

The Ethics of Anger

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Chapter 3

The Moral Necessity of Anger

Krista K. Thomason

Philosophers have long been divided on the moral status of anger. On one side are the skeptics who think that anger is damaging, dangerous, or irrational. Seneca, for example, describes anger as “raging with an inhuman desire to inflict pain” (2010, 14). More recently, Nussbaum has argued that anger is either irrational or narcissistic (2016, 24–29). It is, as she puts it “always normatively problematic” (2016, 5). On the other side, there are the optimists who think that anger can be morally valuable and even morally necessary. Aristotle argues that the right kind of anger is a virtue and that “people who do not get angry in the circumstances one should are thought to be foolish” (2002, 152/1126a5). Solomon argues that anger is both “rational and reasonable” when it is a response to a serious offense (2007, 25). As Bailey puts it, “Anger is the emotion of injustice” (2018, 93).

My aim in this chapter is to defend a strong version of the optimist’s claim. Anger is not just rational and reasonable, but also a morally necessary response to wrongdoing. The version of the argument that I will defend is sometimes called the constitutive view.¹ That is, feelings of anger are constitutive of the proper moral response to the offense, ill-treatment, or injustice.² The constitutive view has been the target of at least two objections. First, there appear to be examples of people who adequately respond to wrongdoing and yet seem not to feel anger. Second, given anger’s clear potential for damage, it would be better for moral agents to respond to wrongdoing without anger. In order to defend the moral necessity of anger, I argue against both of these objections. First, I will explain the constitutive view and the objections against it in more detail.

THE CONSTITUTIVE VIEW

Several philosophers have defended a version of the constitutive view of moral emotions. The constitutive view is inspired by P. F. Strawson's arguments about resentment and its connection to our practices of holding people responsible (1963/2003). Roughly, on this view, emotions are at least partially constitutive of some feature of moral psychology (e.g., judgments, responses, values, practices, or commitments). Constitutivists are not univocal in their explanations. For example, Wallace argues that feelings of resentment are constitutive of holding others to moral expectations (1994, 20–24). Murphy argues that resentment is constitutive of one's sense of moral self-respect (2003, 19–20). In spite of these differences, constitutive views share the same basic strategy. The aim is to explain the role that emotions have in our moral psychology by showing how emotions (at least partially) constitute some psychological features of moral agency.

In spite of their differences, constitutive views are vulnerable to the same type of objection. The objection goes this way: the constitutive view is false because it cannot show that emotions are necessarily constitutive of moral judgments or responses. That is, we can think of cases in which moral agents have the moral judgment or response in question without also feeling the corresponding emotion. If these cases are legitimate, then the emotion is not really constitutive after all.

This objection is particularly salient when we consider negative emotions that seem to have significant potential for damage or harm. Take shame as an example. Many philosophers have argued that shame is a valuable moral emotion because it shows that we care about living up to ideals that we value (Rawls 1971/2003; Taylor 1985; Mason 2010; Deonna et al. 2012). On views like these, shame is constitutive of the painful realization that we have fallen short of the ideals to which we aspire. Skeptics point out how damaging shame can be: feelings of shame often drive people to self-destructive behavior, including self-harm and suicide (Isenberg 1949; Kekes 1988; Manion 2002; Nussbaum 2004). Surely, the skeptics will claim, we do not necessarily need feelings of shame in order to care about living up to our ideals. In fact, getting over shame seems to be psychologically healthier. If it is both possible and desirable to train ourselves out of damaging emotions, we ought to do so.

This same skeptical argument is used against anger. Constitutivists have argued that anger partially constitutes the recognition of an expression of ill will or wrongdoing (Strawson 1963/2003; Murphy and Hampton 1988; Wallace 1994; Murphy 2003; Darwall 2006). If someone does me a wrong or expresses ill will toward me and I do not react with anger, constitutivists will argue that, absent some other explanation, I have failed to perceive this treatment as wrong or undeserved. Similar to shame, skeptics will argue that it is

possible for an agent to recognize ill-treatment without feeling anger (Watson 1993; Pettigrove 2012; Nussbaum 2016). Moreover, given anger's potential for damage or harm, it would be desirable for everyone to feel less anger or to get over such feelings as much as possible.

There are two claims that comprise the skeptical position: what I will call the necessity claim and the desirability claim. The first denies that feelings of anger are necessary in order to properly respond to wrongdoing. The second asserts that, given anger's downsides, it is morally desirable that we try to feel less of it or get over it as much as is possible. I will argue against both of these claims.

THE NECESSITY CLAIM

Skeptics usually deploy two strategies to argue that anger is not morally necessary in order to respond to wrongdoing. One is to argue that it is conceptually possible to separate feelings of anger from judgments of wrongdoing.³ The other is to appeal to moral exemplars who seem to have gotten over their anger.

To illustrate the first strategy, Pettigrove and Tanaka introduce the distinction between anger being warranted and anger being necessary (2014, 273). To claim that anger is warranted as a response to ill-treatment is merely to claim that it would be intelligible or perhaps even permissible for the victim to feel anger when she is mistreated. Arguing that anger is warranted is a weaker claim than that it is necessary. Pettigrove and Tanaka argue that this weaker claim is more plausible because we can see both from philosophical literature and from everyday experience examples of people who are able to make moral judgments and yet do not feel anger (2014, 276–277). If these examples are plausible, then it appears as though the stronger version of the constitutive view is false.

The strategy of divorcing feelings of anger from responses to wrongdoing raises an important question for the constitutive view. What precisely does it mean to say that anger is a necessary part of our responses to wrongdoing? Philosophers who ascribe to the constitutive view provide different answers to this question. Here I will rely on a version of the account that I have defended elsewhere (Thomason 2018). On this version of the constitutive view, a liability to anger is constitutive of our capacity to recognize, judge, or appreciate intentional wrongdoing or ill-treatment.⁴ There are several parts of this account to clarify. First, I and other philosophers who defend this view will speak in terms of *liability* to anger.⁵ Advocates of the constitutive view accept that our emotions are not under our direct control and that they sometimes surprise us. They can arise in situations when we do not expect

them, and they can fail to show up when we assume they will. We may, for example, suffer a serious betrayal at the hands of a loved one and, to our own shock or confusion, not feel anger (Thomason 2018, 147–148). It therefore makes more sense to talk about a liability to anger being a necessary part of recognizing wrongdoing. Having a liability to an emotion means that we are disposed to feel it in some set of specified circumstances because of values or commitments that we hold. The fact that we might not feel anger at a particular moment does not pose an objection to this version of the constitutive view.

Additionally, it is important to understand what is meant by a recognition or response to wrongdoing on this view. Crucially, recognizing a wrong is not a simply matter of assenting to a proposition. This way of thinking is to misunderstand the complex nature of judging or responding to wrongdoing. As Solomon argues, “Anger is not just a judgment of offense, but a network of interlocking judgments concerning one’s status and relationship with the offending party, the gravity and mitigating circumstances of the offense, and the urgency of revenge” (1988, 186). On the constitutive view, the network that Solomon describes comprises the liability to an emotion. Holding some set of values, beliefs, desires, and commitments is to be susceptible to emotions that are relevant to them. A liability to an emotion is not merely the belief that such an emotion would be warranted. The constitutivist will deny that we can easily separate our beliefs about wrongdoing from our emotional responses to it. To use Rawls’s example, to love another person is to be liable to joy in her presence and sorrow in her absence, and my love for her is present in these emotions (Rawls 1971/2003, 426). If I am liable to neither this joy nor sorrow, the constitutive view will claim that I do not actually love her. In the case of anger, if I am not liable to anger when someone wrongs me, then I fail to recognize or appreciate the wrong. There is no such thing as a bare, dispassionate, merely propositional judgment that someone wronged me (Solomon 1988, 187). This is not to claim that judgment must be explosive or expressive, or that our anger must be obvious and overt (Solomon 1988, 188). The constitutive view will, however, insist that judging something as wrongdoing or ill-treatment must involve a liability to feelings of anger. Again, not feeling a particular emotion at a particular moment does not affect the liability to that emotion. The focus of the constitutive view is not on emotions as episodes. Instead, its focus is the role that emotions play in our network of judgments, commitments, and values.

The version of the constitutive view that I and others defend also classifies anger as a reactive attitude. Reactive attitudes arise within the context of what Strawson called the participant stance (1963/2003, 79). The participant stance is so named because it presupposes our participation in relations with others (1963/2003, 76–79). Within the participant stance, we see others as responsible moral agents to whom we owe some basic form of goodwill and

from whom we can expect basic goodwill (1963/2003, 76). It is because of this mindset or commitment that we are liable to feelings of anger when another person shows us disregard. Strawson contrasts the participant stance with the objective stance (1963/2003, 79). Taking an objective stance toward another person is to see that person “as an object of social policy” or someone to be “managed or cured or handled or trained” (*ibid.*). The objective stance does not presume that another person is a responsible agent capable of acting autonomously and intentionally or capable of showing us proper regard and disregard. We would not be liable to anger toward, suppose, a rude automaton who was built to hurl insults at passersby.⁶ When constitutivists claim that anger is a necessary part of recognizing and responding to wrongdoing, we assume that the wrongdoing is intentional and that it originates from a responsible fellow moral agent. We are liable to anger because we see our fellow agents as responsible persons rather than mere causes of events, automatons, or objects of social policy. To summarize, the constitutivist will argue that a liability to anger is a necessary part of recognizing a wrong done by a fellow moral agent.

Skeptics will argue that we have examples of people who can recognize wrongdoing without anger. The first question to raise is whether they react to wrongdoing without feeling anger or without being liable to anger. The constitutivists can accept that people do not always respond to wrongdoing by experiencing the emotion of anger. Again, our emotions are not perfectly under the control of our will, so we do not feel them on command. What constitutivists will deny is that a person can properly recognize wrongdoing without being liable to anger—that such a person literally never feels anger or has never felt anger in other cases. The skeptical case made here needs to be filled out in more detail. One possible interpretation is that we can imagine someone who can assent to the proposition “This action is wrong” without feeling anger. This version of the objection mistakes the complex act of judging or recognizing for simply assenting to a proposition (Solomon 1988, 186). What it means to judge, recognize, or appreciate wrongdoing is complex and cannot be reduced to one proposition or belief. Another possible interpretation is that we are able to imagine the conceptual possibility of someone who does not feel anger and can still judge wrongdoing. It is difficult to know what precisely this conceptual imagining amounts to. Suppose we try to construct a similar case: imagine a parent who takes care of his children, plays with them, participates in their lives, wishes them well, is pained by their suffering, and overjoyed by their happiness and yet also, let us suppose, does not actually feel love for them. A case like this seems to distinguish acts of love and care, loving relations, and parental commitments from something like a raw emotional feel. The constitutivist will argue that this move is possible only in the most abstract sense. The mere conceptual possibility of such a person poses

no risk to the constitutive view because the necessity claim is not merely a conceptual claim. It is a claim about moral relations as they exist in the world for creatures like us.

The reply from the skeptic helps us segue into the second strategy. Skeptics often appeal to cases of moral exemplars who appear to have gotten over or transformed their feelings of anger. These exemplars, they will argue, show that judging wrongdoing without anger is not a mere conceptual possibility. Indeed, these cases show that creatures like us can recognize wrongdoing without the liability to anger. The two most common exemplars are Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi (Watson 1993, 147–148; Nussbaum 2016, 218–225). Nussbaum's discussion of King and Gandhi is thorough and helps illustrate how they function as exemplars for getting over anger. Nussbaum argues that both King and Gandhi see anger as inherently tied to an immature and destructive wish for retaliation (2016, 221). King and Gandhi argue that feelings of anger ought to be “channeled” or “purified” through self-discipline and the reorientation of one's attitude toward the objects of one's anger (2016, 221–222). This process will create a new outlook in which one “carefully separates the deed from the doer, criticizing and repudiating the bad deed, but not imputing unalterable evil to people” (2016, 222). According to Nussbaum, King and Gandhi replace their anger with healthier emotions such as grief and love (2016, 225). This replacement allows them to respond appropriately to wrongdoing without the dangers and errors of anger. Additionally, Pettigrove and Tanaka appeal to Śāntideva's writings on anger to show that the Bodhisattva likewise makes moral judgments and yet feels no anger (2014, 272–273). On their reading, Śāntideva recommends weeding anger out of our lives as much as possible in part because anger presupposes a mistaken view about the importance of our own perspectives (2014, 273). Nevertheless, the Bodhisattva (or the person who aspires to be one) can still make moral judgments. Despite never feeling anger, “they adopt the right sort of stance to the wrongdoing they identify, seeking to avoid such moral failings in themselves and their actions and opposing them in others” (2014, 276).

I think we should be wary of the appeal to moral exemplars. First, the fact that King and Gandhi are two of the most cited examples of people who have gotten over anger might demonstrate that they are more anomalous than they appear. If skeptics think that getting over anger is readily psychologically available to us, it seems we should have more than two examples of people who have achieved it. King also studied the nonviolent philosophy of Gandhi, which suggests the commitments they share may be unique to them (Thomason 2018, 167). Pettigrove and Tanaka resist this move by arguing that the criticisms about anger are far more widespread. They point out that warnings against anger appear not just in Śāntideva, but also in many

other Buddhist texts, Eastern traditions, Stoicism, early Christian and Jewish philosophers, and the sentimentalist tradition from the eighteenth century (2014, 274–275). Of course, the fact that a view is widely shared does not show that it is correct; the view that anger is central to our moral lives is also widespread. Rather, Pettigrove and Tanaka's point is that we cannot dismiss views like Śāntideva's (or King's and Gandhi's) as anomalous. Although this conclusion is surely right, much more work needs to be done to determine the details of these criticisms of anger. While I cannot examine all these accounts of anger here, I will focus on King and Śāntideva and try to show that their positions on anger are less straightforward than Nussbaum, Pettigrove, and Tanaka present them.

Beginning with King, his views on anger are clearly complex. When he describes the mindset of nonviolence, he says it is “nonaggressive physically, but strongly aggressive spiritually” (1986, 7, 12, 18). Likewise, King insists that while the nonviolent resister is physically passive, “his mind and his emotions are always active, constantly seeking to persuade his opponent he is wrong” (1986, 18). He encourages Black Americans to remain “maladjusted” to the injustices of segregation and discrimination (1986, 14). He also repeatedly emphasizes that nonviolence should not be mistaken for or built on cowardice (1986, 7, 12, 17). Given these remarks, King's views on anger are not unequivocally negative. It is difficult to know how to interpret his claim that we ought to be emotionally active and spiritually aggressive without an appeal to something like anger. More specifically, philosophers have argued that King's arguments presuppose a fitting or virtuous anger (Cogley 2014; Bell 2009). It is abundantly clear that King rejects violence and hatred as permissible responses to injustice (1986, 7–8, 12–13, 17–20). Yet rejecting violence and hatred does not require rejecting anger. Other interpreters of King might object to the characterization of spiritual and emotional activity as anger, but my point here is merely to show that King's views about anger are not so straightforward. He might reject anger or he might only reject excessive anger, hatred, and violence (Thomason 2018, 166).

Śāntideva's views about anger are likewise complicated. First, it should be noted that, contrary to popular conceptions of Buddhist philosophy, there is no single view about anger in Buddhism. For example, McRae argues that Tantric Buddhism advocates transforming, rather than eliminating, one's anger (2015, 472–473). With regard to Śāntideva, there is controversy in the literature about the extent to which his text is meant to be a program for cultivating virtue. For example, Garfield argues that Śāntideva's text is, like much of Buddhist ethics, an attempt to solve the existential problem of suffering. On Garfield's view, Śāntideva tries to solve that problem by “by developing an understanding of our place in the complex web of interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*) that is our world” (2011, 338). To interpret

this project as a set of recommendations for moral self-improvement is to shoehorn Śāntideva's views into the framework of Western virtue ethics (Garfield 2011, 335). Even if we set aside concerns like these, understanding Śāntideva's position on anger is still not straightforward. Bommarito, for instance, argues that there is a tension in Śāntideva's criticism of anger and his purpose in describing the way to the enlightened mind (*bodhicitta*). On Bommarito's view, Śāntideva argues against anger because anger assumes that other people are anything more than the sum of conditions and causes (2011, 364–365). According to this interpretation, Śāntideva seems to suggest that being angry with people for the wrongs they do would be equivalent to being angry with a storm that damages our house. As Bommarito points out, however, the advice that Śāntideva provides is directed toward people who are presumed to have at least some kind of agency—otherwise they would be incapable of aspiring to *bodhicitta* (2011, 368–370). This tension may lead us to ask whether Śāntideva really thinks that anger is as irrational or misguided as interpreters claim. Of course, Śāntideva may still reject anger for other reasons. My point is that the details of interpretation may show that the rejections of anger from philosophers like King and Śāntideva are not what they seem.

For the sake of the argument, let us suppose that King and Śāntideva do reject anger. According to skeptics of the constitutive view, this conclusion would mean that they make moral judgments without feeling angry. Presupposed in this argument is the view that they make *the same* moral judgments that those of us who are disposed to anger will make. I think we should resist this assumption. Both King and Śāntideva have substantive moral and metaphysical commitments that lead to their rejection of anger. These commitments reveal particular views about themselves, others, and the universe that are in tension with the presuppositions of the constitutive view.

Let us start with King. King argues that the philosophy of nonviolence involves seeing the forces of justice and evil at work in the world. He writes, “There is something in the universe that unfolds for justice,” and the nonviolent resisters have felt “that as we struggled we had cosmic companionship” (1986, 13–14). The job of the nonviolent resister is to prevent further evil from entering the world—she must “cut off the chain of hate . . . by projecting an ethic of love into the world” (1986, 19). Seeing people as fighters for either justice or evil is also supported by King's commitment to the interconnectedness of humanity. He writes, “All humanity is a single process . . . If you harm me, you harm yourself” (1986, 20). As a result, the target of the spiritual aggression of nonviolence is not the individual who does wrong, but the evil of the universe. He writes that “the attack is directed against the forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing the evil” (1986, 8, 18). King is clear throughout his writings that accepting the philosophy of

nonviolence is a difficult task in part because he recognizes a powerful temptation to give in to hatred, bitterness, or violence (1986, 8, 10).

Śāntideva is committed to overcoming the centrality of the self as part of the development of the enlightened mind (*bodhicitta*) (Bommarito 2011, 364–366; Garfield 2011, 343–344). That is, weeding anger out of one's life is possible when we come to the full realization and appreciation that the self and its attachments and aversions are illusory. This requires weakening the boundaries between self and others (Garfield 2011, 340–341), seeing the actions of others as no different from the conditions or causes in the world (Bommarito 2011, 360–362), and seeing oneself and others as ephemeral and impermanent (Bommarito 2011, 365–366; Garfield 2011, 341–342, 347–348). Śāntideva's path to *bodhicitta* is meant to engender an “insight into the nature of reality so deep that it transforms our way of seeing ourselves and others” (Garfield 2011, 334).

The ethical outlooks of King and Śāntideva contain commitments (to greater and lesser degrees) to what I will call depersonalization. They both encourage us to see people as caught up in forces of the universe and to deemphasize the extent to which people are agents in the harm or suffering they cause. Additionally, they ask us to see ourselves as fundamentally connected to others, including those who wrong us. They also argue that we should see ourselves as less agential than we think. For King, we are part of the forces of justice and light, and we are bound to use the force of love in the face of wrongdoing. For Śāntideva, we are interconnected, interdependent, and ephemeral. Arguments like these pose no challenge to the constitutive view. The constitutive view accepts the Strawsonian claim that anger is a reactive attitude, which arises from within the participant stance (1963/2003, 79). Being in this stance requires that we see other people as autonomous agents who are not mere causal events or caught up in forces outside of them. It is precisely this perception that King and Śāntideva ask us to deemphasize. King and Śāntideva are committed to moral worldviews that do not presuppose the kind of moral agency that Strawson does. Indeed, they advocate for a moral point of view that transforms our traditional way of understanding ourselves and each other. King and Śāntideva recognize that it is natural for us to be angry, given the commitments that we hold. What they ask is that we give up or change those commitments and, in doing so, we will stop being angry. The constitutive view can agree that if we alter or give up the participant stance, then we may no longer feel anger toward wrongdoers. But this is just to say that if we transform our views about ourselves, others, and the nature of wrongdoing, then we will feel different emotions. Characterized this way, skeptics can no longer claim that King and Śāntideva are making the same moral judgments as the rest of us. They understand agency and wrongdoing differently, which is why they do not respond to ill-treatment with anger.

Moral exemplars like King and Śāntideva do not pose counterexamples to the constitutive view. If anything, they show that if we alter our values, beliefs, and commitments, our emotional lives will likewise be altered.

The skeptic can argue that we should do what figures like King and Śāntideva ask. They might say that we would be morally better off rethinking our relations to others and our conceptions of ourselves so that we were less prone to anger. Notice that this is a new argument: the claim is no longer that we can make the same moral judgments without feelings of anger. It is now that we should alter our moral outlooks so that we can get rid of anger. This is the desirability claim, to which I will now turn.

THE DESIRABILITY CLAIM

Recall that the desirability claim states that we would be better off getting over our feelings of anger. There are two versions of this claim. The first version argues that because anger is damaging, harmful, or dangerous, we ought to do our best to feel it as little as possible. Notice that this argument does not outright reject the constitutive view. It simply emphasizes the downsides of anger. The second version also argues that anger is dangerous or harmful, but adds that we ought to follow the example of people like King and Śāntideva. We should, in other words, rethink the values and commitments that make us liable to anger because a world without anger would be a better world. I respond to each of these versions of the desirability claim in turn.

We must examine more closely the claim that anger is harmful or damaging. One way to understand this claim is that some kinds of anger can be harmful. The constitutive view can accept this claim. Of course, anger can sometimes be excessive. For example, people can be rightly criticized for being too angry about a relatively minor offense. Additionally, we might think that it is bad to have a short temper, to stay angry for too long, or to be angry too often. None of these criticisms are of anger *per se*, but rather how people manage or relate to their anger. We might make the same criticisms about other emotions, including positive ones—we might say that someone is being too forgiving or too sympathetic. Also, some of these criticisms are not about our emotions, but about a lack of perspective or proportionality (Thomason 2015, 252–253). The person who is too angry at a small slight could be criticized for being unfair or unreasonable. We might say that such a person lacks perspective or fails to have good judgment about what sorts of wrongs are worth getting upset about. We are able to make all of these criticisms without claiming that there is something wrong with the person's anger *qua* anger. The constitutivist need not argue that every episode of anger is good and valuable. She is committed to the claim that a liability to anger

is valuable because it partially constitutes the recognition of wrongdoing. Defending anger in this way does not entail that anger can never go wrong or can never be criticized. The constitutivist holds that, in spite of its potential dangers, anger is a valuable part of our emotional lives and that should not wish to be rid of it.

I take it those who advocate for the desirability claim mean something more than just that anger can sometimes be excessive. A stronger argument is that there is something inherently wrong with anger. One version of this argument is that anger is basically confused or irrational. For example, Pettigrove and Tanaka (inspired by Śāntideva) argue that we become angry when our desires are thwarted, but many of our desires are confused or not worth our investment (2014, 277–279). In this way, anger is more often than not an inappropriate or confused emotion. They further appeal to empirical evidence that anger negatively influences our other judgments. Some psychological studies purport to show that angry people are more likely to attribute negative traits to people who are unlike them, to rely on stereotypes when making judgments, and to see themselves as less biased (2014, 279–280). Studies like these support Pettigrove and Tanaka's claim that "anger is systematically misleading" (2014, 281). Nussbaum also suggests that anger is inherently irrational. On Nussbaum's view, at the heart of anger is a wish for payback for the harm done (2016, 15). The payback "is seen as somehow assuaging the pain or making good the damage" caused by the original wrong (2016, 24). Yet according to Nussbaum, such a belief is irrational. To imagine that by paying back the offender in kind, our own pain will thereby be alleviated is "magical thinking" (*ibid.*). Alternatively, anger is a response to a perceived diminution in status (2016, 25). An offender's wrong is an act of down-ranking, and so payback is a way to restore balance by bringing the offender low (2016, 26). Nussbaum argues that this way of understanding anger is likewise irrational because it is fundamentally narcissistic (2016, 29). Wrongdoing is not about comparatively high or low status, but rather about injustice (*ibid.*).

There are several points in these arguments that should be separated. The first thing to note is that the conclusion about anger's irrationality will depend a great deal on the specifics of the accounts of anger. Pettigrove, Tanaka, and Nussbaum argue that the payback wish is central to anger (2014, 277–278; 2016, 15). On these grounds, they then suggest that payback is irrational or confused. One might dispute that the payback wish is part of the internal logic of anger. We might, for example, think of anger as a challenge or a protest against the offender's behavior.⁷ On a view like this, anger accuses rather than punishes. Even though the wish for payback might be a common experience when people are angry, it may nevertheless not be an essential part of anger. It could instead be a kind of common coping mechanism (Thomason 2017, 6). It may be quick and easy psychologically to move from recognizing

that a person has wronged me to wanting to see that person hurt in return. There could be any number of reasons why this move occurs: perhaps the offender has made me feel powerless and hurting that person alleviates those feelings. Maybe the payback wish is a desire to bring about a reciprocal appreciation from the offender. If I hurt the offender as she has hurt me, she will realize what it was like to be of the receiving end of ill will (Thomason 2017, 6). We need not settle on one explanation here. The point is merely to show that it is an open question whether the wish for payback is essential to feelings of anger. If it is not, then we cannot conclude that since the payback wish is irrational, anger itself is irrational. We can pose the same questions about Pettigrove and Tanaka's claims that anger is about a thwarted desire (2014, 277–279) or Nussbaum's claims that anger is about down-ranking (2016, 26–27). If anger turns out to be neither of these things, then whatever conclusions we draw about anger from these accounts will not figure into anger's rationality.

My main aim in this chapter is to defend the constitutive view's claim that anger is a morally necessary response, so building and defending my own account of anger would require more work than I can accomplish here. Also, I wish to be pluralist to a certain extent because constitutive views are not univocal in their characterizations of anger. Nonetheless, we should have some sense of what anger is in order to respond to arguments about its irrationality. Let me briefly sketch an account that draws on the work of other versions of the constitutive view.⁸

The constitutivist will claim that anger is part of the recognition that another person has treated me with disrespect or ill will. Feeling anger is not a matter of merely believing that this is the case or making a judgment that an event of a certain kind has occurred (Solomon 1988, 185–186). Anger is an emotional protest or resistance to an offense or expression of ill will. It arises in response to ill will because of the way one understands oneself, the offender, and the relationship between the two. The reason I am liable to anger when someone treats me with ill will is because I see myself as a moral agent and I see that person as a moral agent (Strawson 1963/2003, 76–79). As Hieronymi puts it, the victim's anger "affirms both [the offense's] wrongfulness and the moral significance of both herself and the offender" (2001, 530). It is only because we recognize an expression of ill will as coming from a fellow moral agent that we protest it. I would not be angry at a tree for falling on my car during a storm, but I would be angry at my neighbor for cutting her tree down so that it falls on my car. The reason we protest such treatment is because we see ourselves as existing in a relationship of mutual expectation and obligation. As a fellow moral agent, I see myself as deserving a basic form of regard from my fellows and as owing them the same basic regard.⁹ When another shows me disregard,

I protest this treatment and feelings of anger are partially constitute that protest.

Given this sort of definition, advocates of the constitutive view will argue that there is nothing irrational about anger. It is not irrational because protesting the display of ill will from another moral agent is not irrational. Since we see ourselves and others as standing in relations of mutual regard, when that mutual regard is violated, we will resist it. Anger is not, contra Pettigrove and Tanaka, about our thwarted desires. It is not merely the case that I desire to be treated as a moral agent, but rather that I expect to be and that the offender is obligated to treat me as such. Contra Nussbaum, anger is also not about status. Anger at the offender is not about righting an imbalance or even bringing her low. It is a protest against her ill will or disrespect.

Skeptics of the constitutive view can at this point dispute at least two of the above claims. The first is the claim that we must be liable to anger in order to see ourselves and others as moral agents, and they will point to moral exemplars to make this case. Since I argued against moral exemplars earlier, I will move on to the second claim. Skeptics might instead argue that there is a better, more enlightened way of responding to wrongdoing than with anger. In other words, even if anger is not confused or irrational, we would still be better off if we were to train ourselves out of it. Those of who defend the constitutive view can admit that anger is sometimes damaging and hurtful. An angry person is usually not a good friend, coworker, or spouse. Angry people can be overly judgmental and unfairly expect more of others than they expect of themselves. As Nussbaum puts it, "The world has been propelled to a large extent by rage and retribution, but let us create something better, in ourselves and in political culture" (2016, 247). Nussbaum makes two points here: (a) anger's downsides give us sufficient reason to want it out of our lives and (b) that we would be better off or more virtuous if we decided to see ourselves, others, and the world in such a way that would make anger less central.

Are anger's downsides enough to outweigh its value? We must be careful here that we are not motivated to reject anger on the wrong kinds of reasons.¹⁰ Often injunctions against anger originate from its deleterious effects to the person who becomes consumed by it. Of course, we can be rightly wary of being consumed by an emotion without being wary of the emotion itself. Think, for example, of the warning "Love is blind." No one treats this caution against love's tendency to make us overlook the flaws of our beloved as a reason to get over love altogether. The trouble, according to the skeptics, is that even run-of-the-mill anger can have negative effects. As Pettigrove and Tanaka argue, empirical psychology studies appear to provide evidence for "spillover anger." When we are angry, we tend to be more judgmental and more assured of our own righteousness (2014, 279–280). At the same time, as Cherry argues, the mistakes that people attribute to anger can also be

attributed to our anger evaluations (2018, 57–58). That is, we tend to judge people who express anger harsher than we should, we tend to be unsympathetic toward them, and we often do not take the time to try to understand why they are angry (2018, 52–56). It may be the case, then, that the assumptions we make about anger's downsides are not as clear-eyed as we imagine.

Even if it is true that normal amounts of anger can have downsides, we must ask whether they amount to sufficient reason for getting over anger. There is a tendency to treat anger (and negative emotions in general) as a psychological problem. Anger “eats away at my peace of mind—I lose sleep, snap at my friends, become less effective at my work, and so on” (Murphy 1988, 23). That is, we ought to get over anger as a matter of good mental health, achieving better productivity, having a more positive outlook, or just being overall happier. Perhaps it is true that the person who never feels anger is generally a healthier and more positive person, but on the constitutive view, she would not thereby be morally better than the rest of us. Suppose that she gotten over her anger because, by reading many articles about analytic metaphysics, she has become convinced that all people, including herself, are simply collections of atoms. She no longer sees herself as an agent and she no longer sees others as agents. This view provides her with deep feelings of serenity and happiness because she no longer feels the weight of responsibility. Her new outlook leads her to be patient and compassionate with all of her fellow creatures. Constitutivists will object that no matter how happy or compassionate this person is, this would not count as moral improvement. Once she has given up Strawson's participant stance and no longer sees anyone as an agent, she had abdicated a foundational moral commitment. Even if one is not a constitutivist, one must ask whether the change she makes is a morally better one. Should we morally prefer an outlook that gives up on the concept of agency provided it leads to peace of mind and compassion with our fellow creatures? On what grounds do we assign so high a value to positive attitudes?

My suspicion is that most skeptics do not seek to reconfigure our moral commitments so radically. They simply think that anger is not necessary and, since it is also undesirable, we should train ourselves out of it. This innocuous-sounding view, I suggest, is closer to its radical counterpart than it seems. If the constitutivist can show that anger is neither irrational nor inherently dangerous, the anger skeptic may still claim that it is better or more virtuous to respond to wrongdoing with patience or compassion. The reasons to which they will appeal to support this claim, however, often require the person feeling anger to downplay either her own agency or the wrongdoer's agency.

Suppose I am deeply betrayed by a loved one. She had no excuse, no sympathetic reasons, and did not act out of ignorance. Those who argue for the desirability claim might see my anger as warranted, but will nevertheless

say that it would be better for me not to be angry. What reasons will support this claim? Skeptics might implore me to have compassion for the wrongdoer because she is merely human and humans make mistakes. This reason presents the wrongdoing as a kind of error and suggests that human foibles are inevitable or simply to be expected. To characterize wrongs as stemming from human error is an attempt to defang the seriousness of the wrong—to make it seem more innocent than it is. This sort of reason invites me to see the wrongdoer as acting less intentionally, which is to treat her betrayal as not really expressive of her agency. Likewise, appeals to my loved one's difficult circumstances (supposing she had them) aim to convince me that her bad behavior is the result not of her own doing, but rather the product of her conditions. Suppose instead someone reminds me that I too might be capable of such a betrayal: “There but for the grace of God go I.” These kinds of appeals aim to undermine my own reasons to be hurt by or to object to the betrayal. I ought to go easy on my betrayer because it is merely a matter of luck that I am not in her shoes. Again, this encourages me to see both her actions and my actions as the result of luck and not of agency. Reasons like “You should be the bigger person” ask me to see compassion and patience as an expression of maturity or higher virtue. Here they assume without justification that compassion is more mature than anger. They also paint a picture of the offender as immature or childlike. “Be the bigger person” invites me to see myself as superior to rather than equal to my betrayer. Also, these appeals do not address the reason I am angry in the first place.¹¹ The fact that patience would make me the bigger person does not give me a reason not to be hurt by my love one's betrayal; it only gives me reason to be (allegedly) more mature.

Once we rule out the idea that anger is inherently vicious, irrational, or damaging, we need some further reason to prefer positive attitudes to it, especially if we grant that anger can be fair and justified. The reasons that advocates of the desirability claim usually give in support of compassion and patience rely on a more moderate version of the radical revisionist moral outlook than it first appears. The reasons given in favor of positive responses to wrongdoing usually require me to orient myself away from the participant stance or deemphasize its importance. Those who argue in favor of compassion and against anger may not argue that we should give up on the concept of agency altogether, but the reasons they give for responding to wrongdoing with positive attitudes often attempt to minimize the role of agency in wrongdoing.

Still, one might think there is no denying that patience and compassion are good and anger is bad. Compassion causes us to alleviate suffering, to help us be realistic about our own flaws, and to be forgiving. Anger causes us to want to hurt others, wrecks relationships, and makes us feel as though we are righteous and justified in punishing. Skeptics about anger mistakenly

believe that its presence is incompatible with the presence of patience and compassion. As Hieronymi points it, not only do we get angry at those we love, we love them while we are angry with them (2001, 539). Parents know all too well how anger and patience can exist together, especially when they are punishing their children for bad behavior. The constitutivist will go further: it is not merely that anger is compatible with compassion, but that we cannot separate our positive and negative emotions so neatly. Philosophers have often argued that anger is an expression of valuing or caring about something.¹² As Callard puts it, “Anger, fear, sadness, disappointment, jealousy—these are signs of caring” (2018, 127). It is *because* I care about my relationship with my loved one that I am angry at her betrayal. Feelings of compassion and feelings of anger can both be expressions of valuing one and the same person. Imagine a father who feels both compassion and anger at his teenage son who makes stupid choices because he seeks acceptance and belonging. The father sympathizes with his son’s needs and yet is angry because he wants his son to realize that acceptance doesn’t have to come at the cost of prudence. These kinds of complex emotional states are not mysterious, and they show that anger and positive attitudes are not necessarily in competition with each other. In fact, sometimes they arise from the same source. The constitutive view can agree that compassion and patience are good attitudes to have. Yet it will deny that these attitudes are always better than anger.

We are liable to feelings of anger because we occupy the participant stance with our fellow moral agents. When others show us disregard, ill-treatment, and disrespect, we get angry because we value ourselves and our moral relations. Getting over anger would require us to give up the participant stance or to no longer see ourselves and others as responsible moral agents in relations of mutual regard. Skeptics of the constitutive view believe that we can get rid of anger and leave the rest of our moral psychology untouched or perhaps even better off. I have argued here that getting over anger would require a more radical transformation than the skeptics are willing to accept.

NOTES

1. The term “constitutive” comes from Watson (1993, 120). Versions of this view can be found in Strawson (1963/2003), Rawls (1971/2003), Murphy and Hampton (1988), Murphy (2003), Gibbard (1990), Wallace (1994), Roberts (2003), Hieronymi (2004), Smith (2005), Darwall (2006), Bell (2013), and Thomason (2018).

2. In keeping with Strawson (1963/2003), philosophers who defend this view often use the term “resentment” rather than “anger.” I think there is no difference between

the two, so I will use them interchangeably. As I will make clear, I define anger in a way that is consistent with the definitions of resentment that one finds in the literature.

3. Solomon (1988) has a thorough discussion of objections like this.

4. My version of the constitutive view draws most directly on Strawson (1963/2003), Rawls (1971/2003), Murphy and Hampton (1988), Murphy (2003), and Solomon (1988).

5. The term comes from Rawls (1971/2003, 428).

6. Some might object here that we do get angry at inanimate objects. For example, I might yell obscenities and bang on my steering wheel when my car won’t start. Philosophers who advocate for the view I defend here usually distinguish anger and frustration (Wallace 1994, 21; Solomon 2007, 18). I am frustrated when my car won’t start, when it rains on my picnic, or when the bus is late, but I am angry at people. It is of course possible that we could be angry in cases where we anthropomorphize objects or events, or when we focus on the intentions of the people who might have made the objects or cause the events (“What kind of idiot wrote these directions?” I might think as I struggle to assemble the bookcase).

7. Hieronymi characterizes resentment in this way (2001, 546–549).

8. Strawson (1963/2003), Murphy and Hampton (1988), Murphy (2003), Solomon (1988, 2007), Wallace (1994), and Hieronymi (2001).

9. This is what Hieronymi calls “mutual regard” (2004, 124).

10. Murphy (1988, 22–23) and Hieronymi (2001, 530–531) discuss this point regarding reasons to forgive.

11. Callard makes this point (2018, 128).

12. Solomon (2007), Bommarito (2017), and Callard (2018).

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