8 Anger, Moral Address, and Claimant Injustice

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Abstract

Anger dominates debates in the public sphere. Discussions especially on social media quickly and frequently become shouting matches whose participants are not afraid to express their contempt for each other. In this chapter I argue that anger is a reactive attitude that constitutes a communicative act. As such anger is a kind of moral address which requires uptake to be fully felicitous. I also show that the systematic silencing and disabling of apt anger constitutes an example of claimant injustice (Carbonell 2019). I conclude the chapter by demonstrating that calls for civility, especially online, always risk perpetrating this injustice.

Keywords

Anger; Reactive Attitudes; Silencing; Civility; Moral Address

Hardly a day goes by without someone complaining that debates on moral, social, and political issues that are conducted in the public arena have degenerated into little more than shouting matches. In particular, feeds on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram seem to be dominated by hate-filled diatribes between warring camps over issues, such as transgender rights, Brexit, or the POTUS’ latest tweet, that polarize entire populations. Judging from the alarm voiced from many quarters, one might think that vitriolic verbal confrontations are a new phenomenon that is wholly deplorable.

In this chapter I urge caution against the wholesale rejection of anger in political arguments. While anger can be misplaced and often has negative consequences, it is also uniquely valuable as a distinct kind of moral address. Angry speech, and angry silences—I argue—are communicative acts. As such they can be silenced and illocutionarily disabled by being denied uptake through being treated as mere rants. This silencing, when systemic, constitutes a distinctive form of discursive injustice. Calls for civility might have a place in some circumstances, but one must be aware that they can also be instrumental in the unjust muting of anger.

This chapter consists of five sections. In Section “ Anger, Politics, Social Media” I argue that anger has always been part of political, moral, and religious debates. However, there are also reasons to believe that some structural features of social media platforms are especially suited to causing and spreading angry responses. Hence, one might need to be especially careful about how to react to others’ anger online and how to deal with one’s own angry speech in this context. Section “Anger as Moral Evaluation” offers an analysis of the nature of anger as a moral evaluation that can be fitting or unfitting. Section “The Communicative Function of Anger” argues that anger serves a communicative function. Angry claims and silences are speech acts with a distinctive illocutionary force supplied by anger itself. Section “ Anger and Claimant Injustice” explains that the systematic silencing of anger is a kind of communicative injustice that is of a piece with what Carbonell (2019) has labeled “claimant injustice.” Section “Calls for Civility and Anger Management” shows that calls for civility often contribute to this injustice and suggests that social distance rather than anger is the most important cause of abusive communications on social media.

Anger, Politics, Social Media

There is widespread alarm about the angry nature of current debates on political and moral issues. In the United Kingdom at the time of writing this is particularly in evidence in the hate-filled diatribes on Twitter over transgender women. Similar dynamics were at play, and still are under the surface, in the verbal sparring over Brexit. In Italy discussions over migration are equally vitriolic, while in the United States recent debates over police brutality are divisive, angry, and confrontational. In this context, well-intentioned individuals issue calls for civility in the hope that, by cooling down the debate, the disagreeing parties might be able to listen to each other, and if appropriate, reach a compromise.

One might wonder, however, if the current situation is as unprecedented as some critics imply. In this regard there is reason for caution. Ancient Greeks and Romans already showed grave concern about the weaponization of disagreement into battles of words and diatribes. More recently, the early modern period has witnessed profound disagreements on matters of religion that gave rise to expulsions and violent conflicts. Early modern attempts to delineate the limits of toleration and to devise ways in which the warring factions could live together strongly intimate that disagreeable disagreements, exchanges of insults, or worse are nothing new (Bejan 2017).[[1]](#endnote-1)

That said, there is also reason to believe that some structural features of Social Networking Sites (hereafter SNSs), such as Twitter or Facebook, might facilitate both angry exchanges and the transformation of anger into contempt. One of the ways in which individuals manage their emotions, especially those that are strong, is by expressing them. That is, people tend to share how they feel. Empirical studies have shown that SNSs are especially suited for this purpose because of their different channels that permit both direct messaging and public broadcasting (Bazarova et al. 2015). Since strong emotions are most commonly shared, it is no surprise that empirical research has suggested that anger is among the most widely shared emotions in these networks (Martin and Vieaux 2016).[[2]](#endnote-2) Furthermore, the easy spread of anger by way of contagion is not the sole preserve of online contexts but is easily observable in face-to-face interactions (Lepoutre 2018). While there are many explanations for the current prevalence of anger and rage online, the architecture of SNSs is a contributing factor because of its structural features that afford (in the sense of facilitate) anger.

First, users’ engagement with social media is generally affect-driven (Papachrissi 2015). SNSs promote impulsivity because they make speaking less costly (Baym and Boyd 2012). The cheapness of online speech also facilitates armchair activism since it is easier to put the world aright by flaming on social media than it is to engage in political activism in the public square (Martin and Vieaux 2016).

Second, on social media users are able to broadcast content, to share it easily, and in a manner that secures its persistency and its wide dissemination. These features make SNSs ideal platforms for the sharing of emotions like anger. Furthermore, these same properties mean that users are likely to come across content that they do not wish to see and that might elicit in them strong negative emotional responses, which they might subsequently be disposed to share (Rico 2019).

Third, SNSs facilitate communications under a condition known as “collapsed contexts” where one message reaches multiple audiences many of whom have different or non-existent contextual information (Boyd 2011). In these circumstances, misunderstandings are bound to proliferate. This provides a fertile ground for anger to raise its head since irony and genuine inquisitiveness are harder to detect online.

Finally, SNSs facilitate socially distanced communications. They permit conversations among people who hardly know each other, and thus are not accountable to one another (Martin and Vieaux 2016).[[3]](#endnote-3) It is therefore easier to unleash one’s anger because one does not know the other person and thus one is unlikely to have to explain oneself to that person face to face. In addition, social distancing facilitates the transformation of anger into contempt. The latter is a global emotion and one that is associated with a desire to distance oneself from the target of the emotion. Thus, contempt classifies the whole person as bad and predisposes one to think of that individual as beyond the pale (Bell 2013). Anger is instead directed at a person for something that individual has done. Thus, it is compatible with thinking that the person in question is not irredeemably bad. Further, anger is an approach emotion. When someone is angry at someone else, one is seeking redress. Hence, one can be angry with a friend, but contempt is a friendship-ending emotion. On SNSs users often know nothing about the persons with whom they are interacting. In these contexts, it is easier to presume that the individuals whom we perceive as slighting us are bad people that merit contempt, rather than anger.

In short, the tendency for disagreement about important political, religious, and moral issues to be expressed through vitriol and insults is nothing new. That said, the widespread use of SNSs exacerbates the situation and creates new dynamics. Also, not new is the widespread alarm about this crisis of civility. Now as in centuries gone by commentators have encouraged the disagreeing parties to tone down the anger and be civil. In what follows, I argue that calls for civility are often morally problematic and counterproductive. However, in order to make that argument something first must be said about the nature of anger.

Anger as Moral Evaluation

Anger is generally thought as a basic emotion with a distinctive facial expression that is usually readily recognized by people belonging to diverse cultures. My focus in this chapter is agential anger; that is, anger that is directed to an agent (its target) because of something she has done. I shall ignore here expressions of anger directed at objects, natural events, or creatures that are not responsible for their conduct. Aristotle defines agential anger as a “desire, accompanied by [mental and physical] distress, for apparent retaliation because of an apparent slight that was directed, without justification, against oneself or those near to one” (Aristotle 2007, 1378a30–33).

Anger is therefore a negative emotion that is a response to a perceived slight carried out by another agent and directed at oneself or at another person whom one identifies as belonging to the same identity-defining group as oneself. Aristotle’s definition indicates that anger is associated with feelings of distress and aggression. He describes it as a desire for retaliation, but this description is too narrow since it excludes common cases when a person who is angry seeks an apology, for example, rather than revenge. In addition to feelings and desires anger is also typically associated with thoughts and action tendencies. The thoughts include believing that the target of one’s anger acted intentionally or at least negligently and had no justification for what she did. The dispositions to behave might be to aggression but also to standing one’s ground or making demands. In sum, anger is an emotional syndrome that includes a cluster of affects, desires, thoughts, and action tendencies.

Typically, anger is a response, as Aristotle notes, to an act or omission that is perceived by a subject to be intentional or at least careless and that is a slight because it shows a lack of due regard for the subject’s interests. So, anger like some other emotions has both a focus (the action or omission to which it responds) and a target (the person against whom it is directed). This is one of the ways in which anger differs from contempt. The latter is a global emotion since it targets a person as a whole; anger instead is focused on a specific action, so we may be angry with someone for something he has done and also grateful to the same person for something else that he has also done.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Anger is a common response to a slight even when it does not constitute a wrong or an infringement of our rights. Thus, I might be angry with someone for not lending me something that I really need and which she clearly could temporarily do without while acknowledging that I have no right to the item and that she is not required to let me use it (Shoemaker 2015, 96–97). Hence, anger is broadly felt in response to any conduct that is perceived to manifest a lack of sufficient regard for one’s interests or those of people with whom one identifies. So, anger is a moral emotion (Ben-Ze’ev 2002) since it consists in an implicit moral evaluation of the conduct on which it focuses. The angry response is a way of classifying another’s conduct as morally deficient because it results from having assigned insufficient weight to the concerns of the angry person.

An episode of anger is fitting or apt only when it is a correct evaluation of some conduct. Suppose that I fall over because, it seems to me, you shoved me out of the way. I evaluate your alleged shove as a slight which is to say as something that merits an angry reaction. My anger is fitting only if you shoved me, and that shove is a slight. The angry response would not be fitting if you did not shove me but fell over yourself and pushed me unintentionally. Also, my anger would not be apt, if a car was approaching and your shove was intended to save me from being hit. One can recast these points by saying that to be angry is to evaluate some conduct as “angersome” which is to say as deserving an angry response. Similarly, one may describe a lion’s pouncing as fearsome because it merits fear in response.[[5]](#endnote-5)

In addition to being fitting only if it is a reliable indication (or accurate presentation) of a slight, anger must also be proportional to the harm inflicted (D’Arms and Jacobsen 2000, 74). Hence, it would not be fitting to respond mildly to a grave wrong, or very harshly to a small misdemeanor. Issues about the nature of the wrong inflicted and thus of the apt size of the response to it are hard to adjudicate. Often people belonging to oppressed minorities are thought to overreact because they “explode” in response to what might seem a fairly small slight of the kind that is now commonly classified as a micro-insult or micro-aggression (McClure and Rini 2020). For instance, a person might make presumptions about the status of an ethnic minority person or keep more physically distant from her. If this individual gets an angry response, he might well think of it as disproportionate partly because he intended no harm or because, independently of intention, he thinks that the harm is small compared with the reaction with which it is met.

We do not need to think of these as instances of understandable but unfitting anger. Rather than framing these events as cases where the proverbial straw broke the camel’s back, we can think of the harm inflicted on these occasions as symbolic of a whole history of similar harms, and as such, because of its symbolic valence, it can constitute a grave affront to the dignity of the affected person.[[6]](#endnote-6) In short, the size of the damage to a person’s sense of the self-worth inflicted by a gesture contributes to determining the gravity of the harm independently of whether it is was intended or foreseen. That said, of course anger is only apt in response to genuine slights, where conduct is a slight only if it is a manifestation of lack of due regard.

To summarize, I have argued so far that there are two necessary conditions that must be satisfied for anger to be fitting or apt. First, it must be in response to an actual slight. Second, the response must be proportional to the gravity of the slight. Therefore, it is possible for someone to be angry without her anger being apt because no slight has occurred or because her anger is not proportionate but is instead an over- or an under-reaction. The converse is also possible: a person might not respond angrily to a slight either because she does not recognize the behavior as harmful or because she lacks the self-respect required to perceive the harm as a slight.

I mentioned at the start of the chapter that recent attitudes to the prevalence of anger in public disagreements see it as a problem and as something to mitigate. One of the main arguments justifying this approach is the claim based on empirical evidence that anger is often not fitting. Thus, Pettigrove and Tanaka (2014, 277–82) have argued that anger is seldom accurate and have based their arguments on evidence from social psychology that would show that anger is unreliable because of its tendency to result in false positives. Like all defense mechanisms anger displays a tendency to misrecognize as a slight conduct that is quite innocuous. These results, while well-taken, do not have the import that is often attributed to them. Even supporters of the instrumental value of anger as a source of information and motivation observe its power to obfuscate and lead astray (Lorde 1996; Lugones 2003). This is why they advocate that it is trained so that it can become lucid and calibrated (Lorde 1996). To my knowledge, none of the experiments in social psychology have studied whether training in political activism contributes to improving the accuracy of anger.

Finally, any assessment of anger for its aptness does not suffice to determine whether, all things considered, getting angry on that occasion is the right thing to do (cf., D’Arms and Jacobsen 2000; Bell 2013). While its inaptness provides a reason against being angry, it is possible for anger to be accurate and yet be unjustified for moral and/or prudential reasons. For example, a child’s behavior might merit an angry response and yet a parent might be wrong to be angry at the child because such anger is counterproductive. One might also argue that sometimes being angry especially with children is wrong on moral grounds since avoiding their likely distress at the parents’ anger is more important than one’s entitlement to blaming them. Be that as it may, the overall point is that determining whether anger is apt does not settle the question of whether being angry on one occasion is the right thing to do.

The Communicative Function of Anger

Anger is also, like resentment and gratitude, a reactive attitude (Strawson 2008). That is, anger is not merely a way of registering that one has been subjected to a slight, but it is also a responsibility response. This is because someone who is angry with a person for her behavior is not merely assessing the conduct as bad but also blaming that person for it. In short, to be angry with someone is a way of holding that person responsible for her behavior by blaming her for it. It is precisely because anger is predicated on the assumption that its target is responsible for her behavior that one feels the pressure to calm down a bit, when one discovers that the bad behavior was the result of an understandable mistake, or to be understanding when one discovers that the target of one’s anger suffers from dementia.

Because anger is a responsibility response that consists in holding a person accountable for what she has done to one or those one cares about, angry attitudes call for a response from the target of the anger. Arguably, they direct that person to acknowledge that she has done wrong, to apologize, to feel guilty or to make amends. Hence, anger would seem a different kind of responsibility response from mere disdain or disapproval. Disdain, for instance, communicates to third parties that the target of disdain should not be emulated, while disapproval might be a way of requesting that its target offers an explanation for her behavior (Shoemaker 2015). Anger is different since it is a demand that one acknowledges the wrong done.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The thought that reactive attitudes serve a communicative function and are a form of moral address is not new. It has been defended by Watson (2004, 230, 232) and Shoemaker (2015) among others. But it has been most clearly articulated by Macnamara (2015). In her view reactive attitudes are communicative entities because their function is to communicate. That is, the fact that they succeed in communicating (even sporadically) is the reason why we have, and display, emotional reactive attitudes. Macnamara spells out this idea further by saying that the goal of these emotional responses is to elicit uptake of their content in their addressee.[[8]](#endnote-8) Thus, for example, anger would represent a situation as being a slight committed by another against oneself. Its manifestation by means of its distinctive tone and facial expression is designed to elicit fear and guilt in its addressee. In Macnamara’s view when the addressee experiences fear and guilt she is displaying an emotional uptake of another’s anger which has thereby succeeded in communicating its content.

One can think of anger as something akin to an illocutionary act whose illocutionary force, manifested in the emotional tone and facial expressions that characterize it, is that of demanding a response, and whose content is the content of the moral evaluation.[[9]](#endnote-9) The content of anger is therefore something like: your action A has slighted me (or someone I care about). Its illocutionary force is that of a demand that you endorse the content of the anger because, for example, I demand it of you. In what follows I flesh out these two components.

The evaluative content of anger does not need to be represented by the emotion in order to be conveyed; instead the emotion can communicate it by making it manifest. It is not uncommon for illocutionary acts to communicate their content by means of showing rather than saying. For instance, a person can respond to an invitation to play tennis, by showing her heavily bandaged leg to her interlocutor. In this manner she clearly communicates that she is unable to play (Schiffer 1972, 56). In the same way an angry silence can communicate by showing to the addressee that he (the addressee) has slighted one (or someone dear to one).[[10]](#endnote-10) It is thus possible for anger itself to communicate a content that it does not itself represent but merely indicates. Be that as it may, often people use words when expressing their anger, in those cases the words themselves convey, by saying, the evaluative content.

I have suggested that anger displays or points to an evaluative content which can take the form: your (A’s) ϕ-ing has slighted me (S). Its illocutionary force is the demand that you endorse that content, and thus acknowledge: my (A’s) ϕ-ing has slighted you (S), and endorse it partly because I (S) have demanded it of you (A). That is, the illocutionary force is that of a demand that imposes on the addressee a novel second-personal obligation (Darwall 2006; 2019). This obligation is second-personal since it is an obligation that you have incurred because I have the authority to make it. While all present have reasons to endorse the content that A’s ϕ-ing has slighted S, it is only A that is mandated to do so partly by virtue of S’s implicitly claiming authority over A by being angry at A. This claim is legitimate, however, only when the anger is apt, since if the anger is not fitting S is not entitled to make angry demands.

I have explained the content and the force of anger as a speech act that can be performed with or without the use of words. I have also argued that anger can convey its evaluative content without representing it. I now turn to the claim that anger is essentially communicative. My argument is loosely based on Macnamara’s (2015) to a more general conclusion about all reactive attitudes. In her view anger communicates, because it is frustrated unless it receives uptake. In her opinion, guilt (and fear) is anger’s uptake. That is, anger is frustrated unless its target responds to it by feeling guilty. The feeling of guilt is one way of (emotionally) endorsing the content: my (A’s) ϕ-ing has slighted you (S). However, and contra Macnamara, in my view this endorsement is not sufficient to satisfy fully the angry demand, since anger is frustrated when A endorses this content but not because S has demanded it.[[11]](#endnote-11)

An example might help to substantiate these points. Suppose that Camilla is angry because her partner always expects her to cook. Her partner is very skilled at recognizing Camilla’s angry looks but takes them as prompts to beat a retreat or utter some feeble excuse. Camilla’s partner recognizes that she is angry, but Camilla’s anger is not quelled by this recognition. Rather it is exacerbated. Her anger is frustrated even though its presence is acknowledged because anger has the illocutionary force of a demand that one acknowledges that one has done wrong. Its uptake requires acceptance of responsibility, rather than a mere recognition of the mental state of the angry person.

This example illustrates that the response required by the angry person is not an acknowledgment that one is angry. Her partner knows full well that Camilla is angry, and Camilla knows that she knows. But this common knowledge only makes matters worse not better because what must be recognized is not simply the anger but the slight that caused it. In this regard anger as a reactive attitude differs from some other emotions. For example, fear also has a distinctive facial expression that communicates to others that danger is present. Fear is contagious so that we respond to recognizing fear in another’s face by feeling fearful ourselves. Thus, fear also elicits emotional uptake, but the uptake consists in recognizing the emotional state of the other and, by way of contagion, coming to share it oneself. The fearful person is not frustrated if her fear fails to spread. In short, emotions like fear communicate, but lack the complex communicative structure of anger which fully succeeds only when the addressee comes to share the angry person’s moral evaluation of the situation because this is demanded of her by the angry person.

Having argued that anger is communicative and a form of moral address, I wish to defend the view that it is a demand that one acknowledges a fault. Examples such as the one presented above show that anger is not exclusively a form of protest as demanded by self-respect or a kind of censure.[[12]](#endnote-12) Camilla’s anger is frustrated by her partner’s sheepishness and lack of response. Yet, one can assume that Camilla has successfully protested. One can also assume that Camilla’s anger succeeds in censoring her partner’s behavior as evidenced by the hasty retreat. Thus, it would seem that the point of anger is not primarily as a protest or as censure, rather the point is to engage the other person. This is why Camilla’s anger is frustrated even though she has both protested and censured her partner.

In order to see that anger has the force of a demand, we can imagine that Camilla’s partner suddenly one evening feels guilty about her approach to sharing cooking duties. She buys tons of ingredients and begins to prepare dinner. Camilla might feel relieved, but she might find that her anger is not fully quelled. The angry residue might be caused by anger’s recalcitrance, but it might also be because her partner started cooking without acknowledging Camilla’s entitlement to demand that her partner owned up to her fault.[[13]](#endnote-13) In short, in being angry the angry person attributes to herself the authority to issue a demand; her anger is frustrated unless the fault is acknowledged as well as the legitimacy of demanding this acknowledgement.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Anger and Claimant Injustice

Members of subordinated groups are not infrequently told to calm down. Women especially are often portrayed as hysterical. Their anger is construed as mere venting. They are told that they overreact and that they should put things in perspective. In this section I argue that these responses to anger are, when the anger itself is apt, a kind of silencing which is best thought as a form of illocutionary disablement. When such silencing occurs frequently and systematically it is a variant of a phenomenon known as claimant injustice (Carbonell 2019).

The ability to hold others to account is a crucial aspect of moral agency. Therefore, when one’s capacity to address moral claims to others is disabled, blocked, or undermined one suffers an injustice. This injustice is a form of claimant injustice since it undermines one’s ability to function as a claimant within the moral community. More specifically,

[c]laimant injustice occurs when social prejudices or structural inequalities undermine a moral agent’s ability to engage in felicitous moral address—to make moral claims, to call out wrongdoing, to judge or condemn others for their action, to hold responsible, to seek redress, to blame or punish, or to participate in any of the social practices associated with the participant and vicarious reactive attitudes.

(Carbonell 2019, 182)

Attempts to treat the apt anger of subordinated people as mere ranting or venting or as overreaction fit this bill since they are the product of prejudice and structural inequalities and undermine agents’ capacity for moral address.

When the angry person is seen as merely ranting or giving off steam, she is locutionarily or illocutionarily disabled. Disablement occurs only when the speaker has the authority to make demands on the target of her anger. This authority is dependent among other things on the aptness of the anger since the legitimacy of the claim derives from the fact that one has really been slighted and thus is entitled to seek a redress. However, if in a given situation anger is fitting, and a person’s emotional response is treated as a rant, this treatment causes anger to misfire because it fails to communicate. The addressee’s response of construing anger as a mere feeling with no evaluative content reduces what purported to be an act of communication to mere noise.

Alternatively, the addressee might respond by saying that he sees that the speaker is angry. This response is infuriating and the communicative account of anger can explain this reaction. By acknowledging that the speaker is angry, the addressee disables the illocutionary force of anger as a demand and reduces it to a mere assertion that would purport to describe the mental state of the speaker. This kind of disablement is infuriating because it shifts the focus away from the slight or fault performed by the addressee to the reaction of the speaker, thus opening the possibility that this reaction might be ungrounded.

The illocutionary disablement of anger has further potential consequences that are extremely harmful. The person who is repeatedly told she is overreacting or that she is venting, might begin to doubt her own judgment. She might wonder whether she is seeing racism or sexism everywhere, when the situation might permit different interpretations. She might start to accept intimations to lighten up and wonder if she is really lacking a sense of humor. These responses cause her current anger to misfire but down the line also dampen her sensitivity to injustice. If she internalizes the attitudes of those who reject her anger, she will progressively engage in acts of self-silencing. She will initially truncate her anger or suppress its expression.[[15]](#endnote-15) While these reactions are understandable they deprive one of the insight, offered by anger, into the injuries which one is as yet unable to name. These attitudes also prevent one from calling to account those who are behaving in callous and disrespectful ways. Finally, they deprive one of the prudential and motivational advantages that anger sometimes brings in its train (cf., Tessman 2005).

Calls for Civility and Anger Management

The argument above about the risks of muting anger, when it expresses a legitimate demand, should make any one suspicious about the pragmatic significance of calls for civility and of requests that one tones down one’s anger. While I do not endorse incivility, hateful speech and aggressive confrontations, the dangers of civility should not be underestimated. In this final section I first highlight how calls for civility can serve to mute anger and thus can constitute a form of claimant injustice. I conclude the section by focusing on SNSs. I argue that the architecture of these platforms makes it more likely that apt anger is silenced, that anger is expressed when it is not fitting, and that expressions of anger quickly mutate into contempt.

Demands that one’s tone be managed and calls for civility are often not the best way of addressing angry exchanges in face-to-face situations. They are unlikely to be effective since they are likely to stoke further anger. There are also moral reasons to refrain from them at least in some circumstances. I highlight three broad considerations motivating this stance.

First, traditional conceptions of what counts as civil and civilized are not free of stereotypes. Some behaviors are thought as civil because they are prevalent among members of privileged groups. Others are thought to be uncivil because they are common in other groups despite being disapproved by dominant individuals. Hence, civility is often conflated with manners, while politeness is identified with behaviors characteristic of the privileged. Thus, there is a risk that calls for civility simply serve to mark out the under-privileged and to re-enforce existing prejudices against these groups (Berenstain 2019).

Second, calls for civility draw attention to the so-called uncivil behavior and away from its causes. They can thus serve as distractions or excuses not to engage the real issues. In addition, incivility is often one of the few options available to the powerless. Focus on incivility as the problem is a covert form of social control in the service of the status quo (Berenstain 2019).

Third, those who ask angry people to tone it down so that the message can be heard more clearly prioritize their hurt feelings over the seriousness of the harm suffered by the angry person (Lorde 1996; Bailey 2018). If that harm is great, this attitude demonstrates an insufficient concern for the welfare of the harmed individual. In such a case, the request that the angry tone be cooled down is itself a slight. As such it might well be perceived as offensive and thus cause a greater fitting anger. In addition, cases such as this one are plausibly construed as instances of claimant injustice. Demands that one cools it down are ways in which apt anger is denied uptake while attempting to shift responsibility for the failure to communicate onto the person who has suffered the slight. For these reasons among others, tone management and calls for civility are not the best way to address the confrontational nature of much political discourse.

Angry exchanges on social media platforms not only exemplify the problems discussed above but also introduce novel ones. Two features of SNSs in particular contribute to making it harder for anger to be fittingly expressed and successfully communicated. First, since angry messages are expressed in situations where contexts are collapsed, multiple audiences are likely to interpret their contents differently. It is thus more likely that some users misunderstanding the angry message will in anger construe the initial message as a mere rant. Since collapsed contexts promote the misconstrual of messages, anger as a moral address is bound to be more often prone to failure on SNSs. Consequently, claimant injustice is likely to be more prevalent than in face-to-face discussions.

Second, the social distance characteristic of debates on SNSs facilitates the expression of anger that is not fitting. The presence of multiple audiences can result in anger being partly misdirected and aimed at the wrong targets. Also, people who are not the intended target might react to the angry message in anger wrongly believing that it is addressed to them. Moreover, the lack of shared background assumptions might cause one to answer in anger because of a failure to understand the initial message. In addition, the diminution of accountability produced by social distance also contributes to making anger less successful since its targets cannot easily acknowledge the fault even if they wish to do so. Finally, social distance makes it easier to react angrily, even when one knows deep down that the anger toward one is merited. In short social media facilitate the proliferation of anger that is misunderstood, potentially misdirected, and that cannot be fully acknowledged.

If these considerations are on the right track, attempts to improve the quality of online interactions should focus on the reduction of social distance by making users more accountable to each other’s contributions. The lack of accountability, caused by social distance, and not anger itself is the main cause of the frequent misfiring of anger, and of the increased propensity to respond to anger with anger. Social distance also contributes to explaining why anger online often degenerates into contempt. The less one knows about a person, the more likely one is to think that that person has wronged one because he is a bad person. Consequently, instead of addressing one’s interlocutors in anger, people who interact with each other exclusively on SNSs are quick to move to the abuse and hostility that is often associated with contempt.

In conclusion, I have argued that apt anger is a form of moral address and that muting it by disabling its illocutionary force is a form of injustice. We do indeed live in times of anger, but anger is not without a cause. If we wish to bring about a better society we should focus our efforts on the causes of anger, and acknowledge our collective faults, rather than hiding behind calls for civility.[[16]](#endnote-16)

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1. In recent years some political scientists and philosophers have claimed that the root cause of current political incivility is affective polarization rather than genuine disagreement about the facts (Mason 2018). Affective polarization is a tendency to strongly identify affectively with a group and to equally strongly dislike outsiders. While this diagnosis might be at least partly correct, I set aside here the issues that it might raise. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In addition, the internet includes sites known as rant-sites where users are encouraged to get things off their chests. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On the structural affordances of SNS, see Boyd (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Bell (2013) on contempt as a global emotion. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. There is a lively debate about the direction of fit of emotional responses (D’Arms and Jacobsen 2000). In this chapter I do not take a view on this issue, since none of the arguments I wish to develop hinges on it. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Thanks to Nancy Snow for raising this worry. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This claim is controversial. The construal of reactive attitudes as the making of demands is widely adopted, but rarely defended in detail. For a critic see Macnamara (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. In her view to say that reactive attitudes elicit uptake is to say that they call for it, rather than they demand it. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Darwall (2006, 120) for the claim that reactive attitudes are quasi-speech acts. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Usually anger is elicited by, and follows immediately from, some behavior to which it is a response. It is thus possible for the addressee to understand what anger communicates. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. On the contrary, there are cases where feeling guilty becomes a way of seeking sympathy rather acknowledging the fault (Applebaum 2017). I set this issue aside here. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. There are differing views of the nature of blame. Some see it as demanding some response from its target. Others think of it as a way of censoring some behavior (and hereby punishing the person responsible for it). A third popular account of blame takes it to be a form of protest. It is entirely possible that there are different ways of blaming, so that blame can take on different occasions all of these forms. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. So I disagree with Macnamara’s (2013, 156) argument that blame cannot have the force of a demand because, since guilt is not under one’s voluntary control, it is not possible to demand that one feels that way. I think acknowledgment of a fault is under one’s control and it can induce guilt. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. One might object to this account by arguing that not all anger is expressed and thus anger cannot always be communicative. I agree that anger can be bottled in, but these are cases where anger is suppressed and thus disabled by the angry person herself. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. On self-silencing see Dotson (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. I would like to thank Nancy Snow and Maria Silvia Vaccarezza for their comments. My thanks also to the audience at the *Virtues, Media, and Democracy* IV Aretai International Conference held at Genoa University, 26–27 September 2019 for their helpful comments on the talk on which this chapter is based. Finally, I am grateful to audiences at Amsterdam, Bristol, Kent, Nottingham, and Warwick for discussions on related themes. This paper is best read in conjunction with “Passionate Speech: The Uses and Abuses of Anger” where I analyze the anger of the subordinated and the arrogant anger of the entitled. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)