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Book Review

Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice

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Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice

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Those of us who work in moral psychology and in particular on moral emotions owe Martha Nussbaum immense gratitude for being one of the major pioneers in the field. Although her work spans many topics, she continues to give philosophical discussions of emotions pride of place. Her most recent book, *Anger and Forgiveness*, is no exception. As Nussbaum states in her conclusion, one of the book's primary goals is "getting its readers to see the irrationality and stupidity of anger" (249). The critical part of my review will focus on Nussbaum's account of anger and her arguments against its value, but first I will provide a sketch of the whole work.

The tale of the Furies' transition to the Eumenides provides a touchstone for Nussbaum's thesis. In Aeschylus' *Orestia*, the Furies, once the goddesses of revenge, transform into "the Kindly Ones" and are given a place of honor in civil society (1-3). On Nussbaum's reading, what makes this transformation possible is the total reorientation of the Furies' nature—they go from "something hardly human, obsessive, bloodthirsty" to something "accepting of reasons, calm, deliberate and measured" (3). This transformation is one that Nussbaum recommends both for individual moral agents and for social institutions. She spends the book arguing that like the Furies, anger in both the public and private realms is "always normatively problematic" (5). We would, in Nussbaum's estimation, be better off transforming our own personal and institutional Furies into Eumenides.

Nussbaum presents her conceptual account of anger in Chapter Two. I'll return to this account later, but for now let me introduce her main claims. Nussbaum argues that anger's conceptual core contains "the idea of payback or retribution—in some form, however subtle" (15). Anger's basic structure has both a "target" and a "focus" (17). The target of anger is the person to whom anger is directed while the focus is the intentional act of wrongdoing attributed to the target. On Nussbaum's view, anger "starts with the act that inflicted the damage, sees it as intentionally inflicted by the target—and then as a result, one becomes angry" (ibid). The retribution in anger takes two forms. The first is the "road of payback" where the "imagined payback is seen as somehow assuaging the pain or making good the damage" (24). The second is the "road of status" which "converts all injuries into problems of relative position" (29). According to Nussbaum, both roads are problematic. The road of payback is irrational: "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" (24). The road of status is "narcissistic" because it makes "the world revolve around the desire of vulnerable selves for domination and control" (29). Nussbaum allows for the occurrence of a rare, but not inherently problematic emotional state she calls *Transition-Anger*. In *Transition-Anger*, the content of the emotional response to an offense or injury is

simply “How outrageous! Something must be done about this” (35). This type of anger (if it is anger) doesn’t wish for payback nor does it focus on status. Although this anger is not problematic, Nussbaum thinks it is rare enough that we ought not mistake it for “garden-variety” anger that focuses on payback (36).

Since the retribution that is central to anger is either irrational or narcissistic, Nussbaum argues that we ought to head for what she calls the “Transition” (31). As she puts it, “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 (30-1). The Transition is (a) the realization that anger is irrational in one of the two ways described and (b) the shift in attention away from anger to “forward-looking thoughts of welfare” and “compassionate hope” (31).

In the subsequent chapters, Nussbaum examines the different arenas where anger arises in human life and argues that in all areas we would be better off without it. Chapter Four explores anger in intimate and personal relationships, such as friendships, families, and marriages. Although Nussbaum argues that anger is “well-grounded” in intimate relationships, she nonetheless thinks that it is damaging to the intimacy and trust that are essential to these relationships (96). Since intimate relationships open us up to deep forms of vulnerability, Nussbaum suggests that anger is often a “mask for and deflection of helplessness” (100). Rather than anger, Nussbaum argues that emotions like grief and mourning are “legitimate and required” because they acknowledge the depth of the loss and damage done by wrongs that take place within intimate relations (127). Grief and mourning can take the place of anger and can facilitate repair both quicker and more effectively.

Chapter Five deals with what Nussbaum calls the “Middle Realm,” which includes “dealings with strangers, business associates, employers and employees, [and] casual acquaintances” (138). This territory is ripe for anger since it is also ripe with rude and inconsiderate behavior, but also because, unlike intimate relationships, there is no background of love and trust (139-40). In the Middle Realm, Nussbaum agrees (at least to some extent) with Stoics like Seneca: most of the wrongs that occur are “not worth getting upset about, and it’s a mistake to make them the object of any serious emotional concern” (139). Yet her position isn’t fully Stoic, since she doesn’t believe, as the Stoics did, that it’s better to make yourself less vulnerable to anger by distancing yourself from others. Instead, Nussbaum holds that “important constituents of our well-being are vulnerable to damage by others” in the Middle Realm (140). We are subject to real damage in non-intimate relations and so grief is an important emotion, as it is in intimate relationships. The object of grief in these cases is different. The damage itself is the

legitimate target for grief, but “the person is incidental” (ibid). Since anger contains the wish for payback, it is inappropriate in the Middle Realm: “what is needed above all is to mourn and move on (if the damage is serious) or simply move on if it is not” (141).

Chapters Six and Seven move into the political and legal realm. Chapter Six, entitled “Everyday Justice,” examines anger and wrongful acts done within a legal system. Chapter Seven, entitled “Revolutionary Justice,” deals with anger and unjust institutions. On Nussbaum’s view, political institutions should follow the lead of the Eumenides: “they should express forward-looking concern for social welfare and eschew the backward-looking angry attitudes” (172). Nussbaum realizes that it’s important for the state to acknowledge wrongdoing, but she claims it must do so without falling into the “traps” of payback or status (178). Indeed, Nussbaum argues that it is anger that has placed the question of punishment so centrally to questions about how the law should handle wrongdoing. Instead, she thinks that punishment should “compete for our attention with other strategies for addressing the problem of crime” (179). Given the fact that crime and society’s response to crime is entangled with complex economic and political factors, Nussbaum argues that a society that prioritizes “serious social investment” is one that takes crime seriously (191). Social investment is forward rather than backward-looking. As such, it will not require the state’s expression of anger toward offenders.

In cases where anger comes from oppressed groups toward an unjust state, Nussbaum likewise denies that anger is the “noble” emotion that it appears to be (211). Citing Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela, Nussbaum points out that most struggles for revolutionary justice were undertaken in a spirit of “non-anger” (212). Each of the movements led by these men were successful because they refused to fall into the traps of anger and instead focused on creating a future of mutual trust and cooperation with their adversaries (236). Nussbaum realizes that the call to non-anger will appear difficult if not impossible both in the personal and the political realm. Her response is to point out that many things worth doing are difficult and yet that by itself doesn’t count as a reason not to try. She writes, “Self-cultivation is hard, but impossible if one never gets started” (249). Working toward non-anger both in ourselves and in our institutions will be difficult, but on Nussbaum’s view, it’s a project we must undertake with a “patient and forbearing disposition to see and seek the good rather than to harp obsessively on the bad” (250).

Central to the majority of Nussbaum’s arguments are her conceptual claims about anger—the fact that anger conceptually contains a wish to pay back the offender in kind. If anger turns out not to be conceptually linked to payback, then anger might not be as

irrational or as problematic as Nussbaum claims. Further, even if we accept that payback is a conceptual part of anger, there might be different ways of understanding what the payback is meant to communicate or accomplish that escape Nussbaum's criticisms. I'd like to explore both of these possibilities because Nussbaum's claims about anger are quite radical (something she admits in several places in the book). Her claim is that anger—one of the most ubiquitous, familiar human emotions—is essentially shot through with “stupidity” (249), “magical thinking” (24), “narcissistic vulnerability” (54), and “metaphysical nonsense” (93).

Nussbaum is no doubt correct that anger can be a troublemaker. In its excessive and persistent forms, it can damage relationships and perpetuate injustice rather than address it. Yet one can accept these claims without then concluding that anger is fundamentally irrational or narcissistic. Nussbaum's critique of anger asks readers to accept that one of the most familiar pieces of human emotional life is barely sane—she refers to the person who rises above anger as “rational” and “sane” (27, 30-31) implying of course that the person who feels anger is (at least temporarily) irrational and insane. Nussbaum at times seems comfortable accepting that humans are widely irrational; she claims that “narcissism and anxiety are endemic to human life” (97). She recognizes how hard it is to rise above anger, but she phrases it as: “It's not hard to be stupid” (249). Reasoning can go wrong in a number of ways, but Nussbaum's claim is clearly more radical than this. She argues that a basic human emotional experience is at its core irrational. Before we accept such a bold conclusion, we should investigate whether there are alternative explanations that don't require us to posit widespread irrationality to basic human emotions.

Is the payback wish an essential part of anger? Nussbaum seems to think that only the payback wish picks out the kind of anger we typically think of in ordinary discourse, and that without it we're actually feeling emotions like grief or compassion (23-24). Anger, as Nussbaum argues, is directed toward a person because we perceive that person as doing us a wrong (17). Anger involves a “double movement” from recognizing intentional harm to wanting to pay it back (21). We might wonder, however, whether anger really has this double movement. On a more Strawsonian view, feelings of resentment are part of the realization that another person has inflicted intentional harm on us. What picks out anger among other similar emotions is that it tracks agential injury rather than mere harm. If a Strawsonian view is right, it's not necessarily the payback wish that defines anger, but rather the fact that anger is directed to others considered as moral agents acting intentionally.

Additionally, the double movement in anger might be a subtle move from the emotion

itself to a common coping mechanism for it. We move quickly from anger (recognition that someone has done us wrong) to payback (wanting to hurt them). We could imagine several explanations for this move: perhaps anger is unpleasant and so we want to “do” something with it rather than simply continuing to feel it. Perhaps the recognition that someone has intentionally harmed us makes us feel momentarily powerless and payback is a way of alleviating that powerlessness. We need not settle on one explanation in order to see that the payback wish may not be a conceptual part of anger. It might instead be a common response to anger, which explains why it seems to be so closely linked to the emotion itself. My point here is that more conceptual work needs to be done to show that payback really is essential to anger. If we can find alternative explanations for the connection that aren’t conceptual, then Nussbaum’s critique of anger can be called into question. What is more, those who would defend a Strawsonian account could argue that anger plays an essential role in our moral relations. If anger is part and parcel of the realization that others do us wrongs, then we can’t so easily get over it while leaving that realization otherwise in tact.

Even if we accept that the payback wish is central to anger, we can still stop short of thinking that it’s irrational. The imagined payback “is seen as somehow assuaging the pain or making good the damage” (21). This, on Nussbaum’s view, is magical thinking. What reason do we have for thinking that people actually believe this? The fact that I might want to hurt the person who hurts me doesn’t entail that I believe hurting this person will undo the damage. Of course, it might make me feel better to hurt them, but Nussbaum thinks that this too is magical thinking—why think that someone else’s pain make my pain go away? Perhaps, however, we don’t think that their pain will restore the “cosmic balance” (24). The payback might be a way of forcing an empathetic realization on someone. I hurt you like you hurt me and you will feel what it was like to be me in that moment. I subject you to the same intentional harm and disregard that you show to me. If you dislike it and you protest, then you now appreciate what it was like to be in my position. Notice that this account of the payback wish doesn’t require any magical thinking or metaphysical nonsense. Nor is it about status or down-ranking. It simply forces the wrongdoer to go through the same experience she inflicted on her victim in the hopes that she’ll fully appreciate how the wrong made her victim feel. Of course, Nussbaum might argue that forcing this realization isn’t something we should do, but this objection doesn’t show that anger is irrational. It only shows that giving someone a taste of their own medicine is morally unsavory. It isn’t, however, magical thinking or an obsession with status or rank.

Nussbaum might still wish to argue that there is nothing valuable about anger even if it doesn’t involve payback and even if it isn’t fundamentally irrational. In the conclusion

she says that her main goal for the book is to achieve “a square-one orientation” toward anger (249). In calling into question anger’s rationality or importance, she entertains the objection that non-anger might not be “quite fully human” (105). Additionally, she attributes our unwillingness to abandon anger to a belief that “it entails an inhuman, extreme, and unloving type of detachment” (248). To help address this objection, she cites revolutionaries like Gandhi, King, and Mandela to try to put a human face on the practice of non-anger (224-5).

Nussbaum’s discussion of Mandela reveals some of the ambiguities in her response to this objection. She writes that Mandela fundamentally recognized that anger “simply doesn’t get you anywhere” and that “non-anger and a generous disposition are far more useful” (228). Notice that these points are not moral, but pragmatic: anger is futile and likely damaging to the cause of social justice. Nussbaum clearly points this out: “A responsible leader has to be a pragmatist, and anger is incompatible with forward-looking pragmatism” (229). What Nussbaum doesn’t seem to entertain is that non-anger might not be a virtue, but simply a necessity for the revolutionary. Mandela, for example, may have had no real choice but to get over his anger at the Afrikaaner regime: he either finds a way to move past it or he risks the success of the movement to which he has devoted his life. If non-anger is pragmatic in this way, then we need not think of Mandela, King, or Gandhi as moral exemplars for getting over their anger (they may be moral exemplars for other reasons). Further, Gandhi, King, and Mandela were all leaders of large social movements and the virtues to which they committed themselves might be unique to those positions. That is, non-anger might be essential for anyone attempting to bring about widespread social change, but we need not conclude that it’s a good virtue to practice in general.

Of course, Nussbaum tries to show that non-anger is a good practice for average humans as well. She recognizes that anger is “only human,” but thinks that we can’t give up on the task of non-anger just because it’s hard (247). Here I think Nussbaum misses the point of her objectors when they claim that her proposal seems inhuman. She takes this objection to mean that non-anger requires unloving detachment, which examples like King and Mandela can easily counter. The point is rather that in order for us to proceed toward non-anger we would have to be very different kinds of humans. The fact that King and Gandhi are the most commonly cited moral exemplars who appear to have gotten over anger should give us pause: we have two, maybe three if we count Mandela, examples of people who have managed to transcend these emotions. Additionally, as Nussbaum herself acknowledges, both King and Gandhi have substantive metaphysical commitments that inform their values and King was a student of Gandhi’s teaching (226). King and Gandhi aren’t inhuman, but they also aren’t average

(neither is Mandela). Of course, there's no reason to claim that virtue should be easy, but there is reason to wonder whether it should be saintly.

When Nussbaum claims that anger is “only human,” she seems to think that anger belongs to the worst part of humans—the flawed parts that are unfortunate byproducts of how we're built—and she believes we're capable of being much more. We might wonder, however, whether anger is a bug in the system or simply part of the system. Those who are more sympathetic to a Strawsonian picture will likely be more convinced that anger isn't “only human,” but rather a key part of our moral agency. Examples like King, Gandhi, and Mandela don't speak against this possibility: virtuous though they may be, their moral psychologies have been substantially transformed either by robust metaphysical commitments or their commitments to world change. It seems to me there is more conversation to be had between an account like Nussbaum's and the Strawsonian accounts before we can conclude that anger is essentially irrational and that we'd be better off without it. Nussbaum's arguments surely show the downsides of being too angry or allowing anger to dominate one's perspective. Her book provides good reasons for further examination of anger and its relationship to virtue. As with all of her work, *Anger and Forgiveness* makes an invaluable contribution to the field.