III. Anger: Downranking, Weakness, Payback

We feel calm toward those who humble themselves before us and do not talk back. For they seem to acknowledge that they are our inferiors...That our anger ceases toward those who humble themselves before us is shown even by dogs, who do not bite people when they sit down.

Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1380a21-25

I. Anger: The Missing Link

The philosophical literature on forgiveness has a gap at its heart. The emotion of anger lies at the very core of the problem of forgiveness, both causally and conceptually. It is because anger is felt as such a problem in the moral life that the project of forgiveness takes on such central importance, and forgiveness is typically defined, as Griswold defines it, in terms of a moderation of angry attitudes.

The idea that anger is a central threat to decent human interactions runs through the Western philosophical tradition -- including the political thought of Aeschylus’ time,¹ Socrates and Plato,² the Greek and Roman Stoics, the eighteenth century philosophers Joseph Butler and Adam Smith, and numerous more recent contributors. As Butler notes, in his important and extensive critique, “No other principle, or passion, hath for its end the misery of our fellow creatures”³ – and the pious Bishop Butler is therefore troubled that God has apparently implanted anger in our human nature. The same idea of anger’s destructiveness is prominent in non-Western traditions (Buddhism and some varieties of Hinduism especially). Today the idea of anger as disease has generated a large contemporary therapeutic literature, in which it is the apparently inexorable grip of anger

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³ Joseph Butler, Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel (Cambridge: Hilliard and Brown, 1827), Sermon IX.
that prompts intervention (or advice for self-help). Indeed, therapists are often zealous in uncovering hidden or allegedly repressed anger, which is supposed to cause a wide range of emotional problems. The search for anger can at times shade over into talking patients into anger, or even constructing an injury that may not ever have occurred. Anger, in short, is ubiquitous, and is generally acknowledged to be a major part of many, if not most, lives.

Nonetheless, despite its centrality, recent philosophers, on the whole, spend little time analyzing the emotion. Typical, and highly influential, are Peter Strawson’s reference to a class of “reactive attitudes,” including guilt, resentment, and indignation, all of which track the relation of another’s will to us; and R. Jay Wallace’s highly abstract, albeit valuable, characterization of a class of “reactive emotions” in their relation to evaluation. Even in contexts where it might seem to matter greatly what attitude is in question, philosophers all too often follow Strawson’s lead. Thus a valuable recent discussion of therapy in prisons, linking that question to discussions of blame and responsibility, speaks of a long list of “hostile, negative attitudes and emotions that are typical human responses to blameworthiness: …for instance, hatred, anger, resentment, indignation, disgust, disapproval, contempt and scorn.” This capacious list includes some emotions that might well be problematic in most or even all contexts, when

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4 Peter F. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” originally published in Proceedings of the British Academy 48 (1962), pp. 1-25; and reprinted in Strawson, Studies in the Philosophy of Thought and Action (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 71-96, page references from the latter. Strawson does mention distinct emotions, including resentment, indignation, and “moral disapprobation” ((87 and elsewhere), which may or may not be conceived as an emotion. He does not define them or investigate their internal structure, however.


directed to another person. But does their presence on a list taint the other items on the list? Surely not, without further specific investigations!

In a valuable and influential article, Pamela Hieronymi has emphasized the importance of studying the cognitive content of specific emotions before approaching the topic of forgiveness. Her own approach, however, does this in but a cursory way, without dissecting the different elements in anger, without distinguishing it from other “reactive attitudes,” and without analyzing the many different ways in which the elements of anger may be combined, creating emotional attitudes of different types. She clearly has the right idea: now we just need to do it!

This chapter will sketch out an analysis of anger that will be further elaborated in subsequent chapters on intimate personal relations, less intimate social relations, and political relations; many questions and many cases will deliberately be left for later treatment. I shall, however, propose a radical set of ideas that I will begin to defend here and defend more fully later. I shall argue that (as most traditional philosophical definitions propose) the idea of payback or retribution is a conceptual part of anger, but that this idea is extremely problematic, and anger, therefore, with it. Either the idea makes no sense (since inflicting pain on the offender does not remove or constructively address the victim’s injury); or it makes all too much sense, because the victim sees the offense as primarily one of “down-ranking,” relatively lowered status. In such cases payback may actually work and make sense, effecting a reversal of positions – but only because the values involved are distorted: relative status should not be so important, and making it so important is the sign of an objectionable narcissism. In the process of

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defending these contentions, I shall show a surprising (to me) degree of sympathy with Utilitarian theories of society and of punishment.\(^8\)

II. Anger: Cognitions, Feelings, Eudaimonism

Anger is both complicated and multifaceted. Complicated, in that its cognitive structure involves a number of distinct elements: pinpointing likely sources of error requires taking them apart. Multifaceted, in that there appear to be distinct species of anger, each with its own slightly different cognitive content, and each with a different relationship to love, generosity, justice, -- and forgiveness. It seems to me unlikely that one can constructively (or destructively!) engage the topic of forgiveness without doing much more analysis of this emotion (or emotion group) than is standardly done. Getting the concepts clear must proceed normative debate.

Like all the major emotions, anger has a cognitive/intentional content, including appraisals or evaluations of several distinct types. Often, it involves not simply value-laden appraisals, but also beliefs. (Some of its appraisals, by contrast, may be inchoate and non-propositional, more like value-laden perceptions.)

Furthermore, the appraisals and beliefs involved in anger are what I call “eudaimonistic”: they are made from the point of view of the agent, and register the agent’s own view of what matters for life, rather than some detached or impersonal table of values. Another way of putting this is that they put the emotions’ object within the person’s “circle of concern.” Even when anger involves issues of principle, of broad social justice, or even global justice, this is because the angry person has managed to incorporate such broad concerns into her conception of what matters in life. Such

\(^8\) For the relationship between anger and blame, see Appendix A.
incorporation into the “circle of concern” need not temporally precede the event that triggers the emotion: thus research has shown what Adam Smith already knew, that a vivid tale of woe can around compassion for people we never met and about whom we have no antecedent concern. However, unless a firmer structure of commitment and concern either exists already or is established, the emotion will be a will-o’-the-wisp, and a distraction closer to home makes us forget entirely about the distant person or people. (Smith said that the prospect of losing one’s finger would quickly make the compassionate European forget entirely about the fate of millions of people in China.)

The eudaimonism of the emotions is key idea, too, in the modern psychological literature. Thus Richard Lazarus, in his magisterial Emotion and Adaptation, one of the most influential works of experimental psychology in the late twentieth century, speaks of the major emotions as focused on “core relational themes,” themes of importance for the person’s “ego-identity.” Like Smith’s account and mine, Lazarus’s treatment emphasizes that causes and principles can be objects of emotions – but only when and if a person has ascribed personal importance to them.

Anger is typically accompanied by a wide range of bodily changes and subjective feeling-states. Bodily changes of some type are always present when people are angry, and, after all, the thoughts involved in anger are themselves bodily changes. Subjective feelings of some type are typically present as well, but they are likely to be highly varied (both within a person at different times and across people), and they may be entirely absent if anger is not conscious. Just as the fear of death can lurk beneath the

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threshold of consciousness and yet influence conduct, so too with anger, in at least some cases.

These bodily changes and subjective feelings, though important in their way, have too little constancy for them to be included in the definition of anger, as necessary conditions of that emotion.\textsuperscript{11} For some people, anger does feel like boiling in the neighborhood of the heart, as Aristotle says. For others, it may feel like a throbbing in the temples or a pain at the back of the neck. And in some cases it simply is not felt, like a fear of death that lurks beneath the surface of awareness. One job of therapy is to discover hidden anger; and though at times we may think that the therapeutic process has manufactured anger where it was not present before, it would surely be implausible to take that position across the board.

III. Elements of Anger

What is anger’s distinctive content? A good starting point is Aristotle’s definition. Although it will turn out to be too narrow to cover all cases and varieties of anger, it helps us dissect its elements. Aristotle discusses anger in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, focusing on its danger to virtue, but he actually defines anger in the \textit{Rhetoric}, arguing that a good orator must know what anger’s conceptual content is, in order to whip it up through persuasive words, or to take it away should that be his aim. The very idea that speeches can make people angry presupposes that human anger has a cognitive content:

\textsuperscript{11} On all these claims, see Nussbaum, \textit{Upheavals}, chapters 1 and 2; on the role of feelings, see also Nussbaum, “Précis” and “Responses,” in book symposium on Nussbaum, \textit{Upheavals of Thought}, \textit{Philosophy and Phenomenological Research} 68 (2004): 443-9, 473-86.
you produce it by instilling certain thoughts, not by lighting a literal fire in people’s hearts.\textsuperscript{12}

Anger, Aristotle holds, is: “a desire accompanied by pain for an imagined retribution on account of an imagined slighting inflicted by people who have no legitimate reason to slight oneself or one’s own” (1378a31-3). Anger, then, involves:

1. slighting or down-ranking (\textit{oligória})
2. of the self or people close to the self
3. wrongfully or inappropriately done (\textit{mē prosēkontôn})
4. accompanied by pain
5. involving a desire for retribution

By twice repeating “imagined” (\textit{phainomenés}), Aristotle emphasizes that what is relevant to the emotion is the way the situation is seen from the angry person’s viewpoint, not the way it really is, which could, of course, be different.

Anger is an unusually complex emotion, since it involves both pain and pleasure: Aristotle shortly says that the prospect of retaliation is pleasant. He does not clarify the causal relationships involved, but we can easily see that the pain is supposed to be produced by the injury, and the desire for retaliation somehow results from the injury. Moreover, anger also involves a double reference -- to a person or people and to an act. To use non-Aristotelian terminology that makes explicit an issue that remains implicit in his discussion: the \textbf{target} of anger is typically a person, the one who is seen as having inflicted damage – and as having done so wrongfully or illegitimately. “I am angry at so-and-so.” And the \textbf{focus} of anger is an act imputed to the target, which is taken to be a wrongful damage.

\textsuperscript{12} Anger, according to both Aristotle and me, can also be present in at least some non-human animals, but often in a simpler form, without the thought of fault, and, of course, not expressed in the form of linguistically formulable propositions.
Injuries may be the focus in grief as well. But whereas grief focuses on the loss or damage itself, anger focuses on the act that inflicted the damage, seeing it as willfully inflicted by the target. Anger, then, requires causal thinking, and some grasp of what is wrongful and what is not. Whether Aristotle knew this or not, the grasp involved need not be at all sophisticated: Paul Bloom’s research shows that babies as young as a year old have an inchoate sense of fair play and understand certain behavior to others as inappropriate (or something in that ballpark). The damage may be inflicted on the person who, as a result, feels anger, or it may be inflicted on some other person or thing or value within that person’s circle of concern.

The least puzzling parts of Aristotle’s definition, from the vantage point of contemporary conceptual intuitions, are its emphasis on pain and its emphasis on illegitimate or wrongful damage. The emphasis on pain reminds us that to make someone angry, an injury must be seen as significant and not trivial. How exactly does the wrongful act of another cause pain to the self? Well, presumably, the person sees (or believes) that something about which she cares deeply has been damaged. That sort of loss or damage is usually painful. By caring about things that are within the power of others to harm, we make ourselves vulnerable to pain. This pain is, up to a point, not dissimilar to the pain felt in grief. It tracks the perceived “size” of the damage. Nonetheless, the pain of anger typically makes internal reference to the (believed) wrongful act of another person: the pain of seeing one’s child murdered just feels different from that of losing a child to accidental death. In other emotion contexts, Aristotle emphasizes that pleasure and pain themselves have an intentional content: the

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pain, then, is pain at the injury that has (as the person believes) been inflicted. It’s that specific sort of pain.

As for wrongful injury: even though we experience frustration when someone inadvertently damages us, we only become angry when we believe (rightly or wrongly) that the damage was inflicted by a person or persons, and in a manner that was illegitimate or wrongful. Lazarus gives the example of a store clerk who ignores a customer because he is busy talking on the phone. The customer will feel wrongly slighted, but if she learns that the reason for the phone call was a medical emergency involving the clerk’s child, she will no longer be angry, because she will see that it was legitimate to give the phone call priority. We aren’t always so reasonable, of course, but what matters is how we see the situation: we are angry only if we see the damage as illegitimate. (That idea does not have to involve a notion of moral wrong: just some type of inappropriateness.)

Notoriously, however, people sometimes get angry when they are frustrated by inanimate objects, which presumably cannot act wrongfully. This sort of behavior was reported already by the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus, who spoke of people biting their keys and kicking their door when it doesn’t open right away, and hurling a stone against which one has stubbed one’s toe, all the while “saying the most inappropriate things.” In 1988, the Journal of the American Medical Association published an article on “vending machine rage”: fifteen injuries, three of them fatal, as a result of angry men, kicking or rocking machines that had taken their money without dispensing the drink. (The fatal injuries were caused by machines falling over on the men and crushing

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14 Lazarus, p.
15 Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta III.478.
16 It does appear to be a male phenomenon, at least in this study. Or perhaps women who reacted angrily did not kick the machine hard enough to topple it over. Or perhaps they did not want to ruin their shoes.
them.)\textsuperscript{17} Do such familiar reactions show that anger does not require the idea of wrongful damage? I see no reason to think this. (Clearly, Chrysippus, whose definition is similar to Aristotle’s, did not interpret his examples this way.) We tend to think that we have a right to expect “respect” and cooperation from the inanimate objects that serve our ends, and in the moment we react as if they were bad people, since they clearly are not doing “their job” for us. We quickly realize that this doesn’t make sense – most of the time.

More problematic, at least initially, the restriction to “oneself or one’s own”: for surely we may have anger when a cause or principle one cares about has been wrongfully assailed, or when a stranger is the victim of an unjust aggression. Yes indeed, but that (claims the Aristotelian) is because in that case it has become part of one’s circle of concern. In other words, “oneself or one’s own” is just a way of alluding to the eudaimonistic structure that anger shares with other emotions. This response seems correct: just as we grieve not about every death in the world, but only the death those who are dear to us, so we get angry not at any and every instance of wrongdoing in the world, but only those that touch on core values of the self. As with other emotions, s here: a vivid episode may jump-start the response by moving a distant object into the circle of concern. If, instead of Adam Smith’s tale of an earthquake in China, we hear a vivid tale of a genocide in a distant country, then we may be aroused to anger on behalf of the slaughtered people, even if they were not antecedently of concern to us. But Smith’s point holds: so long as the emotion lasts, so long those people have to be of concern to us. If the concern ceases (because, for example, we become diverted by pressing concerns closer to ourselfer), so does the emotion.

\textsuperscript{17} Carol Tavris, \textit{Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 164, cf. 72.. See also James Averill, \textit{Anger and Aggression} (New York: Springer Verlag, 1982). 166.
Far more problematic, at least initially, is Aristotle’s reference to a “slighting” or “diminution.” We immediately associate that emphasis with the values of an honor culture, where people are always ranking themselves against one another, and where the central case of wrongdoing is a down-ranking. People often criticize honor-cultures and convince themselves that they and their own society have moved beyond this. At any rate, they seem correct in claiming that many wrongful damages are not understood as personal slights. It is no surprise, then, that subsequent definitions in ancient Greco-Roman philosophy modify this condition. Seneca defines anger in terms of a “wrongful harm,” rather than a “slighting.” The canonical Stoic definition, preserved in Andronicus and Cicero, defines anger, similarly, in terms of a belief that one has been wronged.

Has Aristotle simply made a mistake here? I shall argue that he has, but not as large a mistake as one might think: he has captured a style of thinking that is very common in anger, though not omnipresent.

First, the mistake. Defenders of Aristotle try to defend his definition by referring, once again, to eudaimonism. Thus Lazarus, attempting to give a general definition, and not one pertaining only honor cultures, applauds Aristotle’s definition, because it captures this very general idea of an injury to the self’s cherished projects.

This defense, however, is too crude. Not every eudaimonistic injury (meaning injury to something seen by the agent as in his or her circle of concern) involves a down-ranking of the self; some injuries to things one cares about (for example causes or principles) are eudaimonistic without being seen as involving a low ranking of the self.

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18 De Ira 1.2. Unfortunately this part of the work has a gap, which editors fill up from quotations of the work in later Christian authors. It appears that Seneca is mentioning a number of common philosophical definitions, rather than giving his own.
19 Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta 397: in Greek, ἑδικὲκναι δοκοῦντος, in Latin qui videatur laesisse injuria.
Even when anger’s focus is an injury to a beloved person, we may not believe that the damager is trying to do anything to us, much less to belittle us. If a stranger assaults a beloved relative of mine, it would only rarely be the case that I would plausibly see this as a diminution of me, since the stranger doesn’t know me or know the relationship. I would then have a sense of eudaimonistic injury (the injury looms large seen from the viewpoint of my values and concerns), without the sense of personal diminution. So Aristotle’s account is too narrow to cover many central cases of anger.

The narrower sense of oligória as involving down-ranking proves more explanatorily fertile, however, than we might at first suppose. Indeed, there is something comical in the self-congratulatory idea that honor cultures are in another time or at least another place (such as, putatively, the Middle East), given the obsessive attention paid by Americans to competitive ranking in terms of status, money, and other qualities. We might note that even the idea that “honor killings” are an artifact of specific (Middle-Eastern? Muslim?) cultures needs rethinking. The rate of intimate partner violence is slightly higher in Italy than in Jordan, but the Prime Minister of Italy has felt the need to introduce the term “femicide,” -- and we may safely say that a sense of manly honor and competitive injury is involved in many if not most cases in both countries. Only the killings in Jordan would standardly be called “honor killings,” but the refusal to use this label for the European cases is a bit of self-serving blindness on the part of Europeans.

Empirical psychologist Carol Tavris’s wide-ranging study of anger in America finds ubiquitous reference to “insults,” “slights,” “condescension,” “being treated as if I were

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21 I owe this point to a presentation by Rashida Manjoo, Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women of the United Nations, at the University of Chicago Law School in May 2013.
of no account.” People are indeed very concerned about their standing, now as then, and they find endless occasions for anger in acts that seem to threaten it.

From now on I shall call this sort of perceived down-ranking a status-injury. The very idea of a status injury already includes the idea of wrongfulness, for, as Aristotle notes, diminution of status is always voluntary: if someone acted accidentally, I won’t perceive that as diminishing my status. (Remember the store clerk who had an urgent phone call.) Anger is not always, but very often, about status injury. And status injury has a narcissistic flavor: rather than focusing on the wrongfulness of the act as such, a focus that might lead to concern for wrongful acts of the same type more generally, the status-angry person focuses obsessively on her own standing vis-à-vis others.

In connection with such injuries, both Aristotle and Lazarus emphasize the relevance of personal insecurity or vulnerability: we are prone to anger to the extent that we feel insecure or lacking control with respect to the aspect of our goals that has been assailed – and to the extent that we expect or desire control. Anger aims at restoring lost control and often achieves at least an illusion of control. To the extent that a culture encourages people to feel vulnerable to affront and down-ranking in a wide variety of situations, to that extent it encourages the roots of status-focused anger.

Aristotle’s definition is indeed too narrow, but the very fact that such a perceptive cultural observer should have thought that anger always involves status-injury suggests, correctly, that this is an important and prominent aspect of anger, even if not present in every case.

IV. Anger and Retaliation

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22 See for example p. 72, p. 94.
23 See Tavris, pp. 152-3.
What is anger’s aim? The tradition of conceptual analysis holds that there is a double movement in the emotion, and that double movement, from pain inflicted to striking back, is so prominent that ancient taxonomies classify anger as an emotion that looks forward to a future good, rather than as one that responds to a present bad – although, once they say more, they acknowledge that it has both aspects. Aristotle emphasizes that the outward movement characteristic of anger is pleasant, and that anger is in that sense constructive and linked to hope. The imagined retaliation or payback is seen as somehow assuaging the pain or making good the damage.

But how exactly does this work? How does pain lead to the sort of lashing out, or striking back, that we associate with anger in at least many cases? And why would someone who has been gravely wounded look forward with hope to doing something unwelcome to the offender? If we had a non-cognitive account of anger, there would be nothing further to say: that is just the way hard-wired mechanisms work. But ours is not that type of account, so we must try to understand this puzzle. For it is a puzzle. Doing something to the offender does not bring dead people back to life, heal a broken limb, or undo a sexual violation. So why do people somehow believe that it does? Or what, exactly, do they believe that makes even a little sense of their retaliatory project?

First, however, we had better make sure that the philosophical tradition is correct in holding that a wish for payback is a conceptual part of anger. It is pretty impressive that so many first-rate thinkers, from Aristotle and the Stoics to Butler and Smith to recent empirical psychologists such as Richard Lazarus and James Averill should agree on this. They have thought long and hard about the concept, and it would be surprising if they had made an obvious error. Still, let us think again. Anger is not the only emotion that contains a double movement. Many emotions contain a backward-looking appraisal
of what has occurred, but also have associated action tendencies oriented toward a future goal. Grief contains pain at a loss, but also involves, often, a wish for restoration. The grieved person fantasizes about bringing back the loved one. Despite the fact that this is impossible if the person is dead (rather than lost or merely ill), the fantasy can be very persistent and can organize long stretches of the person’s life. When the person is not, or not known to be, dead, the restoration idea is even more central to grief.

Parents of an abducted child grieve in large part by obsessive recreation of the child’s room, clothing, etc., and by obsessive pursuit of all shreds of hope for restoration. And as grief runs its course, the fantasy of restoration is typically transmuted into a dream of substitution, which can be enacted and often is: find a new lover to replace the lost one, have a new child to replace the lost one.

But, even though these action tendencies are closely associated with grief, it is interesting to observe that no standard philosophical or psychological analysis of grief makes them an intrinsic part of grief, a necessary element in its definition. And this corresponds, I believe, to our usage and beliefs. We typically think that grief and mourning can take people in many directions, even if restoration is a powerful element in many of them.

Compassion too has an associated future-directed action tendency, which has been the focus of a lot of psychological research. When I feel compassion for a person who is suffering, I often imagine helping that person, and in many cases I do it. Daniel Batson’s research shows that this tendency toward helping behavior is quite powerful, if the helpful action is ready at hand and not very costly. But that connection is typically understood as contingent and causal, rather than conceptual, even if the causality is pretty robust. Philosophical definitions of compassion (from Aristotle and the Stoics
through Smith and Rousseau to Schopenhauer) do not suggest that the helping
tendency is part and parcel of the emotion, something without which one could not be
said to experience compassion.\textsuperscript{24} I think this is probably correct: the connection is indeed
causal and external rather than conceptual and internal. We can feel compassion for
people even when we are in no position to help them: people in the past, for example.

With anger, however, the future-oriented aim is standardly thought to be part of
the emotion, something without which there is pain of some sort, but not anger.
(Remember that even the pious Butler holds that anger’s object is the misery of our
fellow humans.) We must figure out, first, whether this is correct – whether there really
is a conceptual connection in this case, and not simply a causal connection as in the
others. Second, we must figure out how, more precisely, the pain is connected to the
fight-back response. As we’ll see, there are several distinct ways the connection can be
imagined, corresponding to different types of anger.

Let’s be clear, first, about what the claim is. The claim is not that anger
conceptually involves a wish for violent revenge; nor is it that anger involves the wish to
inflict suffering upon the offender. For I may not want to get involved in revenge
myself: I may want someone else, or the law, or life itself, to do it for me. I just want
the doer to suffer. And the suffering can be quite subtle. One might wish for a physical
injury; one might wish for psychological unhappiness; one might wish for unpopularity;
one might wish for some cherished project (the new marriage with your ex, for example),
to turn out badly. And one can even imagine as a type of punishment the sheer
continued existence of the person as the bad and benighted person he or she is: that is
how Dante imagines hell. All that I am investigating here (and ultimately accepting, with

\textsuperscript{24} On different accounts of compassion in the tradition, see my \textit{Upheavals}, ch. 6.
one significant qualification) is that anger involves, conceptually, a wish for things to go badly, somehow, for the offender, in a way that is envisaged, somehow, however vaguely, as a payback for the offense.

Let’s consider, then, a range of different cases. And let us start from a basic scenario: Offender O has raped Angela’s close friend Rebecca on the campus where both Angela and Rebecca are students. Angela has true beliefs about what has occurred, about how seriously damaging it is, and about the wrongful intentions involved: O, she knows, is mentally competent, understood the wrongfulness of his act, etc. (I choose rape rather than murder, in order to leave Angela with a wider range of possible actions and wishes than would typically be the case with murder. And I choose a friend in order to give Angela more latitude about how to position herself toward the offense and the offender.)

Case 1. Angela feels pain at Rebecca’s rape. She feels that her circle of concern, what she deeply cares about, has been severely damaged, and she believes, correctly, that the damage was wrongful. She now take steps to mitigate the damage: she spends time with Rebecca, she makes efforts to support her in therapy, in general she devote a great deal of energy to mending Rebecca’s life -- and thus to mending the breach in her own circle of concern. So far, Angela’s emotion appears to be grief/compassion, and I think the standard definitions are correct when they suggest that it is not anger, even though the occasion for the grief is a wrongful act. We should notice that in this case the primary focus of Angela’s emotion is the loss and pain caused to Rebecca, rather than the criminal act itself, and to that extent her emotion would seem to have Rebecca, not the rapist, as its target.
Case 2. Angela feels pain at Rebecca’s rape, etc. She does all the things that she did in Case 1, thus expressing her compassion. But she also focuses on the wrongfulness of the act, and her pain includes a special pain directed at the wrongful act – to some extent distinct from her pain at Rebecca’s suffering. This additional pain leads her to want to do something about that wrongfulness. So Angela forms a group to support rape victims, and she gives money to such groups. She also campaigns for better public safety measures to prevent rape. (I am assuming here that it is a case of stranger rape, although most rapes are not.) Should we call Angela’s emotion anger, because it focuses not only on Rebecca’s pain but also on the wrongfulness of the act, and has an outward movement aimed at something like a righting of the wrong? It is an interesting case, but I think that we typically would not call Angela’s emotion anger. I am inclined to see it as a type of morally inflected compassion – not very different, really, from a compassion for one hungry acquaintance that leads me to campaign for better welfare support for all. As in case 1, the emotion does not have the offender as its target; its target is Rebecca, and other women in Rebecca’s position. The offender comes into it only because stopping similar harms is Angela’s goal for the future. Angela is thus thinking of general utility (and in Case 2 the Utilitarian idea of anger’s limits appears for the first time).

Case 3. Angela feels pain, etc., as in Cases 1 and 2. As in Case 2, she focuses on the wrongfulness of O’s act, and she may campaign for general measures to prevent that sort of damage in future. But she also focuses, this time, on O. She seeks to mend the damage by making the offender suffer. Because her circle of concern is damaged, she wants something to happen to O (whether through legal or extralegal means). Here
we finally seem to have arrived at anger, as the philosophical tradition understands it: a retaliatory and hopeful outward movement that seeks the pain of the offender because of and as a way of assuaging or compensating for one’s own pain.

The question now is, Why? Why would an intelligent person think that inflicting pain on the offender assuages or cancels her own pain? There seems to be some type of magical thinking going on. In reality, harsh punishment of the offender rarely repairs a damage. Adding O’s pain to Rebecca’s does not do anything to ameliorate Rebecca’s situation, so far as one can see. In a TV interview after his father’s murder, Michael Jordan was asked whether, if they ever caught the murderer, Jordan would want him executed. Jordan sadly replied, “Why? That wouldn’t bring him back.” This eminently sensible reply is rare, however, and perhaps only someone whose credentials in the area of masculinity are as impeccable as Jordan’s would dare to think and say it.25

This brings us to a likely cause of this type of magical thinking: the centrality of the idea of personal slighting or diminution.

Case 4. Angela is pained, etc. She believes that O’s bad act is not only a wrongful act that seriously damaged someone dear to her, but also an insult or denigration of her. She thinks something like, “This guy thinks that he can insult my friend’s dignity with impunity, and, insofar as he thinks this, he thinks that he can push me around – that I’ll just sit by while my friend is insulted. So he diminishes me and insults my self-respect.” Here, the connection between pain and retaliation is made is through the Aristotelian idea that the eudaimonistic ego-damage O has inflicted is a kind of humiliation or down-ranking. No matter how implausible it is to read O’s act as a down-ranking of Angela

(given that O doesn't know Angela, or even Rebecca), Angela sees O's harm to her friend as an ego-wound that lessens Angela's status. She therefore thinks that lowering O through pain and even humiliation will right the balance.²⁶

American culture thinks this way all the time. In most major sports we find an emphasis on retaliation for injury, and players are thought wimpy and unmanly to the extent that they do not strike back so far as the rules permit (and a little beyond that). Even though it is obvious that injuring one player does not take away the injury to another, it is a different story if one focuses not on injury but on ranking and humiliation: the retaliatory hit is plausibly seen as taking away the humiliation of the first hit.

Slighting in the sense of diminution reaches a broad class of cases, even if not all cases where anger is involved. It is very easy for people to shift mentally from a eudaimonistic concern (this is part of my circle of concern, what I care about) to a narcissistic status-focused concern (this is all about me and my pride or rank). In such cases, a retaliatory strike-back is thought symbolically to restore the balance of status, manliness, or whatever.

Jean Hampton, whose analysis is very close to mine, puts it this way: if people are secure in their dignity, they won't see an injury as a diminishment; but people are rarely this secure. They secretly fear that the offense has revealed a real lowness or lack of value in themselves, and that putting the offender down will prove that the offender has made a mistake.²⁷ I feel her account does not cover all the cases: more straightforwardly, people may simply care a great deal about public standing, and they can see quite clearly that to be pushed around has indeed diminished that. Even in her

²⁶ See the similar analysis in Jeffrie Murphy, “Forgiveness and Resentment,” in Murphy and Jean Hampton, Forgiveness and Mercy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), ch. 1, and in Murphy’s other writings on this topic.
²⁷ Hampton, in Forgiveness and Mercy pp. 54-59.
subset of the cases, the fear she describes is much more plausible if the value people care about is status, which is easily damaged, than if it is inner human dignity, which is not.

All of a sudden, the retaliatory tendency makes sense and is no longer merely magical. To some one who thinks this way, in terms of diminution and status-ranking, it is not only plausible to think that retaliation atones for or annuls the damage, it is true. If Angela retaliates successfully (whether through law or in some other way, but always focusing on status-injury), the retaliation really does effect a reversal that annuls the injury, seen as an injury of down-ranking. Angela is victorious, and the previously powerful offender is suffering in prison. Insofar as the salient feature of O’s act is its low-ranking of Angela, the turnabout effected by the retaliation really does put him down and her (relatively) up.

Notice that things make sense only if the focus is purely on relative status, rather than on some intrinsic attribute (health, safety, bodily integrity, friendship, love, wealth, good academic work, some other achievement) that has been jeopardized by the wrongful act, and that might incidentally confer status. Retaliation does not confer, or restore, those things. It’s only if she thinks purely in terms of relative status that she can plausibly hope to effect a reversal through a strike-back that inflicts pain of some type on the offender. (Thus people in academic life who love to diss scholars who have criticized them, and who believe that this does them some good, have to be focusing only on reputation and status, since it’s obvious that injuring someone else’s reputation does not make your own work better than it was before, or correct whatever flaws the other person has found in it.)
It’s clear that Angela need not think that the injury she has suffered is a down-ranking. That is why Aristotle’s definition is too narrow. Indeed, in this case it seems odd for her to do so, given that O is a stranger who does not know her connection with Rebecca. But this way of seeing injury is very common, and very common even in cases where people are eager to deny that this is really what is going on. That is why Aristotle’s definition is helpful.

Suppose Angela does not think this way, but stops at case 3. Then, insofar as her emotion is anger and not simply some combination of grief and compassion, she does initially wish some sort of bad result for the offender, and she does initially think (magically) that this will set things right, somehow counterbalancing or even annulling the offense. It is human to think this way. However, if she is really focusing on Rebecca and not on her own status-injury, she is likely to think this way only briefly. Magical fantasies of replacement can be very powerful, but in most sane people they prove short-lived. Instead, she is likely to take a mental turn toward a different set of future-directed attitudes. Insofar as she really wants to help Rebecca and women in Rebecca’s position, she will focus on the responses characteristic of cases 1 and 2: helping Rebecca get on with her life, but also setting up help groups, trying to publicize the problem of campus rape and to urge the authorities to deal with it better.

One of these future-directed projects may well involve the punishment of O. But notice that, insofar as Angela is thinking sanely and rationally about what will make the world a better place for rape victims, she will view the punishment of O very differently.

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28 See Averill p. 177, reporting a survey in which subjects were asked about their motives in becoming angry. The two most common were “To assert your authority” and “To get back at, or gain revenge on, the instigator.”
from the way she viewed it in case 4. There she saw punishment as “payback” or retribution -- or, more specifically, as a down-ranking or even humiliation of O, which effected a reversal of positions between her and O: women (and Angela above all) on top, bad men (and O in particular) on the bottom. Now, however, she is likely to view the punishment of O in the light of the future good that could actually be achieved by punishment. This can take several forms: specific deterrence, general deterrence (including deterrence through public expression of important values), and, possibly, instead or in addition, the reform of O. But it might also take the form of creating a better society with better educational institutions and less poverty. Bentham remarked that it is absurd to focus narrowly on what is standardly called “punishment” if what one wants is general social utility.29 Indeed, if we see people focusing narrowly on “punishment” standardly so-called – on prisons, for example – we can safely conjecture that they are focused on payback thoughts rather than on social welfare, no matter what they say. All this remains to be discussed in chapter 6.

In short, an Angela who is really angry, seeking to strike back, soon arrives, I claim, at a fork in the road. Three paths lie before her. Either she goes down the path of status-focus (which I'm inclined to call narcissism, but we can call it by some other name if that term seems too vague), seeing the event as all about her and her rank, or she focuses on payback, and imagines that the offender’s suffering would actually make things better, a thought that doesn’t make sense. OR, if she is rational, after exploring and rejecting these two roads, she will notice that a third path is open to her, which is the best of all: she can focus on doing whatever would make sense, in the situation, and

be really helpful. This may well include the punishment of O, but in a spirit that is ameliorative rather than retaliatory.\textsuperscript{30}

What is really wrong with the first path? Many societies do encourage people to think of all injuries as essentially about them and their own ranking. Life involves perpetual status-anxiety, and more or less everything that happens to one either raises one’s rank or lowers it. Aristotle’s society, as he depicts it, was to a large extent like this, and he was very critical of this tendency, on the grounds that obsessive focus on honor impedes the pursuit of intrinsic goods. The error involved in the first path is not silly or easily dismissed. Still, the tendency to see everything that happens as about oneself and one’s own rank seems very narcissistic, and ill suited to a society in which reciprocity and justice are important values. It loses the sense that actions have intrinsic moral worth: that rape is bad because of the suffering it inflicts, and not because of the way it humiliates the friends of the victim. (Remember that we are talking about a pure status-injury, not one in which status is an incidental concomitant of some more substantial attribute.) Even were Angela herself the victim, it somehow seems off to view rape as bad because it is a down-ranking – rather than because it inflicts pain and trauma. If it were primarily a down-ranking it could be rectified by the humiliation of the offender, and many people, certainly, believe something like this. But isn’t this thought a red herring, diverting us from the reality of the victim’s pain and trauma, which needs to be constructively addressed by attention to her? All sorts of bad acts – murder, assault, theft – need to be addressed as the specific acts they are,

\textsuperscript{30} When the Stoics said that animals are not rational, their opponents pointed to an ingenious dog allegedly belonging to Chrysippus, who came to a three-fork crossing, following a rabbit. He sniffed down the first path; no scent. He sniffed down the second; no scent. Without sniffing further, he galloped off down the third path – thus showing, they said, that he had mastered the disjunctive syllogism. Angela might be like that dog – but as I’ve imagined here she is not quite as smart, since she goes partway down the second path before turning back.
and their victims (or the victims’ families) need constructive attention; none of this will be likely to happen if one thinks of the offense as all about relative status rather than injury and pain. Indeed we can say, with Bentham, that one of the lamentable consequences of an obsession with payback (whether as a result of magical thinking or in the service of status) is a society in which the “mischief” that, as he rightly says, all punishment involves, gets magnified without regard for social utility, creating a dysfunctional society.

Things become more complicated when the injury itself appears to be primarily a status-injury, and this problem must occupy us at length in chapter 6. But we can say something promissory now. Discrimination on grounds of race or gender is often imagined as an injury that really does consist in down-ranking, so there is a tendency to think it can be rectified by bringing the injurer low. But this idea is a false lure. What is wanted is equal respect for human dignity. What is wrong with discrimination is its denial of equality. Reversing positions through “payback” does not created equality. It just substitutes one inequality for another. As we shall see, Dr. King wisely eschewed this way of framing the racial issue.

So the first path, which makes “payback” intelligible and useful, seems morally flawed. It converts all injuries into problems of relative position, thus making the world revolve around the desire of vulnerable selves for domination and control. Because this wish is at the heart of infantile narcissism, I think of this as a narcissistic error, but we can also ignore that label and just call it the status error. If Angela takes the first path, then, payback makes sense, but she commits a (ubiquitous and understandable) moral error.
If Angela chooses the second path, by contrast, she does not make a moral error, but she engages in magical thinking, which is normatively objectionable in a different way, since we all want to make sense to ourselves and to be rational. If she cares about rationality, she will soon see little point in payback, and she will soon backtrack, and shift, very likely, to a third path -- a focus on promoting future welfare. And this will be so whether she focuses on the particular offense and offender or whether, as often happens, she focuses on the class of similar offenses. For a corollary of taking the second path is likely to be a tendency to focus on the general rather than the particular. If one is thinking about Rebecca and what will really be helpful to her, it is natural to focus not only on therapy for her but also on preventing future offenses of this sort, both for her and for others.

Followers of the first path, too, can generalize: for people can come to attach status-importance to a general causes. A person full of status-focused rage because her child has been raped may form a group to prevent sex offenders from living in neighborhoods where families live, seeing this cause as a way of lowering the status of sex offenders and raising up the status of good people like herself. How exactly is this symbolic retaliatory “lowering” different from what the person who takes the second path would imagine and attempt? The status-focused person zeroes in on rank and lowering: thus it is very important to her that sex offenders suffer humiliation and that she and her sort are seen as virtuous and good. The non-status-focused person will consider what actually promotes social welfare – and this will lead her, once again, to a different approach to punishment, which may combine deterrence (specific and general) with reform. It all depends what it useful. It is clear that sex offender registries serve the interests of narcissistic rage. It is much less clear that they serve any of the three
goals of punishment that the non-status-focused person prefers. So, even though both become attached to general causes as ways of carrying out their future-directed projects, they will approach these causes in a different spirit, and very likely choose different causes as a result.

The third path, which I recommend, seems, and is, very Utilitarian, and this may be surprising to the reader. It should be, since it surprises me. Of course some of the errors that I have often imputed to Utilitarianism need not be made by the person who takes this path: she does not need to hold that all goods are commensurable, she does not need to ignore distributional considerations, and she does not need to deny that some good things are so much more important than others that they should enjoy a special protected status. She can, that is to say, be Mill rather than Bentham. Still, the welfarist flavor of this entire discussion is indeed surprising. But consider that sympathy with the Utilitarian idea of punishment arises as the more or less inexorable conclusion of some thoughts about why anger is problematic – irrational in some cases, morally objectionable (because hooked on one’s own status) in others. This author began working on anger with little sympathy with Utilitarian views of punishment, and having criticized that view in print numerous times. It just seems hard to avoid the conclusion that Bentham is no hard-hearted monster, as anti-Utilitarians tend to think, but actually a rational and also a gentle man, as he took himself to be, in a culture suffused with status-consciousness and a virulent payback mentality. The topic of punishment will occupy us much more fully in chapter 6; for now the idea of promoting punishment will occupy us much more fully in chapter 6; for now the idea of promoting

31 Historically, however, a welfarist spin on anger’s proper role appears already in Smith, and is prominently developed by Bishop Butler in 1827, independently of Bentham. Indeed he insists that anger “ought never to be made use of, but only in order to produce some greater good.”
social welfare appears in a general form, as the natural outgrowth of Angela’s rational deliberation.

I am saying something very radical: that in a sane and not excessively anxious and status-focused person, anger’s idea of retribution or payback is a brief dream or cloud, soon dispelled by saner thoughts of personal and social welfare. So anger (if we understand it to involve, internally, a wish for retributive suffering) quickly puts itself out of business, in that even the residual focus on punishing the offender is soon seen as part of a set of projects for improving both offenders and society -- and the emotion that has this goal is not so easy to see as anger. It looks more like compassionate hope.

When anger does not put itself out of business in this way – and we all know that in a multitude of cases it does not – its persistence and power, I claim, owes much, even perhaps everything, to an underlying status-focus and competitive obsession, which are the only things that really make sense of retaliation as ordinarily conceived.

So, to put my radical claim succinctly: when anger makes sense, it is normatively problematic (focused on status); when it is normatively reasonable (focused on the injury), it doesn’t make good sense, and is normatively problematic in that different way. In a rational person, anger, realizing that, soon laughs at itself and goes away. From now on, I shall call this healthy segue into forward-looking thoughts of welfare, and, accordingly, from anger into compassionate hope, the Transition.

I have imagined the Transition in personal terms, and these cases remain to be further examined in the following chapter, where I discuss betrayal and harm in intimate relationships. But to clarify further what I mean by the Transition, let us consider a case in which it takes a political form. For it has often been thought (including by me, in many earlier writings) that anger provides an essential motivation for work to correct
social injustice. So let us look carefully at just one case, the sequence of emotions in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech.\textsuperscript{32} King begins, indeed, with an Aristotelian summons to anger: he points to the wrongful injuries of racism, which have failed to fulfill the nation’s implicit promises of equality. One hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, “the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.”

The next move King makes is significant: for instead of demonizing white Americans, or portraying their behavior in terms apt to elicit murderous rage, he calmly compares them to people who have defaulted on a financial obligation: “America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’” This begins the Transition: for it makes us think ahead in non-retributive ways: the essential question is not how whites can be humiliated, but how can this debt be paid, and in the financial metaphor the thought of humiliating the debtor is not likely to be central. (Indeed it looks counter-productive: for how will such a debtor be in a position to pay?)

The Transition then gets under way in earnest, as King focuses on a future in which all may join together in pursuing justice and honoring obligations: “But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.” No mention, again, of torment or payback, only of determination to ensure payment of what is owed, at last. King reminds his audience that the moment is urgent, and that there is a danger of rage spilling over: but he repudiates that behavior in advance. “In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy

our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred...Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.”

So, the “payback” is reconceived as the paying of a debt, a process that unites black and white in a quest for freedom and justice. Everyone benefits: as many white people already recognize, “their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.”

King next repudiates a despair that could lead either to violence or to the abandonment of effort. It is at this point that the most famous section of the speech, “I have a dream,” takes flight. And of course, this dream is one not of torment or retributive punishment but of equality, liberty, and brotherhood. In pointed terms, King invites the African-American members of his audience to imagine brotherhood even with their former tormentors:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice....

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words “interposition” and “nullification” – one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

We have only to contrast this speech with the vision of payback in the Dies Irae to see the magnitude of King’s departure from the standard trajectory of anger – albeit following one strand in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which we might not wrongly call a “minority” strand.

There is indeed anger in this speech, and the anger summons up a vision of rectification, which naturally takes, initially, a retributive form. But King gets busy right away reshaping retributivism into work and hope. For how, sanely and really, could
injustice be made good by retributive payback? The oppressor’s pain and lowering do not make the afflicted free. Only an intelligent and imaginative effort toward justice can do that. This is what I mean by the “Transition,” a movement of mind we shall study more fully in subsequent chapters.

We notice something further: once the Transition gets under way, there is no room for forgiveness, as classically conceived. The payback mentality wants groveling. The Transition mentality wants justice and brotherhood. It would do no more good for Governor Wallace to moan and grovel than for him to burn in hell: these things do not produce justice, and they are restorative only in the magical thinking characteristic of anger’s initial pre-Transition phase. In the Transition, one comes to see that the real issue is how to produce justice. Rituals of forgiveness might possibly be thought useful to this end, and in chapter six we shall encounter such arguments. But King has no room for them: he wants reconciliation and shared effort. To these political issues we shall return.

V. What Can Go Wrong, and What Good Remains; and Transition-Anger, A Rational Emotion

There are many ways in which anger can go wrong. The person may be mistaken about the target: O did not do what Angela thinks he did; another person, P, was the rapist. The angry person may also go wrong about the event that is anger’s focus: O was there, but did not rape Rebecca. The person may also be mistaken about the appraisals of value involved. Aristotle remarks that people often get angry when someone forgets their name, and this plainly is a confused response. (Either the person has a bizarre view of the importance of names, or she has interpreted this forgetfulness as a more general slighting of her own importance.)
Virtually all people go wrong if they think that retribution will somehow annul the injury. This is what I have called magical thinking, and very often it is followed by a transition toward a more sane and productive type of thinking. Indeed, they also err if they think that retribution will lead to happiness or peace of mind. Adam Smith is much more likely to be correct when he says, “Hatred and anger are the greatest poison to the happiness of a good mind.”

Plainly, however, the key error in anger, ubiquitous and powerful, is the error of taking every wrongful damage to be about oneself and one’s status, construing it as a down-ranking. This error takes many forms and is often subtle and difficult to pin down. I have argued, however, that insofar as payback makes sense, it makes sense on the basis of this error.

Adam Smith makes a similar suggestion, in his very perceptive discussion. In general, Smith’s procedure is to figure out the proper degree of any passion by imagining the response of a “judicious spectator,” who is not personally involved in the events. This device, he says, is particularly needed in the case of anger, which more than most “must always be brought down to a pitch much lower than that to which undisciplined nature would raise them.” The spectator, he argues, will still feel anger when he contemplates injuries done to another person. But his anger will be tempered, first by his distance and non-involvement – and second, interestingly, because he has to consider the situation of the person against whom anger is directed, and this thought of the other will block demands for revenge. In other words, when we move outside of narcissistic self-involvement, we are aided in two ways: first, we don’t have the bias

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34 Ibid., 34.
inherent in thinking that it’s all “about me,” and, second, we have to consider everyone’s welfare, not just that of the wronged party. Smith’s judicious spectator is thus a device that promotes the Transition from excessive ego-involvement to general social concern. It is an imperfect such device: as we saw, people can become ego-invested in their friends’ suffering, or even in general causes. But Smith has the right idea: as a proto-Utilitarian, he moves from concern for the ranking of the fragile self toward more general and constructive social concern.

It is here that we can introduce a major exception to our thesis that anger always involves, conceptually, a thought of payback. There are many cases in which one gets standardly angry first, thinking about some type of payback, and then, in a cooler moment, heads for the Transition. But there are at least a few cases in which one is there already: the entire content of one’s emotion is, “How outrageous! Something must be done about this.” Let us call this emotion Transition-Anger, since it is anger, or quasi-anger, already heading down the third fork in Angela’s road. One might give it some ordinary-language name, such as Hampton’s “indignation,” but I prefer to segment it cleanly from other cases, since I think a lot of cases we call “indignation” involve some thought of payback. Hampton gives the word a technical sense. So I prefer the clearly made-up term. Transition-Anger does not focus on status; nor does it, even briefly, want the suffering of the offender as a type of payback for the injury. It never gets involved at all in that type of magical thinking. It focuses on social welfare from the start. Saying “Something should be done about this,” it commits itself to a search for strategies, but it remains an open question whether the suffering of the offender will be among the most appealing.

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35 See Hampton, 58.
Is Transition-Anger a species of anger? I really don’t care how we answer this question. Such special borderline cases are rarely handled well by conceptual analysis. It’s certainly an emotion: the person is really upset. And it appears distinct, though subtly, from compassionate hope, since the focus is on outrage. The person says, “How outrageous,” not “How sad,” and entertains forward-looking projects focused on diminishing or preventing wrongful acts. What is important is how rare and exceptional this pure forward-looking emotion is. Angry people very rarely think in this way from the start, not wanting ill to befall the offender, even briefly (except as a means to social welfare, should a dispassionate inquiry show that it is indeed that). It is much more common to get angry first and then head to the Transition, than to be there already, focused on social welfare, because the retaliatory instinct is, as Butler observed, deeply human, no doubt through both evolutionary tendency and cultural reinforcement. It is only exceptional individuals who are there already, in major issues affecting their welfare. Such presence of mind typically requires long self-discipline. Thus, one could imagine that King’s own emotion was Transition-Anger, while the emotion constructed in his speech, for his audience, is brief (standard) anger and then a turn to the Transition. In what follows I shall use the special term Transition-Anger when that is what I mean, and if I use the bare word “anger,” that is not what I mean: I mean the familiar garden-variety emotion, about whose conceptual content Aristotle and Butler are correct. Transition-Anger is rare but not totally absent in daily interactions; it will turn out to be very important in thinking about political institutions.

Note that Transition-Anger has an intimate relationship to the sort of unconditional love I discussed in chapter 2. Garden-variety anger, wishing ill to the offender, is in
tension with unconditional love. Transition-Anger is not, because it lacks that wish for ill. But it is just as rare as is unconditional love.

What good can be said of (garden-variety) anger, in the end? First, it may serve as a signal that something is amiss. Anger embodies the idea of significant wrongdoing targeting a person or thing that is of deep concern to the self. While one could have that idea of significant injury without anger – with, and through, grief and compassion – those two emotions do not contain the idea of wrongfulness, which is anger’s specific focus. (It is for that reason that Bishop Butler, for all his animadversions against the passion, nonetheless concedes that it is “one of the common bonds, by which society is held together; a fellow feeling which each individual has in behalf of the whole species, as well as of himself.”) Nor, importantly, do those two emotions contain the thought that something needs to be done, which, as I’ve argued, is a conceptual part of anger. The signal anger sends is pretty misleading, since it embodies an idea of payback or retribution that is primitive, and that makes no sense apart from magical thinking or narcissistic error. So it is a false lead to that extent, and the angry person is always well advised to begin moving beyond anger as soon as possible, in the direction of the Transition. Still, it can be a useful wake-up call. We see this in King’s speech, where he does express anger at the behavior of white America, and urges his audience to feel anger as well, acknowledging the magnitude of the wrongs done and the way in which they affect everyone’s well-being. But then he immediately turns them away from the payback thought that inevitably surfaces, toward a different picture of the future. Managed by such a skillful entrepreneur, anger can be useful, and King always conceived of his project as active and militant, pitted against complacency. Perhaps it’s even more

Sermon VIII.
useful in cases where the wrongdoing might have slid along barely noticed, beneath the surface of daily life, and only the emotion directs the person’s attention to its presence.

Closely linked with the idea of anger as signal is the idea of anger as motivation. The Greek Stoics were often charged with robbing society of motives to pursue justice by their insistence that anger is always mistaken. They responded that people can be moved by principles, without the emotion, and that such principle-based motivations are more reliable than anger, which is likely to run amok. In their own terms, their reply was unsuccessful: for their objection to anger was different from mine. My objection is the tendency of anger to focus excessively on status-injury, and to its proneness to capture by irrational ideas of payback. The Stoic objection was altogether different: they held that injuries that other people can inflict are never serious wrongs, because the important things in life (one’s own virtue and reason) are always securely within one’s own control. Put in other terms, they want to get rid of love and grief as well as anger; I do not. Given their underlying objection to anger, their reply fails: for any principles that would be capable of moving people to pursue justice would have to acknowledge the seriousness of the wrongs that others can inflict. (As Aristotle says, the gods don’t need justice.) The Stoics would have held that the values expressed in King’s speech are altogether erroneous; but then they are bound to hold that his protreptic to pursue justice is also inappropriate.

Things are otherwise with my own critique. In my view, anger is often appropriate enough with respect to its underlying values, and the love and grief that focus on these same values are often fully appropriate; the problem comes with the idea of payback. That idea is, I argued, a conceptual part of anger (except in the rare borderline case of Transition-Anger), and no doubt it is part of what motivates people, at least initially. The
intensity of the emotion, and perhaps, too, its magical fantasy of retribution are part of what get people going, when otherwise at least some people might simply fail to act (or, without anger’s signal, even fail to notice the wrongdoing or its magnitude). But once they get going, they had better not follow anger’s lure all the way to fantasized retribution. It does not make sense, unless one focuses disproportionately on status-injury. Returning to King’s example, one might imagine a future of payback, in which African-Americans would attain power and inflict retributive pain and humbling on white Americans. Society abounded with such ideas. King’s altogether superior stance was that the Transition is only a heartbeat away, since only cooperation will really solve the nation’s problems. Still, anger was a useful motivational step along the road – for a very brief time, and carefully managed. I do not believe that anger is necessary as a motivation to pursue justice, but I still believe it can often be useful, a part, probably, of our evolutionary equipment that usefully energizes us toward good ends – unless things go astray, as they so often do.37

King favored non-violence. So have many intelligent leaders. Sometimes, however, that strategy fails. Nelson Mandela records the gradual decision of the ANC, under his leadership, that violent strategies would have to be pursued. But notice that, while urging ANC members to wake up to anger’s call and even sense it as a motivating force, and while permitting them to engage in certain sorts of violent guerilla tactics, he never failed to point to the Transition, pointing people toward a future of cooperation rather than of payback.

Anger has a very limited but real utility, which derives, very likely, from its evolutionary role as a “fight-or-flight” mechanism. We may retain this limited role for

37 Bishop Butler sees anger’s role as in large part motivational: see Sermon VIII. He argues that compassion by itself would render the “execution of justice exceedingly difficult and uneasy.”
anger while insisting that its payback fantasy is profoundly misleading and that to the extent that it makes sense it does so against the background of diseased values. The emotion, in consequence, is highly likely to lead us astray.

Finally, anger may be a deterrent. As Smith notes, people who are known to get angry often thereby deter others from infringing their rights. Here one can only say that the way anger deters is not likely to lead to a future of stability or peace; instead, it is all too likely to lead to a more devious aggression. And there are many ways of deterring wrongdoing, some of which are much more attractive than inspiring fear of an explosion.

The tendency to anger and retaliation is deeply rooted in human psychology. Believers in a providential deity, like Bishop Butler, find this fact difficult to explain, given its irrationality and destructiveness. For those who do not share Butler’s framework, however, it is much less difficult to understand. Anger brings some benefits that may have been valuable at one stage in human prehistory. Even today, vestiges of its useful role remain. Beneficent forward-looking systems of justice, however, have to a great extent made this emotion unnecessary, and we are free to attend to its irrationality and destructiveness.

VI. The Anger of God

If anger is so compromised, why has it standardly been imputed to God or gods, who are supposed to be images of perfection? The first thing to say is that it has not, in fact, always been so imputed. Buddhism is non-theistic, but the most perfected

38 Ibid., 35.
39 See Butler, Sermon VIII.: “Since perfect goodness in the Deity is the principle, from whence the universe was brought into being, and by which it is preserved; and since general benevolence is the great law of the whole moral creation; it is a question which immediately occurs, ‘Why had man implanted in him a principle, which appears the direct contrary to benevolence?”
humans, bodhisatvas, are free from anger. In both Epicurean and Stoic thought, the gods lie outside the mistakenly competitive and status-obsessed societies that spawn destructive angers. As Lucretius says of the gods, “Needing nothing from us, they are not ensnared by (our) grateful offerings, nor are they touched by anger.” The Christian author Lactantius (240-320), advisor to Constantine, the first Christian emperor, wrote a work entitled On the Anger of God (De Ira Dei), in which he attacks both Epicureans and Stoics, saying that there is no reason to worship a God who doesn’t need our attention and love, and doesn’t get angry when it is withdrawn. Moreover, he continues, if God never gets angry we don’t need to fear God, and that would do away with all religion. Such arguments do not address the Epicurean and Stoic contention that a perfect being would not have anger; they simply amount to the claim that religion as we know it requires the idea of an angry God.40

In other religions, e.g. Hinduism and Greco-Roman religion, gods are not ideals for mortals at all, just defective beings with outsize powers. Their emotions are not understood as exemplary: indeed some valuable emotions, such as compassion for suffering, are often thought to be lacking in the Greek gods, because they don’t understand human vulnerability.41

But it also emerges that key texts in both Christianity and Judaism are inconsistent and complicated on the topic of god’s anger. For the most part, the Jewish God is imagined as a “jealous” god who wants to be ranked number one in the attentions and affections of the Jewish people, who have other options for their worship. Repeatedly, the relationship is compared to a marriage. There are other men, and a bad wife will allow

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40 Lactantius, De Ira Dei, chs. 4 through 8. As we’ll see, Lactantius has some more interesting things to say later in the treatise.
41 See for example the final lines of Sophocles' The Women of Trachis, in which Hyllus charges the gods with callous lack of sympathy for human predicaments.
herself to be lured away from her husband by the money and power of these rivals, forgetting to put her husband in an exclusive first place; so too God wants to be in an exclusive first place vis à vis the other gods, who are trying to lure the Jewish people away.\textsuperscript{42} Indeed, the text is suffused with very standard payback thoughts about the status-injury that either the other gods or the unfaithful people inflict upon God, and the gruesome comeuppance they will soon get. Those other gods and the goyim who follow them will get countless plagues and diseases, and the unfaithful people themselves will be tormented or even destroyed. All of this will constitute a lowering or humbling of these people or peoples, by comparison to God.

This is the status-focused thinking so common in anger, but with this difference: that God can make all these things happen. (And notice that, God being God, God cannot really be personally injured by a human act, \textit{except with respect to status}. God cannot be murdered, or assaulted, or raped. So, insofar as God is angry, this anger is extremely likely to be status-focused anger.)

There are, however, times when God focuses more purely on the intrinsic wrongfulness of harmful acts – particularly, but not only, in the prophetic books, and especially in their discussions of greed and the ill-treatment of strangers. These offenses are taken to be wrongful in themselves, not only as offenses against the status of God. In such cases, God is angry not because of a status-injury, but because what humans do and suffer is of deep and intrinsic concern to God. Lactantius observes that when God gets angry at wrongful acts of humans to one another, this is a way of showing concern for the good and just, and promoting their interests. He makes two distinct points: first, that punishment as a result of God’s anger incapacitates

\textsuperscript{42} See the excellent discussion in Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, \textit{Idolatry}. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), chapter 1. s
wrongdoers, thus clearing the way for the good and just; and, second, that the fear of
divine punishment deters wrongdoers, thus keeping the world safer for the good and
just.\footnote{Lactantius, \textit{De Ira Dei}, chapter 16.}

We can see that Lactantius – correctly summarizing one prominent strand in the
biblical portrait of divine anger – becomes a proto-Utilitarian, thinking of the role of
anger in forward-looking welfarist terms. We can agree that anger is sometimes a useful
deterrent, and that punishment can promote welfare by incapacitating – although it is
not so clear why anger is required, as opposed to well-designed institutions. At any rate,
this picture of God’s anger is quite different from the status-focused picture that
Lactantius presented earlier (correctly summarizing other biblical texts). And we can
see that this sort of benevolent anger is more likely than the other sort to move in the
direction of the Transition. Thus, although payback of all sorts is imagined even in what
we might call welfarist contexts, the texts frequently move, rather quickly, to an
imagined future of peace, cooperation, and reconciliation, and God urges humans to
make this future happen.

In short, the Jewish God’s anger has all the varieties and complexities of human
anger, and all the same problems and prospects.

When we move to Jesus we have the daunting problem already explored in our
previous chapter: the texts give dramatically different pictures of Jesus’ attitude to
erring mortals. Certainly many texts in the New Testament embody terrible payback
wishes. The Book of \textit{Revelation}, for example, jolts uneasily from thoughts of the
vindication of the meek and mild to the most gruesome fantasies of destruction visited
on those who don’t acknowledge the new religion. But what about the Jesus of the
Gospels? It has long been observed – and was compellingly argued by Augustine in The City of God – that the emotions of Jesus are genuine emotions, embodying all the vulnerability of a mortal human being for whom pain and loss matter terribly. Thus Jesus was not a good Stoic. Augustine, however, focuses on grief and joy, and a human being may have those without anger. So, does Jesus get angry? Certainly he seems to, in the well-known scene in which he throws the money-changers out of the temple.

A remarkable account of this passage is offered, however, by the Utku Eskimo people studied in Jean Briggs’s Never In Anger, one of the most compelling works of descriptive anthropology in the twentieth century. The Utku believe that anger is always childish, and a threat to the intense cooperation required for group survival in a very adverse climate. Although anger in children is tolerated and even indulged, both the experience of anger and its outward manifestation are viewed as extremely inappropriate in adults. Briggs was searching for a way of finding out whether they disapproved of the emotion itself or only its outward expression; so, given that they were devout Christians, she asked them about the money-changing scene. It was clear that the incident disturbed them. As good Christians, they felt that they had to endorse Jesus’ behavior; but it did not fit with their picture of adult good character. They adopted an ingenious solution. Jesus, the Utku chieftain told her, did scold the money-changers, but not out of real anger: he did it “only once,” in order to improve them, because they were being “very bad, very bad, and refusing to listen to him.” Their picture of Jesus as moral ideal was incompatible with ascribing real anger to him –

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although, notice, they allowed the idealized Jesus to use anger-behavior as a wake-up call.

Were the Utku imagining our idea of Transition-Anger and distinguishing it from (garden-variety) anger? I think it’s more likely that they are thinking of Jesus as giving a performance without having any emotion in the anger family – a possibility that is open to those who want to deter without risking going down a wrong path. (We’ll investigate this idea in chapter 5.)

Biblical texts are written for people many of whom need simple messages. The idea of an angry God may, in such cases, be not only a useful signal of where wrong-doing is located and a deterrent to wrong-doing, but also a useful source of motivation to correct social problems (imitating God in intensity of concern). Still, the potential for distortion is huge, when God and his anger are considered a moral ideal for humans. Therefore the texts that depict a brief anger leading to a constructive Transition are definitely to be preferred, as is the Utkus’ sage interpretation of Jesus.

VII. Anger and other “Reactive Attitudes”: Grief, Disgust, Hatred, Contempt

Because it has become common to treat anger as one of a long list of “reactive attitudes,” without much attention to finer points of difference among them, the next step in our clarification of anger must be to distinguish it from its relatives. As we have seen, anger\(^{46}\) is a reaction to the perception that the target’s act has wrongfully inflicted damage on something within one’s circle of concern. Although it is directed at the

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\(^{46}\) Again: by the bare term “anger” I mean garden-variety anger, not the special case of Transition-Anger.
target, the focus of anger’s pain is the harmful act itself, not the target, and the person is understood primarily as a perpetrator, the doer behind the deed.

Although grief is not standardly classified as a reactive attitude, it is so close to anger that we need to begin by commenting on its differences. Grief, like anger, focuses on a damage to the self (or the self’s circle of concern). This loss is painful, and that is a key similarity between the two emotions. Grief, however, focuses on an event -- which may be an act done by a person, but may also be a natural event, such as death or a disaster in nature. And its focus is on the loss brought about by this event. Even if the event is thought to be caused by a person, the loss, not the perpetrator, remains its focus: it does not take the person as its target. Nor is the idea of wrongfulness central to grief, since loss is loss whether or not wrongfully inflicted. For all these reasons, the action-tendency of grief is quite different from that of anger: grief seeks restoration of or substitution for that which was lost, whereas anger typically wants to do something to or about the perpetrator. Grief addresses the hole or gap in the self, anger the wrongful infliction of that damage by the target.

Grief and anger may of course be co-present; at times it may be difficult to separate them. Often a grieving person tries to blame someone for the loss, even when blame is not warranted, as a way of regaining control or asserting dignity in a situation of helplessness. Indeed, the turn to anger may function psychically as a way of restoring the lost person or object. In such cases, grief can be deflected into an unusual intense anger, in which all the energy of love and loss are turned toward persecution, as in the mania for malpractice litigation in American health care, or as in our Michael Jordan example, where the TV commentator suggested to Jordan that the death penalty might somehow replace Jordan’s lost father and Jordan, rightly, rejected that suggestion,
preferring to acknowledge his loss. One source of excess in anger, in fact, is a reluctance to grieve, thus acknowledging helplessness. The distinction between grief and anger therefore deserves the greatest possible attention, and we shall return to this theme in the following chapter. The laborious transactions of forgiveness often substitute for the helplessness of mourning.

Anger is also distinct from three other “negative emotions” that focus on other people: disgust, hatred, and contempt. All three of these emotions, unlike anger, focus on the person rather than an act of the person, and on relatively permanent traits of the person. So they immediately raise a question that anger in and of itself does not raise: is it ever appropriate to have strong negative emotions toward a person as a whole, rather than toward a person’s wrongful act? As we shall see, all three of these emotions are initially easy to distinguish from anger – but the distinction becomes blurred when anger is of the status-focused type.

Disgust is a strong aversion to aspects of the body that are seen as “animal reminders” – that is, aspects of ourselves that remind us that we are mortal and animal. Its primary objects are feces and other bodily fluids, as well as decay (especially the corpse), and animals or insects that are oozy, slimy, smelly, or in other ways reminiscent of the repudiated bodily fluids. The core idea in disgust is that of (potential) contamination through contact or ingestion: if I take in what is base, that debases me. In a secondary phase, disgust properties are projected onto groups of humans who do not really have them: racial, sexual, or caste minorities, who are portrayed as hyperanimal or hyperbodily, and who are then said to be contaminants on the grounds that they are

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smelly, germy, etc. Societies then devise remarkable rituals of contamination-avoidance, policing the boundary between the dominant group and the animal by refusing to share food, swimming pools, drinking fountains, or sexual relations with those who are cast as surrogate animals.

Disgust, then, involves fantasy and a sort of magical thinking, in a way that anger typically does not, and it involves self-avoidance and denial of one’s own animality, in a way that anger typically does not. Disgust is thus is suspect as a whole category in a way that anger need not be: it centrally involves false beliefs (“I am not an animal,” “I do not excrete and smell,” “Only those people have smelly animal bodies”). Anger’s characteristic beliefs, by contrast, may often be true: “This is a serious and wrongfully inflicted damage, and it would be good for it to be made good somehow.”

Because disgust focuses on the person rather than a bad act, its action-tendency is also different from that of anger: the disgusted person seeks separation, rather than retaliation or rectification -- although separation may at times involve great harshness and coercion (such as that of the apartheid and Jim Crow regimes), thus bleeding into the harshness of the penal institutions associated with anger.

Despite these differences, disgust and anger have a great deal in common -- when anger is of the status-focused type. Anger heading toward the Transition (rational anger, we might call it) focuses on a bad act and seeks rectification in a way that promotes social good. Status-focused anger, by contrast, reacts to a “down-ranking” or ego-injury and seeks to diminish or lower the (alleged) perpetrator -- not, note, the perpetrator’s deed -- in order to right the balance. This common type of anger lies close to disgust. It sees the other person as a malefactor, rather than a slimy roach or beetle, but insofar as it wishes the “down-ranking” of the other, it often involves
representing the other as low or base; thus its target imperceptibly shifts from act to person. Thus projective disgust and anger become very difficult to disentangle. On the one hand, disgust, though directed at the person, is often triggered by acts: sodomy is a triggering proxy for what some people find disgusting about gay men. (Hence the longstanding confusion, in the law of sexual orientation, between discrimination on the basis of an act and discrimination on the basis of orientation.) On the other hand, insofar as anger seeks lowering, it often slides over into a more general down-ranking of relatively stable personal traits, rather than a temporary downranking of a person on the basis of the wrongful act. This confusion is prominent in punishment, where disgust (making perpetrators live in subhuman and humiliating conditions) is hardly uncommon. On the other hand, disgust’s lowering effect often involves imputing bad acts: people who find gays disgusting tend to represent them as criminals (not to mention criminalizing their acts in the first place!). Thus the distinction between disgust and anger, which initially seems clear, turns out to be not clear at all – when the anger in question is of the status-focused sort.

Hatred is another emotion that focuses on the entirety of the person, rather than a single act. Although anger is directed at a person, its real focus is an act, and when the act is disposed of somehow, anger can be expected to go away. Hatred, by contrast, is global, and if acts are involved it is simply because everything about the person is seen in a negative light. As Aristotle remarks, the only thing that will really satisfy hatred is that the person cease to exist (1382a15). If we think that hatred – an intensely negative attitude to the entire being of another person – is always a bad emotion to have, we are not required to think this about anger, which is fully compatible with liking or even loving the person.
Once again, however, things are not so easy. The anger of a person who undergoes the Transition, focused on an act and aiming at social good, is easy to distinguish from hatred. The person wants wrongdoing to cease, but may continue to love the person and wish her well. When anger focuses on an ego-injury, however, it seeks a rectification that lowers the whole person, and thus easily segues into a negative attitude toward that person, not just a deed. The differential ranking that the bruised ego seeks is no mere temporary frown at the act: it is a stable lowering. Thus it almost has to take on some of the characteristics of hatred, although the emotion might still be less intense, in some cases, than that word typically suggests.

Aristotle suggests that anger’s target is always a particular person, whereas hatred is typically directed at groups (1382a4-6). If true, this would complicate our analysis. But is it true? Because the focus of anger is an act, and acts are usually done by particular individuals, it does seem true that the target of anger is typically a particular person. Hatred, however, can certainly be for particular people as well as for groups; and when groups are seen as causes of damaging acts (e.g. the enemy in wartime), anger, as well as hatred, may be expected to target them. Indeed we can certainly imagine cases in which one would have anger but not hatred toward a group: as in civil war, when one would blame the enemy but be stopped from hating them by ties of relationship or prior love. Once again, then, the distinction between anger and hatred is clear when we consider rational anger, far less clear when we consider status-focused anger.

Contempt is another “reactive attitude” that is frequently associated with anger. At the outset, once again, the two emotions seem very different. Contempt is an attitude that views another person as low or base, usually on account of some enduring
trait or traits for which the person is taken to be blameworthy. It presents “its object as low in the sense of ranking low in worth as a person in virtue of falling short of some legitimate interpersonal ideal of the person.” Of course the ideal may or may not be really legitimate, and the person may or may not really fall short of it. In many cases, contempt is not addressed to failings of ethical character, but, instead, to lack of social standing, or wealth, or position. Thus the imputation of blameworthiness (which distinguishes contempt from condescending pity) is often mistaken: people often blame the poor for their poverty, thinking it a sign of laziness, and have contempt for them on that account. But it seems right to say that contempt usually involves the thought, right or wrong, that the person is somehow to blame for the characteristics that are contempt’s focus – even if they are just forms of weakness for which people are actually not responsible.

Contempt is thus like anger in having both a focus and a target: its focus is a trait or traits, and its target is the person seen as low because of those traits. In both cases, the target is a person. But the focus of anger is an act, that of contempt a stable trait or traits. We can make this point another way: whereas the self-focused version of anger is guilt, the self-focused version of contempt would appear to be shame, an emotion that registers the fact that one has fallen short of some ideal.

We may leave to one side the interesting question whether contempt for another person is ever morally justified (the central issue in Mason’s fine article). (One significant issue is that contempt frequently underestimates human fragility and the difficulty of developing good traits in an imperfect world.) What we can now observe is

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48 The best treatment of contempt in the recent philosophical literature is Michelle Mason, “Contempt as a Moral Attitude” Ethics 113 (2003), 234-272.
49 Mason 241.
50 Mason argues that it is, when contempt is properly focused on a legitimate ideal and gets things right about the person’s blameworthy failure to exhibit the ideal trait.
that, with contempt as with anger, distinguishing the two emotions is easy when we are
dealing with anger leading toward the Transition, which has nothing to do with a low
ranking of the person. remains focused on the act, and ultimately seeks future good. It
is far less easy when we consider status-focused anger, which seeks the down-ranking of
a person in retaliation for the down-ranking inflicted on the self by an act. Still, there is
an interesting difference of dynamic. In contempt, the starting point is the alleged
lowness of the person: the person is thought to lack some good characteristic, whether
moral or social. The negative attitude responds to the perception of lowness. With
status-focused anger, by contrast, the negative attitude responds to something about
oneself – the lowering allegedly inflicted by the act on which anger focuses – and then
the emotion seeks to put the emotion’s target, a person, into a low position. Indeed,
the person is not initially thought to be low at all, but powerful and capable of inflicting
damage. So the two emotions end up in the same place, so to speak, but through a very
different dynamic. Of the two, contempt looks the more potentially reliable, since it at
least begins with an assessment, whereas status-focused anger pushes a person into
lowness without really establishing that the person is actually low (as opposed to having
committed a bad act).

VIII. Anger’s Gatekeeper: the Gentle Temper

How might someone become less prone to the errors of payback fantasy and/or
status-obsession, and more prone to make the Transition? Aristotle’s discussions in
both the Nicomachean Ethics and the Rhetoric offer two suggestive insights.

Anger is an emotion, but in the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle identifies some
standing flaws of character in that domain, including both excessive proneness to anger
and a kind of “insensibility” that fails to respond at all to slights. (In fact, there is a
whole family of excesses, since people may get angry too quickly, or hold onto anger too long, or get angry with the wrong or too many people, or take the wrong occasions for anger.) The corresponding virtuous disposition, neither excessive nor defective in either action or passion, has no name in common usage, Aristotle says, but it is a good idea to assign a name that inclines more in the direction of too little anger -- presumably because the common error is in the direction of excess (1125b26029) The name he chooses is praotês, which might be translated “mildness of temper” -- or, perhaps, “gentleness of temper,” since “mildness” might suggest that the person never gets angry, which is not what Aristotle means.51 The hallmark of praotês is good reasons: “The mild [or gentle] person “is typically undisturbed and is not led by passion except as reason dictates” (1125b33-35). Nor is he afraid to incur disapproval on that account: “He gives the appearance of going wrong in the direction of deficiency: for the gentle-tempered person does not go in for revenge, but instead has sympathetic understanding” (1126a1-3).

We should pause here, since the Oxford translation says “tends to forgive” for suggnômonikos. But in fact there is no warrant for this. First of all, we are talking about someone who does not get wrongly angry in the first place, so there is no room for forgiveness, at least as standardly defined. And further, suggnôme, literally “thinking-with,” is a general word for sympathy, which does not presuppose any idea of fault or blame. Typically, and rightly, it is rendered “compassion” or “sympathy” – as, for example, in Hyllus’s famous statement, at the end of the Women of Trachis, about what the gods lack. They just lack a sympathetic understanding of human affairs very

51 The Oxford translation uses “good-tempered” for the adjective and “good temper” for the noun, which is not terrible, but it seems too general, since it does not suggest a particular relation to anger.
generally: they have “non-mindfulness” or *agnômounê*, whereas the tragic spectator, addressed by Hyllus, is credited with sympathy. This means, I think, that they understand the magnitude of the pain and suffering that events have inflicted on all the characters, whereas the gods just don’t understand suffering (and thus are all too ready to inflict it). Hyllus is not talking about blame at all, and indeed the story is short on good reasons for blame. The centaur Nessus is clearly blameworthy, but he is not mentioned here: the protagonists to whom Hyllus refers, the ones who actually suffer, Deianeira and Heracles, are not blameworthy.

What Aristotle says, then, is that a mild-tempered person is inclined to see things from the point of view of others, understanding what they experience, and that somehow this is connected to not being invested in revenge. What is the connection? First of all, we can see that this sort of mental displacement can weed out some errors about blame: we may be able to see that the person was negligent or even just mistaken, rather than fully culpable. We may also be able to appreciate mitigating factors such as duress of various types, or the pressure of conflicting obligations. Such discoveries might block anger from forming altogether. This set of points connects to Aristotle’s observation about good reasons: participatory imagining helps us figure out which reasons are and are not good, and how strong they really are.

But even if anger turns out to be appropriate, taking the time to see things from the other person’s viewpoint can potentially block or counteract the narcissistic tendency to focus on one’s own status, thus aiding the Transition. Sympathy steers anger in the direction of a balanced focus on harm and correction of harm, rather than on personal down-ranking, with its connection to revenge. Revenge is made a lot easier by a mind-set that sees the other person as a mere obstacle to one’s own status, a
thing. Sympathetic understanding already steers thought in the direction of general social good.

In the Rhetoric Aristotle’s topic is different: how might an orator calm ordinary non-virtuous people, or keep them in a calm (or mild or gentle) temper? Here he is with the average, so he prominently includes the inclination to revenge, and much of his advice focuses on anger of the status-focused sort, and on how to calm people down when they are already deeply committed to the narcissistic error.

The discussion begins with reasons: we become calm if we are convinced that the bad act was not voluntary, or that the person intended the opposite of what he actually did (1380a9-11). Interestingly the reason he gives is that slighting is a voluntary act, so we no longer feel slighted if we see that the act is not voluntary. So we are already on the terrain of status-focused anger. Aristotle then continues in the same vein: we drop our anger if the offender admits fault and expresses regret. He gives servants as an example: if they deny fault we punish them harshly, but we cease to be angry if they admit their fault and evince grief. Once again, the reason is status-obsession: it seems shameless and disdainful to deny an obvious fault: the denial itself is insulting. Now we arrive at the core situation of classic forgiveness:

Also we feel calm toward those who humble themselves before us and do not talk back: for they are plainly acknowledging that they are our inferiors, and inferiors feel fear; but nobody can slight someone whom he fears. That our anger ceases toward those who humble themselves before us is shown even by dogs, who do not bite people when they sit down. (1380a21-25)

Groveling appeases, because it gratifies the narcissistic wish for domination. Aristotle adds that people become calm when they have already punished someone, even if it is not the right person (1380b11-13). This is quite interesting, since it
suggests that restoration of status is central to the angry person’s wish, and the actual offender is but a means (in this case an interchangeable means) to that restoration.

This section of the *Rhetoric*, then, develops the connection between a focus on one’s own status and a proneness to revenge. It is the flip side of the *Ethics* passage, since its protagonist is in no sense *suggnômonikos*, but, on the contrary, is utterly focused on himself, seeing the offender as but an obstacle to his own standing. If the offender makes an animal gesture of submission he will yield; if the offender asserts himself, he will keep trying to put him down. Central to the final letting-go of anger (Aristotle later says) is some type of personal acknowledgment: the offender has to know whom he has wronged and that the punishment is inflicted by that same person (1380b20-21).

Here’s where we do find something like the modern notion of forgiveness: letting anger go if the person apologizes or humbles himself. But this attitude is framed by narcissism: the only reason the person requires humbling is that he has already made what from the point of view of my argument (though not perhaps Aristotle’s) is a narcissistic error. So here’s forgiveness: down there with the dogs, an all-too-human demand for humbling imposed by the insecure ego.

The final section of the *Rhetoric* chapter returns to the theme of virtuous gentleness, but from a very different direction, asking what background conditions conduce to a gentle temper and militate against excesses in anger:

People are gentle when they are in an opposite condition to those who get angry: when they are at play, or laughing, or feasting, or feeling prosperous or successful or satisfied, and in general when they are enjoying freedom from pain or pleasure that does not harm others or decent hope. (1380b2-5)

These comments are unexplained, but let us look into them. Why should people in all these conditions be less inclined to inappropriate anger? All the named conditions, it
turns out, conduce to a diminished emphasis on narcissistic vulnerability. People who feel prosperous or successful or satisfied are not likely to take lots of things as slights. Their ego is secure. Similarly with those who are free from pain, or enjoying some non-harmful pleasure. (Recall King’s concern that despair would lead to violent retaliation.) When someone looks to the future with “decent hope” – by which Aristotle seems to mean the hope characteristic of a decent or fair-minded person (not, therefore, a hope of conquest or domination), he is less vulnerable to competitive anxiety.

But what about being at play and laughing? Those seem the most obscure of the items on the list, and yet they may be potentially the most revealing. First, what does he mean by “at play” (en paidiai)? Aristotle certainly cannot be talking about competitive sports, where people are highly prone to anger (and this is a staple of Greek philosophy, not just a modern issue). But paidia does not mean athletic competition, it means a sort of relaxed and playful activity, of which the games of children (paides) are an example. By coupling it with laughter, he gives us a sense of the subset of playful activities he has in mind. The ego at play, playing around (and paidia is often contrasted to what is serious), has a way of not taking itself too gravely; in such a condition, the ego is worn lightly and slights become less large. Play is also a way of coping with anxiety: as children we learn to manage potentially exhausting fears through drama and games. And anxiety seems to underlie the status-focused anger, born of ego-weakness, that is so central in Aristotle’s analysis. Instead of grasping onto other people and insisting that they serve our needs, the person at play is relaxed and confident in the world and able to allow other people to exist as who they are.

52 See Marcus Aurelius, whose first lesson in avoiding anger is not to be “a fan of the Greens or Blues at the races or the light-armed or heavy-armed gladiators at the circus.”
Aristotle is not Donald Winnicott: he does not have a theory of play. But he has an insight that leads in Winnicott’s direction: play is a set of stratagems by which the ego grows strong enough to live in a world with others. This idea fits with the concept of the Transition: for, I said, anger in sane people has a way of laughing itself out of existence. If one is already in a frame of mind prepared to take oneself lightly or even to laugh at oneself, the Transition is ready to hand.

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