**Is Anger ever appropriate?**

Table of Contents

[Introduction 2](#_Toc501123609)

[Nussbaum’s View 3](#_Toc501123610)

[The Two Types of Anger 3](#_Toc501123611)

[**Payback anger** 3](#_Toc501123612)

[**Status anger** 3](#_Toc501123613)

[**Beneficial Anger** 4](#_Toc501123614)

[***Case 1*** 4](#_Toc501123615)

[***Case 2*** 5](#_Toc501123616)

[Does Anger have to have a retributive element? 5](#_Toc501123617)

[Three examples of anger without a retributive element 5](#_Toc501123618)

[***Gaza Strip*** 5](#_Toc501123619)

[**Nussbaum’s Objection** 5](#_Toc501123620)

[**My Response to the Objection** 5](#_Toc501123621)

[**Nussbaum’s Objection** 6](#_Toc501123622)

[***Student*** 6](#_Toc501123623)

[**Nussbaum’s Objection** 6](#_Toc501123624)

[**My Response to the Objection** 6](#_Toc501123625)

[***Family*** 6](#_Toc501123626)

[**Nussbaum’s Objection** 6](#_Toc501123627)

[**My Response to the Objection** 6](#_Toc501123628)

[The difficulty with Retributive Thinking 7](#_Toc501123629)

[‘Self-Retributive’ Anger 7](#_Toc501123630)

[*YouTube:* 8](#_Toc501123631)

[Conclusion 9](#_Toc501123632)

[Bibliography 11](#_Toc501123633)

# **Introduction**

Emotions are an everyday occurrence. Much work has been done into what the point of emotion is and what part emotions might play in our lives. The great impact emotions have on our lives means it’s not surprising that great philosophers have studied them over the centuries. Anger is an emotion that we encounter every day and most of us are very familiar with. Anger is a response to some ‘wrongfully’ inflicted damage to someone or something that one cares about. When this happens, it is natural for us to feel the need for ‘payback. It is generally agreed by most philosophers that this wish for retribution is a key part of feeling anger. If there is no wish for retribution in your mind when you think you experience anger then perhaps you are experiencing grief or some other emotion. Nussbaum states that anger is a central threat to decent human interactions and posits that a necessary component of anger is the wish for retribution. She states that a wish for retribution can occur independently of anger but anger cannot occur independently of a wish for retribution. In this case – we would be feeling different emotion.

This paper has two sections;

In section One I will discuss in detail Nussbaum’s view, the two concepts of anger she presents: ‘Payback Anger’ and ‘Status Anger’. The former being anger with a retributive element and the latter being where one would react to an insult or wrong with anger in order to ‘put someone back in their place’ so to speak. This is followed by a brief word on why Nussbaum thinks anger might be beneficial in some circumstances.

Section Two discusses cases of anger without the retributive element and how Nussbaum might respond to these cases. We will see how we can be angry at something within our circle of concern but simply want an end to the issue such as a war. This may not involve retribution but still generates anger. I discuss how we can be angry at a flatmate or family member but not want retribution. “Self-Retributive anger” comes up as another case where there does not seem to be retribution involved in anger towards the self. I also discuss here what retribution might consist of and how Nussbaum’s view is unclear on this.

The conclusion will summarise the objections to Nussbaum’s view and the objections to that view culminating in a request for further empirical research to determine if we can establish the nature of the feeling of anger in humans.

**Nussbaum’s View**

Nussbaum sets the stage by discussing the ‘circle of concern. This circle is formed of all the things or people we care about. We would be upset if there was a wrong inflicted on any part of this circle. This circle can widen or contract depending upon what is in it at a certain time. A war in a far-reaching land maybe in the circle today but it may not be in there tomorrow. Our family is an example of a consistent element of our circle. Anger therefore is a natural response to some damage having been wrongfully inflicted harm upon some part of our circle*.* An excellent quote to illustrate this comes from Smith who states that *“the prospect of losing one’s finger would quickly make the compassionate European forget entirely the fate of millions of people in China”[[1]](#footnote-1)* The two kinds of anger which can be generated by wrongful damage to our circle of concern (with us at the centre of it) are status anger and payback anger.

## The Two Types of Anger

In Nussbaum’s paper, she references the two main types of anger, Payback anger and Status Anger. Although not an exhaustive list, these are the two types of anger concentrated on during her argument.

### **Payback anger**

Imagine the following example – someone’s child is killed. It doesn’t seem too hard to imagine that the Parent would want retribution in this case. If we look further into this example; what is the parent hoping to attain by this payback? Will it take the grief away? Possibly a little but it won’t bring the child back. One might argue that no amount of retribution can bring a dead person back. Nussbaum calls this magical thinking, that exacting retribution can somehow change the past, i.e. if someone’s child is killed then killing the perpetrator could change that. We can clearly see that retribution cannot change the past. How does this differ from status anger?

### **Status anger**

This type of anger relates to when we have been insulted or possibly embarrassed in public. As in the following example:

*Insult*: Finn insults Matthew in class by calling him a name, Matthew perceives that he has been slighted or ‘downranked’ by Finn and so goes to Finn’s presentation and embarrasses him in a public arena.

The word downranking here relates to a sort of social scale whereby when we are insulted we are lowered on this scale and not seen as important or authoritative as the insulter. The insulted has effectively been one-upped. This type of narcissistic anger may lead to thoughts of payback in order to redress the social balance. Worried about being seen as weak or downtrodden the person who has been slighted then will exact a penalty. This can lead to a long game of petty insults and could end up being very destructive for both persons individually as well as collectively. So then how can anger ever be beneficial? [[2]](#footnote-2)

### **Beneficial Anger**

Anger can be beneficial in a superficial manner i.e. if I’m a lecturer and I have a reputation for being angry then if students don’t come to my room and I have more time for research. The Lecturer isn’t making any friends here but should his aim be to have more time for research then anger has been effective in him meeting his goal.

There are several studies which purport to show the benefits of anger. One study (Case 1) reported by Tori DeAngelis states that anger is very useful in the office environment and another by Fischoff (Case 2) shows how we can gain an increased sense of control from our anger.

### ***Case 1***

Tori DeAngelis[[3]](#footnote-3)  states that anger is misunderstood as it is viewed to co-occur with violence. "In fact, anger seems to be followed by aggression only about 10 percent of the time, and lots of aggression occurs without any anger" [[4]](#footnote-4).  While assertive expression is always preferable to angry expression, anger may serve an important alerting function that leads to deeper understanding of the other person and the problem. Constructive anger can result in solving mutual problems rather than just being a venting episode. In a similar vein to Nussbaum, Jennifer Lerner in January 2001 Journal of Social Psychology[[5]](#footnote-5) states that anger can be used for status and power in the workplace but in a departure from Nussbaum Lerner states that anger here in particular would not be used as an emotional expression. Here we start to see where anger might have evolved to serve us in the modern day but providing us with a way of functioning in the workplace where power plays and strategy are constantly at work.

### ***Case 2***

In a study post 9/11[[6]](#footnote-6) anger was found to be an empowering emotion. A sample group of 1,786 people gave their reactions to the atrocity and then two months later two sub groups elaborated on their feelings. One group was primed for anger by showing then terrorists celebrating the 9/11 attack and one group primed for fear. Participants primed for anger gave more realistic risk assessments on 25 possible terrorist threats. Here that anger was more beneficial here because it increased peoples sense of control. This supports a possible theory that anger could be tracking the belief of how in control of a situation we are.

However, independent of any practical benefits both Payback and Status anger according to Nussbaum are morally wrong.

**Does Anger have to have a retributive element?**

From the examples, we have seen so far it is certain that there are many examples in the world of anger with a retributive context, but also, contrary to this, examples of anger that do not seem to have a retributive element to them. We have also seen that anger can also be beneficial as well as destructive. In this section I present three examples of anger that do not seem to have a retributive element.

## Three examples of anger without a retributive element

***Gaza Strip***:I watch the news and hear reports of the war in Gaza and this makes me angry. Assuming my circle of concern is widened to include Israel in then I would be justified in feeling this. I am angry at the fact that there are so many casualties in the conflict. However, I do not want retribution I would just like the conflict to stop. [[7]](#footnote-7)

### **Nussbaum’s Objection**

The objection might consist of Nussbaum saying that I am not really feeling anger as I do not want retribution on those who started the war who are causing casualties. Maybe I am mixing the emotion of anger up with compassion or grief.

### **My Response to the Objection**

Here I am not wishing anything bad to happen to anyone I am wishing for a cessation of conflict. Maybe here I wish for UN sanctions to encourage the war to stop – does this constitute wishing something bad upon the perpetrator? If so, does this constitute retribution?

### **Nussbaum’s Objection**

Nussbaum would say that I desire retribution in terms of sanctions as sanctions would hurt the country they are placed upon so I do want some measure of retribution for the suffering caused. That would constitute retribution and therefore, support my theory of my feeling anger.

***Student***: My flatmate keeps eating my food and I am really angry. I do not wish retribution but I hope that next week at the club night she doesn’t win the singing competition she’s entered in. [[8]](#footnote-8)

### **Nussbaum’s Objection**

The objection would again be that either I am not reporting accurately the emotion I am feeling or that I do not feel anger as I do not with retribution. Nussbaum might say that I am wishing for my friend’s life to go a little more badly and therefore engaging in retributive thinking.

### **My Response to the Objection**

If I want my friend to lose a competition that she may not win anyway but I do not take any action for this to come to pass I am not so sure that’s very retributive thinking. Here I am not wishing bad things to happen per se and I am not reducing my flatmates standard of life or lowering her on a social scale. So, this – by Nussbaum’s standards- surely can’t constitute retribution.

***Family***:I get angry at my Husband for not cleaning up but I don’t want any kind of retribution for him. [[9]](#footnote-9)

### **Nussbaum’s Objection**

Nussbaum could say again that I am not reporting accurately what I am feeling but also in this case the actual wish for my husband to clean up might be retributive in itself.

### **My Response to the Objection**

Why would wanting someone to perform a normal human activity with no detriment to them amount to retribution. Are we assuming here that my Husband doesn’t want to clean up and he sees it as downranking in some way for him to clean or is it just that he forgot and having been reminded he is happy to continue cleaning up. Only the first of those scenarios involves some description of retributive thinking.

## The difficulty with Retributive Thinking

Nussbaum could say the following to all three cases in the previous section:

1. You are not actually angry
2. You want retribution but don’t realise it

In 1 there is a huge problem where people are notoriously bad at reporting their mental state. Indeed, Nussbaum herself states: “Anger … subjective feelings of some type are typically present as well but they are likely to be highly varied (both within a person at different times and across people)”[[10]](#footnote-10). This makes it very hard to evaluate if there is any anger or wish for retribution going on. Also, between people we may see different reactions and displays of anger so how could we form a baseline. It even harder to determine if the person is mistaking one emotion for another. I might be tempted to ask; do we need a test here to see if someone is truly angry? Could we look at a person’s behaviour over time and then be able to tell when they are angry? This would involve some Psychological research and this would need to take place before I could answer any of the above. Here, at best, we have an impasse.

In 2 it’s very difficult to determine what Nussbaum, thinks constitutes retribution. Does retribution have to be all out violence and hatred or can it be as simple as in the case on Gaza where we would simply like something to stop? If we are not lowering someone else on the social scale and we are not harming their circle of concern I can’t see any other way we could exact retribution as these two propositions are what Nussbaum uses to frame her idea of retribution. Nussbaum does not specify what form retribution could or would take and does not address circumstances where anger is present without feelings of retribution. I am not sure if depends on the case. How about the situation where I don’t want anything bad to happen to someone but I don’t want anything good to happen either? This seems like a more of neutral landscape.

If we have cases where anger doesn’t have a retributive element then maybe these cases are appropriate cases of anger. It’s very hard to assess Nussbaum’s view of retribution without more clarity around the idea of what is constituted by retribution.

So, what about in the case where I get angry at myself for doing something stupid? This is an interesting case that I would like to explore as I feel we might find some more challenges to Nussbaum’s view here.

## ‘Self-Retributive’ Anger

Firstly, can I be angry at myself and secondly can I then feel retribution towards myself. A simple google search reveals a plethora of links to self-help material in order to learn how to stop punishing yourself. One interesting quote I came across was this:

“Do you feel stuck in chronic self-punishment? Do you reflexively turn against yourself with anger or scorn whenever you feel embarrassment, a lack of control, rejection or failure? Do you yell at yourself, call yourself names, cut off from people who care about you or neglect your physical needs? Do you sometimes even feel compelled to inflict physical harm on yourself?”[[11]](#footnote-11)

This indicates that self-retribution is far more endemic than we might like to think and can be quite serious. This type of retributive anger clearly does have potential to cause psychological harm to oneself and therefore the anger here cannot be appropriate, however, it is clearly widespread. Nussbaum states that “people are always ranking themselves against one another”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Let’s consider the following example.

*YouTube:* I may have performed worse on a test than I expected because I got distracted by YouTube. I am now very angry at myself for not doing as well as I would have hoped.

In this situation, I am likely to be very angry at myself because I knew what I should do but I chose the easy or fun way instead and had some leisure time instead of studying. My end goal of getting a good grade failed and only I am to blame. If we assume here then that anger is present, then according to Nussbaum, I must be feeling retributive thoughts towards myself. This become very complicated depending on what view we take of this situation. If we have an inner self that we can speak to and berate if we choose then we are able to be angry at this inner self. Am I then going to take social lowering action or direct retributive action towards myself. Whether it could be constituted as a tangible lowering of our inner self without this perceived lowering causing irreparable damage or psychological issues is another matter. Self-harming could be retributive action on the self in some cases. If we were able to berate our inner self for many different things we may find that we had a disconnect between our inner and real self and maybe judge our inner self to be blameworthy but out outer self not blameworthy. This could start to border on schizophrenia depending how far this theory goes. However, it is hard to know if, when I am angry at myself am I exacting retribution or lowering my inner self? I think this monologue serves as a reflective tool to understand that next time, when I take my test, I should stay off YouTube.

Again, we would encounter the same objection from Nussbaum that I may not be adequately reporting the emotion that I am feeling. However – I don’t see how retribution could come into this unless we took berating oneself as above some sort of baseline to constitute retribution.

However, what if I was one of the people in the first quote of this section that caused self-harm to myself – where would that sit within retribution. Here Nussbaum would almost certainly say that I had taken retribution on myself as it is quite clear by the harming I had done. It is difficult to draw a line here, do we say that a simple derogatory monologue is retributive or does it have to be some kind of serious harm such as self-harming? This might actually have further consequences out in the wider world, for example, if we could say that, for example, someone who has a negative monologue might be more likely to self-harm due to self-retributive feelings towards them self, we could then try to prevent this from happening. I imagine that more work has been done on this in the psychological field but I think it is important in both psychology and philosophy that we are able to establish this baseline.

Here we have several cases of anger minus retribution and if any of these are correct then Nussbaum’s argument may be flawed in some way.

# **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is difficult to come to any valid position on this argument as more needs to be clarified and further empirical research may need to be undertaken.

In section one we saw the different types of anger and how they might function in some examples. I then discussed instances of when anger can be beneficial. Two examples showed us that anger can be used in a beneficial way to navigate office politics and in order to give people some control over their lives. Nussbaum agrees that anger can, in certain cases, be beneficial but that in the long-term anger is morally wrong.

Three examples then gave instances of where anger may be present without a wish for retribution. At this point I encountered possible objections from Nussbaum stating that I may not actually be angry and that I might be feeling another emotion or that I wished for retribution but didn’t admit it to myself. The response I gave was that it is very hard to determine people’s feelings and it is even harder for someone to report their own feelings. At this point, more empirical research was called for into this area in order to obtain more evidence to support a conclusion.

The other large problem here was that retribution was not very well defined within Nussbaum’s paper and so in order to be able to conclude what retribution might mean, and to be able to baseline it, we would need more clarity on this point from Nussbaum.

The example of self-retributive anger is a very interesting example slightly independent of the others as it demands assumptions be made as to whether we have an inner and outer self and if it is even possible to berate ourselves. A conclusion from this exploration was unable to be reached as it would depend on whether people see an inner and outer self. According to the sheer number of Google resources it is clear that some sort of self-retributive anger exists in general but more research would have to be done into what this actually constitutes.

Fry states, not all anger is justified and as long as we have concepts of ourselves, others, and the relations amongst us, some anger will sometimes be unintelligible.[[13]](#footnote-13) I believe anger can play a valuable role in society and for people in general, but in a more productive manner than full blown aggressive output and thoughts of retribution. Maybe the role it might play is simply that of an indicator that something is wrong or amiss. I would be more inclined to support this conclusion.

# **Bibliography**

1. Fischhoff, B., Gonzalez, R. M., Small, D. A., & Lerner, J. S. (2003). *Evaluating the success of terror risk communications. Biosecurity and Bioterrorism: Biodefense Strategy*, Practice, and Science, 1(4), 255-258.
2. Dijksterhuis, A., & Bargh, J. A. (2001). *The perception-behavior expressway: Automatic effects of social perception on social behavior.* Advances in experimental social psychology, 33, 1-40.
3. Frye, M. (1983). A note on anger. *The politics of reality:* Essays in feminist theory, 84-94.
4. DeAngelis, *T. (2003). When anger's a plus.*Monitor on Psychology, 34(3), 44-45.
5. Berkowitz, L., & Harmon-Jones, E. (2004). *Toward an understanding of the determinants of anger. Emotion*, 4(2), 107.
6. Aristotle, U. (2004). *Rhetoric*. Kessinger Publishing.
7. Smith, A. (2010). *The theory of moral sentiments.* Penguin.
8. Nussbaum, M. C. (2016). *Anger and forgiveness: resentment, generosity, justice*. Oxford University Press.
9. Bloom, P. (2013*). Just babies: The origins of good and evil*. Broadway Books.
10. https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2013/11/20/how-to-stop-punishing-yourself/

1. Smith, A. (2010). *The theory of moral sentiments*. Penguin. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Transition Anger* is a case that would follow on from both payback anger and status anger. This is where, Nussbaum states, the Parent would realise that payback would into bring the child back and so the anger would subside into grief. This transition can no longer really be termed anger and would ultimately, according to Nussbaum, lead to forgiveness. Transition anger doesn’t focus on status and neither does it want the offender to suffer. There is no so called magical thinking here. Transition anger concentrates on reform and justice. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. DeAngelis, T. (2003). *When anger's a plus.*Monitor on Psychology, 34(3), 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. DeAngelis, *T. (2003). When anger's a plus.*Monitor on Psychology, 34(3), 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Fischhoff, B., Gonzalez, R. M., Small, D. A., & Lerner, J. S. (2003). *Evaluating the success of terror risk communications. Biosecurity and Bioterrorism: Biodefense Strategy*, Practice, and Science, 1(4), 255-258. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Fischhoff, B., Gonzalez, R. M., Small, D. A., & Lerner, J. S. (2003). *Evaluating the success of terror risk communications. Biosecurity and Bioterrorism: Biodefense Strategy*, Practice, and Science, 1(4), 255-258. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Explored during class discussions [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Explored during class discussions [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Explored during class discussions [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nussbaum, M. C. (2016). *Anger and forgiveness: resentment, generosity, justice*. Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2013/11/20/how-to-stop-punishing-yourself/ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nussbaum, M. C. (2016). *Anger and forgiveness: resentment, generosity, justice*. Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Frye, M. (1983). A note on anger. *The politics of reality*: Essays in feminist theory, 84-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)