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Can't Complain

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Abstract: Philosophers generally prescribe against complaining, or endorse only complaints directed to rectification of the circumstances. Notably, Aristotle and Kant aver that the importuning of others with one's pains is effeminate and should never be done. In this paper, I reject the prohibition of complaint. The gendered aspects of Aristotle's and Kant's criticisms of complaint include their deploring a self-indulgent "softness" with respect to pain, yielding to feelings at the expense of remembering one's duties to others and one's own self-respect. I argue that complaining may also take the form of mindful attention to shared suffering. A complainer may observe affective duties, such as commiseration and invitations to disclose pains. Against more contemporary views that justify only constructive complaints directed to change, I suggest that quotidian, unconstructive complaining sometimes fulfills important social functions, including the amelioration of loneliness and affective solidarity, for the sake of others as well as oneself.

Keywords: affective duties, Aristotle, commiseration, complaint, Kant

Philosophers have not concerned themselves much with quotidian complaining, or found it permissible when they have. Aristotle and Immanuel Kant often praise the related concept of protest, but what Kant calls "mere complaint," what Aristotle calls "wailing," and what you and I might call griping, whinging, or kvetching, is deplored by both of them. Little has been added to the philosophical literature on quotidian complaint since Kant; an alien looking at the available philosophical works on complaining might understandably conclude that the great men who enjoin us to never complain have the going account.[1] Yet their treatments of ordinary complaining turn out to be exceedingly rigorous and gendered; both generally confine themselves to two related observations: complaining is effeminate and complaining should never be done.

In this essay, I reject the perfect duty to refrain from complaining about one's pains. I argue that complaining more often than never is, at the very least, permissible, and at times even desirable. I consider the empirical evidence that complaining offers personal and interpersonal benefits. Like Julian Baggini, the only other contemporary philosopher to write about complaining at any length, I advocate a view of complaining as a practice and a skill proper to excellent and sociable characters. Unlike Baggini, I do not argue that the point of complaining is to identify what ought to be different, or that complaining is only right when it accomplishes social change. As I explain in Part Two, complaining may fulfill *affective duties* in

[1] The sole notable exception is the enjoyable work of Julian Baggini, whose book, *Complaint*, is subtitled, *From Minor Moans to Principled Protest*. As I point out later in this essay, his focus is the justification of protest and "constructively complaining" to make the world better, and he does not at all address the extent to which Aristotle and Kant dismiss minor complaints as effeminate. My focus will turn out to be rather different. See Julian Baggini, *Complaint: From Minor Moans to Principled Protest* (London: Profile Books, 2008).

an interaffective realm; the role of commiseration in regulating the interaffective realm seems the main function of much quotidian whinging. Philosophers have already offered excellent defenses of protest and constructive second-personal demands for change;[2] in this essay, I take up the forms of complaint that fall outside the scope of justified protest or constructive world-building. I argue for the possible value of precisely that which Kant and Aristotle reject, sharing pains with others or, more specifically, expressing subjectively experienced dissatisfaction[3] in a way that indicates one feels the negative quality of a situation's affective affordances, that is, the features of one's circumstances that permit negative perceptions, such as when we say we are dissatisfied because the movie was dull, because the traffic is frustrating, or because a relative's character is dreadful.[4]

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[2] I realize that protest can be done in the absence of expectation of change, and that a complaint with an eye to social change may not amount to a protest; my point is that I wish to offer at least a partial defense of the value of the sorts of complaints left over when defenses of protest and constructive complaint exclude them. For a defense of constructive complaining, see Baggini, *Complaint,* especially Chapter Three; for defenses of protest, see Bernard Boxill, "Self-Respect and Protest," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6 (1976), pp.58-69; Carol Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, and Feminism: Resisting Oppression* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2013); Thomas E. Hill, Jr., 'Symbolic Protest and Calculated Silence,' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9 (1979), pp. 83-102. See also the justifications of protest in literature on civil disobedience, including Kimberley Brownlee, *Conscience and Conviction: The Case for Civil Disobedience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Maeve Cooke & Danielle Petherbridge, 'Civil disobedience and conscientious objection,' *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42 (2016):953-957.

[3] I model my definition of this sort of complaining on Robin Kowalski's definitive account of complaining as "an expression of dissatisfaction whether subjectively experienced or not," and note that her broader definition is intended in part to accommodate complaining for the strategic purposes of generating changed circumstances and restitution, for example, when returning an item at a store; Robin M. Kowalski, 'Complaints and Complaining: Functions, antecedents, and consequences,' *Psychological Bulletin* 119 (1996), pp. 179-196: 180. Such complaints suit Kant's expectations of more principled and less sensuous forms of standing up for oneself. My focus remains on the less justifiable subset of complaining.

[4] I employ Thomas Fuchs' notion of affective affordances; as he says, "Referring to [the] concept of affordances (that means, offerings in the environment that are available to animals, such as a tree being 'climbable', water 'drinkable', etc.), one could also speak of affective affordances: things appear to us as 'interesting', 'expressive', 'attractive', 'repulsive', 'uncanny', and so on;" see Thomas Fuchs, 'Intercorporeality and Interaffectivity,' *Phenomenology and Mind* 11 (2016), pp. 194-209: 196. In focusing on quotidian whinging as I do, I am limiting the scope of the discussion to exclude bare criticism, that is, mere *identification* of affective affordances that are not related in a causal way to personal dissatisfaction. One may say the small size of an acquaintance's apartment is 'ridiculous, no one could live like that,' without caring at all about the acquaintance or having particular feelings. So situations may offer affective affordances to affect-capable beings, and when one feels their disvalue, one is not

I argue that some complaining is appropriate because it is sensitive to shared experiences, and attentive to the impulses of vulnerable people whose thriving is made more likely with the acknowledgement of others. I suggest that complaining is even *more* desirable in circumstances that cannot be changed, and I describe commiseration, in particular, as an affective duty. Commiseration includes expressing and receiving complaints, to and from the right people, at the right times, and in the right ways, to ameliorate bad circumstances and make the unchangeable easier for complainers and recipients to bear. One may complain in an attempt to attenuate the uncontrolled pains of an eternally imperfect world, and to seek confirmation of one's perceptions. As I shall describe much ordinary complaining, it will also be possible to complain in order to invite others to disclose their own perceptions and pains. I employ the language of virtue in describing skillful complaint, because for one's complaining to accomplish such affective duties, one will have to be thoughtful about how to complain well. Recasting some complaining as mindful of others and mindful of one's appropriate conduct may thereby escape the gendered basis of Aristotle's and Kant's criticisms, outlined in Part One, of complaining as a sacrifice of rationality to emotionality.

Part One: Rejecting Gendered Rigorism

Philosophers seeking a view of complaining that accommodates the ubiquity of our everyday whinging practices would not find the literature regarding complaint all that timely,

merely identifying their negative qualities, but reporting one's subjectively painful or dissatisfying experience with them.

extensive, or helpful.[5] Aristotle and Immanuel Kant both maintain that complaining is effeminate and unworthy of the dignity of the man of virtue. They grant that of course, friends offer to help shoulder distress; "we have our pain lightened when our friends share it," as Aristotle says.[6] But since we ought to spare our friends pain, he continues, "someone with a manly nature tries to prevent his friend from sharing his pain...Females, however, and effeminate men enjoy having people to wail with them; they love them as friends who share their distress. But in everything we clearly must imitate the better person."[7] Kant would certainly seem to agree, saying that "no true man will importune a friend with his troubles...If therefore, the friendship is noble on both sides, neither friend will impose his worries upon the other."[8] It is magnanimous for one friend to stand ready to help, and for the other to refrain from asking for it. Note, for our unfolding purposes, that taking pleasure in the sharing of pain is particularly singled out as effeminate and weak. It is the desire to feel pain together that earns such suspicion.

One might imagine that we can endorse the injunction to never complain, without endorsing the feminized depiction of complaint. However, endorsing the absolute prohibition

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[5] Returning to the enjoyable work of Julian Baggini (2008), I add that *Complaint* is an extensive and timely treatment of other forms of protest and world-improving indignation against that which should be made right. I note, however, that he does not focus on the pains of the vulnerable and isolated as I do, perhaps because we're occupied with different sorts of skills. More akin to my own argument is the essay, "Companions in Misery," by Mariana Alessandri (2014), who notes that complaining between two strangers is "neighborly," and a way "to connect with others" who are our fellow sufferers; see her article in *The New York Times'* The Stone, available at https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/22/companions-in-misery/?_r=0. Although we arrived at our insights separately, I gratefully build upon Alessandri's observations later in this paper. Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this column, which further led me to read Alessandri's scholarly work on the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, cited in Part Two.

[6] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. William David Ross, in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 1171a30, p.1091.

[7] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1171b10-13, p.1091.

[8] Kant, "Lecture on Friendship," in *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. and ed. Louis Infield (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p.204.

of it ignores the source of the prohibition in the view of a good man or moral agent as a deliberative, rational actor and the view of a complaint as irrational. In the quotations above, Kant and Aristotle do not merely offer antiquated anthropological observations; their accounts offer a rather more thoroughgoing rigorism with respect to one's duties to refrain from expressions of pain.[9] I find myself in the usual position of those who feel the urge to escape such confines, as so eloquently expressed by Elmer Duncan and Miodrag Lukich regarding Kant's ethics: "Ordinarily the philosophy student can simply set forth a problem and then try to resolve it. But in the case of Kant's rigorism, it is necessary to set forth the problem, then insist that it really is a problem, and then attempt a solution."[10] I insist that rigorism with respect to complaint *really is* a problem! As many philosophers of friendship have argued, the position that whinging is never to be done relies on a view of the ideal individual man as self-sufficient and dependent upon no other person; although Aristotle famously describes friendships as the greatest of external goods, he and Kant share an arguably instrumental view of particular friends as sources of self-knowledge, or mirrors of one's virtues, or repositories of the relief of confiding secrets. As Andrea Veltman notes, Kant "accordingly teeters between admonishing friends not to reveal themselves to each other and maintaining that some friendships achieve enough trust to permit a full self-disclosure."[11]

[9] To be clear, Aristotle and Kant believed they were indeed offering accurate anthropological observations, but what is more important for the analysis that follows is not the question as to whether they believed this about actual men and women; they did, but my focus is on their concerns (and mine) that a feminized depiction of complaining is tied to a conception of virtue as requiring deliberative rationality in opposition to a readiness to yield to simply sensuous emotions, including the gratification of shared (self-)pity.

[10] Miodrag S. Lukich, and Elmer H. Duncan, "Kant's Rigorism: A Problem and A Solution," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 3.4 (1965), pp. 188-191: 188.

[11] Andrea Veltman, "Aristotle and Kant on self-disclosure in friendship," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 38.2 (2004), pp. 225-239: 237.

Further, rigorous refusal of complaint recommends and reinforces a problematic idealization of a particular variety of masculinity as requisite for all good moral agents. "This leads to an abiding anxiety that friendship must be reconcilable with self-sufficiency, and the implicit endorsement of this (male) view of subjectivity leads to a gendered account of friendship," explains Richard White; "the classical account of friendship is male-oriented" as it downplays intimacy and the sharing of pain with "erosion of personal sovereignty" and "weakness."[12] Like Aristotle, Kant attributes effeminacy to the "soft" man, associating complaint with a life of too much comfort; "Man cannot fulfill his duties if he cannot do without things...In order to be virtuous he must be able to suffer."[13] The duties a man must fulfill, in the passages concerning soft men, are not just duties to one's friends, but to oneself. In the *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, Kant's discussion of servility includes the observation that "complaining and whimpering...are unworthy of" moral agents, because we have duties to ourselves "regarding the dignity of humanity in us."[14] Those who commiserate with such whinging "express the sort of benevolence one has for an unworthy person," akin to becoming "infected" by another's pain and increasing "the evils of the world."[15] The soft-heartedness of pitying listeners amounts to a perverse sort of "boast" as one advertises a sort of insulting kindness that "should not occur at all among human beings."[16] Relatedly, in his *Lectures on Ethics* Kant suggests that "a mind which faces ills and misfortunes steadily and cheerfully makes man more worthy."[17] To complain may be "to submit to physical ills and to be the toy of

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[12] Richard White, *Love's Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), pp. 15-16.
[13] Kant, *Lectures on Ethics,* pp.173-74.
[14] Kant, *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, tr. James Ellington (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), p.98.
[15] Kant, *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue,* p. 122.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Kant, *Lectures on Ethics,* p.145.

accident and circumstance," which "is contrary to the dignity of man."[18] Being "pampered" comes in for some criticism here, as an easy life makes any "diminution of happiness" a fresh misfortune.

For both Aristotle and Kant, it is the complainer's preference to yield to the sensuous temptations of self-pity that undermines the dignity of a manly nature. A virtuous and moral life is predicated upon the capacity to exercise one's autonomy to voluntarily choose the conduct in line with one's duty for the right reasons. The pains of accident and circumstance may be involuntary, but a thoughtful moral agent ought not say the first thing that involuntary bubbles to the lips upon encountering pain. Explicitly, both philosophers hold that fulfilling one's duties entails thought, and implicitly, complaining is thoughtless. The thoughtlessness to one's listeners is more easily inferred; to yield to the expression of one's dissatisfactions or pains is to fail to think past self-regarding desires, to skip the deliberations required by virtue including conscious reflection upon the effects of indulging one's own desire for comfort. Although friends may stand ready to help one shoulder distress, consideration for the ends of others, and the good lives of one's friends, should motivate one to formulate maxims that one will not impose one's own ends upon one's friends.

The presumptive thoughtlessness of complaining is also a failure of duties to oneself, including self-respect, or an indignity unworthy of the better person. To indicate to others that we cannot exert our minds over the involuntary pains of our bodies is to fail to demonstrate our respect-worthy rationality. This is more obvious in Aristotle's ethic, as the good life requires virtues including honor, and being appropriately apprehended by others as worthy of praise.

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[18] Ibid.

Relatedly, for Kant, we ought to esteem ourselves; not only has one inevitably a conscience, an inner judge, it is also the case that one ought not "injure the consciousness of [one's] dignity as a rational man."[19] It is not a coincidence that Kant discusses complaining in relation to "servility," a compromise of a man's true value. "He can and should value himself," Kant urges, and "this self-esteem is a duty of man to himself."[20] As Cynthia Stark notes, "Kant's contention that persons must value their rational nature is at the basis of his ethical theory…all persons are required to view and to treat themselves as having the same moral status as other person," and a man's "consciousness of his sublime moral predisposition" entails "committing oneself to act in accordance with this self-vision."[21] Stark accurately observes that Kant's examples of "what counts as acting in a servile fashion or disavowing one's dignity" include complaining; she explains servility in terms of action "that either conveys the belief that one has a lower moral status than another, or one through which a person subordinates herself to another."[22] Interestingly for my purposes, she then notes that an account of servility as believing one has lower status or subordinating oneself seems not to fit "the possible exception," that is, "the admonition against complaining, whining, or crying out in bodily pain."[23]

Stark seems quite right that Kant's overall depiction of servility does not capture the reasons for his prohibition of complaining. Instead, complaining seems to be prohibited entirely

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[19] Kant, *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue,* p. 97.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Cynthia A. Stark, 'The Rationality of Valuing Oneself: A Critique of Kant on Self-Respect,' *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35 (1997), pp. 65-82: 74, 76.
[22] Stark, 'The Rationality of Valuing Oneself,' p. 70.
[23] Stark, 'The Rationality of Valuing Oneself,' p. 70; Stark does not explore this insight further, but I agree entirely that Kant's view of servility does not quite fully justify his prohibition of complaining; that there is this lack of necessary connection between Kant's abhorrence of complaining and its relationship to self-respect-threatening servility seems to serve my point in the ensuing paragraph that he primarily deplores complaining as insufficiently reflective, as an abdication of autonomy in the face of the temptations of physicality.

because complaint subordinates one's moral person to one's sensuous person, violating Kant's more Stoic principles, which resonate with Aristotle's criticisms of weakness of will. As Ronald Beiner says, regarding Kant's "Stoic impulse," "the foundation [of human dignity] comes to sight in moral experience, where we apprehend ourselves rising above animal causation;" this is why pain is "mastered by the understanding."[24] Noting "Kant's resolve to replace what he views as the femininity of feeling with the masculinity of reason,"[25] Beiner directs our attention to the last section of Kant's last book, in which Kant wrote, "the sheer power of man's reason to master his sensuous feelings by a self-imposed principle determines his manner of living."[26]

The source of the unworthiness of a complaining character, then, seems to be the preoccupation with embodied experiences, and the seeking of comfort in the presence of reminders of one's vulnerabilities to the accidents and circumstances of the sensuous world. One should not long for caring, although one may assert normative expectations for the related activity of sharing moral indignation or, in a word, *protest* at human-caused harm. Both Aristotle and Kant seem to distinguish whinging from protest, and protest comes in for more approval; they endorse protest when they recommend against the excess of mildness in the face of others' culpable wrongdoing. Aristotle notes that there is a nameless virtue related to anger; he holds blameworthy the vice of deficiency of proper feeling when morally wronged: "to put up with insults to oneself and one's friends is slavish."[27] Kant similarly urges us, "Do not suffer your rights to be trampled underfoot by others," and he suggests that when they are

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[24] Ronald Beiner, 'Review: Essays on Kant's Political Philosophy by Howard Lloyd Williams,' *Canadian Journal of Political Science/ Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 26 (1993), pp. 604-606: 605.
[25] Beiner, 'Review: Essays on Kant's Political Philosophy,' p. 606.
[26] Kant, "The Philosophy Faculty versus the Faculty of Medicine," in Immanuel Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties* (trans. Mary Gregor, Lincoln, Neb: University of Nebraska Press, 1798 (1992)), pp.182-183.
[27] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1126a7-9.

trampled, then the sympathy of others in such cases is more praiseworthy.[28] "If a man suffers in health or sustains a loss...due to mere circumstances, we should shrug stoically," he reminds us, "but if his hurt was caused by someone else, it should arouse our utmost displeasure."[29] Protest on behalf of others is a common outlet for such sympathetic moral indignation, and is treated at more length and with greater respect in canonical and contemporary philosophy than mere complaint.

The ordinary practices of individuals present a striking contrast to the canonical prescriptions I have outlined. Despite the enduring adage that complaining doesn't solve anything, many people complain quite a lot, and social media seems to amplify this all-too-human tendency. It is reasonable to think either that Aristotle and Kant err in the absolutism of their prohibition, or that many people today behave in morally undignified ways with unreflective ubiquity. I have entertained both possibilities, but come to the conclusion that neither is simply true. I agree with Aristotle and Kant that there is such a thing as an excess of complaining, but an instance is not an excess. I devoted the first half of this essay primarily to rejecting the canonical prescription to never complain; in what follows, I turn my attention to contemporary accounts, and outline a partial defense of some quotidian gripes against Julian Baggini's view that complaining ought to be constructive. I do not argue for the defensibility of all complaints, and I recognize the features of excessive, or pointless, or ill-intentioned complaint. I grant that some admirable and extraordinary characters do not even feel a *desire* to complain. But my focus in doing ethical theory is not on extraordinary characters. I am

[28] Kant, *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue,* p.99.
[29] Ibid., pp. 199-200.

interested in ethics for the rest of us. Most of us are vulnerable to doubt and pain, at times uncontrollably so. Managing our vulnerabilities may involve complaining excellently. Although I assume much of what I delineate is uncontroversial, I defend rather more whinging than one might consider justifiable in the conclusion of my arguments.

Part Two: Commiseration, Complaining, and Affective Duties

In the course of rejecting the gendered claims above, I noted the relationship of the prescription to forbear from complaint to the view of the right or good man as deliberative, rational, and thoughtful in his ethical life, resistant to the pull of bodily pains and soft emotions. In what follows, I argue that expressions of dissatisfaction or pain may be the *product* of thoughtful attention to persons in vulnerable situations. At times, I suggest, a complaint is a rational and ethical response to a suffering agent, fulfilling affective duties of attention to the pains of others and to shared pains.

We do not typically complain to brick walls. We complain when we believe there is a possibility of response, or at a minimum, where we believe there ought to be a responsive recipient. Further, one does not, properly speaking, complain about *others'* bad circumstances. Protest or expostulation fills that function. "There seems to be a special right to complain and feel aggrieved," Daniel Lyons says in one of the only contemporary treatments of the subject; "anyone is entitled to protest about any wrong, done to anyone, but not, perhaps, to complain over someone else's injury."[30] As Lyons phrases the distinction, complaint (C) could be taken to be a subset of protest (P), but I suggest C is not contained within P. With Bernard Boxill, I argue

[30] Daniel Lyons, 'Entitled to complain,' *Analysis* 26.4 (1966: 119-122), p.119, p.120.

that protest is not always an appeal for sympathy, and may consist rather in an expressed stance of opposition to injustice or other moral wrong.[31] It is possible one can assert protest without any attendant affective pains, if protest is "an uncompromising claim" against an existing wrong "that the victim of some injury has a right not to be injured."[32] Boxill argues persuasively that protest also does not entail that one aims at an affective response in another; according to his view, a protestor does not necessarily rely on getting others to agree with one's claims.[33] The fact that a hostile bystander is unconvinced would not render a protest nonexistent. Protest affirms the dignity of a wronged agent, and whether it persuades or elicits sympathy seems a happy consequence rather than a built-in purpose of protest. I am persuaded by Boxill's account, but then complaint seems not merely an instance of protest limited in scope; complaining is a different kind of communication with functions that sometimes share in the functions of protest, and sometimes do not. I recommend against language that suggests a binary of complaint 'versus' protest. It is not clear that situations always call for one or the other, it is not clear that complaint and protest require different presentations on the part of speakers, and it is not clear that differently motivated people have the same interests when either complaining or protesting.

Julian Baggini appears to agree with me that complaint and protest are not exclusive, and in his treatment of complaining seems to see complaining as the super-set containing protest as a subset. He identifies many sorts of complaints, serving functions that are not all equally defensible, and that include catharsis, social lubricant, affirmation of others,

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[31] Bernard R. Boxill, 'Self-respect and protest,' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (1976: 58-69), p.58.
[32] Boxill, p.63.
[33] Ibid.

confirmation of one's own perceptions, and protest against policies or circumstances that are not as they ought to be and can be changed. Only the last is apt, because constructive, and "complaining about the inevitable or unchangeable is a species of wrong complaint."[34] His ethic sets a limit to quantities and qualities of complaining at the point when complaining becomes a substitute for action or an excuse not to act, because his account of what it means to complain is one that relies on complaining including protest; he argues that right complaining just *is* an insistence of "the seriousness of the failure of things to be how they ought to be."[35] "The point of complaint can and should often be actually to change things," he argues.[36] Expressions and activities that fall short of bringing about a better world, or at least aspiring to do so, come in for criticism as "futile"[37], "a waste of energy"[38], "infantile"[39], and pointless[40]. Realism is a necessity for appropriate complaint, "and realism involves accepting that there are limits on what we can do, as individuals and as a species. Right complaint needs to take this on board, too: there is no point in protesting that things are not as they ought to be if they can't be any different."[41]

Baggini pares back this censure of quotidian complaint when he briefly considers the evidence that the "more frivolous variants" of complaining seem remarkably widespread and numerous. "Even when we're on our way to discuss matters of life and death, the pull of trivial, quotidian complaints is as strong as ever," he grants, and he speculates that this is partly

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[34] Baggini, *Complaint,* p.24.
[35] Baggini, *Complaint,* p.42.
[36] Baggini, *Complaint*, p. 93.
[37] Ibid., p. 28, p.42.
[38] Ibid., p. 28, p.127.
[39] Ibid., p. 28.
[40] Ibid., p. 24, p.127.
[41] Ibid., p. 24.

because the "truly important" matters of world-changing weigh too heavily, and partly because "we can't seem to switch off the sensor which alerts us to what is wrong all around us."[42] His account of complaining is so focused on protest as the paradigm complaint that he marvels (accurately), "Complaining is a social activity, something we enjoy for reasons I only partly understand. It's a capacity we feel almost compelled to exercise," but he concludes we're expressing complaints so much to "[keep] in shape for the times when it really does matter."[43]

I do not share Baggini's view that complaints are (paradigmatically) or should be (normatively) protests, and free from the constraints of such a model, it is not my project to understand quotidian complaint as it relates to proper protestations. I take the view that complaining is a social activity, and I find complaining to serve relational functions better expressed by the description of bonding with a coworker provided by Keguro Macharia: "We can complain—that's part of our affective duty."[44] Complaining offers important personal and interpersonal benefits, to oneself when one may otherwise feel isolated or wonder if one's perceptions are correct, and to others when complaining fulfills social expectations to be a certain kind of cooperative and discursive companion. In short, minor complaints can fulfill the functions of affirmation of one's own presence and perceptions, or affirmation of others'

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[42] Ibid., p. 88.

[43] Ibid, p. 89.

[44] Keguro Macharia, "On Quitting," *The New Inquiry*, May 3, 2013, URL: http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/on-quitting/ [last accessed 13 December 2013]. I should add that "affective duty" is a phrase one will not easily find in philosophy; it is more likely (and still rare) to find "affective duties" referred to, fleetingly, by authors in cultural studies (Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 88) or comparative literature (Victoria Kahn, '"The Duty to Love:" Passion and Obligation in Early Modern Political Theory,' *Representations* 68 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 84-107: 87). Macharia uses the term in passing, specifically to refer to the normative expectation that one will complain or receive a complaint in one's social role as a coworker; I rely on a notion of affective duty in the second half of the paper because it is an exceptionally useful phrase for the form of complaining that I am endorsing.

perceptions, or both. The whinge can communicate one's insistence on acknowledgement ("I am not alone") and/or the interest in acknowledging others ("You are not alone").

In saying this, I do not mean to ignore the many harms that complaining can also generate. Psychologists have catalogued many adverse consequences of complaining for relationships and for individuals. Frequent complainers may "risk interpersonal rejection and negative self-images," they may effect an unfortunate "mood contagion" on listeners who were previously not suffering similar subjective discontent, they may reduce their own well-being by complaining, and the anger and resentment of listeners may lead to relational conflict.[45] It is no wonder, when reflecting on the palpable demerits of complaining, that Aristotle and Kant suggest real men ought to refrain from reports of suffering. Yet most of the adverse effects of complaining are described by psychologist Robin Kowalski as the result of "chronic," "often," or "constantly" complaining.[46] If the negative consequences increase with the frequency of complaint, then it is certainly reasonable to recommend some constraints. It is not reasonable to conclude that one must never complain. High frequency of complaint and utter abstinence are, I argue, vices of excess and deficiency. The language of virtue ethics that I employ here is supported by the more beneficial aspects of complaining that scholars identify.

Kowalski and Baggini both identify "cathartic" benefits of complaint; venting one's frustrations may relieve one of the stressful psychological work of concealing emotion.[47] I appreciate the importance of these personal benefits regarding some forms of complaint,

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[45] Robin M. Kowalski, "Whining, griping, and complaining: Positivity in the negativity," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 58.9 (2002: 1023-1035), pp. 1027-28.
[46] Kowalski, "Whining, griping, and complaining," p. 1028.
[47] Kowalski, "Whining, griping, and complaining," pp. 1024-25; cf Baggini, *Complaint*, Chapter 2.

especially when the alternative to complaining is concealment of emotion. However, I am less interested in the particular psychological benefit of release, and more interested in the norms governing the social practices of complaining, especially when one voluntarily introduces complaints into social spheres that did not require concealment, such as complaints to co-workers in the locker room, complaints to friends on social networking websites, complaints shared between strangers at a bus stop on a rainy day, or shared between delayed passengers at airport gates. Positive aspects of complaint include forms of connection with others that promote "relational solidarity," sympathetic bonding through the development of intimacy, and reassurance from others that one has some legitimate grounds, a reduction of cognitive dissonance.[48] The advantages of scripting the unscripted social experience can also include structuring experiences otherwise chaotic.

Most pressing to me are those occasions when one's complaint is a plea for validation that one's pains are not insignificant, and one's complaint further seeks company to attenuate isolation in suffering, because denial of recognition frustrates basic goods of self-knowledge and autonomy. The recognition of others provides us with options, sources of control, and assistance in integrating our self-narratives; the denial of recognition can leave us trapped within ourselves.[49] Philosophers including Susan Brison suggest that the losses of security and autonomy that bad circumstances make palpable can be partially recovered by enlisting sympathetic others in attending to one's narratives. If the evidence is correct that complaint

[48] Kowalski, "Whining, griping, and complaining," p. 1031.
[49] Axel Honneth and Avishai Margalit, "Recognition," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes (2001), pp.111-139; Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

promotes recognition and autonomy, solidarity and intimacy, sympathy and bonding, then it is quite possible to imagine that there can be, in stressful social situations, such a thing as a *deficiency* of complaining. One may doubt one's perceptions that a situation is bad, one may feel alone in a crowded room, and one may fear that one's coworkers or friends are simply far and away more resilient and unconcerned than oneself, that one does not belong. The urge to correct one's isolation is perhaps a response to just such a deficiency in the emotional surround. Aristotle and Kant attend to the excess of complaint, but if social practices of complaining admit of deficiency as well, then complaint may not be a vice. If it is like a virtue at all, then it may more properly be considered a relative of a "burdened virtue," akin to the virtues Lisa Tessman identifies as proper to the life of a suffering and vulnerable agent who does not (yet) thrive.[50]

I do not go that far, however, and I believe it is most accurate to think of complaining as a skill proper to the virtues of excellent moral agents, rather than a burdened virtue in itself. Like other modes of interpersonal communication, complaining is a skill that expresses certain qualities or traits, but is not itself constitutive of the good life. My arguments have focused on the extent to which complaining ameliorates isolation, but as Tessman argues persuasively, it is "successful sociality" that is constitutive of the good life, and one can be better or worse at the activities and skills that support one's sociality.[51] Although complaining could be done to excess, and even become a habit, it then seems akin to biting one's nails, that is, a type of habit that expresses a vice or virtue, rather than being a vice or virtue in itself. Aristotle grants that

[50] Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (Oxford University Press, 2005).
[51] Ibid., p.71.

"one can be frightened or bold, feel desire or anger or pity, and experience pleasure *and pain generally*, either more or less than is right, and in both cases wrongly; while *to have these feelings* at the right time, on the right occasion, toward the right people, for the right purpose and in the right manner, is to feel the best amount of them, which is the mean amount -- and the best amount is of course the mark of excellence. [emphasis mine]"[52] I suggest that one may not only experience pain, not only "have these feelings," more or less than is right; we have evidence to suggest that one may share these feelings via complaint more or less than is right. I grant that it is often more than is right, especially when it is a pleasure. Complaining is something that many of us enjoy doing from time to time, and the extent to which we enjoy it seems to outrun by some distance the extent to which we seem interested in complaining in order to change the world for the better.

In commenting that complaining is part of the affective duty of colleagues, Macharia noted that he and his friend had "spent a long time" on a prolonged trading of complaints about the state of higher education.[53] Humans do seem to complain about a great deal that is not entirely within our power to change; if anything, we seem to complain all the more when we are frustrated by our helplessness or troubling deaf heaven with our bootless cries. (We complain about the weather – the weather! – not exactly a model set of circumstances we can intend changing.) The phenomenological experience of the strong desire to complain, and the palpable extent to which we oddly enjoy expressing our pains, often at length and in rich detail over a beverage, motivate my interest in defending the thesis that complaining is permissible

[52] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b15-29.
[53] Macharia (2013), "On Quitting."

more often than never. But I hope it is evident that I do not intend mine to be a sheerly utilitarian argument for complaining. Humans enjoy many things that do not require arguments for permissibility or endorsement as skilled when done well. To return to the Aristotelian example of nail-biting, giving into the urge to do it when one is in the habit may result in some sorts of pleasure, generating utils of satisfaction of one's urges, but we can argue that even if nail-biting offers many individuals some pleasurable consequences, it is not good conduct, may have long-term bad effects on one's teeth that outweigh the short-term reception of utils, may use oneself as a mere means or exhibit lacking virtues of self-respect or dignity, and so on. So the permissibility and occasional goodness of complaining is not entirely reducible to the immediate consequences.

Empirical considerations of the pleasure afforded by complaining point to reasons for investigating its benefits, however. I return to Macharia's comment that complaining is part of our affective duty. Philosophers have no widely used notion of affective duties, but Macharia's apt wording here provides a good opportunity to begin constructing one, by appealing to the concept of *interaffectivity*. The latter is Thomas Fuchs' phenomenological term for the sphere of our emotional life, a social sphere as opposed to a purely internal experience, regarding "feelings as residing in between individuals."[54] Like many who hold an externalist account of emotion, Fuchs emphasizes humans' "tendency to mimic and synchronize each other's facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, movements, and thus to converge emotionally."[55] Just as Eric Schwitzgebel argues that "to have an attitude is, at root, to live a certain way," so Fuchs

[54] Thomas Fuchs, "Depression, Intercorporeality, and Interaffectivity," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (20, No. 7–8, 2013, pp. 219–38), p. 225.
[55] Fuchs, p. 223.

argues that "emotions are ways of being in the world, emerging on the basis of a pre-reflective attunement with others, indicating the current state of our relations, interests, and conflicts, and manifesting themselves as attitudes and expressions of the body."[56] One need not foreswear internal accounts to agree that there is something sensibly referred to as an interaffective realm, a dimension of interpersonal life in which we shape and regulate each other's feelings and reinforce or concretize our own internal states. When one takes seriously the interaffective dimension of ethical and social life, then one may see more clearly the extent to which activities including complaining regulate the emotional life, articulating and discerning the causes of pains, affirming the feelings of others or oneself, or inviting disclosure and commiseration. These are thoughtful acts, problematizing the image of complaining as thoughtless, or yielding to sensuous appetites at the expense of acting as one should.

The role of commiseration in regulating the interaffective realm seems the main function of much quotidian whinging. Two coworkers plod to a building in a cold rain tipping down, and as they enter shivering and stomping, one looks at the other and comments on the awful weather precisely in order to invite agreement. It's not "constructive" complaining in order to make the weather better, and it will not change the circumstances, but such complaints are valuable currency in the interaffective marketplace. With that in mind, let us look again at the manly approaches of Kant and Aristotle. Now Kant's injunction to shrug stoically in response seems rather dense with respect to one's affective duty, that is, the imperfect duty to be a good sort of member of the interaffective realm. And if commiseration is

[56] Eric Schwitzgebel, "A Dispositional Approach to Attitudes: Thinking Outside of the Belief Box," in *New Essays on Belief: Constitution, Content and Structure*, ed. Nikolaj Nottelmann (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2013, pp. 75-99), p.77; Fuchs, "Depression, Intercorporeality, and Interaffectivity," p.223.

an important function to fulfill, then Aristotle's argument that one with a manly nature prevents friends from sharing pains is less compelling; instead of seeming "soft," the coworker who offers the negative thought about the discomfort due to the rain seems alert and attentive to a shared state. Seeing another soaked through provides an opportunity to complain in order to commiserate, opening a door for agreement and connection. In saying this, I do not believe I go a great distance from an Aristotelian ethic, because even in their rain-drenched state, what is fine shines through the complaint; I'm contending that the fine thing to do is, at times, to complain, that is, to fulfill imperfect affective duties of mutual recognition of pains. A complainer with an overall good temper and an excellent sense of interaffectivity is capable of feeling distress and identifying the distress of others.

A robust appreciation of our affective duties to commiserate with the uncomfortable justifies my view that there may be, in certain contexts, such a thing as a deficiency of complaining. After all, identifying the distress of others is a basic aspect of much moral life. As Mariana Alessandri argues, philosophers including Arthur Schopenhauer and Miguel de Unamuno urge our attention to each other as fellow sufferers, "companions in misery."[57] Alessandri notes the influence, on Unamuno, of William James, who finds much to criticize in *ubulia*, an apathetic silence in the face of discomfort, a "spiritual sloth" that "James describes … as the failure to act on the basis of what one thinks or feels; it represents a disconnect between thought and action, and includes or is akin to fatigue."[58] Similarly, "Unamuno implies

[57] Mariana Alessandri, 'Companions in Misery.'

[58] Mariana Alessandri, 'Miguel de Unamuno and William James, el gran pensador yanqui,' *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* 5 (2014), pp.12-30. In her Stone article, Alessandri adds, "In 'My Religion,' Unamuno wrote: 'Whenever I have felt a pain I have shouted and I have done it publicly' in order to 'start the grieving chords of others' hearts playing.' For Unamuno, authentic love is found in suffering with others, and negativity is necessary for compassion and understanding."

in agreement with James" that "struggle, pain, want are what make life worth living," not because one's struggles are destined to meet success in changing one's circumstances and realizing contentment, but because remaining connected to one's own pains and the pains of others fight "indifference and cynicism."[59] Attenuating isolation and seeking confirmation that one is not alone are the business of life, the affective tasks of persons who might otherwise lapse into insensitivity.

In an observation remarkably consonant with Fuchs' account of interaffectivity, Alessandri says, "Unamuno repeated James's seemingly backward conclusion in *Principles* that our emotions are the products of our somatic functions, not the cause of them;" Unamuno rejected "the common-sense interpretation of emotions as dictating somatic functions," when it rather seems that our emotions are shaped by our interpersonal and interaffective practices.[60] I do not believe that the causal story of emotions has to be univalent in either direction; Unamuno may overcompensate in insisting that emotional mental contents are effects as opposed to causes. Yet his rejection of the inner world dictating outer expressions is compatible with Fuchs' view that "the facial, gestural, and postural expression of a feeling is part of the bodily resonance that feeds back into the feeling itself... Our body is affected by the other's expression, and we experience the kinetics, intensity, and timing of his emotions through our own bodily kinaesthesia and sensation. Thus, intercorporeality is the essential basis of empathy."[61] My contention is that complaining is, at times, the most appropriate ethical

[59] Alessandri, 'Miguel de Unamuno and William James,' p.20.
[60] Alessandri, 'Miguel de Unamuno and William James,' p.14.
[61] Fuchs, 'Depression, Intercorporeality, and Interaffectivity,' p. 223. In a footnote on this same page, Fuchs, like Unamuno, approvingly cites William James: "In his well-known paper 'What is an Emotion?', William James referred to the inner organs of the body as '…a sort of sounding board, which every change of our consciousness, however slight, may make reverberate'" (p. 223n2).

response to that apprehension of shared distress or discomfort, precisely because in so interacting, one may actually shape the emotional states of oneself and the other; the recognition that complaint affords may reduce isolation in the act of being expressed.

Of course, in all cases of skilled or virtuous complaining, it seems called for that a complaint be at least somewhat sincere; although I expended some energy on criticizing canonical philosophers in this essay, I share the commitment to accurate and truthful self-representation as a mark of excellent character. For this reason, despite my emphasis on social functions of complaint as an affective duty in the interests of commiseration, I do not advocate for complaint entirely for the purposes of breaking the ice. To volunteer negative and yet insincere reports entirely for the purposes of connecting with others takes the moral risks of the negative effects of complaint. Mood contagion is possible, and not all social connection is praiseworthy; to seek it at the expense of the truth begins to slip toward servility.

I would not go so far as to describe all excesses of complaining as a form of servility, but the challenges of articulating an ethic of complaint are made greater by the ever-presence of varieties of mass communication. It is now easier to broadcast our complaints further and wider than in pre-Internet days. Our abilities to do so may outrun our skills. It is tempting to say that the right approach, the safest and wisest, is never to complain about anything, especially online or in public. The audience is both imaginary in intimacy and concretely indiscriminate in reality. Yet without others, we are closed inside ourselves. I embrace, instead, an ethic of appropriate complaining that is sensitive to the realities of an imperfect world, and attentive to the impulses of vulnerable people who at times benefit from the acknowledgements of others. We have some new mapping to do of the terrain of complaint. If it is news to some of us how

often others express pain, perhaps that is the omission of lucky people who so little need others that they can afford to be insensitive, rather than a vice of excess.[62]

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