

Faith and Virtue Formation

*Christian Philosophy in
Aid of Becoming Good*

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ADAM C. PEISER
W. SCOTT CLEVELAND

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What Are You Guarding?

Virtuous Anger and Lifelong Practice

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung

What role should anger play in a virtuous life? If anger's rightful target is injustice, and the world is marked by persistent injustice, is it virtuous to be habitually angry? James Baldwin observes that "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time."¹ Or, on the contrary, if Christlike character is marked by gentleness, should a virtuous person have little to no anger? Desert father Evagrius of Pontus counsels, "Everything you do to avenge yourself against a brother who has wronged you will become a stumbling block for you at the time of prayer."² Approaching these questions through a virtue ethics and spiritual formation lens prompts reflection on deeper patterns of anger. Reviewing the history of black Americans or women might be a way to ask similar questions about virtuous and vicious anger as responses to sustained oppression. Can anger be a virtuous disposition, enabling us to respond well to enduring structural injustices? Or is dispositional anger always wrathful or self-destructive in some way? And how might the relevant virtuous responses be cultivated? Although my focus in this chapter will be largely on the formation of personal character, it will become clear how communal formation remains intricately linked to it.

If anger's proper target is injustice—things that aren't right and need to be made right—then Christians in particular face a puzzle about anger. On the one hand, if injustice toward other human beings is prevalent and persistent, and anger is a legitimate, even apt, response to injustice, then why shouldn't Christians' anger also be prevalent and persistent? More broadly, shouldn't virtuous people be angry people precisely because they care so deeply about justice? On the other hand, we observe Jesus, the greatest exemplar of virtuous human character, along with many other exemplars of Christian virtue, and note that they are characterized by the virtue of gentleness, *not* habitual anger.³ This chapter attempts to address this puzzle and fit these pieces together.

History reveals many strands in the Christian tradition concerning anger. Here, I want to explore two of those strands in order to employ insights from each about virtuous character and its development. One strand makes both theoretical and practical room for righteous anger, while distinguishing such anger from wrath (the vice of unrighteous anger), which it condemns. The other strand warns of the spiritual dangers of all, or almost all, anger. Both build their case using Christ as a model of virtue. I will canvas each position to understand what motivates each and to apply their conclusions to an account of virtue that both values anger appropriately and takes its dangers seriously.

In the second half of the chapter I will explore virtuous responses to injustice that incorporate anger. First, after considering worries about unduly minimizing the role or value of anger, I suggest locating our angry responses within a broader sense of agency, framed by Christian communal practices of lament and hope. Practiced together, lament and hope register injustice and its harm fully but also reframe anger in a larger narrative that includes the role of divine agency and the solidarity of God's people from the past to the present. Lastly, I further contextualize the virtuous formation of anger with help first from neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists who stress virtue's development over a lifetime, and second from the Christian concept of vocation, which provides an array of appropriate responses to injustice in the communal exercise of spiritual gifts.

If injustice is persistent, a virtuous response to it must also be a matter of habit and lifelong practice. To that end, I offer the beginnings of a virtue-based account for those who are angry at injustice but also seek to grow more and more Christlike in their character.

2.1 Anger: A Mixed Review

Christian reflections on anger throughout history reveal ambivalence about its place in Christian character formation and practice. Medieval thinker Thomas Aquinas (AD 1224/5–74) follows Aristotle in arguing that anger is a natural human response that can follow reason's direction and be part of a virtuous life. John Cassian (AD 360–435), representing earlier desert monasticism, suggests that human anger consistently reveals its disordered roots within, which is why Scripture exhorts us to "put away all anger." Both strands take spiritual and moral development as their primary concern, which is why I am focusing my discussion on them. I first consider Aquinas's more moderate position in order to introduce anger's relationship to injustice. Then I will consider Cassian's challenge to it. In light of both views, I will argue that heeding Cassian's counsel will likely be a necessary part of our (re)formation from vice to virtue, even if we think Aquinas's position adequately outlines virtuous ways to express anger, in contrast to the vice of wrath.

¹ Baldwin et al. 1961, 205.

² Evagrius of Pontus, *Chapters on Prayer*, 13 (Sinkewitz 2003, 194).

³ Aristotle makes the same point about good character (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV.5), calling

2.1.1 Justice and Well-Ordered Anger

According to the Aristotelian–Thomist tradition, the passion (or emotion) of anger can be expressed either virtuously or viciously.⁴ Anger can be righteous and zealous; only the vice of anger earns the title “wrath.” What is the difference between the two? Anger needs to be morally evaluated according to both its object (“what” is it about) and its mode (“how” it is expressed).⁵ Righteous or virtuous anger responds to a violation of what is due with the desire to restore justice, and this desire must be proportionate and fittingly manifested. Appropriate anger sanctions the desire to inflict harm on another only on the condition that “this is what is required for justice to be done.”⁶ Appropriate anger must fall under this descriptor, whether it prompts retributive punishment or other forms of restitution or restoration.⁷ If anger is the emotion directed at injuries, offenses, and wrongs with the desire to make them right, then it seems correct to say, with Aquinas, that not only should we feel anger, but we should feel it wholeheartedly. He argues that the will to do justice is in fact strengthened and perfected in human beings—who are not only rational creatures but also embodied, passionate animals—when our emotions and actions harmonize with our rational judgment and support our will to carry it out.⁸

As a healthy emotion, anger (like fear) responds to something we care about when it is threatened, damaged, or dishonored. You don’t get angry (and you don’t feel fear) if you don’t care about some perceived good. Anger, like all emotions, is therefore rooted in love.⁹ Good anger is an expression of love, and what we get angry about reveals as much about what we love as it does about the things that threaten them. In *The Enigma of Anger*, Garret Keizer once wrote, “I am unable to commit to a Messiah who does not turn over a few tables.” If there is real injustice and real injury in the world, believers want a God who cares about it. Turning over tables reveals what Jesus cares most about: “Smite his cheek, and he turns you the other; slap the dignity of the house of prayer and he turns over a table.”¹⁰ Table-turning Jesus is moved by injustice done toward God and the most

vulnerable of our neighbors, although John’s gospel describes him not as angry but as zealous for the Lord (John 2:17). By contrast, cheek-turning Jesus is not upset by those who insult his honor. Anger tracks what we care about. So Aquinas thinks anger expresses our love for justice and a will committed to seeing injustice redressed.

Anger’s proper object is injustice,¹¹ Aquinas argues, I think rightly. It concerns *offenses* against what is right or due to another, not merely *harm* to things we love.¹² Harm causes the emotion of sorrow, while anger is our response when things that ought to be respected and protected are not. To be angry is to hold someone responsible for *undue* infliction of harm (by commission or omission); its concern-based construal¹³ is something like “this *ought* not to be” or “this is wrong and should be made right.” While we may also feel sadness or fear or despair over other harms, damage, and loss, anger flares up when our sense of “what’s due” is transgressed.¹⁴ Ultimately, we care about justice being done because we care about the rightness of the world (in general).¹⁵ Anger, therefore, can be focused on injustice done to others we do not know personally or offenses that are not directed at us. Redressing wrongs must also track what’s due and who has due authority to redress them. In other words, just anger rules out personal vendetta or hatred, vigilantism or revenge.

Aquinas’s account of courage provides an instructive parallel for anger. With the virtue of courage, we handle fear of a dangerous threat rightly for the sake of fidelity to some higher good.¹⁶ So too virtuous anger must handle a desire to redress injury or dishonor in a way that is faithful to the greater good of just relationships and commitments to human flourishing. Anger at things that are not right, therefore, must be expressed in ways that accord with rational judgment and the restoration or protection of just relations, as well as the humanity of the persons involved in the situation. Not only must anger’s object be just, but, in addition, its mode of expression must be appropriate, proportional, and in accord

¹¹ By object I mean the intentional object, i.e., the agent’s construal of it as such. The agent’s perception must be correct if the anger is to be appropriate.

¹² In other words, anger is about bad things that ought not to happen (the moral vs. natural evil distinction, as far as it holds, also tracks this distinction).

¹³ I adopt this term from Roberts 2007, 11–13.

¹⁴ The construal-based account implies that the agent may be in error: her perception of an offense, or its gravity, may be inaccurate.

¹⁵ Anger can thus be contrasted with apathy or complacency: if we do not care enough about anything, we have no reason to get angry when things aren’t right. I will return to this point in Section 2.2.

¹⁶ Aquinas’s view, which I share, therefore opposes the claim that “structural” or “enabling” virtues can still count as virtues even if aimed at evil ends (a view held by Robert M. Adams, see Adams 2006, echoing issues raised in Foot 1979 on courageous wrongdoers; Andrew Pinset’s misreading of my Thomistic account of magnanimity also hinges on this point, see Pinset 2013). All virtues are by definition qualities that perfect human nature and whose exercise is directed at our ultimate good. For Aquinas, fear and anger are irascible passions, so their virtuous forms involve handling difficulties or obstacles to the genuine human good.

⁴ I am aware of the inadequacy of translating medieval talk about the passions in terms of modern psychological expressions (e.g. “emotions”), but here I will gloss over much of the difference. The key points of contact for this chapter are that emotions and passions both implicate the body, they are both responses to value-constituents of the world, and they are trainable over time by reason. For a brief overview of Aquinas on the passions, see White 2002.

⁵ *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter ST) II-II 158.2 (Aquinas 1981); *On Evil* XII.1 resp. (Aquinas 2003). For an overview of ST I-II on the passions, including anger, see Miner 2009.

⁶ In Aquinas’s terms, the material element of harm must fall under the formal ratio of what justice requires; Aquinas applies this in the case of anger at ST II-II 158.1 ad 3. See also ST I-II 46.7—anger addresses an injury with a just infliction of punishment (in the form of reparations or restitution).

⁷ What is due might include what is legally owed or what is morally owed, what’s owed to human beings universally or in a community, or what’s owed to someone in a particular relationship.

⁸ ST II-II 158.8 (see especially ad 3).

¹⁰ Keizer 2003, 10, 26–7.

with what is good for human beings. Aquinas thinks Aristotle's doctrine of virtue as a mean between extremes applies here. Anger is expressed badly when it is too vehement or too lackluster to honor the goods at stake (i.e., when it is excessive or deficient, in proportion to what befits the situation). For example, anger is viciously deformed when it is too intense (disproportionate to the offense, or destructive), arises too quickly (when we are irritable, or hot-headed), or burns too long and becomes grudge-holding resentment or bitter cynicism (when the offended one can't let go of the hurt). Anger's expression also goes awry if it leads us to seek vengeance (harm to the other qua harm: "I want you to *suffer!*") and morphs into hateful spite. In such cases, it is directed at the offender qua person, rather than qua one who committed an offense. These wrathful malformations of anger can be compounded or distinguished. Sometimes we are angry for the wrong reasons and in a vicious manner besides. Other times our anger has the right target, but we still express it badly. You might be right to be angry, but how angry? Angry enough to smash property or wound others with contemptuous name-calling or physical injury? Angry enough to wish you could, even if you suppress the urge? Other times, anger is entirely selfish, and anything we do to express it will be excessive, although we can clearly do more or less damage depending on how we vent (as explosive volcanoes or passive-aggressive vengeance-seekers). In sum, according to Aquinas, anger rightly aimed at redressing injustice and expressed in accord with reason's best view of all the goods at stake in the situation is a well-ordered response.¹⁷ He reserves the term "wrath" for disordered anger of the most common sort—the excessive kind.¹⁸

2.1.2 The Case Against Anger

In contrast to the Aristotelian–Thomist position, a strand of reflection and practice from Christian monastic communities in the deserts of Egypt in the 4th century AD took a harder line on anger. Evagrius of Pontus, one of the desert fathers, and John Cassian, his disciple, both warn that anger at others has no place in a life of holiness, no matter how righteous its cause. Their main concern was that anger, for any cause, in any form, is a hindrance to "pure prayer."¹⁹ Evagrius's book on prayer sounds this recurrent theme:

Everything you do to avenge yourself against another who has wronged you will become a stumbling block for you at the time of prayer.

When you are praying as you should, such things will come over you that you may think it utterly just to resort to anger, but there is absolutely no such thing as just anger against your neighbor. If you search you will find (cf. Matt. 7:7) that it is possible even without anger for the matter to be settled properly. Therefore, make use of every means to avoid an outburst of anger.

Those who store up hurts and resentments in themselves and think they can pray are like people who draw water and put it into a jar full of holes.

Leave your gift before the altar, scripture says, and go; first be reconciled with your brother, then come² (Matt. 5:24) and pray without disturbance. For resentment darkens the ruling faculty of the one who prays and leaves his prayers in obscurity.²⁰

Prayer itself is "the offshoot of gentleness and freedom from anger."²¹

Withdrawal to the desert to pursue an ascetic life reflects these Christians' considered view that the foremost spiritual danger to faith was no longer religious persecution but assimilation into the empire with its temptations of wealth, status, and worldly power. In response, the desert fathers and mothers set up communities away from cities and centers of power. There they pursued the "care of souls" and aimed at *hesychia*, or restful freedom from disturbing thoughts and worldly passions. Those "evil thoughts" (*logismoi*) or suggestions of the demons, if indulged, stirred up passions within that led to sinful actions. Once discerned, these thoughts could be resisted. The desert community's goal was to discipline and re-form their character according to Scripture and the example of Christ (the *Logos*), who defeated the devil's tempting suggestions in the desert, so that they might be able to enter into unhindered communion with God. All remaining passions would then be expressions of love for God and neighbor.

How did their spiritual goals shape their counsel on anger? Cassian interprets Paul's advice to the Ephesians to put away "all anger and indignation and uproar and blasphemy"²² as strongly as possible: "The deadly poison of anger has to be utterly rooted out from the inmost corners of our soul."²³ Dallas Willard echoes the desert tradition in his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount. He claims that "To cut the tree of anger is to wither the tree of human evil. That is why Paul says

¹⁷ Ordering and regulating are a kind of "tempering" of a strong passion, so anger shares the mode of temperance, even though it arises in what Aquinas calls the "irascible" appetite, the power to respond to trouble and difficulty (named "irascible" after *ira*, anger) encountered in pursuit of some good.

¹⁸ As Barton 2003 notes, the Latin often signals this difference: in medieval texts *furor* is associated with fury, irrational or uncontrolled anger, while *ira* is associated more strongly with justified anger or anger properly directed at injustice.

¹⁹ Evagrius, "Chapters on Prayer" #70 (Sinkiewicz 2003, 200). This text and others like it suggest that it is not merely the expression of anger that is problematic, it is the passion itself, given its ability to

disturb one's inner tranquility. For a more comprehensive treatment of Evagrius's texts on anger, see Bunge 2009.

²⁰ Evagrius, "Chapters on Prayer" #13, 21, 22, 24 (Sinkiewicz 2003, 194–5).

²¹ Evagrius, "Chapters on Prayer" #14 (Sinkiewicz 2003, 194).

²² Ephesians 4:31, as cited in Cassian 2000, *The Institutes*, Book VIII.v, 196.

²³ Cassian 2000, *The Institutes*, Book VIII.i, 193.

simply, 'Lay aside anger' (Col. 3:8) . . . There is nothing done with anger that cannot be done better without it.²⁴

The one exception seemed to be permission to be angry at the sources of the thoughts, i.e., at the demonic suggestions and our susceptibility to them, principally because these are evidence of disorder in our relationship with God.²⁵ Evagrius believes that resisting evil is the proper function of the irascible part of the soul. (But even anger directed at the demons who tempt one must be carefully dealt out, since one must never consider something created by God evil *per se*.) As an appropriate response to sin, considered as whatever offends God and damages our personal relationship with him, contrition is often more fitting.²⁶ The root of anger, in the desert view, is too much remaining attachment to what spiritual formation literature refers to as the "false self"—by which they mean the picture of oneself driven by sinfully disordered human nature,²⁷ with its malformed desires, expectations, agenda, and prideful claims to status. The spiritual disciplines and asceticism of the desert communities addressed this root through practices of humility, detachment, and attentiveness to God.²⁸

Evagrius of Pontus calls anger a "dog" that guards the door of the house and barks to protect it. The less you are "guarding" in your heart, he says, the less the dog leaps into action.

²⁴ Willard 1998. The Apostle Paul's description of love as the "most excellent way" (1 Corinthians 13), says that it "does not dishonor others; it is not self-seeking; it is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs" (v. 5, NIV) [compare the ESV: "Love is . . . not rude, it does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful"]—four consecutive descriptions opposing love to forms of anger.

²⁵ Cassian 2000, *The Institutes*, Book VIII.ix. "And so we are commanded to get angry in a healthy way [citing Ephesians 4:26], at ourselves and at the evil suggestion that make an appearance, and not to sin by letting them have a harmful effect." Why apply anger at sin only in your own case? My guess is that Cassian could reply by citing Jesus's warnings about anger in the Sermon on the Mount in mind (see Matthew 5:22). Roberts notes that "when we are angry, this implies that we see ourselves as someone who is in a moral position to judge . . . The condemnation ingredient in anger always involves an illusory self-perception" (2014, 13, 17).

²⁶ See also Roberts 2007, chapter 7, 97–113, on contrition. I take contrition to be a special type of lament—one over the sinful choices that separate a person from God (see Section 2.2 of this chapter for further thoughts on lament).

²⁷ Again, this term is admittedly an imperfect translation, especially as it focuses more on the individual self (a modern way of construing the person) than on human nature and its common capacities. For a representative use, which is common in spiritual literature, see Nouwen's book on desert spirituality, Nouwen 2003, and M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. 2009. This term also does not capture the desert community's ambivalence about the source of temptation, sometimes labeled "demons," and other times, "logismoi" or evil thoughts.

²⁸ Are the desert Christians following a more Stoic way of life, which sought gradually to quell the perturbing passions, since elements of their practice seems to echo these Stoic themes? (See Rist 1978.) Aquinas takes pains to distinguish Aristotelian attitudes regarding the passions from the Stoics even while quoting Cassian as an authority in the Christian tradition. The *hēsychia* of desert ascetic practice, likewise, signals rest in personal and loving communion with God, rather than the freedom from disturbance found in a life guided predominantly by an impersonal *logos* of the cosmos (the *apatheia* of the Stoics). The goal is rightful attachment of the self to God unhindered by the sinful nature, not detachment of oneself from the world. Cassian calls the goal "purity of heart"—meaning a mind and will fixed on God alone, undistracted by any other created good or hindering evil. "When virtue abounds purity of heart is acquired. With purity of heart the perfection of apostolic love is possessed" (Cassian 2000, *The Institutes*, Book IV.xliii).

Over what, pray tell me 'do you fall to fighting so quickly' (cf. Prov. 25), if indeed you have scorned food, riches, and esteem? And why do you feed this dog, if you claim to own nothing? If it barks and attacks people, it is obvious that it has possessions inside and wants to guard them. But I am convinced that such a person is far from pure prayer, for irascibility is the destroyer of such prayer.²⁹

Evagrius reinforces Cassian's concern that most human anger is pridefully motivated by the wrong kind of self-concern. An inflated sense of ourselves becomes a larger target for dishonor and offense because it dominates the scene of our moral construals. Or to return to Evagrius's metaphor, the treasure being defended is a picture of ourselves that is overvalued and too jealously guarded. Our anger is a symptom of the wrong kind of self-protection. When he asks, "What is your anger guarding?" he not only asks us to look at what angers us, but prompts us to seek spiritual practices such as self-examination that reveal the possessions of the false self (e.g., honor, status, claims to superiority, claims to knowledge, humanly measured worth). The discernment of the desert reveals, as one "demotivational" poster put it, that "the only consistent feature of all your dissatisfying relationships is you."³⁰

Evagrius's and Cassian's counsel to give the dog of anger less to guard and bark at is an exhortation to another Christian virtue, humility. Humility in its original Christian context³¹ is the virtue of having a well-grounded sense of self (from the Latin *humus*, meaning "ground"). Its stability is a direct function of finding one's identity and worth in relationship to God. Compared to God, human beings are nothing on their own; they are creatures dependent on God for their entire being. In humility, they also know themselves unconditionally loved as God's children and created in the *imago Dei*, and they recognize the sheer giftedness of such status. Humility thus construes human beings as reliant on God for everything "from the ground up" but at the same time provided with a "ground" below which their worth cannot sink. Consequently, humility decreases the need to grasp for

²⁹ Evagrius, *On Thoughts* 5 (Sinkewicz 2003, 156).

³⁰ See Despair, Inc. Available online at <https://despair.com/products/dysfunction> (accessed 1/11/2018). We have already noted that the wrong sort of self-preoccupation or self-protection drives most bad anger. What is the sense of self at the root of our anger? In Aristotle's Greek culture, anger would characteristically be a response to dishonor of some kind. Anger is attuned to "what is due" to a person, particularly as an occupant of a particular social role (especially in societies where this is tied to both status and identity—see Machiavre 2007 [1981], chapter 10. In the Christian tradition, the notion of a person gradually became more egalitarian, so that human beings *as such* were due a certain threshold of respect, raising the bar of dignity for the lowest members of society (in contrast to Greek and Roman honor cultures, for example). At the same time, the Christian tradition raised concerns about the extent to which one's claims on behalf of one's due tended to track an inflated sense of what the self is owed, which it labeled the vice of pride. Different senses of self-value correlative to what one is owed are directly pertinent to understanding what is and is not rightly targeted anger; therefore, we should expect accounts of anger to vary according to different cultural senses of what is due to oneself (as well as others).

³¹ See Dunnington 2016.

humanly bestowed significance or performance-based status, which would only prove a fickle and sham substitute.³² This makes the humble less susceptible to the damage that human dishonor might otherwise do. Pride, by contrast, is the vice of needing to excel others or have superior status to affirm our worth and value—where that worth and value are conceived independently of any sense of gift, grace, or goodness from God.³³ Roberts describes the humble person as free from “spiritual cannibalism,” a state in which one’s worthiness is parasitic on others’ inferiority and is therefore both conditional and fragile.³⁴

Humility might easily be misconstrued not as defusing anger but as relinquishing our rightful claims to what’s due, or not standing up for ourselves, or becoming a “doormat.” On this mistaken view, humility would resolve not only bad anger, but *all* anger—because it would make no claims for the self, even appropriate ones.³⁵ Hill, Dillon, Lorde, and Bell rightly note the ways that healthy self-respect morally requires acknowledging some such claims.³⁶ A healthier conception of humility would instead see that a human’s worth and dignity are already secured by her relationship to God. The humble person will thus be free from preoccupation with, grasping for, and management of claims to worldly status and honor, and free to live from the honor God gives her.³⁷ (As we will see in Section 2.2, however, such freedom may be a later stage of moral development or be gifted along with a particular vocation.) Jesus Christ gives us a picture of this kind of humility. As the beloved Son (Matthew 3:17), he could make himself a servant (Philippians 2:7–8) and endure a criminal’s death, “scorning its shame” (Hebrews 12:2). As with all virtues and spiritual disciplines in the Christian tradition, then, humility’s detachment is made possible only by rightful *attachment*, and is the fruit of a process of moral development and the working of grace. If this is correct, truly humble people will be models of good justice-seeking *and* appropriate uses of anger. Like a bomb-sniffing K-9 unit, the dog of anger in them has been trained to bark not primarily in self-defense, but to detect and sound the alarm at violations of justice wherever they injure the community.

³² See Roberts 2007, chapter 6 on “Humility as a Moral Project,” 92.

³³ For an excellent evaluation of the differences between Christian humility and Greek honor cultures, see Herdt 2010, chapter 3. Herdt makes clear that the prideful person finds gratitude to others inappropriate and beneath him.

³⁴ Roberts 2007, 89.

³⁵ When the Christian tradition commends the discipline of submission as an antidote to anger, therefore, red flags may go up over such counsel (for its misapplication, see Section 2.2). To be clear, Christian humility is not a Buddhist lack of self, but rather an unmasking of the prideful claims of the false self, although the spiritual exercises of both pull us away from excessive attachment to an independent self of our own making. For an excellent new study of Christian humility, see Dunnington 2019. Dunnington refers to this self-constructed image as the “ego ideal.”

³⁶ Hill, Jr. 1973; Lorde 1981; Dillon 1992; Bell 2009.

³⁷ I will further differentiate how to handle claims of desert for oneself and others in Section 2.2.3 on vocation.

The Christian desert tradition offers this story of virtuous humility and its power to defuse pridefully self-protective anger:

The brothers surrounded Abba John the Short when he was sitting in front of the church, and each of them asked him about their thoughts. Another old man flared up in envy at the sight, and said, “Abba John, your cup is full of poison.”

Abba John answered him, “Yes, Father, it is. But you have said this when you can only see the outside. What would you say if you saw the inside, too?”³⁸

John’s response shows that he is not defensive against a rival’s personal slights; rather, he openly acknowledges his defects, i.e., the “inside of the cup” which God already sees. He rests in the goodness he has as a spiritual gift from God for the benefit of his brothers; no comments from others—whether of praise or blame—can change that. Humility is a source of his equanimity and gentleness in the face of a threat to his reputation and standing in the community. Notice that it also gives him stability or groundedness: he is *not* shaken from his calling or the exercise of his gifts either by others’ insults or his own humble acknowledgment of imperfection. In that practice and calling, his dependence on God thus gives him freedom from the need to guard himself in the same way that a prideful person would. And so his gentle answer turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1).

The desert community was also concerned about anger’s vehemence. Addressing anger specifically as one of the “eight *principia vitia*” (the principal or capital vices, a list that later became the seven deadly sins), Cassian says that anything that causes anger also causes blindness and blocks loving communion with God and others: “The emotion of wrath blinds the eyes of the soul and prevents us from seeing the Sun of Righteousness.” In this regard, he brooks no distinction between anger, which has a just cause, and wrath:

It makes no difference whether gold plates, or lead, or what metal you please, are placed over our eyelids. The value of the metal makes no difference: we are still blinded.³⁹

When the result of the roiling passion of anger is spiritual blindness, caveats about “righteous causes” are not worth much, from Cassian’s point of view. If the passion of anger is so intense that it prevents us from seeing Christ’s image in a brother or sister, then the reason we are angry is not good enough to justify it. We might like to believe that anger alerts us to injustice in the world, but as a matter of fact, our prideful instincts to self-preservation and our lack of self-control in the face anger’s vehemence regularly prevent our anger from functioning as it should.

³⁸ Chadwick 1958.

³⁹ Cassian 2000, *The Institutes*, Book VIII.vi.

We are guarding our own entitlements rather than seeking justice. We are lashing out blindly rather than exercising wise discernment. In contrast to humility, anger puts one in a defensive and (self-) righteous stance, which impedes the careful self-examination required for confession and contrition, as well as the attentive and trustful posture required for prayer. Evagrius and Cassian alike conclude that the removal of anger is therefore necessary for Christlike virtue, unhindered prayer, and communion with God.

2.1.3 Evaluating Anger: A Cautionary Tale

One might wonder why such radical advice from an ancient spiritual community would even be worth considering, especially if even most Christians today reject it as too extreme. To explore this question, my students and I experimented by keeping a journal about our anger. Our practice was aimed simply at self-examination. We kept a record for a week, documenting when we were angry, and about what and how angry we felt. Mild irritation earned a rating of “1,” while intense vehemence and rage scored a “5.” We returned to reflect on our journal a few weeks after completing it. We expected that most of our anger would be rightly attuned to injustice, with a few aberrations and selfish interruptions. What did we discover instead? All, or very nearly all, episodes of anger were about our own self-interested desires and agendas, inflated expectations, personal peeves, and injured egos. *Almost none* had anything to do with injustice, and even fewer had anything to do with what *others* were due. Our anger was almost exclusively focused on protecting the false self. It was a striking, disappointing, and—I have to admit—unexpected result. It turned out that even if we disagreed with Cassian on theoretical grounds, we were convicted by the appropriateness of his spiritual counsel to “get rid of all anger.”

Pierre Hadot has argued that ancient philosophy, and ancient Christianity with it, focused not principally on producing theory or doctrine, but rather on committing oneself to a way of life, which the texts of that tradition then served either to elucidate or inculcate or both.⁴⁰ If we read Cassian (and Scripture) in this tradition of interpretation, we can accept Aquinas’s point that anger can be righteous, while accepting Cassian’s counsel to put away all anger as a transformative practice. Given our self-protective pride, such transformative practices will be necessary for cultivating a life marked by the freedom to love God and pursue justice, unconstrained by disruptive concerns to defend our own power, prestige, reputation, and status.

The desert program of caring for the soul also shows us that handling passions well requires an array of virtues and virtuous practices to reshape our attention to the world, to ourselves, and to God. Their daily regimen of silence, simplicity, solitude, contemplation, and unceasing prayer taught them to put their trust in God’s faithful protection, listen to God’s word about who they were, and let go of worldly values and visions of success. These lifelong disciplines work like water on rock, eroding our disordered loves and re-directing our attachments.⁴¹ Practiced over time, such training can attune us to important goods, expand our capacity to maintain equanimity, and give us strength to endure even under duress.

Moreover, no apprentice in virtue does this alone. Monastic communities made discipleship in charity and humility their collective goal, they shared common daily rhythms, and they mentored and encouraged each other in a way of life. (This was as true of Aquinas’s Dominican order as it was of the desert Christians in the fourth century.) Their model of living shows how significantly environment and culture shape our character and habits, in many cases by contrast with contemporary culture and its formative effects. Think about the everyday way we are trained in wrath. Whatever lip-service contemporary Americans might pay to “civil discourse,” we nevertheless valorize contentious communication. Fictional heroes like Tony Stark, television judges on talent shows, talk-show hosts, Twitter feeds, and politicians trademark this conversation style. We enjoy watching verbal take-downs in sitcoms, savor smack talk in sports, and applaud snarky comments posted on social media. We regularly entertain ourselves by confronting the world in an angry, antagonistic posture. Not only do we become well-practiced in contemptuous talk, but our moral imaginations receive a non-stop anger feed. And this despite good evidence that verbal “venting” turns out to be an ineffective way to discharge anger. Contemporary psychological studies corroborate historical warnings.⁴² Practices such as self-calming (taking deep breaths, removing oneself from the situation), re-framing (trying to put the incident into a different perspective), and creative redirection (e.g., expending energy on exercise) are more helpful for dissipating anger.⁴³ Ancient and modern sources agree that ruminating on anger and expressing it verbally or in action only

⁴¹ See Nouwen 2003.

⁴² Aquinas paints a picture of anger’s natural escalation in his list of wrath’s offspring vices. “Indignation” and “swelling of the mind” indicate rumination about the offense in ways that magnify the injustice done by denigrating the offender, thereby “justifying” a greater retaliatory response. Verbal “exclamations” follow, along with “injuries against others by means of words,” including reviling, backbiting, detraction, gossip, and more (ST I-II 67–76). Insults express disrespect and dehumanize offenders, decreasing empathy and making violence against them easier to tolerate. The last stage includes physical injury and even killing (crimes that treat another human being as an object over which I have total mastery, or that assume retaliation is entirely under my power and purview). In sum, distancing leads to dehumanizing which in turn leads to destroying. Wishing just punishment becomes wishing evil to a person as such.

⁴³ See, for example, van Oyen Whitriet et al. 2011, especially 289; see also van Oyen Whitriet et al. 2015, 250.

⁴⁰ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises” and “Ancient Spiritual Exercises and ‘Christian Philosophy’” in Hadot 1995, 79–144.

tend to inflame and entrench it. Combine those habits with hurry, stress, and not enough sleep, and we might rightly expect impatience, frustration, and resentment to become a default way of life.

In the Cassian vs. Aquinas debate, therefore, we might concede that Aquinas (following Aristotle) offers a template for virtuous anger: correcting injustice is its morally legitimate object. Cassian and Evagrius nonetheless offer good advice for those chronically malformed by the vice of wrath. Because we typically lean toward prideful and defensive self-protection and default into disrespect for others, desert injunctions to get rid of *all* anger would effectively get rid of mostly bad anger. As a result, our ensuing discussion of developing virtue and resisting vice will need to take seriously both Aquinas's principled point about anger's appropriate target, while also heeding Cassian's warnings about the dangers of anger's toxicity when it becomes a habit.

2.2 Anger and Lifelong Virtuous Practice

Our work to understand and reconcile different strands of the Christian tradition on anger has already yielded some practical counsel on handling anger virtuously. I turn now to address our initial question: What should character formation look like for those who seek to live virtuous lives, especially in a world of persistent injustice, and how does anger fit into this project? I will address this question by focusing on handling anger and its occasions virtuously as a matter of *lifelong practice*. My approach will center on virtue formation, first contextualizing anger within other communal virtuous practices that share anger's powerful impetus for change and its expression of pain over injuries inflicted, and then highlighting the developmental and vocational nature of this formation within a moral community. That wider frame will help us honor anger's rightful objects and energetic responses while keeping its destructive potential at bay.

2.2.1 Four Caveats

Before I turn to positive practices, I need to register four caveats. Anger is not the only possible, nor the only advisable, response to injustice; however, using concerns about anger to evade a response is also problematic, for the following reasons.

Cases of persistent (often structural) injustice raise important issues about what constitutes a fully virtuous response in a world full of brokenness, offense, neglect, and actions that perpetrate evil, whether intentionally or not. Things rarely go as they ought, as people rarely behave as they ought. While sometimes our response should be angry intervention, Christians often respond to injustice by saying that

we should be forgiving or at least forbearing. Although true humility, gentleness, and patience do not require passivity in the face of evil, exhortations to such virtues have often been abused by those who are more comfortable keeping unjust structures in place, just as castigating the anger of others as unreasonable or their angry communication as having the wrong "tone" has been an excuse to ignore the complaints of those who are injured or dishonored. As Carl Ellis argues, Christians have a history here to reckon with—one that requires a distinction between what has been done in the name of Christ and what Christ would truly have us do.⁴⁴ Whether anger is the appropriate response in a given case or not, we need to remain sensitive and responsive to injustice. Minimizing or ignoring the truth about what is not right in the name of Christian peace or calls for forgiveness is not acceptable or virtuous.

Likewise, choosing not to defend yourself from disrespect or injury is a different moral choice than choosing not to defend others. Withstanding occasional personal attacks on our own reputation might be harder to bear, but they pale in comparison to systemic abuses that target human dignity and injure the innocent. Even if gentleness leads us to turn the other cheek in the first case, a virtuous response to the oppression of others might still call for turning over tables in the second. Anger rightly motivates us to stand against attacks on others' full humanity (along with our own); likewise, it effectively demands attention when victims are unseen or unjustly neglected. We may have special responsibilities that include expressing anger about injustice when it is done to vulnerable others we are called to care for, or in communities we are called to lead.⁴⁵ We will return to this point in the last section of the chapter.

Anger can be useful in rousing us to action when complacency, callous indifference, and negligence are temptingly comfortable options. This is true especially in the case of systemic injustices, such as racism or sexism, that persist over time. A common temptation in a world of broken systems and recurrent offenses is to give up hope out of weariness or to let oneself be beaten down. Anger is a lively antidote to resignation and letting things slide.⁴⁶ As Gregory of Nyssa put it, "Anger is the sword-bearer of desire."⁴⁷ Aquinas goes further: "Those who are not angry when they have cause to be, sin. For unreasonable patience is the hotbed of many vices, it fosters negligence, and incites not only the wicked but even the good

⁴⁴ Ellis, Jr. 1996. In chapter 2, for example, he argues for an essential contrast between the "slave-holding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering" so-called "Christianity of this land," and the "Christianity of Christ."

⁴⁵ Note the parallel to the pacifism vs. just war debate here: some would advocate that killing in war is evil and must not be done; others counter that defense of the innocent against an unjust aggressor makes it not only necessary, but just and required by neighbor-love (ST II-II 40).

⁴⁶ This is what psychologists call "minimizing" the offense, on the one hand, or "emotional numbing" to pain, a different response which likewise neither addresses nor acknowledges the injustice.

⁴⁷ Quoted in ST I-II 46.2, obj. 1.

to do wrong.”⁴⁸ In a broken world, we often need persistent motivation to keep working against intolerable injustice and thereby bear witness to what ought not to be. Anger may reinvigorate our hold on a vision of justice through a long struggle. “Focused with precision [anger] can become a powerful source of energy driving progress and change.”⁴⁹ It might even be argued that while anger incentivizes those who advocate for justice, it also embodies a healthy sense of agency and respect for persons. In that way, to use Robert Adams’s definition of virtue, righteous anger itself is a way of being *for* what is excellent.

Lastly, we are embodied creatures and our moral and spiritual lives must take account of that fact. Being human brings vulnerability with it.⁵⁰ Because anger is a response to some kind of stressor in the form of threat or injury, it raises our blood pressure and makes our hearts race and faces flush, and it is hard on our hearts long-term.⁵¹ As a result, handling anger well also requires attentiveness to our embodied condition. Human beings are generally more prone to anger when we are tired, hungry, under pressure, or in pain. (The self-examination exercise of keeping an anger journal was helpful not only in telling us more about the roots and objects of our anger. It also revealed the triggering occasions and contexts in which we were most liable to become angry. Our notes revealed that we were angrier late at night, before meals, when temperatures rose, or when we were ill, etc.) Whatever our reasons at the moment (at what could well be a genuine offense), our angry response might serve as a more accurate indicator of sleep deprivation or emotional depletion than the nature or degree of the offense itself. To put it differently, our capacity to absorb events that do not meet our expectations, or to keep things in perspective in a world where events feel threatening or beyond our control, will vary according to our overall physical condition.

We also have good evidence that long-term anger is physiologically unhealthy and hard for human beings to bear without damage.⁵² For example, habitual anger strongly correlates with heart disease, and elevated stress hormones cause inflammation and other forms of long-term physical damage, even impacting mortality rates.⁵³ This fact about our embodied humanity suggests that anger serves us best in short-term situations where immediate defense or intervention is necessary. But emotion-suppression, the other extreme, also has its problems.⁵⁴ Christian responses to grief, anger, and other uncomfortable or negative emotions often err on the side of rushing us through them or telling us not to feel them. Aquinas notes, however, that Jesus felt the full gamut of human emotions (for an explicit example of anger, see Mark 3:1–6), and Aquinas’s account of the virtues

deliberately builds on his taxonomy of the passions we have by nature. A virtuous response involving anger, therefore, must navigate a path that respects our physical vulnerabilities yet also accepts the passions as a trainable part of the human condition.

How, then, should we imagine the development and dispositions of virtuous persons in a world of persistent injustice? And how can their virtue habituation avoid anger’s moral and spiritual pitfalls, as well as its physical toll, while not falling into complacency about what needs to be set right? In the next section, we’ll look at specific practices that support anger’s stand against injustice but also help defuse its destructive potential.

2.2.2 Divine and Human Agency: Communities of Hope and Lament

I now consider ways to confront persistent injustice that help us resist assumptions that this is an individual task, only a human task, and a task whose success ultimately rests on us. Anything that mitigates those three mistakes will help us situate anger within a virtuous character, and keep it from turning destructive, idolatrous, or corrosively burdensome. In this section, I will show that we can best deal with anger and address injustice together, which means that ethically formative and enduring communities of faith may be the best context in which to channel anger’s energy into virtuous agency.

In the first section, I will focus on hope and lament as communal practices that incorporate energy for change and also express grief and pain at things that are not right. As such, they both share key features of anger. Significantly, in the Christian tradition, both hope and lament engage divine agency, while still making human contributions crucial. Hope situates human efforts toward restoration within an eschatological narrative of God’s providential power to make all things new. Lament articulates the corporate prayers and songs of generations of God’s people crying out to God for deliverance in the meantime.

In the second section, I will consider how thinking of anger in terms of developmental stages and particular callings makes clearer that being and becoming angry virtuously is a life-long common project. As one should expect from a virtue-based approach, we have good reason to resist a one-size-fits-all abstract answer for how to be angry virtuously, either as a single person (at different stages of maturity) over a lifetime or as a member of a corporate body with many spiritual gifts. If expressions of anger and responses to injustice are sensibly differentiated and distributed, no one person carries the burdens alone and distinct contributions in a variety of circumstances can be honored.

Three positive aspects of anger that are worth attending to when considering virtue formation are (1) its path-clearing *energy* to move toward realizing future

⁴⁸ Quoted in ST II-II 158.8 *sed contra*. *On Evil* XII.1 (Aquinas 2003).

⁴⁹ Lorde 1981, 8.

⁵⁰ Machynre 2001 highlights this feature of the ethical life and its implications for the virtues.

⁵¹ See, for example, Williams et al. 2000; vanOyen Witvliet et al. 2001, 118, 122.

⁵² Tessman 2005.

⁵³ vanOyen Witvliet et al. 2001; vanOyen Witvliet and Luna 2018, especially 136–9.

⁵⁴ See n. 42.

goods; (2) its robust sense of *agency*, i.e., a healthy sense of self and the possibility of one's actions being effective; and (3) its advocacy for the good, expressed as a keen desire for justice (the restoration of the way things ought to be), motivated by love (for others, for God, and, rightly ordered, for self). Each feature shows that virtuous anger must be not just *against* something, but also *for* something. Anger shares each of these features—energy, agency, and advocacy for love of some good—with hope.

When anger loses any of these three features, it becomes destructive—destructive of the one who is angry, and possibly also destructive of others in its path. The first two features require anger to be positive (even restorative) in its ultimate focus, not *simply* retaliatory or retributive. They also move the agent to address injustice in a way that enables or enacts constructive change in the future (internally or externally or both), rather than scoring points and scorching the earth. The last feature grounds anger in a love of others and a deep yearning for shalom. This love and fidelity to goodness grounds our sense of loss when injustice damages and destroys. Yet the same love protects against violence, dehumanizing others, self-consuming rage, and blaming God.

To capitalize on the positive features of anger it highlights, I will draw on practices of hope to enrich the palette of possible responses to persistent injustice. Sometimes these responses mitigate anger, sometimes they displace it or provide counterweights for it; other times they sustain its constructive focus. I also attend to lament as giving voice and validation to those who suffer injustice and explain how both of these practices—when practiced as a community—reframe our sense of our own power and resources in responding to injustice.

First, hope. In the Christian worldview, injustice is not a perennial feature of the world.⁵⁵ It is a part of the human story, and certainly a notable current part, but it is neither the final *telos* nor the final word about human life in community. Christians look forward in hope to a transformed creation, in which injustices are finally and fully made right by the power and mercy of God. Importantly, however, the renewing work of heralding and signposting this new creation and its transformed relationships has already begun: in fact, for Christians, doing this work is (supposed to be) their primary mission. Recognizing brokenness for what it is; grieving it, and working to reform and restore social structures that contribute to it are essential parts of this work, even if their fruit is sometimes more partial and prophetic than triumphantly realized here and now. For that reason, the Church has traditionally exercised such practices as the spiritual and corporeal acts of mercy, for example, showing hospitality to strangers, the displaced, etc. (witness, for example, centuries of Benedictine practice, religiously affiliated

hospitals, and Christian social service agencies). Christian communities thus engage in countless lived practices that channel anger at injustice into hopeful agency countering its damage. We can be faithful in joining in that work, using our energy for endurance. "Hope," in such cases, "is a revolutionary patience."⁵⁶

Christianity also counts hope as a theological virtue.⁵⁷ How does this theological frame shape our practice? Hope is ultimately grounded not in earthly circumstances or human powers to effect change, since these features of the world often prove disappointingly resistant to our efforts.⁵⁸ Rather, hope is the virtuous practice of entrusting ourselves and others to God's power and mercy,⁵⁹ confident that divine agency empowers positive human agency (and does not supplant it)—although not always in ways we expect.⁶⁰ Divinely empowered hope can be expressed in solidarity with those who currently suffer, following Christ's own example, as well as advocacy for change (however small or large), or prophetic witness that things are not as they ought to be yet. Such practices of hope can be rooted in a personal experience of God's faithfulness (e.g., a testimony after tribulation: "Let us not be afraid to look at everything that has brought us to where we are now and trust that we will soon see in it the guiding hand of a loving God"⁶¹). It can be further nested in a communal experience of that faithfulness (e.g., liturgical uses of the psalms to recount God's saving work in the history of his people). These communal experiences can in turn be framed by a community's Eucharistic and creedal expressions of God's redemptive work to break the power of human sin already now, as well as his ultimate work to renew all things.⁶² Practicing the virtue of hope means learning to live into a bigger story than we can see right now, based on the testimony of the saints who have gone before us and who surround us (Hebrews 11–12).

This theological frame is crucial for practicing Christian hope because it enables human beings to engage in combating injustice without a sense that it all depends on their power or their ability to see their efforts bear fruit. Hope upholds both our effective agency and our lack of ultimate control within a providential and eschatological order. Our work can be a way of being for the good; human agency is still crucial because God's mission is also ours, and the Spirit is at work now, not just someday in the future. At the same time, however, this larger frame frees us from anger's excessive desire to assert our own power and agenda under the assumption that it is entirely up to us to make things right, right now. As human beings, we do not need to be superheroes who save the world from injustice, a task

⁵⁵ In offering a Christian response I do not intend to minimize the contributions of other traditions (e.g., Aristotle's, just mentioned). However, I do believe that it offers especially promising and fruitful theoretical and practical resources for hope, lament, and a social community that sustains both.

⁵⁶ Lamort 1995, xxiv.

⁵⁷ See DeYoung 2014 (republished as Chapter 8 in this volume); Cobb 2017.

⁵⁸ Roberts 2007, chapter 10: 148–64.

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *ST II-II* 17.1-2.

⁶⁰ *ST II-II* 17.5. Aquinas also notes that despair, one of hope's opposing vices, deflates agency by reducing our incentive to perform good acts (*ST II-II* 20.3).

⁶¹ Henri Nouwen, cited in Manning 2009.

⁶² Wright 2009, for example, elaborates this theme.

we would clearly fail to accomplish. Hope frees us from anger's potentially idolatrous sense of control and position of judgment. With the virtue of hope, we can work hard for justice now while also waiting patiently for the Holy Spirit to empower and perfect that work.

Given that the success of our efforts ultimately depends on divine agency, believers can energetically devote themselves to justice with hopeful confidence that nothing is impossible for God. Our assurance rests on God's power and providence, rather than human hubris or high expectations—both classic anger triggers. Without fear that all our efforts will end in failure, or assumptions that success depends on fragile human achievement, human beings can exercise agency in virtuously appropriate ways. We can act against injustice now while praying, "Thy kingdom come." What keeps anger within bounds is knowing that it's not *my* kingdom.⁶³ It is not up to us to realize our vision of the kingdom here and now; it is up to us to partner wholeheartedly with the Spirit's work, trusting that God can use human effort to accomplish things even greater than our imagining.

Along with hope, a virtuous community will need to practice lament. Beyond hopeful expressions of our own agency in reliance on God's agency, lament—and communal lament, in particular—is a practice of calling out evil, injustice, and brokenness. Lament expresses the pain and grief that often lie behind anger and affirms that God, too, cares about injustice and the pain of God's children. Within the context of hope's larger narrative, lament need not give way to despair. Voicing grief and loss *and* feeling like our complaints are heard is an essential step in addressing anger's roots.⁶⁴ We need to express the "not rightness" of anger's construal of the world and say "no" to whatever dishonors and destroys, precisely because we love what God has created good. This is one reason why lament is a recurrent genre in Scripture and embedded in regular liturgy, and why listening to lament is a practice of loving attention. When someone's pain is acknowledged as significant because the person in pain is recognized as worthy of love and respect, our responses directly target anger's sensitivity not only to injury, but also the dishonoring message behind it. How many of us simply long for our pain to be heard and the burdens we bear to be worth others' attention and care?

In a similar vein, Billings, Cobb, and Green note that communal expressions of lament and solidarity with those who are suffering are a powerful salve against despair and loss of hope, especially over time.⁶⁵ Lament as a practice makes sorrow over brokenness a speakable and significant way to acknowledge the injustices that

mark too many human lives. Collective expressions of protest that this hurt is not the way it's supposed to be are encouraging to those who are burdened. What stirs our anger is partially addressed by a genuine chance to grieve brokenness and injury together. How much of the strident politics of identity would be necessary if the pain of the vulnerable who are now discounted and disregarded genuinely grieved us all? Even in cases when our current communities do not share our lament, we can draw upon a long tradition and history of communal lament: solidarity in suffering can transcend a person's current era and immediate context.

What sorts of practices of lament are apt for those called to embrace others whose anger articulates sadness, shame, and suffering? The prayer book of the Church—the book of Psalms—gives full voice to human lament: cries for help, fear of oppression, endurance of mockery and betrayal, and vulnerability to the point of brokenness, along with weeping. African American spirituals constitute a whole genre within Christian hymnody that offer examples of communal lament done with authenticity and solidarity. If injustice were experienced in communities with regular practices that acknowledge fear, grief, hurt, sadness, humiliation, and vulnerability, where these emotions are safe to share and where others hold our pain with respect and empathy, some of our responses of persistent anger would be assuaged by tears.⁶⁶ The practice of lament says that not all injustice is fixable by us; suffering is part of our life in this world—but not a part we have to accept with Stoic resignation. The psalmist weeps throughout the night and cries, "How long, O Lord?" Regular lament enables both grief and endurance, without condoning or minimizing the evil suffered.⁶⁷

My argument is that practices that acknowledge and share in others' pain will buffer, redirect, focus, and reshape the anger of those hurt by unjust social structures. Truly acknowledging such pain should surely also motivate efforts to change those structures, even against the odds—so lament and hope can also be mutually reinforcing. Along with the virtue of humility, these communal practices, rooted in a supernatural framework for human history and a sense of divine solidarity, will help us be angry well. The energy we were directing toward expressing anger and making bids for recognition of injustice might be bolstered by partnerships with others who—at the very least—will stand alongside us in solidarity and encouragement. A community that shows us respect also gives us necessary grounding⁶⁸ and provides a welcome respite from being beaten down by structural systems of persistent injustice. Christ's personal responses to the

⁶³ When the Church also works to advocate for those crushed by oppressive systems, its solidarity in lament with those who suffer is more credible. (We often note this point by its unfortunate absence.) What is true of the Church can be extrapolated to other communities as well.

⁶⁴ The communal/cultural/structural nature of such shifts in practice is important to note, as our culture becomes busier and more preoccupied, with the result that we devote less time and attention in practices like face-to-face listening, or silence receptivity, or the sort of attentiveness that fosters empathy.

⁶⁵ See Dillon 1992, n. 34.

⁶³ In Dallas Willard's lectures on the Sermon on the Mount, he describes anger's typical construal as "an insult to my kingdom." See Willard 2011, "Divine Conspiracy 11: Living Without Anger."

⁶⁴ "Anger is the grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change" (Lorde 1981, 8).

⁶⁵ Billings 2015 and Cobb and Green 2017 offer extended discussions of these themes.

downtrodden and disrespected reveal the power of such regard.⁶⁹ A community that reinforces our value and dignity can counterbalance insults to our honor and remind us of our secure identity in Christ.⁷⁰

But when should we wait and weep, or advocate and act together? When do our tears cleanse and when do they catalyze change? In what remains, I want to address—in broad terms at least—ways that human anger can be developed into healthy and sustainable responses to injustice. This time my focus will be on how virtuous responses should vary with stages of development and different callings.

2.2.3 A Developmental and Vocational Approach to Virtuous Anger

So far I have maintained that anger can be part of our response to injustice, even if Cassian's warnings and our own self-examination give us reasons to practice humility and situate our responses to injustice within communities formed by hope and lament. Our anger should not carry the weight of this work alone. Addressing injustice while engaging together in these framing and formative practices keeps us energized by the cosmic narrative of God's redeeming power and comforted by God's solidarity in suffering love.

How do we become the sort of people who express anger in virtuous ways? Along with an emphasis on communal agency (human and divine) and contextualizing anger within other virtuous practices, we should attend to the role of time. Virtue development and spiritual formation take time, which means that both persons and communities of virtue are sustained over lifetimes and generations only with commitment and intentional effort. In this last section, therefore, I offer thoughts about the shape anger might take within a lifelong trajectory. First, I will focus on virtue development across stages of life, using two recent commentators on Aristotle, and second, I'll note the importance of vocational differentiation within a formational, as well as a historical and inter-generational community—the Christian Church.

Virtue ethicists emphasize a developmental view of the virtues.⁷¹ Inspired by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Julia Annas distinguishes the learner from the expert in virtue, and notes that the virtuous response we expect—and should expect—from each person varies according to a person's stage of character development. Even after accounting for differences in situational contexts, then,

⁶⁹ One striking example appears in the gospel of Luke, when Jesus defends the woman who anoints his feet with perfume ("Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman?'; Luke 7:44, emphasis added).

⁷⁰ Robert Adams's conception of a "common project," and friendships as a paradigmatic instance, may be a fruitful direction in which to develop this thought further. See Adams 2006, chapter 6.

⁷¹ Recent representative examples include Annas 2011; Annas et al. 2016.

we should not expect a one-size-fits-all prescription for how to be angry in a virtuous way. The response that is appropriate for someone who is young (still developing a sense of identity, still forming healthy ego boundaries) might well be some sort of anger—indeed, at this point we might need to encourage certain expressions of anger. Largely we are teaching such a learner to recognize in which cases anger is appropriate for someone at the early stages of moral development (i.e., what appropriate objects for anger are) and the most constructive way to express it. This would presumably be paired with practical training in empathy and love, fairness and respect for others, and delayed gratification, among other things. Some of the teaching and modeling here will involve basic skills such as (a) learning to distinguish the ways physical triggers (e.g., tiredness, stress, physical discomfort, or hunger) color our construals and trigger emotional responses like anger, (b) learning to pay attention to violations of another's due (since children tend to be self-focused), (c) learning what not to tolerate and how to self-advocate appropriately when others offend or cross boundaries (i.e., how to be appropriately assertive, and how to create and protect safe spaces), and (d) learning how to manage conflicts and express our feelings in constructive, relationship-building ways (e.g., empathy-training, bridge-building communication patterns such as a soft start-up, expressing needs instead of making accusations, and active listening).

In his classic piece on the development of virtuous character and moral integration, Myles Burnyeat further differentiates three different stages of virtue development.⁷² In the first stage (usually, the young), learners respond principally to their own sensory pleasure, so anger triggers will be occasions of injustice that cause pain, and learning what to be angry about will involve virtuous training about appropriate pleasures and their place in human life. (So, per the desert program, habits of detachment, simplicity, and delayed gratification help us unlearn selfish insistence on getting what we desire and also train us in hopeful expectation and waiting, even when this means tolerating discomfort or deprivation. Virtuous communities will have to strongly counter-form their members against a consumer culture on this point.)

At the second stage, learners gain sensitivity to honor and social approval, even over personal pleasure. Here, affirmation or disapproval from others serves as an effective tool for tutoring emotion, including anger. Communities must be intentional about this, however, because social groups can teach us complacency (e.g., the "bystander effect") or provide needed accountability. Given how powerful a pressure social conformity can be, virtuous expectations from both authorities and peers, especially in a personal context like a church, family, or neighborhood, can strongly form how we feel, what we value, and how we express our feelings and

⁷² Burnyeat 1981.

values in action. Honesty/cheating studies show that knowing that someone is watching can be a powerful curb on inappropriate human behavior. Moreover, such structural prompts articulate and “nudge” us toward living out certain values: for example, when students are required to write out an honor code statement and sign it before taking a test, they tend to cheat less. Having mirrors or cameras depicting our behavior to ourselves or others has the same effect, as does seeing others’ reactions to our behavior—as a “social mirror,” as it were.⁷³ We might rightly expect the same to be true for anger. In well-formed learners, their own conscience (or *phronesis*) eventually stands in for the roles initially supplied by moral mentors and mirrors. For those who have been malformed here, external accountability structures will need to play an ongoing role.

Lastly, apprentices in virtue learn to value virtuous activity for its sake. In their internalized value system, justice is now sought for itself, as a good beyond considerations of associated pleasure or external approval. Virtuous agents at this stage understand what virtue requires, love virtuous activity as something excellent in its own right, and choose to live that way, simply because they endorse this as the best way to be. They choose virtue as the human good, and also as their own good.

As a possible fourth stage, I might add to Burnyeat’s Aristotelian account that as we become more mature and secure in our status as children of God, regardless of alternate treatment in the world, we internalize and operate from a wider view of God’s mercy and providential care—i.e., an even more expansive view of the good. Spiritual growth in such trust develops through the cumulative experience of God’s faithfulness and yields less and less anger. This, too, takes time. My own experience of this trajectory reveals that the desert fathers and mothers, like some of the incarcerated Christians I know with life sentences, eschew almost all anger. Such a disposition usually emerges from positions of extreme asceticism or deprivation (for example, the stripping away of all worldly goods, or exile). Forced to depend wholly on God, they live from an extraordinarily deep sense of God’s providential care. With the anchoring conviction that all things are in God’s hands, they trust God’s goodness no matter how dire the conditions. That assurance characterizes their fundamental comportment in everyday life, no matter how bleak or broken things appear to be at the moment. This stance seems, however, to be hard won through much suffering and spiritual growth.⁷⁴ Making this a one-size fits-all take on anger would therefore not be helpful for a learner (and might even be damaging). Taking a developmental, long-term view to

virtuous anger therefore reveals another way Aquinas and Cassian can both be right.

In such a virtue-formation program, then, a learner (say, a child or young adult) might focus on attending to the emotions beneath anger and finding safe people who listen well, practicing self-advocacy and self-protection when necessary, cultivating empathy for others in similar situations, and imitating models who stand up for them. They would be encouraged and rewarded (with pleasure or social praise) for doing so. Counsel for those who have more spiritual maturity, by contrast, might be to maintain graciousness and gentleness more often and with greater self-sacrifice. As learners grow, they might move from following to leading communities that enact narratives of humility and hope, as well as joining faithfully in practices that anchor and strengthen our spiritual identity in Christ. Older, more experienced mentors might wisely discern the anger that calls a community to advocacy from the anger that is merely a symptom of attachments to worldly dreams and our own power. As Jesus confronted the Pharisees who protested healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath,⁷⁵ mature virtuous anger may be directed at the stubborn hearts of those who refuse to see through the eyes of love, combined with a response first to extend healing, and second, to lay down one’s life. Bryan Stevenson’s work with the Equal Justice Initiative counts as a good example of a virtuous combination of such bold confrontation and sacrificial service.⁷⁶ But this leads to a second point, which expresses an important caveat.

Clearly, appropriate individual responses need to be sensitive to different stages of moral development, as learners are nurtured by and apprenticed into mature formation within a virtuous community. Further, however, virtuous responses to injustice, including a response of anger, must take into account one’s different vocations and gifts within a community, against a uniform prescription for “a virtuous response” to injustice. How and when one gets angry, whether anger is a valuable asset or a liability, and which actions count as a virtuous response, will vary between persons based on their (and their communities’) callings. A vocationally differentiated approach to anger also requires a community to situate and balance all these roles. Consider the following suggestive examples.

Some members of the community have gifts or roles that fit them for uncomfortable prophetic protest, or sacrificial advocacy, or solidarity with those suffering from injustice. Sometimes—for example if we are leaders—we might be called to fight back against injury, not for our own sake, but for the sake of those we represent or are charged to protect. Others might use their administrative gifts, political and economic power, or sheer tenacity to undercut injustice through large-scale legislative or small-scale structural changes; still others may generously

⁷³ See Christian Miller in this volume (Chapter 10) for a helpful discussion of how the psychology of honesty and cheating can inform efforts to cultivate the virtue of honesty.

⁷⁴ Let me emphasize that I believe this is for the mature in virtue *and* for those who have discerned a personal call to such a life. I am painfully aware of the pernicious ways external calls to humility and self-sacrifice are directed to the already disempowered or on victims of injustice by others who use Christian virtue-talk to keep them “in their place.”

⁷⁵ Mark 3:1–6.

⁷⁶ Stevenson 2014 narrates some of this work and its costs.

support and faithfully encourage those efforts. One will turn over a table in the temple, another will heal on the Sabbath; one will issue stern warnings, another will run down the road to forgive; one will gently gather the broken with a burning heart, another will call out corrupt leaders with an authoritative word; one will lament with victims of injustice, another will develop programs for offenders. Some will be called to teach compassion and charity to their children at home; others will be called to speak truth to power in the halls of power. Some will raise a fist; others will kneel in prayer. Some will preach loudly and on a public stage; others will plead with silent tears. Some will need to learn to speak up; others will need to learn to listen. Some may find that confronting injustice puts them in the middle of the road, leading a demonstration; others will walk the same road silently amid shouting denouncers, to martyrdom. Their witness stands as a testament to God's cosmic justice even if it costs them everything in this life, just as the one who protests bears witness to God's image in those who are oppressed. These different vocations respond to injustice in very different ways, and exercising virtue while being faithful to our calling over a lifetime will require both different gifts and different formative training with respect to the place and uses of anger. A community will need to discern—and make space for the expression of—a variety of gifts and callings to honor the roles, contributions, and voices of each of its members. My sense is that a virtuous community, and especially the Church, will need them all.

Lament gives a legitimate voice to our grief and injury without mere venting or expressing itself in vengeful violence; hope channels our energy into working for shalom and anchors that work in a larger providential narrative of divine power and mercy. Aware of how our embodiment makes us vulnerable and limited, but also how the reach of our communal support and the diversity of our spiritual gifts and callings expands the range of human agency, virtuous anger and responses to injustice can be both wisely bounded, appropriately developed over time, and used to serve the Church's mission as a body with many members.

2.3 Conclusion

Using insights from two strands of the Christian virtue tradition, I have argued that anger has injustice as its legitimate target, but this point is more often a matter of principle than everyday practice when we attend to the sheer proportion of our anger that is disordered. Our angry responses tend to be self-protective in prideful ways. Moreover, when we confront pervasive and enduring structural injustices, we need to be especially discerning, since persistent anger is likely to be physically damaging and burdensome. When it is balanced by the virtue of humility and supported by formative practices such as hope and lament, anger can fuel work against injustice while avoiding these pitfalls. Virtuous responses to injustice—

both anger and its relinquishment—can be further differentiated by stages of moral development over time and calibrated to a variety of callings. In these ways, Christlike gentleness and Christlike anger at injustice can both find their place in lifelong virtue formation and the gifts of the virtuous community.⁷⁷

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