



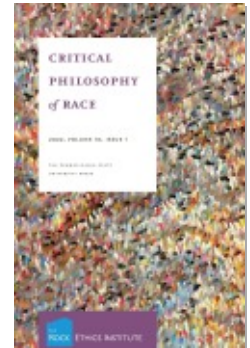
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**ON JAMES BALDWIN
AND BLACK RAGE**

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Abstract

What I aim to elucidate in this article is Baldwin's moral psychology of anger in general, and black rage in particular, as seen in his nonfiction. I'll show that Baldwin's thinking is significant for moral psychology and is relevant to important questions at the intersection of philosophy of emotions, race, and social philosophy. It also has pragmatic application to present-day anti-racist struggle. Baldwin's theoretical account of Black rage, I'll argue, (1) dignifies Blacks by centering them as people with agential capacities and (2) provides them with a pragmatic politics of rage that is useful in the fight against white supremacy and racial injustice.

Keywords: anger, black rage, James Baldwin, race, moral psychology

James Baldwin is said to—through his work—“penetrate and analyze [the rage of being black in America] and convert it into a recognizable human emotion.”¹ However, while Baldwin's views on love and shame have received scholarly attention, his views on anger have not.² This is surprising given that Baldwin is often described as angry. His Cambridge Union

debate foe, William Buckley, described him as “a tormented writer . . . who celebrates his bitterness against the white community.”³ When a posthumously published volume of Baldwin’s later essays was released in 2010, writer Jeremy MacArthur proclaimed: “He’s been dead for 23 years. . . . But Jimmy Baldwin is still angry.”⁴ His anger still has not gone unnoticed. The lack of scholarly attention to Baldwin’s views is also surprising, since Baldwin had lots to say about anger. When scholars do focus on Baldwin and anger it is usually confined to Baldwin’s rhetorical politics of Black anger—rhetoric that Jeffrey Kurtz describes as “a civic honesty . . . tinted by anger about the habits of speech and action that collectively . . . collude to facilitate our collective political death.”⁵ His thoughts on anger, or more properly put, his account of Black rage, is largely ignored. This is an unfortunate reality that must be remedied.

What I aim to elucidate in this article is Baldwin’s moral psychology of anger in general, and Black rage in particular, as seen in his nonfiction. I’ll use “anger” and “rage” interchangeably throughout this text. Although the term “rage” is often used to apply to intense and irrational anger, I use “Black rage” to refer to the anger *of* Black folk *at* racism and racists. In this way, I follow in the tradition of race theorists like bell hooks and Cornel West who use the phrase to describe a specific possessor and target of anger. I’ll show that Baldwin’s thinking is significant for moral psychology and is relevant to important questions at the intersection of philosophy of emotions, race, and social philosophy. It also has pragmatic application to present-day anti-racist struggle. Overall, my aim is to explore Baldwin’s theoretical account of Black rage, and I’ll argue that his account (1) dignifies Blacks by centering them as people with agential capacities and (2) provides them with a pragmatic politics of rage that is useful in the fight against white supremacy and racial injustice. In the first section, I’ll argue that Baldwin provides an elaborate account of Black rage (an account often under-described in the philosophical literature) through an exploration and examination of the Black American experience, while carefully articulating a sophisticated cognitive and bodily view of anger along the way. I’ll explain in the second section how he reconciles questions of agency with Black rage through his belief of the ever-present role of human agency throughout anger’s different phases. In the third section I’ll show how Baldwin can help us respond to ancient and contemporary critics concerned with anger’s counter-productivity by examining his distinction between useless and useful anger.

Black Rage

In “Notes of a Native Son” Baldwin describes his first experience of racial discrimination while living and working in New Jersey for a brief time. As a Northerner, he never thought people would look at him and expect him to behave the way they expected Southern negroes to behave. Not only did he experience racial animosity at the defense plants where he worked, he also faced discrimination at restaurants, bars, and other public places. It was during this time in New Jersey that Baldwin admits that for the first time he “contracted some dread, chronic disease.”⁶ He describes it as *bodily*, as a “pounding in the skull and fire in the bowels.”⁷ He notes its *permanence and regularity* when he writes, “Once this disease is contracted one can never really be carefree again, for the fever, without an instant’s warning, can recur at any moment.”⁸ Baldwin is not describing a cold or migraine but rage. And he suggests that he is not alone in feeling it. “There is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood.”⁹ It is here that Baldwin moves from simply giving an account of anger at moral injury to an account of Black rage.¹⁰ Anger at moral injury can arise in response to a variety of wrongdoings, regardless of its racial nature. The cause can be a single incident and it is likely to cool and disappear once that wrongdoing has been rectified. However, Black rage is specific in what it is responding to and thus different.

Black rage has several causes according to Baldwin. Racial mistreatment is the first cause of the rage that “every Negro alive” has. This rage hangs over the streets of Harlem like storm clouds as the outraged witness police officers populate their neighborhoods. Black inhabitants have this rage not only because they are surveilled but because they are also disenfranchised, forced to live in unlivable conditions, and presented with few to no opportunities to escape. It is then not surprising that Baldwin alternates the terms “fury and frustration” and “rage and despair.”¹¹ However, one shouldn’t think that this rage is merely self-referential. Black rage is not only in response to the mistreatment that one, as Black, experiences. It is also a response to the ever-present mistreatment of other Blacks. Baldwin is clear: “Part of the rage is this: it isn’t only what is happening to you, but it’s what’s happening all around you all of the time.”¹² The use of “all of the time” is telling. Black rage is a response not only to past harms. It is a response to the continual mistreatment of Blacks.

Baldwin also notes that the rage is in response to the “most extraordinary and criminal indifference, the indifference and ignorance of most white people in this country.”¹³ We must be careful not to lump indifference and ignorance together. Indifference is attitudinal. Ignorance is epistemic. Let’s address each in turn. While there are whites who directly mistreat Blacks, there are many who witness it with indifference. They lack sympathy and compassion in the face of black suffering. The other cause is socially epistemic in nature. It is an example of what Charles Mills describes as “white ignorance.”¹⁴ And Mills credits Baldwin and other twentieth-century African American writers with making it a theme in their work. These writers often point out the epistemic asymmetry between whites and Blacks in which they know whites well, but are rarely seen or known by them. Baldwin notes that Blacks have a “bottomless anger” because they are forced to learn far more about whites than whites have to learn about them. Knowledge about Blacks is a luxury for whites. On the other hand, knowledge about whites is part of Black folks’ survival. As Baldwin describes in “Nobody Knows My Name,” “No one in the world . . . knows Americans better . . . than the American Negro. This is because he has had to watch you, outwit you, deal with you, and bear you, and sometimes even bleed and die with you, ever since we got here.”¹⁵ Although Baldwin acknowledges that he has often used the asymmetry as a way to outwit whites and thus survive, the very fact that it exists is cause for the rage. When whites decide to learn about Blacks this creates black fury because, for Baldwin, this sudden awareness or need to know only highlights the fact that Black people’s humanity has occupied so little place in the white man’s mind.¹⁶

One comes to have Black rage through a particular epistemic position. Note that Baldwin states, “There is not a Negro *alive* who does not have this rage in his blood.” If Baldwin means that every Black person has this rage, then the meaning of the claim will still hold absent of the word “alive,” since it is already presumed that the subject “Negro” refers to subjects in the present tense. However, I think the use of the term “alive: is intentional and not redundant. “Alive” does not refer to physical life but an enlightened one. Baldwin claims that only Negroes with a certain level of consciousness have this rage; for Black rage is borne out of an examined life.

An examined life for Baldwin is a life of “endless questioning,”¹⁷ “re-examining,”¹⁸ “journeying further,” “honest examination,”¹⁹ “criticizing,” and “intellectual activity” where one is willing to be pierced by the sword of truth.²⁰ The subject of examination is oneself and the world. An examined

life requires an engagement with the past and the present; learning and understanding through self-appraisal; and a willingness to see through the world of illusions. The primary illusion in America, for Baldwin, is its exceptionalism. It is an illusion that America actually lives up to the standards it sets for itself, and has achieved freedom in every way. But Negroes “alive” know better. This knowing better, borne out of examination, creates an anger, not a bliss or contentment. For Baldwin (as it was for Socrates), the unexamined life is not worth living.

It is possible that Blacks who do not have this rage have not lived an examined life. Baldwin in “No Name in the Street” gives an example of this when he recalls gifting the suit he wore to Martin Luther King Jr.’s funeral to an old friend. When he visited him, Baldwin could not “understand how nothing seemed to have touched this man.”²¹ He was for Baldwin, unknowable about the “raging school battle” or “anti-poverty program. . . . He seemed little touched by the cataclysm in his house and all around him as he was by the mail he handled every day.”²² Baldwin implicitly contrasts his friend with his friend’s stepdaughter, who, although possessed with what Baldwin describes as an “indigestible fury” (a militancy in which one is angry about things they do not have full knowledge of), had felt anger at injustice. Their discussion of Vietnam points to the illusion that his friend had accepted; an illusion that arises as a result of an unexamined life and thus produces a non-angry Black man. His friend not only defends the war but also yells, “Let me tell you what I think *we’re* trying to do there.”²³ His use of “we’re” is evidence of his unexamined life—for according to Baldwin, not only had his friend bought into America’s myth concerning the war but he had also bought into the illusion that he, as a Black man, is part of the “we” of America. This is not to say that Black rage is sufficient for a Black person to live an examined life. Rather, it is to claim that Black rage is borne out of an examined life. Recall, there are other things for Baldwin that are necessary for an examined life—they are what epistemologists refer to as intellectual courage, attentiveness, honesty, and love of truth. Black rage caused by racial mistreatment and asymmetrical racial knowledge and brought about through an examined life was articulated by Black leaders like the Black Panthers and Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam. In “No Name in the Street” Baldwin describes Huey Newton, leader of the Black Panthers, standing in city hall with a gun, challenging the policemen’s gun and their right to be in the ghetto. Baldwin claims that what got the Panthers so much attention *and* pushback was

that they “articulated the rage and repudiated the humiliation of thousands, more, millions.”²⁴ Through this rage, they expressed Black America’s grievances. Perhaps this is also why Baldwin felt that he knew something about the pain as well as the fury of Elijah Muhammad. Although he considered Elijah’s and his own responsibilities to be different, Baldwin as an alive Black man understood the fury—for it had the same cause for him and countless others.

Baldwin is not claiming that Black rage brought about by these causes is a collective emotion. He is not suggesting that the racial group called “Blacks” have intentional attitudes and thus consciousness. Neither should we take the term “Black rage” to refer to a single emotion attributed to groups rather than individuals (plural subject model).²⁵ Nor is Baldwin claiming that all Blacks experience anger at the same object (shared emotion model). Rather, Baldwin is describing an individual emotion that has a variety of causes and it is not necessarily experienced by all Blacks—for whether one has this rage depends on one’s level of consciousness. Black rage, in Baldwin’s view, is an affective and cognitive response felt by Blacks who experience and witness the continual mistreatment as well as indifference to and ignorance of their suffering. This is not to say, though, that Black rage is an emotion experienced just by individual Blacks. Although it is an individual rather than a collective emotion, it arises due to a sense of collectivity and can lead to collective action—as historical and present-day social movements highlight. Recall, it comes about due to witnessing the experiences of others. And as we shall see in the third section of this article, it is useful in part, according to Baldwin, because of the positive things it communicates to Black folk, and for how it leads to collective action *with* other outraged citizens.

However, there are moments in which one’s Black rage is cooled. Then there are times in which it reaches a boil, as in the case of Baldwin in New Jersey (for which I will provide more details in the following section). Baldwin has ideas about what we can and should do with this cool and boiling rage. In doing so, he illuminates the agential capacities that Blacks have in the various angry stages—and he does it in ways that counter negative stereotypes of them as well as their anger.

Choosing to Live Consciously or Surrender

If Black rage is present in every Black person “alive” due to these causes, what is the place of agency in Baldwin’s account of Black rage? That is, do Blacks have the capacity to act and to choose given the presence of Black rage? In what follows, I argue that consistent with Baldwin’s belief in human possibilities, he thinks we have agency at every phase of Black rage.

In the “Notes of a Native Son” passage previously cited, Baldwin continues: “It [Black rage] can wreck more important things than race relations . . . one has the choice, merely, of living with it consciously or surrendering to it.” I interpret living consciously with this rage to mean to have it under control. To “surrender to it” means to allow rage to control you. While the first option allows for agency, agency may sound puzzling in a context in which rage controls the subject. For this reason, I will give attention to the ways in which one might surrender to rage and examine to what extent agency has a place.

Two Ways of Surrendering

Baldwin provides two examples of what it is to surrender to rage. In the first example, the angry agent engages in a violent, revengeful act that could result in his or his target’s death. On his last night in New Jersey (and after experiencing many instances of racial mistreatment there), Baldwin “wanted to do something to crush these white faces, which were crushing me.”²⁶ He walked into a restaurant with the anticipation that he would be discriminated against. As the waitress told him that they did not serve Negroes, all of his fury flowed toward her. His Black rage had reached a boil. He notes, “I hated her for her white face, and for her great astounded, frightened eyes. I felt that if she found a black man so frightening, I would make her fright worth-while.”²⁷ After realizing that he could not get close enough to grab her neck, he picked up a water pitcher and threw it in her direction. After throwing it, he seemed to come out of his rage describing it as “frozen blood abruptly thawed.”²⁸ He was able to escape the restaurant with his life.

The second example of surrendering to rage occurs in “The Devil Finds Work.” In this example, the angry agent engages in a verbal act that, given her vulnerability to white violence, could result in her death. To support Baldwin’s view that the movie *Lady Sings the Blues* has nothing to do with Billie Holiday, Baldwin describes a scene from the movie that is not in the original book. At a stop on the road with her bandmates, Billie sees a group of Blacks grieving as a black body hangs from a tree. Soon after, the Ku Klux Klan appears, marching on the main street nearby. Billie, filled with rage upon viewing the lynched body, makes herself visible and curses at the Klan. Like Baldwin, she and her white bandmates are able to escape.

Baldwin thinks that this encounter did not happen, not only because it is not in the book but because: “One of the necessities of being black and knowing it, is to accept the hard discipline of learning to avoid useless anger, and needless loss of life: every mother and his mother’s mother’s brother is needed.”²⁹ While Baldwin is correct to point out the scene’s inconsistency with the book, the fact that it *should not* happen doesn’t support the fact that it *did not* happen. Recall, Baldwin also surrendered to anger. However, and more importantly, I think Baldwin is making a normative claim. Consciously living with anger (i.e., controlling it) *requires* us to avoid useless anger. Surrendering to anger (i.e., allowing it to control you) can result in a loss of Black life. This should not happen because every Black life is needed. Given what Blacks know about whites, they know better; for they are “schooled in adversity long before white people are. [They] perceive danger far more swiftly . . . they know their white comrade’s brothers far better than the comrade does.”³⁰ Before elaborating on the useless anger that Baldwin references, it is worth examining the agency involved in living with the rage consciously and surrendering to it.

The Presence of Agency

Note the idea of choice suggested in the above passage. Baldwin thinks that we have a choice either to control our anger or allow our anger to control us. But this picture is too simplistic. At what point do we have a choice?

The stoic Seneca thinks that anger undergoes a three-stage process. In the first stage, the emotion begins without reason being involved. Indeed, he thinks the first stage should not be called anger, since the agent is experiencing an impression and not a passion. It is “involuntary bodily

movements . . . no more anger than the impression itself.”³¹ In the second stage, the emotion comes into being and reason can operate here; with the agent choosing to resist or surrender to it. Here anger appears. It is born from deliberation and can be eradicated by deliberation. In the third stage, anger is fully developed and is beyond the capacity of control. “It desires vengeance . . . having overthrown reason.”³² Seneca thinks that choice only occurs in the second stage. This second stage seems to fit with Baldwin’s “simplistic” picture: avoid or surrender. But is there choice on Baldwin’s view in the other stages?

Baldwin’s account of the relationship between the examined life and Black rage rejects Seneca’s first stage view—for we come to be angry by living an examined life. This is not to say that we can think ourselves into the emotion or that we should fully reject Baldwin’s disease metaphor. Rather, it acknowledges that reason is not fully absent in the first stage.

On the other hand, the New Jersey restaurant incident seems to support Seneca’s third stage view. Baldwin writes:

When we re-entered the streets something happened to me which had the force of an optical illusion. . . . [I felt] a click at the nape of my neck as though some interior string connecting my head to my body had been cut . . . [with the sound of the pitcher crashing] my frozen blood abruptly thawed, I returned from wherever I had been, I *saw*, for the first time.³³

This description seems to illustrate (in somatic terms) that Baldwin is being controlled by his anger. Something has *happened to him*. Once anger is fully developed, does Baldwin think we then lack control? If Baldwin thinks that every Black person “alive” already has Black rage, he would not also remind them of their choice if he did not think they had the capacity to control it. Unlike for Seneca, anger is not beyond our control for Baldwin. While both Richard Wright and Baldwin understood that to be a Negro is to be in rage almost all the time, and both aimed to express it, Baldwin had a solution: “The first problem is how to control that rage so that it won’t destroy you.”³⁴ Baldwin thought that although we may all have a “private Bigger Thomas living in the skull,” we are not doomed to failure. “[He] believed that the real psychological situation of blacks is that they are always faced with a choice.”³⁵

One might object by suggesting that the worry for Baldwin is not anger but expressed anger. Perhaps every Black person alive does have a rage inside of them, but if they let it out they will be controlled by it. However, this contradicts Baldwin's admonishments for Blacks to express their anger. It was unexpressed anger—anger that remained bottled up; never expressed to its target—that was problematic for Baldwin. He notes that inarticulate rage was all the more dangerous because it was unexpressed and therefore could turn into bitterness.³⁶

Does Baldwin think there is lack of agency in *boiling* Black rage? Insofar that you can describe yourself as having been enraged, that you can recount it afterward and reflect on how you felt, then you are agentially contributing to the action and thus have some kind of minimal agential capacity. On this view, Baldwin does not think there is a lack of agency in boiling Black rage. Baldwin is able to relive the moment over and over again “like an automobile accident.”³⁷ He acknowledges that he had “no conscious plan” but he was aware of what he wanted to do: “crush these white faces.”³⁸ Baldwin is also able to reflect on his attitudes: “I had been ready to commit murder.” Note that Baldwin never criticizes the enraged state as if it is to blame for taking away his power to act otherwise. Instead Baldwin criticizes himself for surrendering to the emotions and attitudes involved in the state. He writes, “My life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart.”³⁹ It was a hatred he chose to carry, just like he chose to enter the restaurant, to not touch the waitress with his hands, etc. This ability to choose and act does not ignore his bodily experience, but it explains that both can be present at the same time for Baldwin.

In sum, on my reading of Baldwin, there is a capacity to choose throughout Black rage's several phases, including the kind of boiling rage that he experienced. Anger is not something that we are overcome by and cannot control. Rather, it is something within our control and from which deliberate action is engendered. We are not fated to one kind of anger. We have a choice to engage in the useless or useful kind, and thus useless or useful action. As we shall see, it is this agential capacity that makes it possible for Blacks to protest, criticize, and create through rage (i.e., chose useful anger). More specifically, Blacks who have this anger also have control. Contra stereotypes of Blacks as irrational and out-of-control, Baldwin attributes agency to them in ways that humanize and dignify them as rational beings through his theoretical account.

Useless and Useful Anger

Now that we know what we *can* do with Black rage, what then *should* we do? In this section I give attention to Baldwin's "useless anger" and argue that it is, according to Baldwin, what Blacks should avoid and a valuable concept that reveals a target of anger skeptics concerned with anger and productivity. More importantly, it provides Blacks with a pragmatic politics of rage that can be used in the service of anti-racism struggle.

Let me begin first by providing a preliminary account of what useless Black rage involves. Baldwin does not claim that Black rage *is* useless and therefore should be avoided. On the contrary, he claims that it can become useless and when it is it should be avoided. Black rage is not by definition useless. Black rage can be useless *and* useful. It is up for us to decide which version we choose. His two examples of surrendering to rage provide a window into the nature of useless anger.

Based on the Holiday and New Jersey examples, we might conclude that useless anger is anger that can get you killed. If this is the case, then Baldwin and the "fictitious" Billie Holiday did in fact experience useless anger given that they barely escaped death after their angry episodes. But this can't be the whole story. The anger of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers could have also gotten them killed, but Baldwin never describes them as experiencing useless anger. The anger that he ascribes to Malcolm, in particular, is "unfamiliar rage"; a rage that articulated a love for Blacks, an "apprehension of the horror of the black condition" and a determination that his beloved would be empowered to change their own condition.⁴⁰ I argue that, according to Baldwin, Black rage is useless not when it welcomes death but when it contains hate.⁴¹

After the New Jersey restaurant incident Baldwin could not get over two facts: he could have killed and been killed. But we ought not take Baldwin's point to be solely focused on death. In addition, he notes that this could have occurred not because of what others did, but because of his own hatred. So I take Baldwin's concern not to be with the overwhelming power of anger but instead with one's capacity to hate others and oneself through anger. Baldwin acknowledges that the hate that Blacks have for whites is different from the hate whites have for Blacks. The former is not born out of superiority but the need to get the white man off his back. Nevertheless, for Baldwin, this hate can have a murderous power over you. He calls this a "self-destroying limbo"; a limbo from which he could not write.⁴² It is the

self-destroying state that he had witnessed his father succumb to and one he strove to resist. Anger is useless for Baldwin not when it prevents one from being heard, is less digestible to whites, or doesn't lead to reform. It is useless when the anger contains hate. Such a hate can lead to physical *and* existential death. So we ought not take Baldwin's caution against useless anger to be an indictment against Black rage in general.

This view stands in contrast to the counterproductive argument tradition of William Buckley, Seneca, and more recently, Martha Nussbaum. In her 2018 article "The Aptness of Anger," Amia Srinivasan gives attention to the 1965 Cambridge Union debate between Baldwin and Buckley. Buckley argues against Baldwin's politics of anger because it focuses on the past, on what has been done; however, it doesn't turn its gaze toward the future. Buckley notes "[Negroes] have done a great deal to focus on the fact of white discrimination against Negroes. They have done a great deal to agitate a moral concern. But where in fact do they go now?"⁴³ He also claimed that this anger only leads to self-destruction and motivates white violence. For these reasons it is counterproductive. Buckley joins a long tradition of anger skeptics. Seneca believed that anger aims at destruction. He writes of anger that it "is above all other [emotions] hideous and wild, raging with an utterly inhuman lust for arms, blood and tortures. . . . Anger [is] a short madness: for it is equally devoid of self-control . . . forgetful of kinship."⁴⁴ Seneca is claiming that anger makes a person out of control. And his anger is likely to lead to revenge and also break important bonds. For Aristotle, anger entails a hope for revenge, and Nussbaum (influenced by Aristotle) thinks anger is irrational because it conceptually has this vengeful hope—a hope rooted in the thought that one can actually undo what has already been done through revenge. Therefore, Nussbaum claims that the best way to achieve a just society is through love and generosity. And they are our best options because, contrary to anger, they are *not* status focused nor are they backward-looking but focused on the future. Srinivasan argues that there is more to anger, normatively speaking, than its effects. Taking on a moderate functionalism view in which she admits that anger has typical behavioral expressions and can be altered by cultural programming, Srinivasan claims that we should not ignore anger's aptness even when counterproductive. In her view, the fact that anger could be counterproductive does not provide us with a decisive reason not to get angry. But another point is worth mentioning. Srinivasan continues by claiming that Buckley's and other critics' "real target is not anger (apt or not) but its stereotypical

expressions,”⁴⁵ that is to say, their worries are directed toward stereotypical angry behavior: violent or seemingly out-of-control expressions of anger, for example.

However, I do not think that anger skeptics like Buckley and Nussbaum’s real target is only anger’s stereotypical expression. There are times in which we are angry, and revengeful expressions are not part of the picture. Being angry with our children is an example. I also do not think that Baldwin is concerned with anger’s stereotypical expressions as I have already addressed. The expression will be, all things considered, the same whether it is useless or useful anger. For example, Billie Holiday when angry might curse at the television just as she cursed at the Ku Klux Klan. Baldwin, when angry, might throw a pitcher of water on a garden lawn just as he threw a pitcher at the white waitress. The worry for angry skeptics as well as Baldwin cannot be reduced to expression. What Baldwin’s work highlights is that the real target is a protracted anger which tends “towards hatred and [is then] *manifested* in schemes of retaliation and vengeance.”⁴⁶ On Baldwin’s view, what is the difference between useful and useless anger is the presence of hate in the latter. This is not merely an expressive, counterproductive issue for Baldwin. More importantly, it is an internal, counterlove issue.

Baldwin’s criticism of anger appears only when it is tied to hate. Hear Baldwin at length from “A Talk to Teachers”:

What I am trying to get at is that by this time the Negro child has had, effectively, almost all the doors of opportunity slammed in his face, and there are very few things he can do about it. He can more or less accept it with an absolutely inarticulate and dangerous rage inside—all the more dangerous because it is never expressed. It is precisely those silent people whom white people see every day of their lives—I mean your porter and your maid. . . . They really hate you—really hate you because in their eyes (and they’re right) you stand between them and life.⁴⁷

Black rage is not dangerous when it rises in intensity. It is dangerous when it contains hate; hatred for whites and self-hatred. This is useless anger for Baldwin and useless anger should be avoided.

What can we infer about useful anger on Baldwin’s account? On my reading, Black rage is useful when it is loving, critical, and creative.

Rather than containing hate, useful Black rage contains love. It involves and expresses love for Black people (a love that also involves affirming and valuing Black life) without giving into the hate and supremacy that befalls white racists.⁴⁸ It must be noted that hatred toward whites does not necessarily suggest a love for Black people. Baldwin admits in *Autobiographical Notes* that his hatred of whites did not mean that he loved Black folks—for he had once despised them because they “failed to produce Rembrandt.”⁴⁹ On the other hand, useful Black rage both avoids hatred of whites and involves a love for Blacks. bell hooks (1995) criticizes Cornel West for his depiction of Malcolm X’s Black rage. By making “rage synonymous with ‘great love for black people’” and by “collapsing Malcolm’s rage and his love, West attempts to explain that rage away, to temper it.”⁵⁰ For hooks, Malcolm’s rage was not just about love, it was about his commitment to justice. Is my reading of useful Black rage vulnerable to hooks’s criticisms? Well, I do not think that collapsing or connecting rage with love is necessarily an act of tempering the rage. The strength of the temper accusation will depend on one’s view of love. The love that Baldwin had in mind was not a kind that would successfully temper the rage. Rather, it makes it much more revolutionary, by which I mean, counter to the status quo and their dominant values, and focused on resistance and freedom. Consider that Baldwin thought that “Negroes in this country . . . are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open to the world.”⁵¹ Political theorist Chris Lebron remarks on Baldwin’s loving stance as follows: “Love requires an investment of mind but also of spirit. . . . Racial oppression and abuse tend to motivate a person to turn the attention of the oppressed and the abused on herself. . . . This broadly leads to despair, and despair can subsequently manifest self-hatred and self-pity.”⁵² Love can undo this despair and prevent the abuse. Thus, any decolonial project would entail a call to love in order to undo colonial destruction and assert humanity and hope for the disenfranchised, among other things. Black theologian James Cone reminds us that loving blackness undermines white supremacy. Hooks in later chapters of *Killing Rage* even motivates the idea of loving blackness as political resistance. Claiming that Black rage is useful when it involves or expresses a love for Black people is not a move to temper the rage. It reveals just how radical and useful that rage is, since the very idea is a resistance and refusal enterprise.

In this sense, one might be tempted to think that Baldwin’s account of Black rage is an example of Nussbaum’s “Transition-Anger.” Unlike

garden-variety anger—which in her account is status-focused and involves a payback wish—transition anger does not contain a desire for retribution but rather “always extends to the wrongdoer a generous type of love and a hope for a future of cooperation and constructive work.”⁵³ While she admits that transition-anger lacks the retributive wish and can be used in the service of social goals, she thinks that it is rarely practiced in its pure form. When she writes in her 2016 book *Anger and Forgiveness* about revolutionary leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela she notes that “to the extent that any of them admitted anger as acceptable, it was either our borderline species of ‘Transition-Anger,’ a sense of outrage without any wish for ill to befall the offender, or else a brief episode of real anger, but leading quickly to the transition.”⁵⁴ However, her account of transition anger is too focused on the wrongdoer, and in this way it differs from Baldwin’s account of Black rage. Nussbaum’s transition anger overemphasizes extending sympathy, respect, friendship, and generosity to the wrongdoer. Baldwin’s account of Black rage, however, helps us to see that anger is not merely about extending love to a white wrongdoer, but to the Black person who was wronged; it’s not just about hoping in a cooperative future with the wrongdoer, but hoping in the Black person who was wronged. To put it bluntly, Baldwin’s account of Black rage decenters whiteness and places Black life at its center—and it is able to do this in ways that escape hatred and disrespect.

Useful Black rage is also critical. Anger is a form of protest against wrongdoing. Protest is not simply an appeal to white sympathy or demand that whites give Blacks what they deserve. Protest is about announcing wrongdoing, expressing disapprobation, and holding others to account. Baldwin used his vocation as a witness and his Black rage to “criticize her [America] perpetually.” He used his Black rage to “accuse my country and my countrymen . . . that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.”⁵⁵ And in doing so, his Black rage was useful. We can also apply this aspect of criticality and usefulness to the interpersonal. In her account of anger as a political emotion, Céline Leboeuf—using Franz Fanon as a point of analysis—argues that rage can “*awaken* him to his oppression but also sets the stage for *reflections* on racism that transcend the desire for revenge” (emphasis added).⁵⁶ She notes that even if it is impure as Nussbaum describes, it can still be instrumentally valuable, since it “opens up a space for questioning racist societies. . . . Its value rests on its effects on the psychology of the

oppressed,” among other things.⁵⁷ I agree. In the case of Baldwin, useful anger is not only anger brought about by an alive consciousness, but it rests on the effects that this questioning and examination has on the Black person. In addition, this questioning also becomes useful, since it is a prerequisite to social action—action that is rarely engaged alone, but instead undertaken in solidarity with other outraged citizens (who are motivated to act because of the rage). Baldwin writes: “I’m not a doom-monger. If you don’t look at it, you can’t change it. You’ve got to look at it.”⁵⁸

Useful Black rage is also creative. Baldwin knew that his rage was useless when he was unable to write. Recall, that it was the self-destructing limbo of hatred and fear from which he could not write. We can therefore infer that useful rage was the rage that allowed him to write. This creative Black rage hit him while in Paris while looking at a picture of 15-year-old Dorothy Counts who was attacked by a white mob on her way to school in Charlotte, North Carolina.⁵⁹ Although he would stay in Europe another year, Baldwin’s self-described fury brought about by the image is what would eventually lead him to “pay his dues” by visiting the South to bear witness and record his account and thoughts in such works as “No Name in the Street.” When he recounts Billie Holiday’s rage, what makes it useless for Baldwin is its hatred. What would make it useful, at least in part, would be its motivating force in the creation of her bittersweet tune “Strange Fruit.” Baldwin acknowledges that protest literature like Richard Wright’s *Native Son* angry writing was useful in that it allowed him for the first time in his life to see expressed “the sorrow, the rage, and the murderous bitterness which was eating up my life and those around me.” He admits that Wright’s work “was an immense liberation and revelation for me.”⁶⁰ However, Baldwin’s criticism of *Native Son* was not that Wright used his anger to create literature. As “one of the last . . . angry productions” that “recorded his days of anger” *Native Son*’s “overwhelming limitation” was, according to Baldwin, its depiction of Blacks in a “fantastic and fearful image” with no tradition or social connections.⁶¹ The image of Bigger Thomas presented a certain picture of Black rage that fed into myths of monstrous Blacks who all had the inevitable potential of violence. Such a myth provided moral immunity from individual and collective responsibility. In other words, it falsely illustrated a Black rage that was absent of agency and lacked love and creativity. It depicted a false view of Black rage as pathological and always useless.

Note that Black rage's usefulness does not depend on its ability to bring about any reform. Black rage (with its love, criticality, and creativeness) is useful because it communicates disapprobation of injustice and affirms love and value of and solidarity with Blacks. While Black rage maybe criticized for discouraging uptake by whites, inciting white violence, or being merely cathartic and not politically efficacious, Baldwin helps us to see that its usefulness cannot be measured solely in terms of political contributions.⁶² He shows that Black rage is useful when it satisfies other purposes.

What is the relationship between agency and this useful anger? Black folk, like other moral agents, are able to deliberate and to act and thus make their anger useful—something they can then use to value others, protest oppressive conditions, and ultimately change their world. It's this ability to choose that Baldwin calls our attention to. He highlights how Black agency is revealed both in Blacks' ability to not be controlled by anger as well as to choose what their anger would do in the world. Black rage is not just something Black folk can feel. It is also a way to act in the world. Baldwin reminds us that Black rage is a way to respond to the world in critical, loving, and creative ways; all in the service of dismantling the racial causes and conditions for it. In doing so, Baldwin not only defends an emotion but also Black life and Black people's moral and political possibilities.

Conclusion: Angry Humanist and Angry Pragmatism

Anger is currently undergoing a resurgence in philosophy. Moral psychologists are exploring the nature and function of anger, political philosophers are exploring its role in public life, and ethicists are examining its aptness, virtue, and vices. As philosophers explore these themes, it is important for them to not only have conversations with each other but also rely on work being done in the empirical sciences and in the humanities. Among the humanists that we can benefit from is James Baldwin. As a writer who explored the complexity of the Black experience and the white supremacy that inflicts it, Baldwin had a lot to say about the anger of Black folk (Black rage) and has a unique gift of combining both the empirical and the theoretical in a way that not only provides answers to philosophical questions concerning anger but poses important ones as well. Baldwin helps us to (1) understand the nature and causes of a unique type of anger of the

oppressed, (2) recognize our agential capacities at each angry stage, and (3) make use of guidelines to evaluate and use the emotion. In addition, he helps us to see the connection between self-examination, criticality, emotions, and agency. Through an examination of oneself and a racist world, an anger is borne (i.e., Black rage). This anger contributes to a criticality that is necessary for reporting the results of one's examination and for challenging others to see and live differently. Throughout this process of anger, however, the conscious person with Black rage has not necessarily lost control. Rather, she is exercising her agential capacities and is capable of using her rage in useful ways as she struggles against anti-black racism.

But Baldwin's contribution is not simply a theoretical one. As racial injustice and anti-black racism continue to manifest themselves in the United States, many Blacks have responded with anger. Although their anger is a fitting response to such wrongdoing, many have criticized their anger—often alluding to its backward-looking focus, its tendency toward violence, and its inability to persuade the powerful to give into angry people's demands. This presents a dilemma for the racially oppressed. Should they hold on to their anger, without guilt, and use it for change? Or should they make attempts to replace it with more positive emotions like love and compassion? Baldwin is a wonderful resource for thinking the first option is worth our consideration. He helps us to see that Black rage is not pathological. It is rational, warranted, inclusive, and useful. He also helps us to see that Black people who are angry are not necessarily out of control, selfish, or ignorant. In sum, Baldwin's work enriches our view of an emotional experience, as well as the moral and political conditions that create it, by "converting it [Black rage] into a recognizable human emotion" *while also* making those who feel it recognizable as moral and political agents. And we are indebted to him for such a contribution.

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NOTES

1. Maurice Charney, "James Baldwin's Quarrel with Richard Wright," *American Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1963): 65–75; at 72.
2. For work on Baldwin's love see Grant Farred, "Love Is Asymmetrical: James Baldwin's The Fire Next Time," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 3, no. 2 (2015): 284–304; Chris Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 109; and J. P. Fantuzzo, "Facing the Civic Love Gap: James Baldwin's Civic Education for Interpersonal Solidarity," *Educational Theory* 68, nos. 4–5 (2018): 385–402. Also, there are exceptions. Amia Srinivasan, in "The Aptness of Anger," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2028): 123–44, uses Baldwin to argue for the aptness of anger.
3. William F. Buckley Jr., "Can We Desegregate, Hesto Presto?," in *Rumbles Left and Right: A Book about Troublesome People and Ideas* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), 124. For more thoughts on what Buckley thought of Baldwin and what Baldwin thought of Buckley, see Nicholas Buccola, *The Fire This Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).
4. Jeremy McCarter, "James Baldwin: Still Angry after All These Years," *Newsweek*, August 5, 2010, <https://www.newsweek.com/james-baldwin-still-angry-after-all-these-years-71557>
5. Jeffrey B. Kurtz, "'To Have Your Experience Denied . . . It Hurts': Barack Obama, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Black Anger," *Howard Journal of Communications* 28, no. 1, (2017): 93–106; at 94.
6. James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 70.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Fanon explains a similar reaction that is brought about by the white gaze. He writes, "I can feel that familiar rush of blood surge up from the numerous dispersions of my being. I am about to lose my temper. The fire had died long ago, and once again the Negro is trembling. . . . I was expected to stay in line" (*Black Skin, White Masks* [New York: Grove Press, 2008], 94.).
11. James Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 431.
12. James Baldwin et al., "The Negro in American Culture," *CrossCurrents* 11, no. 3 (1961): 205–24; at 205.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 11–38.
15. James Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 220–21.
16. James Baldwin, "The Negro at Home and Abroad," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 603.
17. "Nobody Knows My Name," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 136.

18. *Ibid.*, 195.
19. *Ibid.*, 208.
20. Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 371.
21. *Ibid.*, 363.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 364.
24. *Ibid.*, 455.
25. For more views on collective emotions, see *Collective Emotions: Perspectives from Psychology, Philosophy, and Sociology*, ed. Mikko Salmela and Christian von Scheve (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
26. Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 71.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, 72.
29. James Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 477–572; at 562.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Seneca, *Anger, Mercy, Revenge*, ed. Robert Kaster and Martha C. Nussbaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 34.
32. *Ibid.*, 36–37.
33. Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 63–84; at 70–71.
34. Baldwin, "The Negro in American Culture," 205.
35. Maurice Charney, "James Baldwin's Quarrel with Richard Wright," *American Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1963): 65–75; at 72.
36. James Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 678–86; at 681, 683.
37. Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 72.
38. *Ibid.*, 71.
39. *Ibid.*, 72.
40. Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 412.
41. It is important to note that "hate" here refers to hate toward individuals and not hate toward evil simpliciter. See Macalester Bell, "Anger, Virtue, and Oppression," in *Feminist Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy: Theorizing the Non-Ideal*, ed. Lisa Tessman (New York: Springer, 2009), 165–83, where she argues that anger is virtuous in that it shows a love for that which is virtuous and a hatred for that which is evil. This is not the hate that makes anger useless.
42. James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 5–9; at 8.
43. Quoted in Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," 2.
44. Seneca, *On Anger*, Book 3:1.
45. Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," 14
46. Robert Solomon, *True to Our Feelings: What Our Emotions Are Really Telling Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18. Though I am quoting Robert Solomon here, I credit Baldwin with illustrating this point decades earlier.
47. James Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 678–86; at 681.

48. For arguments for how anger at racial injustice is an expression of love to those who hate and are complicit in racism see Myisha Cherry, "Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice," in *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, ed. Adrienne Martin (New York: Routledge, 2019).
Here, I intentionally focus on Blacks as a target of love. But this does not preclude other targets.
49. Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 5–129; at 8.
50. bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), 13.
51. James Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 291–347; at 302.
52. LeBron, *Making of Black Lives Matter*, 109.
53. Martha Nussbaum, "From Anger to Love: Self-Purification and Political Resistance," in *To Shape a New World*, ed. Brandon Terry and Tommie Shelby (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 105–26; at 105.
54. Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 212.
55. Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 291–347; at 292.
56. Céline Leboeuf, "Anger as a Political Emotion: A Phenomenological Perspective," in *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, ed. Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 15–30; at 26.
57. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
58. James Baldwin, "How to Cool It," *Esquire*, <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a23960/james-baldwin-cool-it/>
59. This is according to Baldwin's own account in "No Name in the Street." Some scholars, such as Ed Pavlič ("Why James Baldwin Went to the South and What It Meant to Him," LitHub.com. June 29, 2018, <https://lithub.com/why-james-baldwin-went-to-the-south-and-what-it-meant-to-him/>), have questioned this account given a dispute in timing of when he sees the image. For a recent reflection on Baldwin's account, see Eddie Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York: Crown, 2020).
60. Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name," 137–285; at 253.
61. Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 5–129; at 25–26.
62. For additional arguments for why intrinsic values and socially beneficial acts are just as valuable as political acts that aim for reform see Thomas Shelby's *Dark Ghettos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017) and Candice Delmas's *A Duty to Resist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).