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Anger: Scary Good

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ABSTRACT

I argue that recent attempts to vindicate blame have failed to fully face the vengeful feelings and angry outbursts that have led to scepticism about blame's ethical status. This paper endeavours to fill that gap. I claim that feelings of angry blame are characteristically responsive to threats to social status, and that angry expressions are distinctive because of their scariness. Still, I conclude, there is an important place for angry blame in good lives and good relationships. In offering a defence of angry feelings and expressions, I argue that blame's seemingly objectionable features are crucial to its expressive and restorative power.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen the emergence of a robust literature on the nature of blame, its characteristic features, and its role in moral life. Some of the greatest contributions to this body of scholarship have stressed blame's function as a means of 'moral protest' (see Hieronymi [2001: 547] and Smith [2013: 27–48]), and its ability to prompt 'moral conversation' (see McKenna [2013]) or 'exchange' (see McGeer [2013]).

But it seems to me that these theories, though suggestive and important, are limited: on their own, they are insufficient to vindicate the feeling and expression of angry blame. This is because they overlook, and sometimes even distort, the very aspects of blame that stand in greatest need of justification. A fully satisfying account of blame's role in moral life requires an honest look at the uncomfortable feelings and raw emotional outbursts that have led philosophers to question the moral justification of blame in the first place. Crucially, this examination must go beyond an exposition of what it is at which blaming attitudes and reactions aim. Indeed, the analysis must expose the characteristic *ways* in which blame accomplishes its tasks.¹ What, if anything, is distinctive about full-blooded, painful, expressions of anger and resentment that makes them good 'conversation starters' or means of moral protest? I argue that anger is distinctive because it is *scary*: its connection to action and (sometimes violent) threat allows those who employ it to

¹ To her credit, McGeer [2013] also sees the limitations of theories that 'sanitize' our blaming practices. I argue in section 4, however, that her treatment of anger is itself too 'sanitized'.

stand up for themselves, to establish or re-establish social standing and self-respect, and to bring transgressors back into the moral fold.

My task in this paper is to explain how and why anger works when it works, and what we would lose if we succeeded in eliminating it from our emotional repertoires. I begin, in [section 2](#), by exploring two related questions about the internal logic of resentful angry feelings. First, to what do they respond? Second, what are their aims? I focus on anger that is responsive to, and involves a desire to rectify, perceived slights and disruptions to the moral order, or what Martha Nussbaum [2016] calls ‘status injuries’. Drawing from the work of Jeffrie Murphy, Pamela Hieronymi, and others, I offer a brief endorsement of this goal of status-restoration, and I respond to Nussbaum’s recent suggestion that the desire to ‘lower’ offenders in the name of such rebalancing is objectionably narcissistic.

But vindicating fitting blaming feelings is not enough to justify their expression. In [section 3](#), I illuminate the ‘ugly’ aspects of expressed angry blame—its connection to threat, its tendency to jolt, and its ability to scare. In doing so, I explain why misdirected and excessive anger can be so corrosive, but I argue that anger’s objectionable features are essential to its expressive and restorative force. And so, after responding in sections 4 and 5 to some objections to angry expressions, I conclude that there is a place for angry blame in good lives and good relationships. In a cluster of morally significant cases, feeling and expressing resentful anger is fitting, virtuous, and well-suited to communicate a laudable fighting spirit. The banishment of anger would represent a serious loss.

2. Angry Feelings

Before proceeding, I should be clear about what I mean when referring to ‘angry blame’ or just to ‘blame’.² We use the word ‘blame’ in various contexts, to describe a wide range of reactions. I will defend angry feelings and expressions of resentment, pangs and outbursts of righteous anger that respond to imbalances in social status caused by transgression. I have chosen to concentrate on this sort of blame for two reasons—first, because it seems to be a socially significant species of moral anger, and, second, because its attendant hostility and antagonism, as well as its focus on relative status, make it seem especially in need of moral justification.

Before attempting to justify the expression of such anger, I shall first, briefly, consider the logic and ethics of the feeling. When is angry blame fitting? One plausible suggestion—offered in various forms by R. Jay Wallace [2011], Christopher Evan Franklin [2013], and Victoria McGeer [2013], among others—is that anger responds to damage or threats to things that we value, and can help us to protect those things from harm. More broadly, Shaun Nichols [2007: 413] has written that ‘moral anger is triggered by perceived injustices.’

² The term ‘angry blame’ comes from Susan Wolf [2011]. She defends the feeling and expression of the angry attitudes by highlighting their expressive and restorative power, and so we are in broad agreement. However, this paper goes beyond Wolf’s view, which does not emphasize the characteristic scariness and status-focused nature of anger. Because I see anger as both characteristically status-focused and scary, I am perhaps more sympathetic to anger’s sceptics than Wolf is. As a result, my justification of anger takes a different form from hers, by emphasizing the significance and value of these potentially objectionable features.

But philosophers (Nietzsche and Joseph Butler, for example) and self-reflective non-philosophers alike have long noted a tight connection between resentment and a desire to strike back at offenders, and the language of protection and defence is not particularly helpful in making sense of this relationship. A fully satisfying account of angry feelings will improve our understanding of why they so often manifest themselves in retaliatory desires and behaviour.

Nussbaum [2016] has recently offered one explanation of this kind, arguing that anger is prompted by the perception of relative down-ranking or ‘status injury’. Nussbaum, as we will see shortly, thinks that such status-anger is rooted in narcissism and is thus morally objectionable. But plenty of pro-resentment theorists (see, for example, [Murphy and Hampton 1988: 16] and Hieronymi [2001: 547]) share her conviction that anger, resentment, and blame are particularly responsive to perceived slights or status injuries.

Consideration of the ritual of apology and forgiveness can help to highlight the strength of this connection. In offering an apology and asking for forgiveness, the transgressor humbles himself to the wronged parties and (re)affirms his commitment to shared standards. [Murphy and Hampton 1988: 28] goes a step further, suggesting that the apology ritual can involve self-lowering, even humiliation.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that every instance of genuine anger or blame is a response to a perceived down-ranking. Still, I think that focusing especially on these kinds of slights can help us to fully understand our angry-blaming practices. Moreover, it seems to me that those instances of resentment that stem from perceived status injuries are most in need of moral defence: some bristle at the thought that we ought to care about relative status at all, and especially at the idea that we should direct unpleasant attitudes toward others to correct imbalances in rank.

The discussion of apology is crucial to answering another question about angry blame’s internal norms: what is the goal of anger? According to Hieronymi [2001: 547], resentment is a kind of ‘moral protest’, a way for the aggrieved to register that he or she will not stand for being treated as less-than. Nussbaum [2016], however, thinks that anger aims more directly at abasement than at protest. On her account, when resentment and anger are rational, they involve the desire to put down the offender, to lower his or her relative status in order to correct the imbalance in rank that the transgression caused or exposed. Nussbaum [ibid.: 28] finds this desire to be narcissistic because it implies that the aggrieved party sees the immoral action as being all about his or her status rather than the ‘intrinsic’ badness of the act itself.

I’ll make two replies to Nussbaum’s charge of narcissism. First, the desire to lower offenders need not be narcissistic at all. After all, the thought motivating the urge to diminish transgressors may be that ‘no one should be above the law’ or that ‘the norms of this community apply to him, too’, as opposed to ‘he doesn’t get to be above *me*.’ Imagine, for example, feeling resentful of someone who cuts in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles. It seems reasonable, and consistent with the spirit of resentful anger, that one might wish for an employee to send the cutter-in to the back of the line, and for the cutter-in to apologize to those who had been patiently awaiting their turns. ‘He needs to learn that the rules apply to everyone’, one might think. This sentiment, although still involving a desire to lower the

offender, is not narcissistic: it doesn't imply an undue focus on *one's own* status. Rather, it reflects a desire for fairness and equal adherence to relevant norms.

And so it is worth questioning Nussbaum's claim that a concern with status implies a 'tendency to see everything that happens as about oneself and one's own rank' [ibid.]. Here we should be careful not to conflate a focus on rank with a focus on oneself. In the case of the line cutter, or in familiar cases of resentment on behalf of someone else, the desire to humble need not stem from a worry about one's *own* position. Of course, one who valued *only* his own status, or who overvalued it, would be guilty of narcissism; but merely feeling resentful in response to wrongdoing implies neither of those faults.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, being concerned about one's own status, even when this concern manifests itself in a vengeful desire to 'right the balance' of relative rank or to preserve the moral order, is permissible and, in some cases, admirable. The perception that one's relative rank has been compromised, or that one has been disrespected, is compatible with, and perhaps in some cases even essential to, a complete understanding of many transgressions. As much as we may not want to admit it, the actions of others *can* diminish us. In a certain mood, it is easy to say that we ought not to care about our social standing, that we should render ourselves invulnerable to the contempt and status-related disrespect of others by reminding ourselves of our intrinsic worth, moral status, and inalienable dignity. In practise, however, there are times when our dignity really *is* at risk, when we are genuinely 'dissed'. Of course, there is a sense in which all of us have moral worth, no matter how others slight us, but it is not unreasonable to care about our relative *de facto* statuses as well, and about the moral order in which they exist.³

To be fair, Nussbaum acknowledges that some slights do amount to affronts on dignity. Using the example of discrimination, she explains that even in these cases, lowering the offender does not accomplish the goal of securing the respect and dignity the mistreated party desires [ibid.: 29]. It is worth noting that many kinds of wrongs, not just discrimination, can impinge upon one's dignity or social standing. Even minor slights, such as being interrupted or ignored, can reveal disrespect. In any event, Nussbaum is right to say that, when others threaten and compromise our dignity, what we want is to be treated respectfully. But this respect and dignity is often partially constituted by the ability to make our anger felt and understood in the interest of restoring our social standing. Ideally, expressions of anger will achieve these goals by prompting transgressors to reconsider their actions and to offer self-humbling apologies that reflect an understanding of their misdeeds and their consequences, and that reaffirm a commitment to shared norms and values.⁴

It should come as no surprise, given her criticisms of anger, that Nussbaum finds this apology/forgiveness ritual morally suspect. She writes [ibid.: 74] that

the forgiveness process between humans also focuses unduly on status, suggesting that lowness and abasement compensate for a lowering or status-offense that the offender has inflicted The victim is encouraged to enjoy the spectacle of [the wrongdoer's] groveling as an intrinsically valuable part of the forgiveness process.

³ Here, and in my emphasis on the connections between anger and self-respect, I'm drawing on ideas developed by Murphy. For more on why indifference to one's social position is not a virtue, see his contribution to *Forgiveness and Mercy* [Murphy and Hampton 1988: 93–4].

⁴ McGeer [2013: 180] is insightful on this point. For her, the purpose and chief salutary feature of blame is its ability to prompt reflection and restorative response.

While Nussbaum is right, as we have seen, to stress the importance of status in moral exchanges that proceed from anger to forgiveness, her emphasis on *lowering*, specifically, is slightly misleading. Yes, apology is a status-levelling mechanism, but, as [Murphy and Hampton 1988: 28] notes, rebalancing and restoration of status may be achieved either by lowering the offender or by raising the victim (or both). The point is important because it reminds us that, even when we *do* wish for wrongdoers to lower themselves by apologizing, the goal is not for the abasement to ‘compensate’ for the wrongdoing, nor is it to provide an enjoyable spectacle. Rather, we hope that offenders will apologize because, in doing so, they demonstrate their commitment to the relationship and its (violated) governing norms. Status-levelling apologies, either through lowering, raising, or both, allow wrongdoer and wronged to proceed on equal moral footing: they offer an assurance that the miscreant does not see himself as ‘above the law’.

In fact, it isn’t clear that apology would even be recognizable without its status-altering features. Sincerely uttering ‘I’m sorry’, ‘I hope you can forgive me’, or even ‘You were right and I was wrong’⁵ is likely to force the speaker to ‘swallow his pride’ and to inspire a welcome sense of validation and worth in the recipient. I think that this analysis takes much of the sting out of Nussbaum’s concern that, in the Christian forgiveness ritual from which our contemporary, secular, apology and forgiveness practices have emerged, ‘the drama of lowness and fear has been amped up so high that there seems to be no room for personal dignity or self-respect’ [2016: 74].⁶ What is a transgressor, who regrets having hurt someone for whom he cares, and who wants, perhaps even desperately, to reassure the victim that he sees her as a moral equal, supposed to do? Of course, excessive grovelling is undignified, but surely we can leave room for a distinction between bad apologies that involve sickening self-abasement and good ones that involve a self-humbling that is both healthy and tasteful.⁷

3. Scary, Good

In the previous section, I focused on the fittingness and aims of resentful status-based anger that directs itself toward striking back at transgressors in order to restore the balance of relative status. I suggested that such feelings are apt and justified when one’s status, or the moral order more generally, has been compromised or threatened by a wrongdoer’s bad action.

But one need not express every fitting attitude, and feeling another person’s expressed anger involves a kind of uneasiness that philosophers have noticed and

⁵ My grandmother encourages anyone shown to be wrong in family arguments—which are understood to range from the most trifling factual disagreements (whether the movie starts at 7:00 or 7:05, for example) to full-blown moral disputes—to perform this restorative allocation.

⁶ In mentioning fear, Nussbaum is onto something significant, as we will see in the next section.

⁷ Nussbaum [2016] does see a place for a certain form of anger, which she calls ‘transition-anger’, in a good life. The key feature of transition-anger is that it is not status-based. People feeling transition-anger do not see wrongdoing as an affront to the victim’s standing and have no interest in lowering the wrongdoer. Instead, transition-anger is forward-looking, inspiring the angry person to envision a better future. In many cases, this attitude is laudable, but I do not see it as an adequate replacement for the kind of status-anger that Nussbaum rejects and that I endorse. As I’ve indicated, investment in social status (even one’s own social status) can be permissible and good, as can efforts to rectify imbalances in standing by seeking humbling (status-levelling) apologies.

discussed and yet have failed to fully face. This is the discomfort that comes from the characteristic volume and venom of expressions of resentment. Without addressing this aspect of angry blame, we will not be able to produce a satisfying justification of its expression.

To see whether expressions of blame are justifiable, one must confront the features that distinguish them from other emotional responses and that make them distinctively unpleasant: one must reckon honestly with the aspects of anger that would lead one to question its justification in the first place. Next, one must explain why angry blaming is a respectable (or good) part of our moral practice, preferably in a way that vindicates the very features of angry blame that make it appear morally questionable. These are the main tasks of this section.

3.1. Anger among Intimates

One way to see what makes angry blame unique as a means of moral protest, conversation-starting, or social levelling is to examine alternative means by which we might criticize objectionable conduct. McGeer [2013: 182] attempts such an examination and argues that only emotional expressions of our displeasure will do:

Emotions are what biologists call ‘expensive signals’: they are hard to generate under conditions that do not naturally prime a person to experience them; equally they are hard to fake. Blaming emotions thus have a special communicative (and evidential) power. Since they are hard to generate under conditions wherein blamers do not genuinely perceive an injury, they convey to transgressors both how seriously blamers regard the offense and their sincerity in pressing their normative demands.

I agree that the angry emotions have, as McGeer suggests, a ‘special communicative power’, but her explanation of this power, although helpful, is incomplete. I will argue that what is being communicated is not exactly the seriousness with which one regards the offense, or the sincerity of the moral objection, but rather another kind of seriousness—namely, a willingness to *fight*.

Before I defend this claim, let us consider McGeer’s suggestion that emotions convey the sincerity of a normative demand. Imagine that you’ve wronged a friend, and that he informs you, in a firm, emotionless tone, that if you do not produce the apology that you owe him then he will no longer spend time with you. To my mind, an angry expression of these thoughts, as opposed to your friend’s measured response, would not indicate that he took the offense more seriously, nor would it add sincerity to his moral demand. Moreover, even if emotions are sometimes necessary to convey a sense of seriousness and sincerity, McGeer’s argument (which focuses on the difficulty of faking emotions and the energy required to generate them) is not specific to the *angry* and *blaming* emotions. Your friend could convey seriousness and sincerity by expressing sadness and disappointment as well.

McGeer may agree with these points. Her thesis was not that anger is the only way to convey seriousness and sincerity, and so I do not mean so much to object as to provide what I take to be an important elaboration. My complaint is not that McGeer is wrong to say that the angry attitudes can communicate seriousness and sincerity. Rather, my worry is that her account does not isolate the *distinctive* features of anger that allow it to do its characteristic work.

Wallace [2011] and Franklin [2013] suggest a different answer to the question of the unique power of the angry attitudes. Wallace [2011: 369] argues that

resentment and indignation are *relational*, especially apt for protesting violations of *my* dignity or *your* rights. He holds that sadness and disappointment, on the other hand, are not capable of responding in this way to the relational aspect of moral values. Franklin [2013: 221–2] also emphasizes the ‘relational’ quality of anger—its ability to respond to someone *in particular* having transgressed against something that the victim values. Sadness, in contrast, at least according to Franklin, responds only to the fact of loss or harm to a valued object rather than to a wilful ‘disvaluation’ or ‘violation’ by another agent. As a result, sadness lacks ‘the dimension of condemnation required for defending and protecting moral values’ [ibid.].

But it seems to me that, although certain kinds of sadness may not reflect the kind of investment in value or relational concerns that Wallace and Franklin have in mind, other kinds of sadness and disappointment do so quite well. If I decide to skip my sister’s housewarming party, for example, her sorrow will not take the form of some abstract melancholy, but will instead be sadness *that I*, her own brother, would miss her celebration. It seems implausible to hold that this sort of sad reaction indicates that she cares less about my feelings toward her than she could, or that she sees my absence as anything less than a serious ‘disvaluation’ of her and her preferences.

To take another example, I am sure that I am not the only one who, as a child, dreaded disappointing his parents more than angering them. When I disappointed them, they were not disappointed that someone had done a bad thing; they were disappointed *in me* because of what *I did*.⁸

Certain kinds of disappointment and sadness, then, express genuine concern for valued objects and relationships, but a sad or disappointed reaction as opposed to an angry one can reveal a great deal about a respondent’s interpretation of a slight and his or her relationship with the transgressor. The meanings of these different reactions, as well as the reasons *why* sad, disappointed, and angry responses can take on these meanings, have been underexplored.

The problem, I think, is that philosophers have tried to locate the force of anger and resentment in too ‘rational’ a place. My suggestion is that anger confronts us on a more ‘basic’ level than a ‘rational’ presentation of reasons, arguments, and even feelings. Expressions of anger are effective in getting transgressors to reconsider their behaviour, and in prompting them to engage in the status-balancing apology ritual, because of the expressions’ connection to *action*, even violent and physical threats. Simply put, anger is scary.⁹ It is because of this sometimes unconscious association with threat and danger that expressions of anger and resentment

⁸ I do not mean to suggest that ‘interpersonal’ or ‘directed’ sadness and disappointment always arise in response to transgressions. They do not. One can be disappointed in one’s child for his choice of college major or in a friend for her taste in music, for example. I’m grateful to Susan Wolf for raising this point.

⁹ My claim is that anger is characteristically scary, not that anger is *always* scary, or that it is only justified when it is scary. Nor do I claim that the status-based resentment on which I focus here is the only kind of anger. A football fan may, for example, become angry with her favourite team’s quarterback when he throws an interception, and never intend, or threaten, to do anything about it. And then there is anger on behalf of others, a phenomenon more closely related to the kind of angry blame in which I am interested, but that I do not address in detail. There are important analogies, and disanalogies, between resentment and these varieties of anger. I think that this paper can provide at least a start toward helping us to understand better the purpose and method of those angry feelings, but my remarks cannot tell the whole story on their own.

have their expressive and restorative power. The suspension of civility demands attention.¹⁰

When wrongdoing occurs in the context of a close relationship, interpersonal disappointment and sadness can, of course, be appropriate, but anger has a distinct place in these intimate contexts. I have been arguing that expressing disappointment or sadness to someone, like expressing resentment, can be a way of conveying one's (often deep) disapproval. But disappointment characteristically goes beyond resentment by revealing a kind of despair: rather than fighting to keep the wrongdoer in the fold, disappointment can signal withdrawal and re-evaluation. This is why it can sting so deeply to learn that one has disappointed or saddened a close friend or family member. If the disappointment is justified, then one has not only failed to live up to the standards that govern the relationship; one has failed to be or become the kind of person that the wronged party thought that one was or could be.

This kind of serious shortcoming is in general harder to overcome than is a transgression that would inspire anger. Anger does not necessarily imply a re-evaluation of character or a weakening of the relationship. In fact, in many cases it implies the opposite—namely, that the offender, through humbling himself and apologizing, can more or less set things right, and that the parties can put the incident behind them. In anger, we *fight back*. We might fight for the relationship to remain as it is, to return to how it was, or to realize its potential. Thus, a willingness to fight before reconsidering or withdrawing can be a sign of trust and investment. In expressing anger, as opposed to disappointment or sadness, we communicate a certain kind of faith, or at least hope, that the episode that gave rise to the anger will not force us to reassess or terminate the relationship.¹¹

It is no accident that receiving this message, feeling this willingness to fight, is jarring, unpleasant, and sometimes even intimidating. In order to fully understand the connections between anger, payback, and the restoration of status and self-respect, we must face up to anger's scariness. Expressions of anger are distinctive not because of their ability to convey sincerity or to call attention to specifically interpersonal slights; rather, the crucial feature of anger is its promise of *action* should the imbalances that led to the anger persist.¹²

3.2. Anger toward Strangers

What about anger toward strangers? Once again, we may begin by contrasting anger with sadness. Suppose that you cry in response to a friend's slight. If he is

¹⁰ I'm grateful to Kristina Gehrman for suggesting this way of putting the point.

¹¹ Here I depart again from Nussbaum [2016: 115], who suggests that disappointment, not anger, is generally the better'-grounded' response to minor wrongdoing.

¹² At this point, one might worry that the scariness of anger might prompt offenders to offer apologies a little *too* hastily, perhaps even without understanding what it is for which they are apologizing. These sorts of bad apology are indeed familiar, but I don't see them as a threat to the justification of angry expressions, for two reasons. First, a certain kind of bad apology is underrated. If the anger in question is justified and appropriately expressed, a wrongdoer's fearful apology, although less than ideal, can at least signal a willingness to humble herself in the interest of mending the relationship. Second, and more importantly, I do not claim that victims ought to *accept* bad apologies. If one scares a wrongdoer into such an inadequate display, it is perfectly reasonable to demand something more satisfying ('What are you sorry *for?*'). In this way, even bad apologies may open the door to conversation and reconciliation. (I am grateful to Brian Berkey for raising this concern.)

truly your friend, and cares about you and your feelings, seeing your tears may be disconcerting to him and will perhaps force him to consider his remarks and the pain that they caused you. He will feel pangs of remorse and offer you an apology. Now imagine being wronged by a stranger. Will seeing you cry affect him at all? Perhaps, depending on who you are and who he is, and what social positions you occupy (sex, race, sexual orientation, class, and a host of other factors could be relevant). But for a particularly hard-hearted stranger, an expression of anger, which will be more likely to jolt, scare, or destabilize, may be required to do the job. Sometimes only a threat will do.¹³ The accounts of Hieronymi [2001], Wallace [2011], and Franklin [2013], with their language of protest, protection, and defence, discerningly call attention to this tight connection between anger and action.

In section 2, I argued that angry blame aims to restore equality of status between parties. Expressions of anger may lead to this kind of rebalancing, in two ways. So far, I have been discussing cases in which a jostle prompts the offender to realize the error of his ways, renounce his bad action, and offer an apology. This is, to borrow McGeer's [2013] term, a 'mentalized' version of the process. I suspect, however, that in many cases, and especially in cases of stranger-directed anger, the language of 'conversation' and 'exchange' is a misleading over-rationalization of the blaming process. Athletes who play contact sports, for example, often have occasion to make use of short bursts of anger ('Get your elbow out of my face!'). These encounters are successful when the opponent retreats and stops 'playing dirty'. Apologies and feelings of remorse are irrelevant; the important thing is that he backs down. Often, these reactions are not 'mentalized' in the way that McGeer [ibid.], McKenna [2013], and others have in mind, but this doesn't automatically unjustify them. The dirty player disrespects his opponent and the norms of the game; in expressing anger and getting him to back off, the angry player protects himself and re-establishes his standing.

We can construct moral cases along the same lines. Imagine a woman responding to a catcall on the street by whipping around, locking eyes with the harasser and yelling, 'Don't you *ever* talk to me like that!' It seems to me that whether or not the woman's anger inspires the catcaller to question the moral justification of his behaviour or to feel remorseful is beside the point. At least in some plausible version of the case, that is not the anger's aim. Is it thereby unjustified, or somehow undeserved? Quite the opposite: the anger is an apt, and morally justified, response to disrespectful behaviour that attacks the victim's *de facto* social standing. No matter how the harasser reacts, the outburst is a way of striking back, one that forcefully communicates a readiness to fight for respect.

4. Pleas for Composure

I think that the forgoing remarks suggest that life without the angry attitudes, in addition to being alien, would be impoverished, depriving us of the ability to fight for our relationships and respect with dignity and authenticity. But perhaps the

¹³ There is, of course, another reason why disappointment seems out of place when directed toward strangers: These emotions are most at home in relationships defined in part by high expectations of goodwill between the parties. Just as strangers cannot betray us, strangers, and even acquaintances, cannot disappoint or sadden us as our close friends or family members can.

anger sceptic is still unconvinced. ‘Isn’t the idea behind angry blame—that we need to give wrongdoers a visceral jolt to accomplish our goals—a bit cynical?’, we can imagine her asking. ‘Aren’t we giving up too easily on good old rational conversation?’

Responding to this objection is instructive because it brings out a false dichotomy implicit in the contemporary blame literature. On the prevailing model, blame is either ‘mentalizing’, again to use McGeer’s [2013] term, or it is objectionably primitive: it is either part of a rationalized ‘responsibility exchange’, or it is immoral bullying, manipulation via non-rational threat. One of the aims of this paper is to carve out a middle ground between these extremes. It is naïve to think that every rational agent will be instantly receptive to reasons and argument. It is often difficult, inconvenient, and embarrassing to back down, to reconsider one’s actions, or to allow oneself to feel guilt and remorse. Even caring and responsible people can be stubborn and dense, needing a ‘non-rational’ push to engage in these painful processes. The point could be read as an extension of Bernard Williams’s [1995] discussion of ‘proleptic’ blame: sometimes signalling a willingness to stand up and *fight* for one’s respect, or for the restoration of a relationship, gives the blamed agent a reason to care.

But one might wonder whether emotion is necessary at all; wouldn’t a system in which we dispassionately stated our demands and our threats (‘Unless you apologize to me, I will hit you, shame you, or withdraw good will’) be more honest and straightforward?¹⁴

There are many reasons to prefer our angry blaming practice to this dispassionate alternative. Here I will present two that I see as especially important. First, emotional responses signal a kind of vulnerability that stone-cold communication of facts does not. When we lash out in anger, we reveal that our aggressor’s actions can hurt and threaten us. One might, for example, implore an angry friend engaged in a dispute with an antagonist not to ‘give her the satisfaction’ of a reaction. I submit that this satisfaction is status-related. It is, roughly, the satisfaction of having gotten under the target’s skin, of knowing that she sees her social rank or self-respect as unstable enough that some status restoration is necessary in response to the offense.¹⁵

Angry reactions, then, precisely because they betray vulnerability, have a meaning, and a conversational role, that is different from emotionless alternatives, which are more appropriate for interactions with children or others who pose little threat to our social standing (‘If you don’t change your behaviour, I’ll send you to your room’). Where expressions of anger suggest emotional exposure and equality of status, composed statements of demands and threats can signal reserve, detachment,

¹⁴ The notion that the expression of any emotion could be objectionably manipulative raises questions about the extent to which the angry attitudes, and our expressions of them, are under our control. I cannot answer these questions here. In this paper, I have attempted to isolate patterns in our blaming behaviour and to present some arguments that will at least bear upon us when we *can* exercise control over our emotional response.

¹⁵ Thus, while the expression of resentment can often facilitate self-respect, in other cases a lack of response, or a contemptuous reaction, can be empowering, indicating that one cannot be wounded by the aggressor’s disrespectful behaviour. Sorting out exactly which of these reactions are best suited to which cases is important work that I cannot undertake here. For now, it is enough to say that we need room in the moral toolbox for all of them. For more on contempt as a salutary moral attitude, see Bell [2013].

and even superiority. These postures are not only incongruous with the ways in which we experience moral life; they are often objectionable in the context of close relationships in which we are, and ought to be, emotionally vulnerable.¹⁶ Thus, calmly and straightforwardly stating that one plans to make an aggressor's life worse in some way if he or she doesn't apologize would not serve the same social function as an angry reaction, even if the linguistic contents of the two responses were identical.

But even the assumption of identical content is dubious, and this is my second response to the cold-blooded proposal. The implicit threat that attends an angry reaction will often be less specific and content-rich than a calm and clear presentation of demands and penalties. Straightforwardness is not always a virtue; an angry expression of a moral demand allows a blamer to jolt her target without explicitly articulating a stakes-raising threat.

This makes expressions of anger 'conversational', in a way that has perhaps been underappreciated. Calm and specific articulation of demands and threats is limiting, both for the blamer and the blamed. It constricts the blamed agent's possible responses and, in turn, forces the blamer into a corner if the blamed agent calls the bluff or doubles down on his bad behaviour. In this way, a reactive system that sanctioned only the composed approach, like other practices that truncate conversation in favour of explicit statements of policy and consequences, could foster imperiousness and arrogance and could unduly restrict one's ability to protest. Angry outbursts, on the other hand, allow victims to leave interchanges open-ended because the threats implicit in their blaming responses are less than fully determinate.

5. Anger and Power

But not all expressions of anger succeed in threatening their targets. Marilyn Frye [1983] has observed, for example, that women's anger is often taken less seriously than is men's. Frye focuses on social expectations of women and their ability to occupy positions of authority, noting that it is harder for women to have their anger and resentment taken seriously in the workplace than in the kitchen, for instance. It is worth elaborating on Frye's thought in a way that extends the position that I have been developing here about the (sometimes unconscious) connection between anger and physical violence: one reason why men's anger is taken seriously is because failure to take it seriously can be dangerous. Moreover, men, and people in positions of power more generally, can safely express anger in situations where less powerful others cannot. It is safe for a rich white American to yell at his immigrant housekeeper, but not the other way around. My account helps to make sense of these power dynamics.

Do these imbalances in the ways that agents may successfully employ anger threaten its justification? This concern is naturally suggested by, and only fully appreciable in light of, a recognition of anger's scariness. In fact, the more seriously we take the connection between anger and threat, the more we ought to worry about anger's place in social life.

¹⁶ For related discussion of the kind of interpersonal caring that good relationships require, see Shabo [2012].

The objection calls attention to potential problems with anger expressed by both weak and powerful agents. Anger expressed by the weak may not always meet with uptake from more powerful targets, and its expression may expose victims to social and physical risks. And anger expressed by powerful agents may quickly become too scary, verging on dissent-crushing abuse, coercion, or cruelty.

It would be dishonest to deny the existence of these pitfalls, but banishing anger in an effort to avoid them would be a mistake. Consider the charge that expressing anger can expose one to physical and social danger. This is true. As illustrated by examples ranging from police brutality during protests, to violent interpersonal backlash, signalling a willingness to stand up and fight back against injustice can be risky. But this is no surprise. Anger is scary, after all, and oppressors are often right to be frightened by it. Indeed, the riskiness of anger contributes to its indispensability as a response to wrongdoing: in many cases, victims reasonably seek out precisely the response that is transgressive, scary, and brave.

This analysis complicates the worry about anger's ineffectiveness. Is anger that meets with derisive laughter, or that inspires fury rather than guilt, ineffective? In a way, yes: it departs from an ideal script for angry interaction in which the wrongdoer listens, understands, and apologizes. In another way, though, 'ineffective' anger can be successful in so far as it allows victims to stand up courageously for themselves, to fight back, and to foster a sense of dignity and self-respect.

Moreover, while we should acknowledge the social barriers to fully satisfying angry interactions, we shouldn't overestimate them. In practise, no single group has a monopoly on the effective and justified use of anger. This is in part because anger's scariness need not always involve an explicit or implicit threat of physical violence.¹⁷ In many cases, especially ones involving intimates, the 'scariness' of anger can take the form of a threat of a temporary withdrawal, or a temporary withdrawal of goodwill. These threats are nonviolent, but they still harness the characteristic jolting power of anger by suggesting a willingness to make the target's life more difficult if a change in behaviour, an apology, or a restoration of status is not forthcoming. Consider, for example, the phenomenon of giving a family member 'the silent treatment'. The aggrieved party gives the wrongdoer a threatening glimpse of a more permanent withdrawal, and the 'treatment' is effective when the vision is unpleasant or jarring enough for the transgressor to apologize or make a show of contrition. The 'scariness' in this case comes in the form of a silent withdrawal, but one that expresses anger rather than disappointment. The wrongdoer is invited to re-establish communication and to continue the relationship on terms that the silent victim can accept. A more permanent version of the 'silent treatment', a total termination of the relationship, may also destabilize the transgressor, but the interaction is different. The goal of the withdrawal in that

¹⁷ Still, I do not mean to diminish, or to disavow totally, the relationship between anger and violence. In fact, in certain cases, it is the threat of violence that makes anger an effective tool for putting a stop to degrading or bullying behaviour *without* the use of physical force. Questions of when and how we may employ, or threaten, violence in order to right or to prevent moral wrongs are notoriously difficult, and the answers will vary, depending on the specifics of the cases at issue. I cannot address these questions here. Provisionally, I will say that the kinds of threat that I have sought to justify must at least be accompanied by an intelligible (and legitimate) demand or complaint that addresses the target in a common moral language. Justified anger, although it need not be explicitly 'mentalizing' in McGeer's [2013] sense, must retain a distinctively human moral character. Thanks to Jerry Postema for suggesting this clarification.

case is the withdrawal itself, not scaring the wrongdoer straight; there is no invitation to go back to the way that things were.

But what about the ways in which the socially powerful can employ scary anger to consolidate and wield power? Won't tyrants use anger to intimidate and abuse? Yes, but I am not defending bullying, violent suppression, or anger that aims to protect a morally corrupt social order. Rather, I have tried to show what we would lose by banishing anger altogether, by explaining why and how anger works when it works *well*.

One might reasonably ask, though, how often this actually occurs: How frequently are the powerful able to avoid the hazards of anger gone wrong? How common it is for anger to advance socially acceptable goals? How often are the weak able to successfully use anger to get their targets' attention? In light of these questions, one might be tempted to think that the question of anger's ethical status is at least partially empirical. If the data suggest that we can handle anger, then it should stay; if not, then perhaps we should jettison it after all.¹⁸

I think that holding anger hostage to empirical data in this way would be a mistake. Anger is not exclusively, or even mostly, a tool of the powerful. (Consider the role of anger in social movements and in resistance to oppression).¹⁹ And, given the ability of even dismissed and backlash-inspiring anger to facilitate self-respect, I am sceptical that any empirical study could adequately measure its effectiveness or value. But even if data did suggest that expressions of anger often led to bad outcomes, trying to eliminate anger in response would do all of us a disservice. I have not made any statistical assertions about anger's tendency to have good consequences. Rather, I have sought to defend the claim that anger plays a crucial role in certain kinds of *ideal* relationships because of the way that it allows us to stand up for ourselves. With these ideals in mind, I think that the better answer to such data would be to redouble our efforts to create conditions that could facilitate the kind of uptake that socially weaker agents are sometimes denied, to set out to cultivate the virtue required to see when anger is called for and to dispense and receive it well, and to internalize the moral rules that govern and constrain its use.²⁰ An account of these virtues and rules is outside the scope of this paper, but acknowledging the tight connection between anger and threat can help us to understand some of the moral boundaries that we must (and do) draw around the expression of anger, and why those limitations are highly contextual, varying even in accord with the physical stature of the angry person.

Perhaps this response will strike some readers as naïve, but I see it as optimistic. I do not wish to downplay the risk of anger turning to abuse or being used to stifle dissent, and I recognize that cultivating the virtue required to learn and internalize the lessons of successful angry interactions is a difficult task. I hope to have shown, though, that it is an important one, worthy of our best efforts. As we aspire to do better, we should not despair. There is a rich variety of good relationships that we can observe and study, ones that not only survive angry blame but are

¹⁸ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer who prompted me to consider this suggestion.

¹⁹ For just one example among many, see Audre Lorde's [1981] speech.

²⁰ Along these lines, I am not claiming that anger should always be one's first response to a slight. It should not; in fact, in many cases, being slow to anger is virtuous.

strengthened by it.²¹ In the meantime, we should neither banish it nor squint until it appears defanged, scary though it is.²²

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²¹ Wolf [2011] emphasizes this point.

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