et al., 2018).

Additionally, both Gandhi and MLK described the essential role that anger plays in social revolution, and specifically in their non-retributive movements. While Gandhi advocated for non-violence and maintaining control over anger, he also discussed how anger provides the fuel to fight against injustice. He said:

> Use your anger for good. Anger to people is like gas to the automobile – it fuels you to move forward and get to a better place. Without it we would not be motivated to rise to a challenge. It is an energy that compels us to define what is just and unjust. (Gandhi, 2017)

In other words, he describes anger as *the source* of resolve against injustice. Gandhi recommended that we should closely regulate our anger so that it does not manifest in violence or fury, which are more retributive in nature. However, he did not advocate for the elimination of anger altogether, because he understood it to be the foundation of social justice movements:

> I have learnt through bitter experience the one supreme lesson to conserve my anger, and as heat conserved is transmuted into energy, even so our

> anger controlled can be transmuted into a power that can move the world. (Gandhi, 1920)

This view stands in sharp contrast to anti-anger views that equate anger with retribution. According to Gandhi, anger does not inherently beget violence, and it is not the roadblock to societal change. Instead, it is the force through which individuals recognize and confront injustice.

Meanwhile, MLK spoke frequently about the angriest moments of his life, and how they led him to a commitment to seeking justice. Notably, he strongly cautioned against unbridled anger, particularly as it could manifest in hatred and bitterness:

> While I lay in that quiet front bedroom, I began to think of the viciousness of people who would bomb my home. I could feel the anger rising when I realized that my wife and baby could have been killed. I was once more on the verge of corroding hatred. And once more I caught myself and said: 'You must not allow yourself to become bitter'. (King, 1998)

Because MLK often spoke of the importance of actively regulating anger in order to avoid developing retributive thoughts and behaviors, many have understood him to be anti-anger. However, while he saw retribution as counterproductive to societal reform, he recognized the role that anger played in motivating a desire to fight injustices, and acknowledged it's importance in facilitating change: "The supreme task [of a leader] is to organize and unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming force" (King, 1968). Thus, both Gandhi and MLK argued that anger could be dangerous if left unchecked, and that retributive thoughts and behaviors are counterproductive. However, instead of eliminating anger, they channeled it towards changing the conditions in the world that

they saw as perpetuating harm against themselves and others. Ultimately, some regulation of anger is useful to avoid retributive thoughts and behaviors. However, it is misguided and potentially harmful to suggest that we should eliminate feeling and expressing anger altogether. Even if it were possible to pursue this suggestion, such over-regulation would yield consequences for the targets of injustice, and ultimately lead to a decline in social progress.

Conclusion

Anti-anger views propose that we eliminate the feeling and expression of anger to the best of our abilities in order to avoid focusing on retribution for past events, and instead focus on facilitating positive future outcomes. Advocates for this view claim that the function of anger is to achieve retribution, which they argue is immoral, unhelpful, and irrational. However, a functional account of anger demonstrates that the function of anger is not retribution, which is inherently backward-looking, but rather the reparation of injustice, which is forward-looking because it aims to improve future outcomes for those who have been wronged. Thus, anger is not inherently immoral, unhelpful, and irrational. On the contrary, in the appropriate contexts, anger is the most adaptive emotional response in preparing us to communicate disapproval, motivating us to confront unjust situations, and changing wrongdoers' behaviors. While anger can manifest in risky or aggressive behaviors that are tied to a desire for retribution, these behaviors can be regulated without eliminating anger altogether, in the same way that sorrow can be regulated without eliminating sadness, and panic can be regulated without eliminating fear.

Importantly, the costs of over-regulating anger would disproportionally affect individuals that experience inequality on a regular basis. Since the over-regulation of anger can suppress the functions of anger that are aimed at communicating limits and facilitating necessary confrontation, individuals and communities that experience oppression are less likely to be able to adaptively respond to their situations by eliminating anger. Additionally, the over-regulation of anger can negatively impact individuals' psychological health by invalidating their experiences and increasing cognitive burden, thus compounding negative emotions and decreasing well-being for those that experience frequent injustice. Finally, current research and historical examples suggest that anger is a force for social change, such that circumstances would not improve for vulnerable communities without the feeling and expression of anger.

Though we often can and should regulate anger, it is important to keep in mind that emotions serve adaptive functions, and that over-regulating them can be detrimental for health and wellbeing. Anger at another car during traffic hour may not be very helpful, but anger at an oppressive boss or institution is both justified and instrumental in achieving change. So while it's good to attend to emotions like anger and how they're influencing beliefs and behaviors, it is ultimately important to understand and accept anger in order to direct it towards productive outlets. In sum, it's okay to be angry: it is part of the human experience and how we make progress as individuals and as a society.

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