

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Bitterness without hope

Anna Cremaldi | Jack M. C. Kwong 

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA

Correspondence

Anna Cremaldi, Department of Philosophy and Religion, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA.

Email: cremaldiam@appstate.edu

Jack M. C. Kwong, Department of Philosophy and Religion, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA.

Email: kwongj@appstate.edu

1 | INTRODUCTION

The ancient Greeks aptly describe bitterness in terms of unresolved anger. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle depicts the *pikros* as a figure with a tendency to retain anger and to carry it as a burden within. Following a tradition of reference to swallowed anger (e.g., *Iliad*, Book I, line 80), Aristotle's *pikros* makes clear that the distinctive nature of this figure's burden is that he has neglected to “digest” anger. This traditional image of the bitter person's main affliction as swallowed and improperly digested anger comports well with our modern sense of bitterness. Pretheoretically, we still think of bitterness today as a subterranean emotion, buried within and lacking the highly outward demonstration of closely related emotions such as anger. Moreover, we see the bitter person as someone who seems to feed unhealthily on a private sense of injustice, occasionally and awkwardly expectorating their undigested anger.

Yet what exactly is the nature of bitterness, beyond these traditional images and their modern echoes? This question has not received much attention in philosophy. Nevertheless, some important work has been done to better understand the nature of bitterness, primarily through discussions of the role the emotion plays in our political and social discourse. Thus, theorists have been concerned to determine the conditions in which bitterness is justified (McFall, 1991; Stockdale, 2017); understand the interpersonal dynamics behind accusations of bitterness (especially when they are directed at members of minority groups) (Campbell, 1994); uncover the sense in which the emotion is social (Campbell; Burrow, 2005); and identify the benefits and destructiveness of bitterness (Meyers, 2004; Stockdale). A surprising theme that emerges from these discussions is that the nature of bitterness is taken to be conceptually anchored around the concept of hope. As Katie Stockdale notes, hope is “important to understanding bitterness” (2017, p. 2), a sentiment that is reflected in other definitions of bitterness. For instance, Lynne McFall argues that bitterness is *disappointed hope* while Stockdale claims that bitterness is *hopeless anger*, an emotion experienced when there is a loss of hope that a frustrated moral expectation will be corrected. To be sure, anger still retains an important role on some of these definitions, but hope is posited as conceptually significant in understanding the nature of bitterness.

In this paper, we join the discussion concerning the definitional question of what bitterness is, a question that in our view has been sorely underexplored. Specifically, we challenge the connection that theorists have drawn between bitterness and hope, showing that bitterness is in fact intelligible without appeal to hope.¹ We then argue that an adequate definition of bitterness can be formulated solely on the concept of anger and show that bitterness at its core is *unresolved* and *helpless* anger. In associating bitterness with lack of resolution, we thus track a tradition that goes back as far as the classical period of philosophy. Although some contemporary scholars have also explained bitterness in terms of a lack of resolution and the anger that is associated with it, an adequate explanation of their connection, in our view, has yet to be offered. More importantly, our principal disagreement with them is that an appeal to such anger is sufficient to explain the nature of bitterness whereas they do not, evidenced by their appending hope to bitterness on their accounts. Our aim in this essay is to motivate an anger-based definition *sans* hope and argue that it is preferable over competing accounts in being more explanatorily adequate.

The paper is structured as follows. Its first section examines two contemporary accounts of bitterness that share the assumption that hope is necessary in explaining the nature of bitterness.² Next, we demonstrate that these accounts fail to explain cases of *helpless anger*, wherein agents feel bitter despite not experiencing a loss of hope. This failure paves the way for a new account of bitterness, which we develop in the third section. Specifically, we argue that bitterness is more effectively construed solely as an unresolved anger that an agent experiences. In the final section, we show that such an account of bitterness—one that does not have any conceptual ties to hope—satisfactorily explains key intuitions about bitterness, succeeding in several respects where other accounts fail.

A clarification is in order before proceeding. As scholars note, bitterness is an emotion that can take on a wide range of objects (Stockdale, p. 365; McFall, p. 148). One can be bitter toward a natural disaster, such as a wind storm that uprooted one's prized apple trees, or toward one's bodily appearance or disability. One can also be bitter toward people, such as the friend that betrayed one's confidence. In this paper, we will be primarily concerned with the latter sort of cases—what McFall and Stockdale refer to as *moral bitterness*. These cases are concerned with bitterness that results from faults of human agency, such as when one is wronged or suffers from injustice by others (McFall, 148; Stockdale, p. 365). Despite this focus, we will suggest below that an additional explanatory benefit of our account of bitterness is that it can be extended to explain cases of bitterness that are not moral in nature.

2 | THE CONNECTION BETWEEN HOPE AND BITTERNESS

In the contemporary literature on bitterness, hope figures centrally in its definition. Bitterness is defined either as *disappointed hope* (McFall) or as *hopeless anger* (Stockdale). Specifically, these accounts point to two ways that hope is thought to be enmeshed with bitterness:

1. An agent possesses a hope that is disappointed, and she is consequently bitter.
2. An agent possesses a moral expectation that is violated, and she becomes angry and hopes for remediation. This hope is then disappointed, and she is consequently bitter.

While the causal explanations of bitterness in (1) and (2) diverge, they share the central feature that bitterness has conceptual ties with disappointed hope. Without disappointed hope, the thought goes, one cannot be bitter.

On both of these accounts, bitterness as an emotion places emphasis on a forward-looking or prospective component.³ The bitter person is someone who once pictured the future as, in all likelihood, being a certain way but now sees it not turning out as hoped. In other words, the bitter person was once necessarily hopeful. While the connection between bitterness and hope is not defended systematically, a rationale can be easily reconstructed along the following lines: there is a distinctive sort of disappointment in bitterness. It is not just thwarted desire, but rather thwarted desire *regarding the future*. Bitter people do seem to have once wanted something from their futures, to be the sort to say, with resignation, that ‘I wanted that’ or ‘I deserved that.’ In this way, bitter people have disappointed hope. Here, hope is understood in a garden-variety way as a desire that some state of affairs obtains and a belief that its obtainment is possible.⁴ In the case of bitterness, this hoped-for state of affairs is regarded as good for the agent—say, her hope to be treated with respect or have a promise kept. Bitterness results when the future begins to appear as if it will *not* be that way, and the agent ceases to desire the future as she had envisioned or stops seeing the future she desires to be possible. That is, she has a *disappointed hope*.

As briefly alluded above, scholars describe two distinct causal paths to bitterness—one starting with hope, and the other with moral expectation. Let us now examine these paths in greater detail. Lynn McFall’s seminal account is an instance of the first. In it, she sees hope as necessary to explain both the cognitive and conative dimensions of bitterness. Hope is linked to the conative because we cannot otherwise explain the bitter person’s disappointment. After all, the embittered person is someone who desires that the future unfold in a certain way and is disappointed when it fails to do so. But hope’s causal priority is located in its cognitive role in bitterness. As McFall points out, “that hope is necessary is shown by the fact that you can’t betray someone’s hopes who has none” (McFall, p. 147). Without hope, we cannot account for the bitter person’s very anticipation of, say, being treated justly. It is only when we understand a person’s deeming it likely that she will be treated justly that we can subsequently account for her bitter disappointment at not being treated thus. Consider a contrast between the cynical and the bitter person. The bitter person is someone who has, at one point, judged that the world is a just sort of place, whereas the cynical person withholds such a judgment and laments that “life is not fair”. However, the bitter person also desires to be treated justly—a desire which the cynical person lacks because she does not believe in the world’s justice.⁵

According to McFall, not all thwarted hopes generate bitterness. One can hope that drinks will stay chilled in a cooler or that some pie will be left when one gets home. When these scenarios fail to materialize, one tends to feel mild annoyance, rather than the keen disappointment of bitterness. McFall thus suggests that bitterness is a response only to *important* hopes. Moreover, she claims that not all thwarted hopes generate *justified* bitterness. To be justified, one’s hope must not only be important, but also “legitimate”: it must be (1) a personal or moral ideal and (2) “not extremely unlikely to be realized” (p. 149). To take her example, suppose one has the ideal of “being true to two lovers” at the same time, the realization of which is statistically unlikely. This example suggests that merely possessing an ideal is not sufficient for legitimate hope. In addition, one’s ideal must be tempered by reality. A third condition on legitimate hope is that it be (3) engendered by an “explicit statement of intention” (p. 149). Again, to take McFall’s example, suppose one has an ideal of sexual fidelity. One’s hope based on this ideal cannot be regarded as legitimate if one’s partner explicitly neglects to promise as much.

Let us now turn our attention to the other path to bitterness that is based on hope. Whereas McFall’s causal narrative of bitterness begins with hope, Stockdale’s causal path to bitterness starts with moral expectation. Her rationale is that McFall’s narrative leads to an unwelcome consequence. Suppose that a person is a member of an oppressed class and hopes to be properly

recompensed for being wronged. Given that such a hope statistically is extremely unlikely to obtain, it would not, by McFall's standard, be considered legitimate. This is to say, members of oppressed classes with hope of recompense would be irrationally bitter. According to Stockdale, this is an unacceptable conclusion. As a corrective, she seeks a different basis for bitterness in moral expectation and anger. As Stockdale argues, these two notions offer a more appropriate basis for bitterness because they can better track the emotion's phenomenology. In her view, the bitter person is angry because her moral expectations—which track things to which we feel entitled, even if they are unlikely to occur—have been violated. Consequently, the agent begins to hope for recompense. Her anger, however, turns to *hopeless anger* in bitterness proper when the community around her neglects to recognize the legitimacy of her anger and she starts to experience a loss of hope that “others will act in accordance with the moral expectations we continue to endorse” (p. 368; cf. 371).⁶ For Stockdale, hope and moral expectation thus ride on different psychological rails in the bitter person.

According to Stockdale, an account of bitterness based on hopeless anger can offer a satisfactory explanation of an important case of bitterness—namely, the sort engendered by political or social injustice toward groups of people as a whole (p. 365). Stockdale orients her discussion of this sort of bitterness around James Baldwin's essay “Notes of a Native Son.” She interprets his bitterness as constituted by an unresolved anger and a hopelessness regarding a resolution of such injustices, where a loss of hope informs his “moral perception.” As she notes, “it helps to focus his attention on the bleak realities of persistent racism that blacks in America face” (p. 366). For our purposes, the important point to note is that, if Stockdale's reading of bitterness is right, Baldwin's bitterness—that is, his hopeless and unresolved anger—hones his attention to the likelihood that injustice is irremediable. Yet, we might wonder: Is this in fact how bitterness sharpens Baldwin's attention or that of others who are regularly plagued by social or political injustice? We turn to this question in the next section.

3 | HOPELESS VERSUS HELPLESS ANGER

In the previous section, we examined two ways in which scholars have thought that the concept of hope (or lack thereof) is essential to the emotion: McFall's disappointed hope and Stockdale's hopeless anger. Here, we argue that an appeal to hope is not in fact necessary for understanding the nature of bitterness. Consider the following scenario:

Jordan is up for a promotion, which is contingent on a majority of his colleagues voting for it. When his colleagues convene to consider whether he deserves the promotion—colleagues with whom he has so far had collegial, even friendly working and personal relationships—they decide in a manner departing from past deliberation that Jordan must prove that his record is exceptional. While the majority of his co-workers *do* decide to promote him, Jordan nevertheless feels that he has been maligned. He is angry that a new criterion of ‘exceptionality’ has been unfairly and arbitrarily imposed on him, especially when colleagues who had recently gone up for promotion merely had to satisfy the requirements as set forth in the promotion document and did not have to prove that their accomplishments were exceptional. Jordan pursues the issue with his colleagues, one after another, including his department chair. In each case, they demur, insisting that he has no grounds to be angry

and suggesting that he drop the matter. Lacking a way to pursue the matter and feeling helpless, Jordan therefore desists and is stuck with his anger.

We submit that in this scenario, Jordan can plausibly be characterized as bitter. Specifically, he is bitter that his colleagues arbitrarily imposed a new criterion in deliberating about his application for promotion. The root of Jordan's bitterness can be located in his initial anger at his colleagues for imposing such an arbitrary criterion. When his concerns about being unjustly treated were not countenanced by his colleagues as legitimate, Jordan no longer had an outlet for his anger, at least in regard to the people that mattered.⁷ Their dismissal of him essentially has the effect of a *ruling* that signaled that it would be inappropriate for Jordan to further pursue the matter with them and to continue to be angry. Nevertheless, Jordan remains angry, given that he does not believe the matter to be satisfactorily adjudicated. Since his colleagues' dismissal of his concerns now prevent him from expressing his anger *publicly*, he therefore has no choice but to confine his anger within and privately, and in this sense, swallows and ingests it. In so doing, Jordan became embittered.

The key point to note here is that we can make sense of Jordan's bitterness *without reference* to hope at all. Indeed, his bitterness is perfectly intelligible by sole appeal to anger, in particular, his swallowing and ingesting the anger that resulted from an unresolved unjust act. As mentioned, his colleagues' adjudication against him removed Jordan's basis to be angry, and decreed that he ought not continue to be so. He therefore no longer has a public outlet to express his anger and concerns. Additionally, the adjudication also effected that there is nothing he can do *at this time* to resolve his anger and the unjust act that caused it. This experience of not being able to do anything about one's circumstances and resulting anger *right here and now* renders Jordan helpless.

Accordingly, what is salient to the bitter person is *less* the issue of whether she can expunge this swallowed anger at some future time but *more* the fact she has to carry this burden at all. If a friend were to advise Jordan to pursue the promotion issue with the dean, Jordan may well refuse to take it at the time because he is not in the proper mental space to do so. He is too preoccupied stewing in his anger—an anger that he is forced to ingest—to be motivated to seek future recourse. This is not because he believes there can never be resolution in the future; when pressed, Jordan can perhaps identify other avenues where he can seek recourse (e.g., the provost, the chancellor, the AAUP). Rather, it is because Jordan is too bitter to consider them. In response to his friend's advice, he may say: "Thanks for the advice. But I'm too bitter to do anything about it these days. I'm just too disgusted with my colleagues. They've really left a bad taste in my mouth. I can't even fathom the thought of dealing with them right now. Maybe I'll do something about it later."

What this illustrates is that Jordan's bitterness is entirely separable from, and antecedent to, the question concerning future recourse. An important ramification is that insofar as we think of hope as having to do with future recourse, we see that we can make sense of bitterness without appealing to hope at all. Indeed, our view suggests that *pace* Stockdale, there is no particular hope that Jordan has to possess—and therefore, lose—for him to experience bitterness. Thus, he may or may not hope that his concerns will be adequately addressed, or that his other colleagues are not similarly unjustly treated. Our contention is that we need not appeal to any of these (or other hopes) in order to make intelligible his bitterness.

Incidentally, our account suggests another way in which Stockdale's account of bitterness as hopeless anger may be challenged, as outlined below. Our above characterization states that hope (or its lack thereof) is not necessary for explaining a person's experience of bitterness. Notice, however, that a person could come to be hopeful *yet* remain bitter, indicating that bitterness need not be hopeless anger. Thus, when his friend gives the same advice to Jordan as above, namely,

taking the promotion issue up with the dean, Jordan may well see this option as a potential recourse and consequently, possess hope that his concern will be adequately resolved. Despite being hopeful, he nevertheless remains bitter. This is not because he thinks that this strategy will fail; indeed, he suspects that the dean may agree with him and rule that his colleagues were being unfair. Rather, Jordan's bitterness does not vanish because the anger he has had to swallow, which was caused by his colleagues' unjust actions and subsequent unsatisfactory adjudication against him, remains in him. If this characterization of Jordan is on the right track, a person can be bitter whilst being hopeful. This, again, is because hope or its lack thereof is not necessary for explaining bitterness.⁸

A useful way to capture the contrast between Stockdale's and our accounts is to introduce a distinction between *hopeless anger* and *helpless anger*. Both are emotions that an agent experiences when she has been wronged. In addition, they concern her attitude with respect to possible recourse she can take to settle unfinished business—namely, none. Importantly, the two differ in their emphasis on temporal dimensions. Hopeless anger stresses that one lacks *eventual* recourse, whereas helpless anger centrally revolves around the fact that one lacks recourse *now*. In this regard, we submit that bitterness is better described as helpless anger.⁹ As remarked, the embittered need not have thoughts about the chances of resolution in the future; what is salient to her is that she is *stuck* with an anger that has been forced upon her to ingest, with no recourse to expunge it. We also suggested that were the embittered to entertain thoughts regarding such chances, she may be hopeful and optimistic regarding them. All of these attitudes are consistent with but distinct from bitterness. There can be bitterness without hope in these respects.

Note that this idea of *helpless* anger, as opposed to *hopeless* anger, might be at issue in the central case Stockdale seeks to explain—namely, the bitterness described in James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son." In the opening of the essay, Baldwin recounts the experience of moving to New Jersey as an eighteen-year old. He enters restaurants, only to find that he is unexpectedly refused service. Baldwin describes this as the awakening of his bitterness. In New Jersey, he "first contracted some dread, chronic disease" (Baldwin, 1995, p. 592)—the same bitterness that plagued his father, but which he himself had yet to experience until he was eighteen. Baldwin is initially angry at being refused service. But his anger is transformed into bitterness once it becomes directed towards the reception of that violation. At the very least, the white community in New Jersey acquiesces to the refusal of service to a young black man in restaurants, bars, etc. Indeed, many actively condone Baldwin's treatment. Effectively, the community judges that nothing needs redress and that Baldwin's anger is therefore inappropriate. As such, Baldwin's anger has nowhere to go and he consequently has to swallow his anger and becomes embittered. An apt description of Baldwin's emotional state, we contend, is *helpless anger*. In judging that he has no recourse *now*, he is not necessarily judging that he will lack eventual recourse. Indeed, nothing in the above description has alluded to such a recourse; yet his bitterness is perfectly intelligible. The bitterness he describes is consistent with his feeling angry and helpless rather than angry and hopeless.

We noted at the outset that the present paper is primarily concerned with cases of moral bitterness. However, further support for our proposal of bitterness as helpless anger can be found by considering cases of bitterness that do not involve moral expectations. For instance, some people feel bitter because they fail to live up to societal beauty norms given the bodies that they have. In such cases, their bitterness is neither the result of a violated moral expectation nor a disappointed hope in society. Rather, they are bitter because they have unresolved anger: They are angry that such demanding societal norms exist and persist, and that they cannot meet them. Equally important, they feel helpless in that there is nothing realistic they can do about their circumstances

and to resolve their predicament. As a consequence, they are forced to swallow their unresolved anger and in so doing, become bitter. In our view, such cases of non-moral bitterness, which are ubiquitous, are better explained by appeal to helpless anger than to frustrated moral expectations or dashed hopes. An explanatory advantage of our account, therefore, is that it can cover both moral and non-moral cases.¹⁰

In short, we have seen that hope need not factor in bitterness at all. To reiterate, the bitter person need not have any particular attitude about the likelihood of eventual recourse, let alone one that is despairing. Our above hypothetical scenarios suggest that the core of bitterness is a feeling of a lack of resolution regarding a past wrong that forces anger to be swallowed. The matter most fundamentally preoccupying the bitter person is the wrong that has happened, its remaining unresolved, and the fact that he has to ingest it. If this is correct, bitterness does not necessarily involve hope, which many scholars have assumed. The bitter person's attention is centered on the wrong that has been inflicted on him, and while he could look for future resolutions, this is not what preoccupies him when he is bitter.

To conclude this section, we would like to consider an objection that may be raised against our characterization of Jordan, namely, that it is possible for him to be adjudicated against and thereby have unresolved and swallowed anger, yet not feel bitter. For example, using advice and techniques, say, from Stoic philosophy or popular psychology, he may reason that remaining angry at his colleagues would not only be a waste of his time and psychological resources but also damage his professional and personal relationships with them. Accordingly, he decides that he would be better off letting go of his anger so that he can maintain good relations with them. In short, the objection is that were Jordan to pursue this course of action, he would intuitively *not* be considered bitter; yet, our account seems to return a contrary verdict: By virtue of having unresolved and swallowed anger, Jordan would still as a matter of fact be characterized as bitter.¹¹

There are two ways to respond to this objection. The first is to maintain that the objection is mistaken to assume that Jordan still has unresolved and swallowed anger after employing the aforementioned advice and techniques. For example, taking a step back to look at the broader picture, Jordan may realize that his colleagues were not in fact being malicious but were instead entangled in a complex web of departmental and university politics, with his promotion case caught in the crosshairs. Feeling sorry for them instead, Jordan ceases to be angry. Given that he no longer has unresolved anger, our account, *pace* the objection, would render the same verdict that Jordan would *not* be bitter. Indeed, it would more precisely claim that Jordan was *once* bitter (due to his unresolved anger), which he later neutralized or eliminated with his later realization. The second response is to argue that Jordan *remains* bitter despite applying, say, Stoic advice and techniques. For example, he may have convinced himself that maintaining collegial relations is far more important a goal than holding a grudge. Or he may have realized that what ultimately matters is that he is promoted, however the promotion comes about. In either case, employing Stoic advice *lessened* the intensity of Jordan's bitterness from being at a dysfunctional level where he obsessed and stewed in it to one that enabled him to more or less resume his life prior to his promotion. To be sure, Jordan is still bitter but his emotion is so mild that it now has little effect on his thoughts and actions, manifesting only as a momentary unpleasant sinking feeling whenever issues of promotion come up or whenever he is reminded of his own. He may simply say or think "I'm still bitter about that" without having any intention to act on it, and leaving it at that. On this response, the objection is mistaken because it mischaracterizes Jordan as not being bitter when in fact he remains so, albeit in a faint manner.

4 | BITTERNESS AS UNRESOLVED ANGER

Against the view that bitterness is hopeless anger, we have just suggested that hope is not conceptually connected to bitterness and gestured that what is central to bitterness is not loss of hope but momentary lack of resolution and the swallowing of anger. In broad outline, our proposal is that bitterness is the emotion that arises when anger lacks opportunity for expression. Below, we will develop and defend this account of bitterness as unresolved anger.

To start, it is worth returning to the lineage of this way of thinking about bitterness, the origins of which are classical. In the *Timaeus*, Plato seems to be describing a class of emotions that include bitterness when he observes that, when the bilious humors out of which anger arises are confined within the body and lack an “external vent,” they beget diseases of the soul (86e-87a; cf. 69d). Similarly, Aristotle regards bitterness as pent-up anger, which is based on the judgment that one has been undeservedly slighted and is typically accompanied by a desire for revenge. Of especial note is that bitterness is one of the excesses of anger (*NE* 4.5, 1126a9-24; trans. Ross):

The excess can be manifested in all the points (for one can be angry with the wrong persons, at the wrong things, more than is right, too quickly, or too long) ... Sulky people are hard to appease, and retain their anger long; for they repress their passion. But it ceases when they retaliate; for revenge relieves them of their anger, producing in them pleasure instead of pain. If this does not happen, they retain their burden; for owing to its not being obvious no one even reasons with them, and to digest one's anger in oneself takes time. Such people are most troublesome to themselves and their dearest friends.

Unlike virtuous anger, which finds public expression toward the person who inflicted the insult, the bitter person keeps his anger in *privately* and for *too long*. Because his anger is hidden and buried, no one thinks to address it. The consequence is that the bitter person is left to digest his anger on his own, which, in Aristotle's estimation, “takes time.”

What emerges out of this classical way of thinking is that there is a distinctive emotion associated with pent-up anger. Our proposal is that bitterness is such an emotion. It is closely related to anger, but ultimately differs from it in being unresolved and forced back into us. As Aristotle might put it, bitterness is effectively swallowed anger. Specifically, we take bitterness to be constituted by the following elements:

1. Anger occasioned by a violation of confident moral expectation.
2. Irresolution of one's anger caused by adjudication against one's anger.
3. Sting of bitterness.

In our view, all of these elements are necessary components of bitterness. In what follows, we will elucidate them in the context of Baldwin's essay “Notes of a Native Son.”

4.1 | Anger

The first critical component of bitterness is that it starts with anger in response to the violation of one's moral expectation. In this respect, we side with Stockdale and disagree with McFall. A moral expectation posits something which an agent sees herself as being owed—something she

regards as her due. In Adrienne Martin's words, it is something to which an agent feels entitled (Martin, 2014, p. 30). Similarly, Margaret Urban Walker describes moral expectation as "a kind of presumption that is also an insistence that people live up to standards" (Walker, 2006, p. 67). Moral expectations run the gamut in degrees of presumption, including anything from feeling like others ought to show up on time to the feeling that you are owed respect or restitution for a wrong.

Importantly, we contend that the mere violation of a moral expectation may not be sufficient to produce the anger required for bitterness. In our view, the violation must also be accompanied by psychological expectation, specifically one's prediction as to whether some state of affairs will come to pass. Consider a scenario in which a person feels morally entitled to something but does not psychologically expect it. Suppose Alice has a friend, Molly, whom she morally expects to keep a particular promise. Despite this expectation, Molly has failed Alice multiple times in the past and to Alice's chagrin, is likely to fail again in this case. Alice thus lacks a psychological expectation that her friend will meet her moral expectation of keeping the promise. When Molly predictably fails Alice over and over again, we submit that such a violated moral expectation will less likely be followed by anger or the fresh sting of indignation that attends anger but more by a sad, I-wish-it-were-otherwise, disappointment. Alice, for instance, may come to realize that Molly is simply incapable of keeping a promise, perhaps in much the same way that children are incapable of meeting what is expected of them. In such a case, Alice is sorry that Molly failed to meet the promise, and will "pull for" her to keep the promise in the future.¹²

By contrast, consider a scenario in which a person feels morally entitled to something *and* psychologically expects it. Suppose now that Alice has both a moral expectation *and* a psychological expectation that Molly will keep a promise. Molly has kept her promises in the past, which is why Alice psychologically expects that the pattern will continue; Molly has demonstrated that she is in fact capable of fulfilling what is morally expected of her. As it happens, Molly fails to keep the promise and thus violates Alice's moral expectation. In the absence of a good explanation of Molly's failure, we would expect Alice to be shocked and indignant; that is, we would expect her to be *angry*. A useful way to capture the central difference in the above examples is to appeal to Walker's discussion of confident and hopeful trust. According to her, there are times when we "expect something of someone without being certain, or even being doubtful, that we can expect them to do it" (Walker, 2006, p. 64). For her, moral or normative expectations require trust, which "can be either more confident, when one relies on compliance one believes is somewhat or very likely, or more hopeful, when one relies on compliance that is possible but more uncertain" (ibid.). Borrowing this distinction, our present contention is that moral expectations that are accompanied by hopeful trust generate mere disappointment, whereas those that are accompanied by confident trust generate the relevant anger that constitutes bitterness.

4.2 | Adjudication and the irresolution of anger

While some scholars agree that anger figures centrally in bitterness (e.g., Campbell; Stockdale), they dispute the grounds on which anger evolves into bitterness. For example, Campbell locates those grounds in the failure of uptake by others, whereas Stockdale locates them in a loss of hope of redress. On our view, what causes anger to transform into bitterness is located instead in adjudication against one's anger—that is, in a final judgment of sorts that one's anger is mislaid or unjustified. Such an adjudication drives an agent's anger back into her, preventing it from being appropriately expressed. In short, it forces her to swallow the anger.

The term ‘adjudication’ connotes, among other things, a verdict or resolution—a judgment that is final, in some sense. It is the last word, so to speak. This sense of finality is how we intend to use the term. When a person’s anger has been adjudicated against, we submit that her anger is judged against with finality, delivered in a verdict as if to say: ‘It is final. Your anger is not justified.’ One argument to support our contention that adjudication is necessary to transform anger into bitterness is to consider the following scenario: Suppose a person has merely been wronged by others but claims that she is bitter. In such a case, we might plausibly wonder whether it is appropriate for her to experience such an emotion. Indeed, we will urge her first to seek ways to rectify or resolve her situation. Only when she has done so, and the verdict or resolution is unsatisfactory, is she then entitled to feel bitter. After all, the effect of such a verdict is that she has no right to be angry and ought not to be so. Thus, were she to continue to feel anger, she would have to keep it within herself and experience it privately.

Notice that adjudication in the sense that we are using it does not necessarily imply *active* judging and can also include passive forms of judgment such as complying with *x*, being reticent about resisting *x*, or neglecting to show support for *x*. Consider Baldwin’s essay as an instance of adjudication in our sense. Start by noting Baldwin’s emphasis on the unanimity of the support for Jim Crow policies in New Jersey: There was “unanimous, active, and unbearably vocal hostility” (Baldwin, 1995, p. 592); the “enmity ... of all my superiors and nearly all my co-workers” (Baldwin, 1995, p. 592); and “it was the same story all over New Jersey, in bars bowling alleys, diners, places to live” (Baldwin, 1995, p. 592); “I was always being forced to leave” (Baldwin, 1995, p. 592). On his last night in New Jersey, Baldwin recounts a story of being forced out of a diner, only to face a crowd of people in the streets, which appeared to him—despite their disparate movement—to be moving in unison against him. He explains,

... People were moving in every direction but it seemed to me, in that instant, that all of the people I could see, and many more than that, were moving towards me, against me, and that everyone was white. I remember how their faces gleamed ... I wanted to do something to crush these white faces, which were crushing me. (Baldwin, 1995, p. 593)

Baldwin’s metaphor of the sea of faces crushing him describes a sense of univocal judgment against him. From his perspective, the ‘other’ has formed a negative judgment against his anger and the justness of his complaint. Such a univocity of judgment, we contend, is one form in which adjudication against anger can be expressed. The scale of disagreement with Baldwin’s anger—the sheer number of people in the form of a sea of face—captures this sense.

Moreover, this adjudication *qua* univocity of judgment transforms Baldwin’s bitterness. It is one thing to be refused service but another to be castigated for being angry about being refused service. At this point, one can still hold out for the possibility that someone else may see it one’s way. But when a person is castigated for her anger *ubiquitously* and *unanimously*, she senses finality. This additional factor signals not only judgment on the part of the community but also reveals that the *entire* community is seemingly abiding the judgment, making it stand with a kind of finality. The community on the whole appears to be delivering the verdict as if to say: We deem it right not to serve black people. Its verdict, in short, is no service.

Two strands thus need to be teased out of the phenomenon behind the univocity of judgment against Baldwin. On the one hand, there is the fact of being *judged against*. This in and of itself can provoke anger. It is the feeling of being told you are wrong when you are sure you are in the right and of having your anger judged as inappropriate. On the other hand, there is the univocity

of judgment. This univocity does distinctive work in this scenario. Not only has Baldwin been judged against, but he has been judged against with some finality along with the implication that he should not feel this way. This second point pertains to what we call *adjudication*. We can perhaps summon the feeling by imagining ourselves in the courtroom where Jim Crow has just been decreed as correct when we know it is in fact not. Such a verdict signals that not only a judgment has been made, but that it will also stand.

4.3 | Sting of bitterness

It is important to identify the effect of having one's anger adjudicated against in the sense just described, which we will here call the *sting of bitterness*. Our view is that when a dispute is settled and the wrong side is favored, we have something like an apparent resolution. Importantly, the losing party may feel very much as if matters were not resolved, let alone resolved correctly. This lack of resolution plays a crucial role in the experience of bitterness. In our view, bitterness is not merely occasioned by anger at having been treated unjustly and at having that injustice stand after adjudication. It additionally involves a sense of lack of resolution, a sense of being burdened with unfinished business. This is what we mean by the sting of bitterness.

Turning once again to Baldwin for illustration, note that the 'verdict' against him is passed in the context of a dispute wherein one side believes it is just to refuse service whereas the other side thinks it is morally corrupt. At least in New Jersey, the dispute is effectively settled in favor of the pro-Jim Crow side. The verdict is that Baldwin's anger is inappropriate: He should neither be angry about being refused service nor have a corresponding desire for redress. Yet, Baldwin feels very much as if matters are *not* resolved. To say that he has unfinished business is to undersell the phenomenon, for Baldwin is not merely left with further work to do. Rather, he is burdened in that, in light of this verdict, he now has to carry his own anger. It feels to him as if he has to go forward with a burden and do so with an acrid taste in his mouth. This is the effect we would like to capture with the sting of bitterness, which is the weighted feeling one has when one's anger has nowhere else to go.¹³

As some scholars have noted, when an agent's legitimate claim to anger is unsatisfactorily addressed, she suffers an additional harm. For instance, in discussing moral repair, Walker draws attention to the significance of "compounding" an initial wrong¹⁴:

Failures of wrongdoers or others in a supporting community to acknowledge the fact of wrongdoing and injury, and to confirm the victims' deservingness of repair, are themselves *additional injuries* to trust and hope. These additional wounds themselves in turn create needs for acknowledgement and repair and further obligations of wrongdoers or others to respond. Thus are injustices *compounded* and histories of injury produced when wrongdoing is ignored, denied or inadequately addressed. (Walker, 2006, p. 108; our italics).

Walker's important insight here is that the neglect to acknowledge the wrong posed by an injustice damages the trust that members of a community share amongst one another, generating an additional site for moral repair. Thus, such a neglect *compounds* the original wrong. Our suggestion here is that swallowing anger constitutes an additional harm to the agent—one that goes beyond the initial harm of the violation of moral expectations.

5 | BENEFITS OF THE ACCOUNT

Why should we think of bitterness as unresolved anger? We submit the following reasons in support of this way of construing bitterness. First, notice that our account of bitterness can be derived from various strands found in contemporary accounts of bitterness. Although our assessment is that each is inadequate in explaining the emotion, they nevertheless contain important insights and can be combined to formulate a coherent view of bitterness. As remarked, Stockdale is correct to point out that bitterness, *pace* McFall, results not from disappointed hope but from violated moral expectation. Where Stockdale's account falls short is to append hopelessness to bitterness, which we have shown above is unnecessary for understanding the latter emotion. In this respect, McFall, as well as Campbell, is right to focus *not* on the bitter person's attitude with respect to prospective recourse to mitigate the injustice, but on the more proximal aspects of bitterness, such as its causes and phenomenology. In turn, McFall is mistaken to leave out anger as one of the main explanations of bitterness, whereas Campbell and Stockdale are right to anchor their accounts of bitterness around anger. Combining the strengths and removing the weaknesses of these accounts, we submit, yields the characterization of bitterness offered in this paper: Bitterness is at root a compound anger that initially responds to a violation of moral expectation and which we are subsequently forced to swallow due to an adjudication process that does not resolve the wrong. All of these elements can be found in the examples of Jordan and Baldwin, which is why they can rightly be characterized as bitter. More importantly, hope is conspicuously missing from our account because bitterness neither is caused by its disappointment nor leads to its loss.

Second, our account of bitterness enjoys advantages over other anger-based accounts. Consider Campbell's influential view. According to her, bitterness is *constituted* by a collaboration between a certain mode of expression and a certain mode of response. Specifically, a person becomes embittered when she recounts an injury where people fail to listen. As Campbell notes, bitterness "seems to be a *particular mode of expression*—one in which people no longer care to listen. Both the mode of expression and the failure of uptake combine to form bitterness" (p. 50). As such, Campbell stresses that bitterness lacks a private nature: "bitterness is more often publicly formed rather than privately formed before being revealed to others" (p. 51; cf. 47). On her view, whether someone can feel bitter or not is contingent on how others interpret our expressive behaviors.

We contend that this account can be challenged. Bitterness does not necessarily depend on the failure of others to listen. In our view, a person can be bitter *in spite of* a willingness of others to listen. Returning to the example of Jordan, suppose his colleagues later recognize that they had wronged him and decide to issue an apology. By Campbell's light, Jordan should *cease* to be bitter because there is now uptake of his complaint. Yet, it is conceivable that Jordan may well refuse to accept the apology *because* he is too bitter to do so.¹⁵ The fact that he can remain bitter when his colleagues now have 'listened and acted' suggests that the emotion is not in fact constituted by a failure of uptake. Our account of bitterness can accommodate such a possibility. On it, although bitterness is caused by a form of failure of uptake—what we have called adjudication—the emotion is not constituted by it. A person can remain bitter even if the adjudication was reversed or ameliorated, for the anger that she was forced to swallow remains inside her.

There is another way to show that bitterness may not be constituted by a failure of uptake. When Jordan initially approached his colleagues to voice his complaint, there may well be uptake in Campbell's sense in that they cared to listen to him. This fact alone, however, does not always imply that they will agree with him. Indeed, their judgment was that they had in fact acted fairly and properly. Because Jordan disagrees with their adjudication, he had no recourse but to swallow his anger, and in so doing, became bitter. A person can therefore

experience bitterness even when there is uptake by those who have wronged him. In our view, what is essential to the emotion is that the bitter person perceives that the wrong has not been satisfactorily addressed (or that she has been wrongly adjudicated against). More importantly, this can occur even if the guilty parties cared to listen and act. That our view, but not Campbell's, can accommodate the observation that bitterness can, in fact, have a private nature is an added benefit of our account.

A third advantage of our account is that it preserves the important intuition that the bitterness of socially and politically marginalized groups is morally justified, contra McFall's account, which renders such bitterness as irrational on the grounds that it is based on false and illegitimate hopes. Like Stockdale, our view is that an account of bitterness based on anger and violation of moral (and psychological) expectations can explain why members of minority groups are not irrational in being bitter in response to unjust treatment. Unlike Stockdale, however, our account does not need to appeal to hopelessness or a loss of hope to make bitterness intelligible. It suffices simply to point out that the anger need only be adjudicated against and swallowed.

Relatedly, a fourth benefit is that our account of bitterness offers novel insights on how bitterness is connected to hope and motivation. Even though Stockdale construes bitterness as hopeless anger, she does not foreclose on the possibility that bitterness can engender new hopes and have motivational force. Referring to historically disadvantaged groups such as indigenous Canadians, she notes that even if bitterness is "ill equipped" to motivate its bearers to engage in positive action, say, actively protest against colonialism, it nevertheless can be motivating. Thus, bitterness can serve as a moral reminder for *others* to listen and to act, in particular, the perpetrators of colonialism and the moral community at large. It can also recruit *other* motivating virtues and moral values that the embittered possess, like self-respect, courage, determination and integrity (pp. 374–375). Through these indirect ways, bitterness can be motivating and can help find and cultivate new hopes, such as the "the hope that oneself alongside other members of oppressed groups and those standing in solidarity will support one another in struggles against injustice" (p. 375).

In our view, bitterness indeed can be motivational in the indirect ways that Stockdale and others have described. However, we submit that bitterness can also *directly* motivate its bearers. Recall that our construal of bitterness as helpless anger does not have hope as a constitutive part. As such, when a person is merely helpless, she does not see the future as being foreclosed on and can hold out hope that some future recourse could rectify the injustice behind her anger. Her experience of helplessness is *here and now*, which does not preclude her from seeking out future avenues. Because bitterness is not necessarily debilitating for the embittered individual, the helplessly angry person could actively seek out ways or devise plans to rectify the injustice that caused her bitterness. As we noted, Jordan could *himself* take direct action by filing a complaint against his colleagues to the Chancellor or the AAUP at a later time to seek recourse to address his situation with the colleagues. Thus, if Jordan were asked why he did so (or better yet, why he was *still* pursuing the issue), he could respond by saying "Because I'm bitter. I cannot believe that others still do not see the wrong that was done to me", which reflects that his judgement that the injustice he suffered has not been satisfactorily resolved. Since irresolution is a defining aspect of the bitter person's state, she is acutely receptive to future recourse by which resolution might be achieved. Plausibly, bitterness makes someone especially poised to address the initial injustice or to notice her opportunities to do so. That bitterness has this motivational force is due to the fact, as our account insists, that bitterness need not be connected to a loss of hope. As we suggest, bitterness is compatible with hope because bitterness does not condemn its bearer to cease to actively seek out novel and creative resolutions. As such, our account makes space for bitterness's creative potential.

6 | CONCLUSION

This paper develops and defends an anger-based and hope-less account of bitterness. In particular, it argues that contrary to what some scholars have maintained, bitterness can be explained without appealing to the concept of hope, as it is neither disappointed hope nor hopeless anger. Instead, we propose that bitterness is *unresolved anger*, an emotion we experience when a lack of resolution to our violated moral expectations forces us to swallow our anger. In our view, construing the emotion this way more accurately captures instances of bitterness and is more explanatorily adequate than competing accounts. No doubt much more work is needed to flesh out the account presently on offer. Little, for example, has been said about the conditions under which bitterness is justified or rational, or about the appropriateness of evaluative claims directed at bitter individuals or groups. These queries must be reserved for a later occasion. Instead, our efforts here have primarily been to unearth the nature of bitterness, which we hope to have advanced the literature in constructive and helpful ways.

We would like to thank three anonymous referees for the Journal of Social Philosophy for their helpful and constructive comments.

ORCID

Jack M. C. Kwong  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0171-0568>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See also Milona (2019, section 6.2) for an alternative pessimism-based view of how there can be bitterness without hope.
- ² It is worth noting that this paper is principally interested in bitterness as an emotion, as opposed to a character trait. We assume that a bitter person is someone who is *disposed* to experience the emotion of bitterness, which we argue below is an unresolved and helpless anger.
- ³ This is not to deny, of course, that these accounts lack a backward component. Indeed, Campbell, McFall and Stockdale also discuss bitterness in the context of unresolved events in the past.
- ⁴ See Milona for a survey of recent accounts of hope (Milona, 2020).
- ⁵ See McFall's discussion of the distinction between cynical and bitter persons (p. 147).
- ⁶ It is important to point out that Stockdale's notion of hopeless anger admits of a loss of hope in varying degrees, not just complete hopelessness and despair.
- ⁷ As we will soon elaborate, the fact that Jordan's colleagues did not countenance the legitimacy of his concerns, which is an adjudication against Jordan, is a necessary condition for his feeling bitter on our account. Jordan's initial anger at his colleagues' imposition of an arbitrary requirement in considering his promotion need not turn into bitterness if he decided that raising this issue up with them would irreparably damage his future working relationships with them. In such a case, Jordan could simply be characterized as being angry, which emotion he decided to hide for the above personal reason. In our view, bitterness is a different kind of swallowed anger; in Jordan's case, it is anger that remains after he has been adjudicated against.
- ⁸ It is worth noting that a person can also be bitter *and* experience hopelessness. For example, following Stockdale, she may lose hope that the moral wrong will be sufficiently acknowledged and addressed. However, the important difference is that on our account, the person is not bitter *because* she experiences hopelessness in addition to anger. That is, lack of hope is not needed to explain bitterness. Rather, our view is that bitterness can be understood *solely* in terms of anger.
- ⁹ To be clear, both Stockdale and we construe bitterness as a form of unresolved anger. Where our views differ is that she thinks that bitterness is further constituted by a loss of hope, whereas we think that bitterness is

further constituted by helplessness. To reiterate, our suggestion is that bitterness can be explained without recourse to hope (or its lack thereof).

- ¹⁰ We would like to thank an anonymous referee for raising this suggestion and for the example.
- ¹¹ We would like to thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection.
- ¹² On the theme of hope as ‘pulling for’ see Walker (2006, p. 69), cf. 45.
- ¹³ It is instructive here to contrast bitterness with a close relative—namely, resentment. Unlike bitterness, resentment is something that can be outwardly expressed. We ‘show’ our resentment and wear it on our sleeves. By contrast, bitterness is *kept within*.
- ¹⁴ See the important footnote on p. 108 of Walker (2006) which addresses “second injury” and “second wound” in the empirical literature.
- ¹⁵ Interestingly, this point suggests that Campbell may be mistaken to think that the bitter person is condemned by people who no longer care to listen. In some cases of bitterness, such as the modified Jordan example, it is in fact the bitter person who condemns those who have wronged her.

REFERENCES

- Baldwin, James. 1995. *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Burrow, Sylvia. 2005. “The Political Structure of Emotional: From Dismissal to Dialogue.” *Hypatia* 20(4): 27–43.
- Campbell, Sue. 1994. “Being Dismissed: The Politics of Emotional Expressions.” *Hypatia* 9(3): 46–65.
- Martin, Adrienne. 2014. *How We Hope*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- McFall, Lynne. 1991. “What’s Wrong With Bitterness?” In *Feminist Ethics*, edited by Claudia Card, 146–160. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Meyers, Diana Tietjens. 2004. *Being Yourself: Essays on Identity, Action, and Social Life*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Milona, Michael. 2019. “Finding Hope.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49(5): 710–29.
- Milona, Michael. 2020. *Philosophy of Hope in Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*. Edited by Steven C. Van den Heuvel, 99–116. Spring International Publishing.
- Stockdale, Katie. 2017. “Losing Hope: Injustice and Moral Bitterness.” *Hypatia* 10(10): 1–17.
- Walker, Margaret Urban. 2006. *Moral Repair*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Anna Cremaldi is currently an associate professor of philosophy at Appalachian State University. Cremaldi’s research is on ancient ethics and contemporary virtue ethics, with a particular focus on the virtue of generosity. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Ratio* and *the British Journal of Aesthetics*.

Jack M. C. Kwong is professor of philosophy at Appalachian State University. His current research interests concern the topics of hope, and the nature of open-mindedness. Kwong’s work has appeared in such journals as the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *European Journal of Philosophy*, and *Synthese*.

How to cite this article: Cremaldi A, Kwong JMC. Bitterness without hope. *Journal of Social Philosophy*. 2022;00:1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12455>