

# The Red Mist

Maxime Lepoutre  
University of Reading

Forthcoming at *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*

## 1. Introduction

In her 2018 autobiography, *Rage Becomes Her*, Soraya Chemaly memorably recalls one of the first times she experienced sexual harassment:

In cases like these, I usually freeze—like many of us do. My brain and heart race to determine *the nature of the risk* and calibrate my response. However, on the day when I was fourteen, and the man grabbed my arm, I didn't freeze; I punched him hard in his windpipe. This was my first memory of *blinding visceral rage* in these circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

Chemaly's rage at the harasser exemplifies a central feature of anger: namely, that anger often comes at an epistemic cost. Her anger, indeed, is experienced as "blinding." And it blinds her, more specifically, by distracting her from the "risks" involved in lashing out. In everyday life, we have a term for this epistemic cost of anger: we call it the "red mist."

The idea that anger gives rise to a red mist constitutes one of the most longstanding objections to this emotion. Seneca, for instance, condemns anger on the grounds that it seems to involve a "departure from sanity," which "does not disturb the mind so much as take it by force."<sup>2</sup> More recently, evidence from experimental psychology has reignited these epistemic concerns. Drawing on this evidence, Glen Pettigrove pessimistically concludes that anger "adversely affect[s] judgment."<sup>3</sup>

To critics such as these, anger's red mist is concerning for two related reasons. First, and most obviously, it suggests that anger might be detrimental to knowledge, especially knowledge of what risks one faces. Second, *because* of this epistemic deficiency, anger may lead to bad consequences. Chemaly's furious response to being harassed, for example, might have led to a catastrophic escalation of the situation.

Some are unfazed by this concern. Defenders of anger commonly observe that, even if anger comes at an epistemic cost, it also yields significant epistemic benefits.

---

<sup>1</sup> Soraya Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 122, emphases added.

<sup>2</sup> Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays*, ed. John Cooper and J.F. Procope (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), iii.1.

<sup>3</sup> Glen Pettigrove, 'Meekness and "Moral" Anger', *Ethics* 122, (2012): 361; see also Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 38.

In particular, anger highlights injustices that may otherwise have been overlooked.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, partly *because* it highlights injustices, anger often motivates actions of opposition to injustice that may result in good, rather than bad, consequences.

I am sympathetic to this response. But it is nevertheless limited in two important ways. First, absent further development, this response does not establish that anger is epistemically good, overall. *Perhaps* the epistemic benefits of anger outweigh its epistemic costs. But the opposite could conceivably be true. This, in fact, is typically what critics such as Seneca or Pettigrove believe. So, this response is unlikely to convince those who take issue with anger's epistemic costs.

However, there is a second and more fundamental problem. The problem is that this response leaves unchallenged the critics' central assumption: namely, that the epistemic costs of anger are necessarily a bad thing. Chemaly's testimony is intriguing, not just because it highlights anger's epistemic cost—its blinding red mist—but also, crucially, because it suggests that this cost has moral value. The red mist enables her to take a stand against an injustice, in a way that protects her sense of dignity and self-respect.

It is this suggestion that I wish to articulate and develop here. I will argue that the epistemic costs of anger are intimately bound up with one of its core moral benefits. Specifically, the red mist contributes to protecting the dignity and self-respect of those who experience it. Thus, anger is useful not just because of the knowledge that it facilitates, but also because of the knowledge that it prevents.

To be clear, this argument does not purport to show that the red mist is always a morally good thing, overall. In fact, I will highlight a number of circumstances where it is not. But it nevertheless establishes something important. It shows that it is far more difficult to move from the epistemic costs of anger to a moral rejection of this emotion than critics have usually supposed. This is for two reasons. First, my argument reveals an overlooked moral benefit of anger, which we must weigh against anger's epistemic costs. Second, this moral benefit is significant, because it pertains to the enjoyment of a fundamental good: namely, self-respect.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 defines anger, and clarifies the nature of its epistemic benefits and costs. In particular, it underscores what is perhaps anger's most central epistemic cost: that anger makes risk less visible to the angry person. Next, Section 3 argues that the perception of certain forms of risk can be deeply harmful to self-respect. Putting these two conclusions together, Section 4 demonstrates that anger's red mist contributes meaningfully to protecting the self-respect of those who live under certain forms of risk. Lastly, Section 5 qualifies this argument by considering more closely a) the conditions under which the red mist protects self-respect, b) the extent to which this protective role could be performed by other emotions than anger, and finally, c) whether this role comes at too high a price.

---

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Audre Lorde, 'The Uses of Anger', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 25 (1997): 278; Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality* (Trumansburg: The Crossing Press, 1983), chap. 5; Maxime Lepoutre, *Democratic Speech in Divided Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), chap. 2.

## 2. The Epistemic Costs of Anger

What is anger? Like all emotions, anger is a state characterized first of all by a physiological dimension. In other words, anger is associated with certain bodily feelings.<sup>5</sup> For example, anger can make our skin feel hot, our heart race, our breath quicken, our voice tremble, etc.

Anger also possesses a motivational dimension. Feeling angry typically involves being moved to do something. The angry person is disposed, in some broad sense, to act against the object of their anger. Since anger's natural object is injustice or wrongdoing, this means that anger characteristically involves a motivation to oppose what we perceive to be injustices or wrongdoings.<sup>6</sup>

But anger, crucially, is not merely a physiological and a motivational state. It is also a cognitive state, in that it modifies the way we represent the world around us. How, exactly, does anger alter our representations?

To answer this question, we need to step back and consider how emotions in general affect our representations. The answer, in short, is that emotions are sources of salience. As philosophers have widely argued, emotions highlight particular features of our environment, and focus our attention on them.<sup>7</sup> This salience role is absolutely essential to our cognition. We typically inhabit immensely complex environments that bombard us with information. By selecting some features, and making them salient to us, emotions allow us better to navigate the world, and to make sense of it.

Different emotions can be distinguished, in part, based on what they make salient to us. Grief makes loss more visible to us. Hope highlights reasons to be optimistic about our aims and projects. As for fear, it makes salient potential sources of danger. As Elgin observes, for instance, if I am afraid as I walk home at night, and I hear footsteps behind me, my attention will naturally be drawn to the features of this situation that could make it dangerous.<sup>8</sup>

What, then, does *anger* make salient to us? If fear represents the world around us as dangerous, anger, by contrast, represents it as unjust.<sup>9</sup> So anger, as a source of salience, highlights possible sources of injustice or wrongdoing.

This, to anger's defenders, is undoubtedly its most important epistemic benefit. In non-ideal social and political settings, injustices are not always plainly visible. For example, political elites sometimes deploy spurious ideologies to make injustices appear morally legitimate (as, say, when the ideal of meritocracy is used to rationalize

---

<sup>5</sup> Julien Deonna and Fabrice Teroni, *The Emotions* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Martha Nussbaum, 'Transitional Anger', *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1 (2015): 45–48; Macalester Bell, 'Anger, Virtue, and Oppression', in *Feminist Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy* (London: Springer, 2009), 168–69. Some philosophers refer to the emotion I am describing as "moral" anger, while allowing that some "non-moral" forms of anger (e.g., frustration) can have objects other than injustice or wrongdoing. See Pettigrove, 'Meekness and "Moral" Anger', 357–58.

<sup>7</sup> On the salience role of emotions, see Catherine Elgin, 'Emotion and Understanding', in *Epistemology and Emotions*, ed. Georg Brun, Ulvi Doguoglu, and Dominique Kuenzle (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), 43–46.

<sup>8</sup> Elgin, 'Emotion and Understanding', 43–44.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, 85–86; Amia Srinivasan, 'The Aptness of Anger', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 126 (2018): 128–29; Agnes Callard, 'The Reason to Be Angry Forever', in *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, ed., Myisha Cherry and Celine Leboeuf (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 15–30.

what are in fact deeply unjust inequalities). In settings such as these, the experience of anger is helpful because, to use Audre Lorde’s memorable phrase, it casts a “spotlight” on wrongs that may otherwise have been overlooked.<sup>10</sup> Thus, so long as we live in societies that contain grave injustices, as well as epistemic obstacles that make it difficult to fully recognize these injustices, anger’s salience function constitutes an important consideration in its favour.

This epistemic argument for anger does require some qualification. In particular, it requires distinguishing between warranted (or rational) anger, and unwarranted (or irrational) anger.<sup>11</sup> At least two conditions must be satisfied for anger to be warranted. First, anger is warranted only if the object or situation it is directed at actually involves an injustice or moral wrong. If I am angry that you broke your promise to me, but you did not in fact break your promise, then my anger is unwarranted and irrational.

The second factor has to do with intensity. Anger can vary in intensity. It can take mild and non-violent forms, such as minor irritation or moderate indignation. But it can also be far more intense, as exemplified by Chemaly’s violent rage at the sexual harasser. Intense anger is not necessarily unwarranted or irrational. Rather, what is crucial, as Lee McBride III notes, is that anger must be proportionate to the severity of the injustice it is responding to.<sup>12</sup> Thus rage may be a rational response to grave injustices, such as slavery. But it is obviously not a fitting response to a minor moral violation, such as your forgetting to return my favourite book. Conversely, minor irritation is not a warranted or rational response to the grave injustice of slavery.

What does this mean for anger’s epistemic value? Defenders of anger generally agree that, for anger to be epistemically valuable, it must be warranted or rational.<sup>13</sup> When anger is unwarranted or irrational—e.g., when it is directed at a situation devoid of injustice, or when it is disproportionate relative to how severe injustices are—it tends to lack epistemic value. Indeed, unwarranted anger highlights injustices where there are none, or fixes our attention on injustices to a greater degree than is justified by their severity.

But, even with this qualification, critics of anger insist that it faces a deeper problem: even when anger *is* warranted or rational, it still comes at an important epistemic cost. This is the flipside of anger’s salience role. Salience is always a comparative matter. When we highlight something, we also necessarily place other things in the background of our vision. The upshot for (warranted) anger is that it makes injustices visible, but only at the expense of making other things less visible. To put this slightly differently: the fact that anger performs an epistemically valuable

---

<sup>10</sup> Lorde, ‘The Uses of Anger’, 278. See also Lepoutre, *Democratic Speech in Divided Times*, chap.2.

<sup>11</sup> I will be using the terms “warranted anger” and “rational anger” interchangeably.

<sup>12</sup> Lee McBride III, ‘Anger and Approbation,’ in *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, ed. Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 5-6. See also Zac Cogley, ‘A study of virtuous and vicious anger.’ In: *Virtues and their Vices*, eds. Kevin Timpe and Craig Boyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 202-03. These two conditions are necessary for anger to be warranted. But they are not intended to be sufficient. For further ways in which anger can go wrong, see, e.g., McBride, ‘Anger and Approbation,’ 5.

<sup>13</sup> Srinivasan, ‘The Aptness of Anger’, 130–33.

salience function partly explains why, as we saw in the Introduction, anger also involves an epistemically costly “red mist.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet the problem is not simply that anger’s salience function comes at an epistemic cost. It is, in addition, that *the more* anger draws our attention to injustices, *the more* it draws our attention away from other things. Intense rage fixes our attention on perceived injustices more strongly than mild indignation would. But this same increased fixation also means that, when we are full of rage, we ignore more things, and ignore them more completely, than when we are mildly indignant.

So, despite (warranted) anger’s clear epistemic benefits, it is difficult to argue that it is all-things-considered epistemically valuable. The epistemic benefits of anger entail epistemic costs; and when its epistemic benefits increase, the epistemic costs are likely to do so too.

The foregoing concerns about the epistemic costs of anger are not mere theoretical conjecture. Experimental psychologists have widely corroborated the proposition that anger makes some things less visible to the angry person. What is more, they have made this proposition more specific, by identifying precisely *what* anger’s red mist tends to make less visible to us. The most consistent result is that experiencing anger makes *risk*—understood as the possibility that a negative consequence will occur—less salient to those who are angry.<sup>15</sup>

Current experimental psychology suggests that there are two principal ways in which anger tends to suppress our perceptions of risk. First, anger can make the probability of a bad outcome less salient to us. Put differently, experiencing anger can make us judge that a bad outcome is less likely to arise than we would otherwise think.<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, anger can make the *badness* of a possible bad outcome less salient. Here, the issue is not that anger makes us underestimate the likelihood of the outcome. Rather, it is that anger makes us underestimate how problematic it would be if it took place.<sup>17</sup> Either way, experimental results strongly suggest that anger’s red mist makes us less attentive to the risks we are exposed to than we would normally be.

But we needn’t rely exclusively on the theoretical accounts provided by philosophers, nor on experimental studies taking place in non-political contexts, for the insight that anger can suppress our attentiveness to risk. Indeed, this insight is also

---

<sup>14</sup> In ordinary usage, the term “red mist” is commonly used to refer to the epistemic costs associated with very intense forms of anger (e.g., blinding rage). It is worth highlighting that, here, I am using the term “red mist” more broadly, to refer to anger’s epistemically costly tendency to conceal risk. As the evidence from experimental psychology discussed below shows, this epistemic cost applies not just to very intense anger, but to milder forms of anger as well. However, in practice my emphasis will be on cases of intense anger (e.g., Chemaly’s rage). This is because these are the cases where the risk-related epistemic costs of anger are greatest, and where, therefore, the self-respect protecting function I am discussing is most clearly exemplified. Thus, even though I take the “red mist” to be a feature of anger generally, my account will focus predominantly on a particularly intense subset of cases involving the red mist. I am grateful to a reviewer for pressing me to clarify this.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Jennifer Lerner and Dacher Keltner, ‘Fear, Anger, and Risk’, *Journal of Personal and Social Psychology* 81 (2001): 146–59; Scott Hemenover and Shen Zhang, ‘Anger, Personality, and Optimistic Stress Appraisals’, *Cognition and Emotion* 18 (2004): 363–82; Elisa Gambetti and Fiorella Giusberti, ‘Dispositional Anger and Risk Decision-Making’, *Mind & Society* 8 (2009): 7–20.

<sup>16</sup> Lerner and Keltner, ‘Fear, Anger, and Risk’, 154.

<sup>17</sup> Hemenover and Zhang, ‘Anger, Personality, and Optimistic Stress Appraisals’, 370; Gambetti and Giusberti, ‘Dispositional Anger and Risk Decision-Making’, 14.

familiar from the testimony of political actors, when they express or report on their anger. Chemaly, recall, explicitly notes that when she experienced rage towards the man who harassed her, that intense anger short-circuited her usual assessment of risk. Nor is Chemaly's case unusual. As we will see in greater detail in Section 4, the anti-slavery abolitionist Frederick Douglass once observed that, when his fury boiled over, he found himself acting "heedless of consequences".<sup>18</sup>

We could readily add to these examples. But what leaves no doubt is that, just as critics of anger suggest, anger—and intense anger in particular—comes with an unmistakable epistemic cost. Anger diminishes or suppresses our perceptions of risk. And it does so, not just in carefully controlled experimental settings, but also in real-world political environments where the stakes are high.

### 3. Feeling At Risk

In this section, and the following, I want to suggest that this epistemic cost of anger nevertheless plays a positive and important moral function. Specifically, it helps to protect the self-respect, or dignity,<sup>19</sup> of those who are subjected to risk.

To see why, we first need to examine why feeling at risk might be detrimental to self-respect. Self-respect, as I am understanding this notion, consists in one's sense of oneself as having a basic and equal moral standing, in virtue of which one is owed respect.<sup>20</sup> Why might feeling at risk impair self-respect, thus understood?

The first thing to note is that *not all* risk impairs self-respect. To begin, some risks are voluntarily pursued or chosen because people find them exciting (e.g., the risks associated with extreme sports). Experiencing chosen risks such as these seems intuitively unproblematic for one's sense of moral worth.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, not all categories of unchosen risk are problematic for self-respect. Suppose I love the feeling of riding a motorcycle at full speed, but would prefer if this activity were not so risky. In this case, the experience of risk attached to riding my motorcycle is, in an important sense, unchosen: I perform the activity *despite* the risk. Still, it seems unclear why exposure to this risk would diminish my sense that I am owed respect in virtue of my basic moral standing.

My argument here will therefore be restricted to a specific category of risk, that is particularly salient in non-ideal conditions: risk that sustains or consolidates injustice ("injustice-sustaining risk"). Real-world politics is non-ideal not only because it involves grave injustices, but also because attempts at dismantling those injustices are often risky. Chemaly's story vividly exemplifies this kind of risk: standing up to unjust sexual harassment exposes Chemaly to the risk of backlash or violent escalation.

---

<sup>18</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1855), 104.

<sup>19</sup> I am using the terms "self-respect" and "dignity" interchangeably here.

<sup>20</sup> I am drawing on Robin Dillon's influential characterization of self-respect (in Robin Dillon, 'Respect', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018). Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/respect/>). For other characterizations that emphasize the importance of recognizing one's moral equality, see also Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 98; and Macalester Bell ('Against Simple Removal', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2021): 7).

<sup>21</sup> John Tomasi, *Free Market Fairness* (Princeton: Princeton, 2012), 80; Alice Baderin and Lucy Barnes, 'Risk and Self-Respect', *British Journal of Political Science* 50 (2020): 1430–32.

Likewise, as Davin Phoenix argues, if a person of colour acts out against racial injustice in the US, “[they] risk being labelled a threat, targeted, monitored, and brought down by agents of the system [they] challenge.”<sup>22</sup>

This injustice-sustaining risk threatens to impair self-respect via two mechanisms. First, perceiving such risks can deter actions aimed at opposing injustices. If taking a stand against injustice exposes me to severe violence, I may simply decide *not* to act. Chemaly is explicit about this. Awareness of risk, she suggests, normally leads her to “calibrate her response.” In practice, she later indicates, this means that she, like many other women, often ends up “biting her tongue” when faced with unjust harassment.<sup>23</sup>

This matters, because acts of opposition to injustice are intimately bound up with the preservation of self-respect. To see this, consider first that injustice has an expressive dimension. In her influential analysis of speech-acts, Mary Kate McGowan observes that an action typically presupposes its own appropriateness.<sup>24</sup> What this means is that injustices, and the actions that sustain them, express their own appropriateness. When a group violates the rights of another, for instance, that violation expresses, by presupposing it, the proposition that this group may appropriately be violated in this way. More generally, then, injustices express disregard for the moral standing of their targets.

This has an important implication for acts of resistance to injustice. If injustice expresses disregard for the moral status of its targets, acts of resistance by contrast express the rejection of this proposition. In other words, the act of resisting injustice helps to reaffirm one’s equal moral standing when one has been wronged. Hence, Tommie Shelby concludes that “we surrender or sacrifice our self-respect when we acquiesce to mistreatment or when we suffer indignities in silence.”<sup>25</sup>

My point here is not that perceiving injustice-sustaining risks will *always* deter actions aimed at opposing the relevant injustices. As we will see in Section 5, it is possible to recognize such risks and nevertheless take action. But injustice-sustaining risk nevertheless makes such actions less likely. The risk, for example, that one will be subjected to a violent backlash creates strong pressure not to take a stand against an injustice one has suffered. Some may be able to withstand this pressure. But many others are likely to respond (as Chemaly notes) by “biting their tongue.” Insofar as this is the case, injustice-sustaining risk poses a threat to self-respect.

So far, my argument has been that perceiving injustice-sustaining risk threatens self-respect indirectly, via its deterrent effect on action. But this category of risk also poses a second, and arguably more direct, threat to self-respect. Independently of its impact on action, the existence of risks that sustain injustices can *aggravate* the demeaning message conveyed by those injustices.<sup>26</sup>

Take, once more, the case of sexual harassment. Acts of sexual harassment already express a degrading attitude—e.g., the attitude that it is permissible to treat women as

---

<sup>22</sup> Davin Phoenix, *The Anger Gap* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 17.

<sup>23</sup> Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, 128.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Kate McGowan, *Just Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 140.

<sup>25</sup> Shelby, *Dark Ghettos*, 99.

<sup>26</sup> For the idea that the existence of risk might express a degrading message, see, e.g., Baderin and Barnes, ‘Risk and Self-Respect,’ 1424.

mere sexual objects. But the fact that women who resist such harassment risk incurring verbal or physical violence *adds* to this degrading message. It sends the message, not only that women may permissibly be treated as sexual objects, but that—in addition—they have no right to protest against, or otherwise oppose, this treatment. Awareness of this risk therefore exacerbates the original insult faced by victims of sexual harassment—and with it, the potential damage to their sense of self-worth. This is once more explicit in Chemaly’s testimony. The experience of such risk, she suggests, “is how we come to accept the harsh fact of our violability.”<sup>27</sup>

Let us take stock. I have argued that perceiving injustice-sustaining risk threatens self-respect in two ways. For one thing, it makes it more difficult—and so, less likely—that one will act against injustices to which one is subjected. From the perspective of self-respect, this matters because taking a stand against injustices is a crucial way of reasserting one’s basic moral standing. Yet perceiving risk is a problem even for those who do take action. This is because injustice-sustaining risk exacerbates the demeaning message associated with the injustices it consolidates—not least, by denying one’s moral entitlement to protest or resist those injustices. Thus, to be aware, not just of an injustice, but also of the risk that sustains it, is to be aware of even greater disregard for one’s moral status.

#### 4. The Red Mist and Self-Respect

We can now appreciate a significant value associated with anger’s epistemic cost, or red mist. Perceiving that we live under risk (in particular, injustice-sustaining risk) can pose a deep threat to our self-respect. But, importantly, we have also seen that anger’s red mist makes risk less visible to us. Putting these two conclusions together, the upshot seems to be that anger’s red mist helps the angry person maintain or recover their sense of self-respect.<sup>28</sup>

It does so, more specifically, by blocking the two expressive mechanisms through which the perception of risk assaults our sense of dignity. First, we have seen that risk can exacerbate the disrespectful message associated with injustices. By concealing risk,

---

<sup>27</sup> Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, 123. Note that perceiving this exacerbated message of disrespect can aggravate the injury to one’s self-respect in at least two complementary ways. In the first place, simply *understanding* the disrespectful message associated with injustice-sustaining risk is hurtful. Indeed, it is hurtful to realize, via that understanding, that others do not respect one’s basic moral standing (and more specifically, one’s right to stand up to injustice). But there is arguably a second and deeper possible harm to self-respect. In some cases, as the Chemaly quote suggests, perceiving the exacerbated message of disrespect associated with injustice-sustaining risk is hurtful because it leads to some degree of *acceptance* of that message. This second mechanism may not obtain in all cases: there may be cases where one perceives the risk-induced message of disrespect yet does not accept this message to any degree. Nevertheless, it is a possible further harmful consequence associated with registering the exacerbated message of disrespect. I am grateful to a reviewer for helping me clarify this distinction.

<sup>28</sup> The claim that anger can protect self-respect can also be found in Bell, ‘Anger, Virtue, and Oppression’, 168; McBride, ‘Anger and Approbation,’ 9. My argument develops this argument in two significant ways. First, it explains in greater detail *why* anger protects self-respect. Second, it shows that this benefit supervenes on what is typically considered a negative feature of anger: namely, its epistemic cost.



the red mist shields us from experiencing this added insult. Second, insofar as the red mist blinds us to the risks we face, it diminishes our sense of vulnerability—which, for many of us, makes it more likely that we will take action against injustices we face, and thereby reassert our dignity. So, the red mist both helps to reduce our exposure to a degrading message, *and* facilitates a dignifying counter-message. By suspending her consideration of risk, for example, Chemaly’s “blinding visceral rage” simultaneously shields her from its degrading message (as a symbol of her “violability”) and emboldens her to fight back, and thereby reassert her dignity.

Now, for any purported benefit of anger, we can ask: “How important is this benefit?” I wish to suggest that, in the case of the red mist’s self-respect protecting function, the answer is “Very important.”

The first reason is simply that self-respect is of great moral significance. Indeed, possessing a sense of oneself as a moral equal, who is owed respect, is crucial to living a good and meaningful life. In his influential discussion of self-respect, Shelby suggests as much. He takes self-respect to be an “intrinsic” good, without which one is bound to live “an impoverished life.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, for Shelby, it is often worth sacrificing material gain, and other important ingredients of one’s welfare, to maintain one’s self-respect.<sup>30</sup>

This is by no means an unusual view. As Robin Dillon observes, there is “surprising agreement among moral and political philosophers” that self-respect is “essential to the ability to live a satisfying, meaningful, flourishing life—a life worth living”.<sup>31</sup> Nor does this value depend on having a particular or idiosyncratic conception of what constitutes a good and meaningful life. Rawls, for instance, famously argues that self-respect is a “primary good” (“perhaps the most important primary good” there is).<sup>32</sup> In other words, it is something that one has reason to want, and without which it may be difficult to live a good and meaningful life, whatever one’s conception of the good and meaningful life may be.

The second reason why the function at hand constitutes an important benefit has to do with frequency: not only does this function protect something that is of great moral significance, but it *often* protects it.

As we saw in Section 3, the experience of risk is especially likely to impair self-respect in cases where risk sustains injustices. Now, crucially, these cases are very common in non-ideal conditions: oppressed groups often find themselves in tragic situations where, on the one hand, they are subjected to grave injustices; and, on the other hand, it is extremely risky to take action against these injustices.<sup>33</sup> Standing up

---

<sup>29</sup> Shelby, *Dark Ghettos*, 99-100.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. To say that self-respect is crucial to living a good and meaningful life does not imply that the value of self-respect reduces to its contribution to welfare and well-being. As Susan Wolf argues, what makes life meaningful is not reducible to considerations of well-being. See Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1-7.

<sup>31</sup> Robin Dillon, ‘Respect,’ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018). Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/respect/>, sect. 4. As Dillon also notes, self-respect may be valuable in ways that go beyond its place in a meaningful and good life. According to Kant, for instance, there is a *moral duty* to respect oneself. While I am sympathetic to this view, the existence of self-regarding duties is controversial. Accordingly, my argument will not depend on accepting it.

<sup>32</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice—Revised Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 386.

<sup>33</sup> Edmund Flanigan, ‘From Self-Defense to Violent Protest,’ *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (2021): 9.

to sexual harassment, for example, often comes with a risk of escalation. Likewise, protesting or rioting against police violence itself often involves a risk of subjection to police violence. Thus, there is reason to think that, in the real world, anger's red mist can frequently help to preserve self-respect: it offers protection against a threat that is rife in non-ideal conditions.

Even so, for all that I have said about the value of anger's red mist in non-ideal circumstances, this defence might still seem overly abstract. After all, I have so far only provided one concrete example of this value—namely, Chemaly's rage towards her harasser. To further illustrate this account, and provide a more concrete sense of the red mist's importance in non-ideal settings, I therefore wish to conclude this section by demonstrating how it makes sense of a further piece of testimony—Frederick Douglass's famous recollection of when, still a slave, he finally fought back against the slave-breaker Covey:

Whence came the daring spirit necessary to grapple with a man who, eight-and-forty hours before, could with his slightest word have made me tremble like a leaf in a storm, I do not know [...] The *fighting madness* had come upon me, and I found my strong fingers firmly attached to the throat of my cowardly tormentor; as *heedless of consequences*, at the moment, as though we *stood as equals* before the law [...] Well, my dear reader, this battle with Mr. Covey—undignified as it was, and as I fear my narration of it is—was the turning point of my “life as a slave.” [...] *It recalled to life my crushed self-respect* and inspired me with a renewed determination to be A Freeman. A man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity.<sup>34</sup>

Douglass's testimony leaves no doubt that this episode restored his “dignity” and “self-respect”. How did it do so? The answer revolves crucially around anger and risk perception. Douglass's blinding rage (his “fighting madness”) left him acting “heedless of consequences.” And this inattentiveness to risk in turn helped resurrect Douglass's self-respect in two ways: first, by allowing him to regard himself as Covey's equal in standing (indeed, Douglass overtly associates the perceived absence of consequences with a sense of equal status); and second, by emboldening him to fight back against his oppressor (where previously, he would have “tremble[d] like a leaf in a storm”). So, in Douglass's testimony, we have another remarkably vivid account of how anger's red mist can play an indispensable role—by concealing the degrading status symbolism associated with risk; and by emboldening him to act out against injustice—in protecting self-respect.

I have argued that the epistemic cost of anger can play a morally valuable function, and that this function is of great significance in non-ideal circumstances such as our own. The core upshot is that, to defend anger, we do not necessarily need to show that the epistemic benefits of anger outweigh its epistemic costs. Because the epistemic costs of anger can perform a morally valuable function, it is at best an open question

---

<sup>34</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 103–6, emphasis added.

(to which I return in the next section) whether, overall, they constitute a bad thing for anger.

## 5. The Limits of the Red Mist

None of this means that the value of anger's red mist is without limits. To clarify my argument, the rest of this paper will examine more closely under what conditions anger's red mist protects self-respect; whether it is necessary to protect self-respect; and whether, even if it is necessary, it nonetheless comes at too high a cost.

Let us start with the circumstances under which anger's red mist helps to protect self-respect. One might worry that my account of the red mist's value overgenerates—in other words, that it lends support to intuitively unacceptable instances of anger. Consider a white supremacist who experiences violent rage directed at people of colour, and who lives in a society that legislates strongly against hate crimes. This legislation clearly imposes a risk: anyone who performs a hate crime faces lengthy incarceration. And this risk may well deter the white supremacist from acting as they otherwise would. At first sight, my account of the red mist's value might seem to have an implausible implication in this case: it might seem to imply that the white supremacist's rage is a good thing, because the epistemic costs associated with that rage conceal risks, and thereby protect the white supremacist's self-respect.

In fact, my argument for the red mist's value does not extend to the white supremacist, for two reasons. The first is that, in this case, perceiving risk needn't undermine self-respect. My argument, recall, centres on risk *that sustains injustice*. But the risk to which the white supremacist is subjected does not sustain injustice—rather, it serves to uphold justice. This makes a crucial expressive difference. As discussed in Section 3, unjust actions and states of affairs implicate the moral inferiority and violability of their targets. By contrast, just actions and states of affairs express the opposite message. They express a message of fundamental moral equality.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the risks imposed by hate crime legislation express the idea that no one—not the white supremacist, nor their intended victim—should be harmed due to their race, ethnicity, etc. Insofar as this risk expresses the equal moral standing of all, its visibility seems protective of—not detrimental to—self-respect. My analysis therefore does not imply that the white supremacist's rage protects self-respect: their red mist conceals, not a disrespectful message, but rather a message of universal and equal dignity.

Second, even if the white supremacist's red mist *did* contribute to maintaining their self-respect, it would still not follow that it is good overall, or indeed that it is morally equivalent to Chemaly's or Douglass's red mist. This is because this (alleged) benefit would arguably be overridden by countervailing moral costs. For one thing, the white supremacist's red mist is constantly conjoined with an attitude of profound disrespect towards others. That is, their anger is premised on the perception that racial minorities are inferior. Moreover, the white supremacist's red mist is likely to motivate them to act in support of unjust and oppressive norms. This is in stark contrast to Chemaly

---

<sup>35</sup> For discussion in the context of anti-discrimination law, see Elizabeth Anderson and Richard Pildes, 'Expressive Theories of Law', *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 148 (2000): 1503–75.

and Douglass, whose anger emboldens them to *challenge* oppressive norms. Since both factors—the disrespectful attitude; and the oppressive actions—have great moral disvalue, the white supremacist’s red mist seems overall bad in this case *even if* we assume (for the sake of argument) that it would preserve their self-respect.

But even with qualification, my argument for the value of anger’s red mist might still seem overstated. Even where people *are* subjected to risks that consolidate grave injustices, anger may not seem necessary to preserve their self-respect. To insist that it is necessary would imply that political figures such as Mohandas Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King—who spearheaded struggles against injustice but are often regarded as having repudiated anger<sup>36</sup>—lacked self-respect. Yet this seems clearly false.

Strictly speaking, this observation is correct. It is indeed *possible* for someone who eschews anger to maintain their self-respect despite facing injustice-sustaining risk. There are different reasons why this might be. Perhaps they possess an unusually strong social support network, whose presence allows them to feel worthy of respect despite this risk’s derogatory message, and despite the fact that it deters them from acting out against injustices they face. Or, to give another example, perhaps they have an extraordinary sense of self-sacrifice, such that perceiving such risks does not deter them from acting against injustice, and thereby reaffirming their self-respect.

Even so, this observation is compatible with recognizing that subjection to injustice-sustaining risk typically makes it harder to maintain one’s self-respect. As I argued in Section 3, these risks usually aggravate the demeaning message conveyed by injustices, and create strong pressure not to act out. Both Chemaly and Douglass, recall, vividly describe the pressure that the awareness of such risk placed on their willingness to act, and on their attending sense of dignity. Though withstanding this pressure is possible, it is hard—and, as the above examples suggest, it may require felicitous social circumstances, or rare character traits. In this context, anger’s red mist is helpful: though it may not be strictly necessary for the protection of self-respect, its impact on risk perception nevertheless meaningfully facilitates it.

This initial response may not be sufficient to appease the sceptic. After all, you might think that emotions other than anger could be equally effective at facilitating the preservation of self-respect in the face of risk. Hope seems like a promising candidate here. Jakob Huber argues that hope is capable of motivating political action. And hope, too, does so by altering our perception of the social environment. Notably, hope tends to make good outcomes appear more salient than they otherwise would. This outlook can encourage acts of resistance to injustice that—partly due to the risks they involve—would otherwise have seemed futile and not worth undertaking.<sup>37</sup>

I agree that hope is a valuable political emotion, and that it is valuable, in significant part, because of its capacity to motivate acts of resistance to injustice—acts

---

<sup>36</sup> Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, chap.7. I am assuming, for the sake of argument, that these three figures actually repudiated anger. But this claim is controversial. For disagreement, see Myisha Cherry, ‘Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice’, in *Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, ed. Adrienne Martin (London: Routledge, 2019), 157–68.

<sup>37</sup> Jakob Huber, ‘Defying Democratic Despair’, *European Journal of Political Theory* (2020): 2.

which, in turn, help reaffirm our self-respect. But this does not undermine my defence of anger's red mist, for several reasons.

The first reason is more conciliatory. Even if we assume that hope and anger are equally capable of protecting self-respect, and of doing so in the same circumstances, this does not undermine my central contention in this essay. As explained in the Introduction, my primary aim has been to challenge the inference from the observation that anger comes at an epistemic cost *to* the conclusion that anger is morally undesirable. In response, I have argued that, on closer inspection, this epistemic cost can perform a morally valuable function. This point is not inherently comparative: it is compatible with thinking that *other* emotions can perform this valuable moral function as well.

But we can go further than this first response. There are respects in which anger's self-respect protecting function seems distinctive, such that hope could not fully replace it. To begin, hope and anger can be warranted in different circumstances. There are circumstances where hope is warranted, but anger is not (e.g., hoping, in a context where no injustice has occurred, that my friend likes the gift I have given them). And, more importantly for our purposes, there are circumstances where anger is warranted, but hope is not. When the good outcome one desires (e.g., the eradication of injustice) is impossible to achieve, hope is arguably unwarranted.<sup>38</sup> Anger, however, can in principle be warranted in these "hopeless" cases. Whether we are warranted in feeling anger does not depend on the possibility of good outcomes. Instead, it depends on the existence of injustices.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, warranted anger can contribute to shielding us from the derogatory message conveyed by injustice-sustaining risk, and can motivate us to take an expressively powerful stand against the relevant injustices, even where we cannot warrantably hope for success. Imagine, counterfactually, that Douglass had no chance of defeating Covey in their physical struggle. Even in this "hopeless" scenario, anger would still have been warranted, and could still have helped him to reassert his dignity.

Moreover, even in cases where both anger and hope are warranted, anger has distinctive features that make it particularly well-suited to protecting self-respect. In particular, Samuel Reis-Dennis has argued that

anger is distinctive because it is *scary*: its connection to action and (sometimes violent) threat allows those who employ it to stand up for themselves, to establish or re-establish social standing and self-respect<sup>40</sup>

The thought, in other words, is that anger is distinctive partly due the kinds of actions it makes us willing to engage in. Specifically, anger often (though not always) involves a willingness to engage in confrontational, sometimes even violently confrontational,

---

<sup>38</sup> Claudia Blöser, Jakob Huber, and Darrel Moellendorf, 'Hope in Political Philosophy', *Philosophy Compass* 15 (2020): 5-6.

<sup>39</sup> Srinivasan, 'The Aptness of Anger'.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Reis-Dennis, 'Anger: Scary Good', *Australian Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2018): 451-52.

behaviour—what Reis-Dennis refers to as a “willingness to fight”.<sup>41</sup> This is clearly visible in our running examples: Chemaly’s and Douglass’s intense anger motivates, not just any action, but physically confrontational action. When directed at injustices, this willingness to fight has expressive significance: it communicates, with distinctive force, one’s sense that one is owed respect. One possible reason for this distinctive expressive force—which Reis-Dennis alludes to<sup>42</sup>—relates to norms of civility. Confrontation (and particularly violent confrontation) is, in most contexts, a deep departure from conventional norms of civility. Accordingly, a willingness to engage in (violent) confrontation signals how deeply one is committed to defending one’s dignity.

In sum, anger’s red mist can help protect self-respect in circumstances where hope may be unwarranted; and even in cases where both are warranted, anger’s particular motivational profile allows us to reassert our self-respect with distinctive strength. This is not to say that hope should not also play an important role in preserving our self-respect in the face of injustice. But the foregoing considerations suggest that anger’s contribution to self-respect cannot fully be replaced by hope.

Still, even if anger’s red mist plays a distinctive role in protecting self-respect, one might worry that this role comes at a significant, and perhaps excessive, cost. Anger helps protect self-respect by making injustice-sustaining risk less visible to us. Yet, if we disregard risks that are really there, the causal consequences of our resulting actions might be bad, overall. For example, lashing out at one’s oppressor, irrespective of the risks involved in doing so, could lead to a violent backlash and increased oppression. This concern about counterproductivity is especially strong in “hopeless” cases, because in these cases achieving a good outcome, which could counterbalance the risk of negative repercussions, is by definition impossible.

But even if the red mist leads to counterproductive results in many cases, I have argued that there is still a moral reason to commend it: namely, that it contributes to preserving self-respect. Moreover, I have argued that, because self-respect is a fundamental component of living a good and meaningful life, this reason is weighty.

This is not to say that the value of self-respect always has overriding force. Sometimes, the downstream consequences of the actions motivated by the red mist may be so bad that they override the value of self-respect. In these cases, the red mist is not a morally good thing, overall. But what matters for my purposes is that this is not necessarily the case. There is no reason to think that the disvalue of an action’s bad causal consequences will always outweigh the value of self-respect. Indeed, it

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 457. The point is not that anger always motivates us to fight (physically or otherwise). It is that anger is prototypically more strongly associated with a willingness to fight than other emotions (in particular, hope)—and this stronger association arguably affects its expressive force. For discussion of anger’s characteristic association with “fight,” see, e.g., Linda Skitkila, Christopher Bauman, Nicholas Aramovic, and Scott Morgan, ‘Confrontational and Preventative Policy Responses to Terrorism: Anger Wants a Fight and Fear Wants “Them” to Go Away’, *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 28 (2006): 375-84; and Leonard Berkowitz, ‘A Different View of Anger,’ *Aggressive Behavior* 38 (2012): 322-333.

<sup>42</sup> For Reis-Dennis, it is because of their “association with threat and danger that expressions of anger and resentment have their expressive [...] power. The suspension of civility demands attention.” (‘Anger: Scary Good’, 457-58).

seems intuitively plausible that the value of self-respect at least sometimes outweighs the counterproductive consequences that may result from blindly lashing out.

Consider again Chemaly's enraged lashing out at the street harasser. Blindly lashing out could have led to more harassment, not less. But it is not clear that Chemaly would regret her act even then. Her proud retelling of the event, even in light of her subsequent awareness of the risks involved, suggests otherwise. It suggests, in other words, that taking a stand—and thereby reaffirming her status as an agent who deserves respect—may well have counted more to her. A similar observation applies to Douglass's attack on Covey. His autobiographical recollection suggests that, even in hindsight, regaining his self-respect (which he likens to a "resurrection") was worth risking his life for.<sup>43</sup>

This suggests that the red mist's benefit to self-respect at least sometimes outweighs its potential counterproductivity. When exactly—and relatedly, how commonly—will it do so? This question cannot fully be answered in the abstract. Determining when the red mist will be overall valuable depends partly on empirical facts about specific real-world contexts. Nevertheless, at least three moral parameters should guide our assessment of the red mist's overall value in particular settings.

The most obvious parameter concerns the *scale* of the red mist's potential negative consequences. The greater the red mist's negative causal consequences are, the less it is likely to be overall valuable. Second, it also matters *who* sustains these consequences. Acting without consideration of risks is morally worse when doing so leads to negative consequences that affect, not just oneself, but innocent bystanders too. This seems a positive feature of Douglass's and Chemaly's actions: *prima facie*, they do not expose innocent bystanders to harm. The third factor, finally, concerns the *status quo*. When we assess the overall value of the red mist in particular settings, we should consider how they compare to the consequences of inaction. The bad consequences of acting out of blind rage seem less problematic if inaction would have been nearly as bad, than if inaction would have resulted in significantly better consequences. This moral dimension helps appreciate why, of the cases discussed, Douglass's red mist may intuitively seem to be the most valuable. Douglass compares the condition of slavery to a form of death.<sup>44</sup> Precisely because his existing situation was already so terrible, the potential negative consequences of his anger-fuelled resistance had less weight to him than they otherwise would have.<sup>45</sup>

These three moral parameters (which are not intended to be exhaustive) offer preliminary insight into how we may go about assessing the red mist's overall value in particular settings. Now, one complication here is that, once we are angry, it may be difficult to apply these parameters. After all, applying them to a particular case requires knowing about the potential consequences of a course of action, about whom these consequences affect, and about how they compare to the status quo. But this is precisely the kind of knowledge that anger's red mist makes less accessible to the angry person.

---

<sup>43</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 106.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, the foregoing account of the conditions under which anger's red mist is overall valuable can still guide action at an earlier stage, *prior* to our becoming angry. Consider two ways it can do so. First, it can guide how we train our emotional dispositions. Emotions are typically not under our *direct* volitional control: we generally cannot simply choose, when confronted with an injustice, whether to become angry or not. But it is nevertheless possible to exercise *indirect* control over our emotions. In other words, our emotional dispositions can be trained through repeated behavioural and cognitive exercises.<sup>46</sup> McBride applies this insight to anger: though he recognizes that doing so is not an easy task, he suggests that we can and should train our anger to make it "attentive to various contexts".<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, the moral considerations outlined above can guide *how* we train or discipline our disposition to feel anger. We can train, for instance, to resist anger—and thus avoid its red mist—in conditions where innocent bystanders are involved.

Second, the parameters outlined above can also guide political rhetoric. Political speakers routinely aim to arouse emotion in their audiences. The decision to verbally arouse anger should be sensitive to whether its red mist would be valuable, overall, in the relevant settings. For example, a public speaker should refrain from verbally exciting anger in her audience, if she suspects that blindness to risk would cause excessive harms, or injure innocent third parties. Thus, here too, the account I have offered of the red mist's overall value is capable of guiding action.

## 6. Conclusion

Anger comes at an epistemic cost. It clouds our vision with a red mist. To many, this constitutes one of the central reasons why we should avoid this emotion.

I have argued that this concern is overly hasty. It overlooks, notably, the fact that anger's epistemic cost performs an important moral function. By concealing risk—more specifically, risk that helps sustain injustices—anger helps us retain our self-respect. It does so in two main ways: first, by shielding us from the degrading message associated with injustice-sustaining risk; and second, by helping us to take a stand against injustices we face.

The moral value of this function is nonetheless qualified in at least two respects. First, not all instances of the red mist perform this self-respect protecting function. To reiterate, my argument applies principally to cases where risk sustains injustices. Second, even when it does protect self-respect, the red mist is not always valuable overall. As we have seen, acting without awareness of risk can sometimes engender bad consequences. In some cases, these could outweigh the value of self-respect.

Both qualifications are important. But neither constitutes a decisive problem for my argument. Even if the red mist does not always protect self-respect, the conditions in which it does so remain common in non-ideal conditions. As for the risk of countervailing bad consequences, we can work to elicit anger, and to train our

---

<sup>46</sup> Kristján Kristjánsson, *Virtuous Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), chap.9.

<sup>47</sup> See McBride ('Anger and Approbation,' 7) on the importance and possibility of disciplining anger.



emotional dispositions, so that the red mist arises predominantly in contexts where it does tend to be overall valuable.

Overall, then, my defence does not yield a blanket approval of blind rage. Morally speaking, the red mist is not a tool for everyone and at all times. But the fact that the red mist can be misused should not detract from the following basic insight: that, in the hands of those who face paralysing and degrading risk, the red mist can be, and often has been, a vital protector of dignity.

## **Acknowledgments**

For helpful discussions and/or feedback on previous drafts, I am deeply indebted to Alice Baderin, Samuel Bagg, Jacob Barrett, Joanna Demaree-Cotton, Jamie Draper, James Hutton, Alexander Prescott-Couch, and two anonymous reviewers, as well as participants in the Oxford Centre for the Study of Social Justice, and the University of Reading's Philosophy Visiting Speaker Series.