

# Plato on the Role of Anger in Our Intellectual and Moral Development

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## Abstract

In this paper I examine some of the positive epistemic and moral dimensions of anger in Plato's dialogues. My aim is to show that while Plato is clearly aware that *retaliatory* anger has negative effects on people's behavior, the strategy we find in his dialogues is not to eliminate anger altogether; instead, Plato aims to transform or rechannel destructive retaliatory anger into a different, more productive, *reformative* anger. I argue that this new form of anger plays a crucial positive role in our intellectual and moral development. In relation to our intellectual development, anger is often part of people's reactions to the Socratic interrogations and it often helps or hinders attempts to acknowledge one's ignorance and become motivated to learn. For anger to play a positive role in the context of philosophical conversations, Plato suggests its transformation from being an outward-looking and reactive emotion oriented towards retaliation (refutation), into a mostly inward-looking emotion aimed at one's own moral and intellectual reform or self-betterment. In relation to our moral progress, anger is strategically linked both to the control of our appetites and to the virtue of courage, so anger is crucial to the psychology of the good citizen. Concretely, anger is needed both for the development of the right opposition to injustice and greed, and for the formation of an adequate sensitivity to justice.

## Keywords

anger – retaliation – reformative anger – learning – moral development

## 1 Introduction: the Ambivalence of Anger in Plato

In Plato's psychology, anger (*θυμός* or *ὀργή*) is one of the emotions associated with the spirited part of the soul (*τὸ θυμοειδές*), i.e. the intermediate aspect of the soul that is non-rational in nature but can side with reason and restrain

appetites. When the agent's spirited part of the soul is well trained, the thumoeidetic emotions and desires – such as anger, shame, admiration, disgust, or love of victory and honor – make appetites and fears follow the commands of reason and the person behaves with courage or temperance; however, when not properly trained, they may provoke grave misadjustments in the soul and inappropriate behavior. Spirit (*θυμός*) and the spirited emotions have received extensive attention recently, and in particular, Plato's views on shame's positive role in our moral development have been explored from various angles, with special attention to Socrates' employment of shame in his cross-examinations.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I add to this work on thumoeidetic emotions by examining some of the positive epistemic and moral dimensions of anger.<sup>2</sup>

Anger comes up often in Platonic dialogues, and it is characterized as a complex and ambivalent emotion. My aim in this paper is to show that while Plato is clearly aware that retaliatory anger has negative effects on people's behavior, often leading to error and excess, his goal is not to eliminate anger altogether and substitute it with other milder emotions; instead, Plato aims to transform destructive retaliatory anger into a different, more productive kind, which I shall call "reformative anger". This new form of anger plays a crucial positive role in our intellectual and moral development. In relation to our intellectual development, anger is often part of people's reactions to the Socratic interrogations and, just as shame, it is an emotion that can either help or hinder attempts to acknowledge one's ignorance and become motivated to learn. In relation to our moral progress, Plato connects anger both with the control of our appetites and with the virtue of courage, so anger is crucial both for the development of the right opposition to injustice and greed, and for the formation of an adequate sensitivity to justice.

The paper is divided in three main sections that deal with (1) Plato's rejection of *retaliatory* anger and his proposal of *reformative* anger as an alternative to it; (2) the crucial role of anger in Socratic cross-examinations; and (3) anger's general positive role in moral progress and the life of the good citizen.

1 Recent important studies of the positive function of *θυμός* in Plato's moral psychology are Hobbs (2000); Singpurwalla (2013); Wilburn (2013), (2015); and Renaut (2014). For discussions of Plato's views of the positive role of shame in moral development see e.g. Kahn (1983); McKim (1988); Cairns (2003); Moss (2005); Cain (2008); Futter (2009); Pilote (2010); Tarnopolsky (2010); Jenks (2012); Collobert (2013); and Candiotta (2014), (2018).

2 In comparison to shame, the positive role of anger has received significantly less attention. It is mentioned in Moss (2005), where is discussed together with shame as one of the thumoeidetic emotions, and it plays some role in the analysis of Socrates' strategy in Collobert (2013), where the author comments on the relevance of anger (*colère*) as one of the emotions that awakens the desire to philosophise, but the main focus of these authors' discussion is shame.

In Part 1, I offer an overview of the place of anger in Plato's dialogues and lay down some of the reasons why anger is often seen as a negative emotion. As several commentators have shown, Plato is concerned with the dangers involved in retaliatory anger and strongly rejects it.<sup>3</sup> The desire for retaliation is grounded on a fundamental ignorance about the sources of wrongdoing and a misapprehension of the sources of moral disagreement, and it is one of the biggest obstacles both against being open to learning (or to being corrected) about moral issues and to reforming those who are morally wrong.

In Part 2, I examine Plato's views on the role of anger in our intellectual development by looking at anger's place in situations of moral disagreement in general, and in Socratic cross-examinations in particular. One of the common reasons why people get angry regarding moral disagreements is because they think that those who hold views different from theirs are motivated by an intention to deceive or to take advantage. In Socrates' refutations, his interlocutors often get angry because they believe that Socrates is either not sincere or lacks good will towards them. Moved by this anger, those who are being refuted, and in general those who disagree about relevant moral issues, feel the need to attack those with whom they disagree instead of engaging in productive conversation. Plato is aware of how futile, even destructive, this retaliatory anger can be, and for this reason, as I argue, he proposes to rechannel it towards a reformative anger that aims at teaching and learning instead of aiming at winning the argument. In the context of philosophical conversations, thus, Plato suggests the transformation of anger from being an outward-looking and reactive emotion oriented towards retaliation (refutation), into a mostly inward-looking emotion aimed at ones' own moral and intellectual reform or self-betterment. For this reason, the philosopher's mission will be at least in part, to help people to rechannel their anger, so that those who do not know move from being irritated at others or at others' opinions for being in dissonance with theirs, to being concerned with their own internal harmony and the consistency between their own beliefs.

Part 3 deals with the role of anger in moral progress, with special attention to anger's connection to our sense of justice, and to the virtue of courage. Not only Plato does not eliminate anger from his emotional repertoire when he deals with our moral education, but he makes it central to the psychology of the good citizen. In the upbringing project of the *Republic*, Plato is clear about the centrality of the spirited part of the soul as a mediator between appetites and reason, and anger is one of the main thumoeletic emotions doing that

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<sup>3</sup> This point is extensively discussed in Allen (1999), (2000); Mackenzie (1981) and Saunders (1973).

mediating job; in addition, anger is at the core of the virtue of courage. Moreover, as his discussion of the art of weaving in the final section of the *Statesman* reveals, the role of the good ruler is to make sure that citizens have the right combination of anger and shame, of courage and moderation, so that they are not too wild or too mild. To avoid a population of citizens that are spineless in the face of injustice and excessively concerned with private matters, anger is essential, as it makes people sensitive to injustice and unafraid of making changes and intervening when society goes in the wrong direction.

## 2 The Dangers of Traditional Anger and Plato's Reformatory Model

As Danielle Allen has persuasively argued, Plato consistently aims at correcting the traditional role that anger plays in Athenian justice as a motivator of the desire for retribution.<sup>4</sup> To this aim, Plato seeks to revise Athenian conceptions of punishment and substitute the retributive or retaliatory approach with a reformatory one. In this new reformatory model, Allen argues, punishment is separated from revenge, and is concerned instead with the betterment of the wrongdoer.<sup>5</sup> The ground for Plato's new model of punishment, as Allen notes, is Socrates' famous claim that no one does wrong knowingly. If wrongdoing is the result of ignorance, then "the aim of punishment is to deal with the problem of this ignorance through the education (*μάθησις*) of the wrongdoer about what is truly "good" to do" (Allen (2000), 247). As a consequence, there is no place for retribution or retaliation, only for transformation.

Socrates uses this approach in *Ap.* 26a, when he argues that if he indeed corrupts the youth he would be doing so involuntarily and out of ignorance, and for this reason he would need education (*μαθήσεως*) and not punishment (*κολάσεως*). With this move, Allen argues, Plato reverses "the whole of the standard Athenian approach to punishment" (Allen (2000), 247), and as a consequence, he rejects the traditional anger model: "Plato's rejection of a retributive punishment in favor of reformatory punishment both entailed and was

<sup>4</sup> See Allen (1999), Allen (2000) (especially Chapter 10: 'Plato's Paradigm Shifts'), and Allen (2003).

<sup>5</sup> Allen summarizes Plato's position on punishment as follows: "Punishment should arise not from anger at the wrongdoer but from concern for the wrongdoer and the state of his or her soul" (Allen (2000), 247). Mackenzie (1981) and Saunders (1973) both find a reformatory theory of punishment in Plato's *Protagoras*, *Gorgias* and *Laws* and, as Allen (2000) notes, they also think this view is grounded on "Plato's argument that punishment should aim to teach the unvirtuous wrongdoer how to be virtuous" (247).

itself central to *a general and comprehensive rejection of Athenian politics and its basis in anger*" (Allen (2000), 249, my emphasis).<sup>6</sup>

Now although Allen's conclusion that Plato rejects the old retributive model of punishment is accurate, this does not need to imply that Plato's new reformative model requires the rejection of anger altogether. Instead, as I contend, what Plato proposes is a new model of the role of anger in punishment, where anger's job is not that of seeking retaliation but instead that of reforming those who are morally wrong. In this new model, then, anger's goal is not to appease the revengeful impulse of the victim by inflicting some proportional harm on the wrongdoer, but instead it is a tool to reform (and thus benefit) the wrongdoer through education or moral conversion. This anger is often self-directed, as in the anger that wrongdoers feel at their own ignorance and moral failure once they become aware of them, and in those cases it aims at self-transformation.

In the following sub-sections I focus mainly on the two causes of anger most frequently brought up in the dialogues: moral disagreement and wrongdoing. In relation to moral disagreement, several dialogues insist on the uselessness of reactive anger and blame as a response to wrong claims, and instead suggest that educating the ignorant is the right response. Similarly, in relation to wrongdoing, Plato addresses the problems generated by the usual reactions of *retaliatory* anger; the proper response to wrongdoing instead is a *reformative* anger that aims at educating and remodeling the bad traits of the wrongdoer.

### 2.1 *Moral Disagreement, Wrongdoing, and Retaliatory Anger: the Example of Socrates' Accusers and Jury*

There are, of course, good reasons for why Plato wants to get rid of retaliatory anger. Plato knows better than anyone that excessive or wrongly directed anger can be dangerous – both at the personal and political levels – and that people slide very quickly from disagreeing with someone about moral issues to attributing to them some sort of wrongdoing. One of the most familiar examples of this kind of anger is the anger directed at Socrates by his accusers, old and new, which is crucial both in bringing him to trial and in prejudicing the jury against him. Concretely, this is the sort of anger that Anytus expresses against Socrates in the *Meno* (94e-95a), which finally leads him to bring Socrates to trial. It is also the type of anger long-held by what Socrates calls his 'old accusers' in the *Apology*, i.e. those prestigious people – politicians, orators, poets, etc. – whose pretensions to possession of wisdom were unmasked as empty by Socrates'

<sup>6</sup> See also Allen (1999), 199.

cross-examinations. In fact, both sets of accusers took themselves to be reacting against Socrates' wrongdoings (corrupting the youth with dangerous beliefs), and they thought that the right reaction to those wrongdoings was to return some harm to him in the form of punishment.

In the *Apology* Socrates offers some reflections on the roots of this kind of anger and connects it to the common retaliatory reaction that people have against opinions that are perceived as offensive or morally repulsive. In general, Socrates observes, moral disagreement tends to lead people to retaliatory anger, just as wrongdoing does. First, at *Ap.* 31e1-32a3 Socrates begs his audience not to turn against him – “don't be angry at me” (μοι μὴ ἄχθεσθε) – because of the things that he is about to say. He claims that people often get angry when they see others saying or doing things that clash with what they think or do. This is the reason why, as he explains, he has not led a public life: he was afraid that his life would be in danger and people would turn against him in anger if he had tried to say and do in public the kinds of things that he says and does in private – i.e. claims and actions in defense of justice and against injustice.

A second reference to the dangers of public anger appears at *Ap.* 34b6-d1, where Socrates confesses to fear that his speech and his attitude might be read as disdainful and provoke the anger of the members of the jury, because unlike most defendants, he will not be using emotional appeals, etc. He is afraid that many of the jurors will vote against him “in anger” (μετ' ὀργῆς),<sup>7</sup> not necessarily because they think he committed any wrong, but because they consider his views untenable, arrogant, or offensive. Trapped in the old model of anger, where disagreement leads to desire for retaliation, the public's reaction to Socrates' claims would be to desire to inflict some harm in return.

## 2.2 Socrates' Non-retaliatory “Revenge”

In response to the old model of retaliatory anger, in the *Apology*, Socrates criticizes his accusers' erroneous approach to punishment and presents an alternative: whenever someone has wrong moral opinions, or whenever someone commits moral error, people should try to cure that person instead of trying to hurt them. If he was indeed a wrongdoer, then the adequate response or “revenge” (τιμωρία), would be to reproach his erroneous views about morality and guide him towards caring more about virtue. Socrates offers an example of how to react to moral disagreement through his own reaction to the jury's final decision of conviction:

<sup>7</sup> *Ap.* 34c8-d1. See a discussion of this example in Konstan (2006), 67–68.

So I am certainly not angry (οὐ πάνυ χαλεπαίνω) with those who convicted me, or with my accusers. Of course that was not their purpose when they accused and convicted me, but they thought they were hurting me, and for this they deserve blame. This much I ask from them: when my sons grow up, avenge yourselves (τιμωρήσασθε) by causing them the same kind of grief that I caused you, if you think they care for money or anything else more than they care for virtue, or if they think they are somebody when they are nobody. Reproach (ὄνειδίζετε) them as I reproach you, that they do not care for the right things and think they are worthy when they are not worthy of anything. If you do this, I shall have been justly treated by you, and my sons also. (*Ap.* 41d6-42a2, trans. G.M.A. Grube)

In this passage the message is that retaliatory anger is misguided, since it is unable to undo the wrong, and adds a second wrong to the first one. When people try to punish in a retaliatory way, the result is that while there are no positive changes effected in the wrongdoer, there is also a loss of opportunity for true reform. Reactive anger and revengeful punishment do not produce any good results. For this reason, Socrates has no desire for revenge against his accusers or the jury, or at least he is not interested in a traditional revenge – i.e. inflicting harm in return for harm.<sup>8</sup>

Instead, the “revenge” proposed by Socrates consists in provoking through verbal reproach the necessary changes in the wrongdoers so that they learn what is wrong about their actions and modify their false conceptions about what is good and bad. The purpose of this revenge, then, is not to hurt the wrongdoer, but to educate and reform them, as to prevent that they continue committing wrong actions or keep having erroneous beliefs. In line with this position, Socrates asks the jury to use this kind of revenge with his children, if they see that his children do not care about the important things in life, and to use reproaches to remind them about what is truly worth-pursuing and to redirect their behavior if they deviate from the right path.

### 2.3 *Retaliatory Anger and the Problem of Moral Disagreement in Euthyphro*

In the *Euthyphro* we find many interesting references to the dangers of retaliatory anger. First, Euthyphro’s complicated situation is a consequence of a series of episodes of anger, and Euthyphro himself sees his plan of bringing his

<sup>8</sup> Another example of Socrates’ non retaliatory attitude occurs at *Phd.* 116c, where the officer explains why Socrates, unlike most other prisoners, is not angry at him, because Socrates properly understands his situation and who is responsible for it.

father to court for murder not only as the source of irritation among his relatives, but also as the motive of public rage against him.<sup>9</sup> In addition, as part of a discussion of the sources of moral disagreement, Socrates presents the beginning of an explanation for why people get angry when others defend opinions that clash with theirs, and a description of the issues in relation to which anger commonly arises.

In this dialogue, anger appears at several crucial moments. First, Euthyphro is prosecuting his father for the murder of one of their servants, who in turn killed one of their slaves “while drunk and angry” (παροινήσας οὔν καὶ ὀργισθεὶς, 4c5). Moreover, Euthyphro says that his father and other relatives “are irritated” or “displeased” (ἀγανακτεῖ) by the fact that he is prosecuting his father for the crime (4d5-6), and that people in general are angry (χαλεπαίνουσιν) with him for his decision (6a3-4). Euthyphro’s explanation for why he is the victim of popular anger is that people are confused about how to assess his actions:

These people themselves believe that Zeus is the best and most just of the gods, yet they agree that he bound his father because he unjustly swallowed his sons, and that he in turn castrated his father for similar reasons. But they are angry with me (ἐμοὶ δὲ χαλεπαίνουσιν) because I am prosecuting my father for his wrongdoing. They contradict themselves in what they say about the gods and about me. (*Euthphr.* 5e5-6a5, trans. G.M.A Grube)

The angry reactions against Euthyphro’s decision to bring his father to court described in this passage are very similar to the ones feared by Socrates in the *Apology*. People grow angry when they see someone defending a view or an opinion that they find too foreign or too incomprehensible, and their impulse is to want to punish (by somehow harming) the defender of such view. Why?

Throughout the dialogue, Socrates and Euthyphro make some progress towards revealing why people get angry at those with whom they disagree. In particular, they concur that there are certain sorts of matters upon which people not only disagree, but once engaged in disagreement, have no easy ways to settle, so that they typically get angry, fight and even hate each other.

SOCRATES: What are the subjects of difference that cause hatred and anger (ἐχθραν δὲ καὶ ὀργάς)? Let us look at it this way. If you and I were to differ about numbers as to which is the greater, would this difference make us enemies and angry with each other (ἐχθροὺς ἂν ἡμᾶς ποιοῖ καὶ

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the relevance of anger in Plato’s *Euthyphro* see Harris (2002) at 89–90.



ὀργιζέσθαι ἀλλήλοις), or would we proceed to count and soon resolve our difference about this?

EUTHYPHRO: We would certainly do so. (*Euthphr.* 7b6-11, trans. G.M.A. Grube)

The kind of disagreement that causes anger and enmity is not disagreement about math or about measurements – not about numbers, or about “the large and the small” or about “the heavier and the lighter”. In those cases, we just measure and solve our differences by measuring or calculating. However, there are some subjects about which measuring and calculating does not help.

What are these delicate topics? Socrates identifies mainly three: the just and the unjust; the noble and the base; the good and the bad.<sup>10</sup> People tend to have confused and conflicting opinions about these values, so it is very common that they disagree, and because they have no clear way of solving the disagreement, they quarrel:

SOCRATES: What subject of difference would make us angry (ὀργιζοίμεθα) and hostile (ἐχθροί) to each other if we were unable to come to a decision? Perhaps you do not have an answer ready, but examine as I tell you whether these subjects are the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad (τό τε δίκαιον καὶ τὸ ἄδίκον καὶ καλὸν καὶ αἰσχρὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν καὶ κακόν). Are these not the subjects of difference about which, when we are unable to come to a satisfactory decision (ἰκανὴν κρίσιν), you and I and other men become hostile (ἐχθροί) to each other whenever we do?

EUTHYPHRO: That is the difference, Socrates, about those subjects. (*Euthphr.* 7c10-d7, trans. G.M.A. Grube)

Moral disagreement is, as the case of Euthyphro shows, one of the most common sources of anger (and even hatred), and the cause is that there seems to be no easy way to settle the disputes by appealing to explicit rules or experts. Whenever it seems impossible to reach a sufficiently clear judgement about moral issues concerning justice, beauty, or goodness, we mistrust others and make them our enemies. Socrates does not spell out here how moral disagreements lead to anger and hostility, but other dialogues offer some hints.

<sup>10</sup> See also *Resp.* 476a-477b and *Cri.* 48c-d for the special status of these topics and the claim that people tend to have confused and conflicting opinions about them.

#### 2.4 *Socrates and Protagoras against Retaliatory Anger in Protagoras*

One dialogue that presents a similar kind of concern with retaliatory anger in the context of moral disagreement is Plato's *Protagoras*. First, Protagoras sees the tendency to retaliate against those who defend views different from one's own as an obstacle for his professional activities and a risk for his own way of life, since he often has to handle the angry reactions of those whose cities he visits, where people can misinterpret his intentions and consider him to be a corruptor of the youth. More generally, Protagoras criticizes the retaliatory model of punishment and offers an alternative reformatory view based on the education of the wrongdoer similar to that defended by Socrates in the *Apology*. Also for Protagoras the preferability of reform over retaliation is grounded on the assumption of the teachability of virtue.

Just as it is for Socrates, retaliatory anger presents a real danger for Protagoras. He admits that he is always cautious to avoid arousing the anger of citizens in places where he teaches and publicizes his wisdom, since he knows that by attracting promising young men who wish to acquire knowledge, he risks causing resentment and hostility on the part of their elder relatives or acquaintances:

Caution is in order for a foreigner who goes into the great cities and tries to persuade the best of the young men in them to abandon their associations with others, relatives and acquaintances, young and old alike, and to associate with him instead on the grounds that they will be improved by this association. Jealousy, hostility, and intrigue on a large scale are aroused by such activity (οὐ γὰρ μικροὶ περὶ αὐτὰ φθόνοι τε γίνονται καὶ ἄλλαι δυσμένειαι τε καὶ ἐπιβουλαί). (*Prt.* 316c-d, trans. S. Lombardo and K. Bell).

Protagoras suggests that the kind of jealousy (*φθόνος*) and hostility (*δυσμένεια*) that older people sometimes direct at teachers of virtue is based on their own ignorance. As Socrates' in the *Apology*, Protagoras locates the source of jealousy and hostility (and, I think, of anger in general) on people's suspicion that the views of the other are incorrect or offensive and are, consequently, a potential tool for corrupting the youth. Protagoras' view is, then, that the source of hostility is a kind of ignorance, and his response is to try to educate those who might be hostile against him by being open to respond to all their questions and concerns; concretely, one of the main tools that he uses to minimize their hostility is to argue in favor of the teachability of virtue.

Protagoras' opposition to retaliatory anger is manifest in his distinction between two approaches to punishment: "bestly" or retaliatory, and

future-oriented or reformatory. Protagoras' view is that those who seek punishment as retaliation and not for the sake of education are "exercising the mindless vindictiveness of a beast" (*Prt.* 324b).<sup>11</sup> At 323d-324c, Protagoras contrasts this past-oriented retributive punishment, which he also calls revenge (τιμωρία), which assumes the unteachability of virtue, with κόλασις, the kind of punishment that is future-oriented, according to reason, and aims at teaching and reform:

Reasonable punishment (κολάζειν) is not revenge (τιμωρείται) for a past wrong – for one cannot undo what has been done – but is undertaken with a view to the future, to deter both the wrong-doer and whoever sees him being punished from repeating the crime. This attitude towards punishment as deterrence implies that virtue is learned, and this is the attitude of all those who seek requital in public or in private. (*Prt.* 324b-c, trans. S. Lombardo and K. Bell)

Protagoras' view is that since virtue can be taught and learnt, whenever someone does something wrong or bad, the purpose of punishment should not be revenge, which is a foolish attempt to undo what has been done, but instead the goal should be to teach the wrongdoer so that they do not commit similar mistakes or crimes.

The *Protagoras* reveals, even more clearly than the *Apology*, that whether people assume the universality of moral knowledge or the teachability of virtue is central to their attitude in relation to punishment and anger in cases of moral disagreement. Protagoras points out that here there is an asymmetry between justice (or the virtues in general) and the crafts, since everyone is expected to have certain competence in moral issues, or at least pretend that they do. For this reason, while people get angry when another person lays claim to a competence which others do not think the claimant to possess, nobody gets angry with someone who claims knowledge or aptitude in matters of justice, as it would be ridiculous if they did not at least pretend to knowing.

And so you won't think you've been deceived, consider this as further evidence for the universal belief that all humans have a share of justice and the rest of civic virtue. In the other arts, as you have said, if someone claims to be a good flute-player or whatever, but is not, people laugh at him or get angry with him, and his family comes round and remonstrates

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion of Protagoras' views on punishment see Allen (2000), 248ff.

with him as if he were mad. But *when it comes to justice or any other social virtue, even if they know someone is unjust, if that person publicly confesses the truth about himself, they will call this truthfulness madness*, whereas in the previous case they would have called it a sense of decency. They will say that everyone ought to claim to be just, whether they are or not, and that it is madness not to pretend to justice, since one must have some trace of it or not be human. (*Prt.* 323a7-c2, trans. S. Lombardo & K. Bell, my emphasis.)

People normally assume that everybody has some knowledge about moral issues, which is acquired as part of our socialization and upbringing, and they are confused when someone disavows that kind of knowledge. The assumption that moral knowledge is universal is, I think, also the reason why whenever people hear someone else making claims about the just, the noble, and the good that differ from their own, they tend to suspect that person is trying to deceive them or trick them. As a consequence, people respond to moral disagreement as if it were a kind of wrongdoing, with a desire to return some kind of harm against the person who makes claims that they take to be deceitful moral beliefs.

The acknowledgment of the teachability of virtue is, then, crucial for a transformation of the model of punishment from retaliatory to reformative. If virtue is teachable, then it follows that those who express erroneous views about moral issues, or those whose behavior is morally wrong, are not necessarily trying to deceive or take advantage of others; instead, it might be that they are simply ignorant about those issues. Once we realize that the reason for someone's moral errors is lack of teaching, and not deceptiveness or ill-will, then we become open to considering that the reform of the wrongdoer is a more adequate response than retaliation.

### 2.5 *Callicles' Irritation with Socrates' Clever Trick in Gorgias*

In the *Gorgias*, the conversation between Callicles and Socrates also suggests that the feeling of being tricked is an usual source for the kind of irritation and desire for revenge that makes conversations unproductive. Callicles grows frustrated with Socrates' claim that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it, and suspects that Socrates does not really mean what he says. Callicles' analysis of Socrates' strategy at *Grg.* 483a is that Socrates is not acting in good faith but he is, instead, using a "clever trick" (*σοφὸν*) and "wrongdoing in the discussions" (*κακουργεῖς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις*). Socrates seems to be using equivocation to corner both Gorgias and Polus, with the purpose of making them say

things that conflict with what they really think. And because Callicles believes Socrates is acting in bad faith, he gets angry and intervenes in the conversation with the purpose of chastising him. His reaction is not unreasonable. If the other person seems to use tricks or make claims motivated by a desire to win the debate or to play, rather than to seek truth, then one might reasonably get irritated and aim at the rejection of the other's views at any cost.

In line with the distinction between retaliatory and restorative punishment that we find in *Apology* and *Protagoras*, also in the *Gorgias* (at 476dff.) Socrates argues against retaliation and in favor of a reform approach to anger. Socrates offers a redefinition of the notion of "suffering punishment", where punishment turns out to be good for the sufferer insofar as it is supposed to rid the wrongdoer from the bad character which is source of the bad action. Of course, this is the main reason for Callicles' incredulous reaction at 418bff. Socrates' view that suffering punishment when guilty is better than not suffering it is so opposed to the standard Athenian practices that Callicles questions whether Socrates is serious in his claims. But despite Callicles' suspicions, Socrates genuinely thinks that suffering punishment is beneficial for those who have committed a crime, and that it is in fact better than not suffering it. The reason is, also here, that he believes that when someone has done some wrong, the main goal of punishment is to repair the moral error of the wrong-doer and to make whatever changes are necessary so that the error does not occur again. Punishment benefits the person who does the wrong, since it has the effect of deterring future bad behavior.

Given the numerous examples in which anger goes wrong, we might be tempted to conclude that Plato is proposing to get rid of anger altogether. Anger can be provoked both by a perception of wrongdoing and by perceptions of moral ignorance or trickery, and it can have terrible consequences if not properly rechanneled. However, Plato does not think that we should get rid of anger. Instead, as I shall show in the next sections, he reserves room for positive contributions of anger and considers it an important emotion in our intellectual and moral development. Concretely, the kind of anger that aims at reparation is a promising tool for moral reform, and can be a source of both learning and of positively shaping people's character.

### 3 Socratic Cross-examinations, Anger, and Intellectual Development

Plato sometimes associates a tendency to feel anger in relation to disagreements about moral issues with the presence of the seeds of justice, and thus he

suggests one important reason to keep anger in our emotional repertoire. He thinks, however, that many of the episodes of anger are misdirected, and they tend to be obstacles against knowledge and virtue, instead of positive resources. In the context of Socratic cross-examinations, Plato seems to think that there is a bad way and a good way to experience this emotion. The bad way, with which we are familiar from many Socratic dialogues, is to blame others for our own inability to properly grasp things, to be irritated at them because they have tricked us and led us to confusion, or to resent them because they have been the cause of our ignorance being exposed. There are several moments in the dialogues where we see people growing frustrated and getting angry at Socrates; as a consequence of this anger, the conversations often are derailed and the participants adopt a defensive and unproductive attitudes. The good way, is to be grateful to those who expose our ignorance and to see our reaction of anger as a symptom of our own confusion; in this case, the right response is to redirect that initial impulse to react against the other towards ourselves instead. This self-oriented anger is a good motivator for self-transformation and has the effect of encouraging us to learn.

We do not see Socrates successfully rechanneling the anger of his interlocutors very often, and Socratic conversations tend to offer examples of the bad effects of an anger that derails the conversation before Socrates can rechannel it. Socrates laments this fact in the *Apology*, where he remarks that those who suffer refutations in the hands of his followers “get angry” (ὀργίζονται) at him, instead of getting angry at themselves (*Ap.* 23c8). In *Republic* v and in the *Sophist*, however, we are presented with two good models of philosophical conversation, and we are shown that anger, in the hands of someone sufficiently skilled, can be properly redirected and become a motivator for learning and self-reform.

First, in *Republic* v, Socrates suggests that the good philosopher knows how to handle cases where people get initially angry at those who show that the views they hold are problematic or inconsistent. In fact, the job of the philosopher is to redirect that initial anger and transform it into a positive force. Concretely, the philosopher should aim, through philosophical conversations and other methods, at turning the interlocutors towards their own ignorance and encouraging them to do something about it. In the hands of the philosopher, anger – even violent reactions like that of Thrasymachus – can turn out to be the beginning of learning.

At *Sophist* 230b-c we find a second example of the re-channelling of anger, when the Visitor suggests that, when done properly, those who are refuted are supposed to turn their irritation at themselves (and their own ignorance) and not at others. Realizing one’s own ignorance and being irritated about it is essential to the process of learning that the Visitor proposes.

### 3.1 *The Calming Powers of Philosophy: How to Handle those Who Have Mere Opinion*

In *Republic* v Socrates provides a description of an ideal exchange between a philosopher cross-examiner and those who do not have knowledge, and he uses it to explain the potential calming powers of cross-examination. After distinguishing knowledge and mere opinion from each other, Socrates explains that people who hold mere opinion grow angry against those who claim the truth, since they mistakenly believe themselves to possess knowledge.

What if the person who has opinion but not knowledge is angry (*χαλεπαίνη*) with us and disputes the truth of what we are saying? Is there some way to console him and persuade him gently, while hiding from him that he isn't in his right mind?

There must be. (*Resp.* v.476d-e, trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C Reeve)

Again, in conversations about moral matters, when people disagree and think that they have knowledge about the subjects of dispute, it is very possible that they become angry at each other. Socrates continues his explanation of how to best handle such conversations by considering how such a person might be rendered calm or gentle. The suggested method is to use, first, cross-examination to establish the distinction between knowledge and mere opinion and lead the interlocutor to acknowledge that distinction:

Consider, then, what we'll say to him. Won't we question him like this? First, we'll tell him that nobody begrudges him any knowledge he may have and that we'd be delighted to discover that he knows something. Then we'll say: "Tell us, does the person who knows know something or nothing?" You answer for him.

He knows something.

Something that is or something that is not?

Something that is, for how could something that is not be known? Then we have an adequate grasp of this: No matter how many ways we examine it, what is completely is completely knowable and what is in no way is in every way unknowable?

A most adequate one.

Good. Now, if anything is such as to be and also not to be, won't it be intermediate between what purely is and what in no way is?

Yes, it's intermediate.

Then, as knowledge is set over what is, while ignorance is of necessity set over what is not, mustn't we find an intermediate between knowledge

and ignorance to be set over what is intermediate between what is and what is not, if there is such a thing?

Certainly.

Do we say that opinion is something?

Of course.

A different power from knowledge or the same?

A different one.

Opinion, then, is set over one thing, and knowledge over another, according to the power of each. (*Resp.* v.476e-477b, trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C Reeve)

Then, the next step is to show the interlocutor that she is not completely ignorant, but instead, that she is in an intermediate state between ignorance and knowledge. Although Socrates does not fully explain the purpose of leading one's interlocutor to that conclusion, the strategy seems to aim at moving the attention away from the refuter and turning it towards the ignorance. This has at least a humbling effect, and eliminates the initial irritation against the refuter, but it can also have the positive effect of making the person aware of the fact that, although they presently do not have knowledge, they can find a remedy by themselves.

The view that refutation (and punishment in general) can have a calming effect in some people is also suggested by Socrates's example at *Resp.* 440c-d, where he claims that whenever people think they have done something unjust, if they are noble and good, then they will not "be angry" (ὀργίζεσθαι, 440c2) at the one they think justly makes them suffer. It is only when someone thinks he is being wronged, that he "becomes angry" (χάλεπαίνει, 440c8) at the wrongdoer and fights for what he believes to be just.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, whenever someone is refuted and comes to truly see that they were wrong, that person would welcome the refutation and not be angry at the refuter.

### 3.2 *Gentle Anger as Motivator to Learn and Be Better in the Sophist*

Plato's *Sophist* offers additional insights on the role of anger in learning and the corresponding pedagogical strategies. At *Soph.* 229e1ff. the Visitor distinguishes between two kinds of teaching, a rough one and a smooth one:

VISITOR: One part of the kind of teaching that's done in words is a rough (τραχυτέρα) road, and the other part is smoother (λειότερον).

THEAETETUS: What do you mean by these two parts?

<sup>12</sup> See Blank (1993), 431, for a discussion of this passage with similar purposes.



VISITOR: One of them is our forefathers' time-honored method of displaying anger (χαλεπαίνοντες) and sometimes gently encouraging (μαλθακωτέρως παραμυθούμενοι). They used to employ this method especially on their sons, and many still use it on them nowadays when they do something wrong. Admonition (νουθετητικήν) would be the right thing to call all of this.

THEAETETUS: Yes.

VISITOR: As for the other part, some people seem to have an argument to give to themselves that lack of learning is always involuntary, and that if someone thinks he's wise, he'll never be willing to learn anything about what he thinks he's clever at. These people think that though admonition is a lot of work, it doesn't do much good. (*Soph.* 229e-230a, trans. N.P. White)

The rough method involves scolding and nagging, which are annoying for everybody and usually not very effective. In contrast, the smooth method consists of reminding people that ignorance is involuntary and that we should be grateful when someone reveals our ignorance and take it as an opportunity to learn. The proposal is to reverse people's attitude about refutation and encourage them to be grateful towards those who reveal what they do not know.

The advantages of the smooth method of teaching are further explained a bit later in the dialogue, at *Soph.* 230b4-d, where the Visitor makes a defense of cross-examination and explains that one of its benefits is a reorientation of anger. The main point concerning anger is that when people are shown that they have inconsistent or contradictory beliefs, they "get angry at themselves and become calmer toward others" (230b9):

They cross-examine someone when he thinks he's saying something though he's saying nothing. Then, since his opinions will vary inconsistently, these people will easily scrutinize them. They collect his opinions together during the discussion, put them side by side, and show that they conflict with each other at the same time on the same subjects in relation to the same things and in the same respects. The people who are being examined see this, get angry at themselves, and become calmer toward others (οἱ δ' ὀρώντες ἑαυτοῖς μὲν χαλεπαίνουσι, πρὸς δὲ τοὺς ἄλλους ἡμεροῦνται). They lose their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves that way, and no loss is pleasanter to hear or has a more lasting effect on them. Doctors who work on the body think it can't benefit from any food that's offered to it until what's interfering with it from inside is removed. The people who cleanse the soul, my young friend, likewise think the

soul, too, won't get any advantage from any learning that's offered to it until someone shames it by refuting it, removes the opinions that interfere with learning, and exhibits it cleansed, believing that it knows only those things that it does know, and nothing more. (*Soph.* 230b-d, trans. N.P. White)

When cross-examinations go well, then, the refutation does not provoke retaliatory anger against the refuter, but instead, a gentler anger is felt towards oneself when the limits of one's knowledge are revealed by someone else and gratitude is felt towards the person who has led the refutation and shown how one's knowledge is insufficient or imperfect. In the final lines of our passage, the Visitor indicates that the adequate method to provoke this kind of gentle and positive anger towards oneself is shaming through refutation, as opposed to harsher admonitions.

Shame generates a self-directed anger and thus prepares us for learning by turning our attention towards our own imperfection, helping us remove false beliefs about our knowledge, and revealing our ignorance. Self-directed gentle anger is, then, the result of a successful process of refutation, in which the harsh reactive anger that people normally feel when they encounter someone who has different opinions about moral issues is rechanneled into a positive impulse towards self-betterment and learning. That impulse is the new reformative anger.

#### 4 Anger's Role in Moral Progress

Beyond the sphere of learning and deliberating together, Plato has anger play also a positive role in our moral and political lives more generally. In the *Republic*, Plato establishes a complex interconnection between the spirited part of the soul, the emotional response of anger, and conceptions of justice and injustice.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, anger is instrumental in keeping our appetites aligned with reason, and thus it promotes the internal harmony that is characteristic of virtue. On the other hand, anger is at the core of the virtue of courage and is crucial for making us engaged citizens.

For anger to perform these functions in our moral development and in our political interactions, the unproductive harsh retaliatory anger needs to also here be transformed into a gentler emotion oriented towards self-betterment

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the connection between anger and the sense of justice in Plato's *Republic* see e.g. Renaut (2016), 139–40.

and social reform. Concretely, in the *Republic* and the *Statesman*, the transformation of anger involves mixing it with moderation and shame, or making it calmer through other means, so that it can be effective in a gentle way. In the *Republic*, Plato is careful not to exclude anger from the citizens' emotional repertoire and he directs much of the musical education towards shaping the citizens' disposition to anger. Here the purpose of education is to moderate anger, but not eliminate it, since good anger is recognized as the central motivator of the virtue of courage. Similarly, the final sections of the *Statesman*, where the transformation of wild retaliatory anger into good anger occurs by properly mixing it with shame and moderation, suggests a project of determining the proper place and right amount of anger in the citizens' soul. Here too, instead of eliminating anger, Plato indicates that once we balance anger with moderation, it becomes an effective force in our political interactions.

#### 4.1 *Anger at Oneself and Shame in Republic IV*

The discussion of the spirited part of the soul in *Republic IV* is perhaps the most familiar text about Plato's views on the place of anger in our moral psychology. The central example in support of the independence of the θυμοειδής as a part of the soul is the example of Leontius, at 439eff., who becomes angry with himself, or rather with his eyes, which are motivated by desires to look at corpses. In this example, the spirited part reacts against the desiderative or appetitive part of the soul and tries to moderate it:

Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus along the outside of the North Wall when he saw some corpses lying at the executioner's feet. He had an appetite to look at them but at the same time he was disgusted and turned away. For a time he struggled with himself and covered his face, but, finally, overpowered by the appetite, he pushed his eyes wide open and rushed towards the corpses, saying, "Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight!"

I've heard that story myself.

It certainly proves that anger (τὴν ὀργήν) sometimes makes war against the appetites, as one thing against another. Besides, don't we often notice in other cases that when appetite forces someone contrary to rational calculation, the person reproaches (λοιδοροῦντά) himself and gets angry (θυμούμενον) with that in him that's doing the forcing, so that of the two factions that are fighting a civil war, so to speak, spirit allies itself with reason?

But I don't think you can say that you've ever seen spirit, either in yourself or anyone else, ally itself with an appetite to do what reason has

decided must not be done. (*Resp.* 439e-440b, trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C Reeve)

This text is another testimony of the intimate relationship between shame and anger in Plato. Although the case of Leontius is often discussed mainly in terms of shame, in the passage there is a transition from an initial moment of shame's characteristic disgust and hiding one's face to a moment of admonition and self-directed anger. In this case, the anger is not directed towards one's ignorance, but instead it is focused on one's weakness in relation to one's appetites and has the role of siding with one's reason as to keep unruly appetites under control.

#### 4.2 *Music, Tempered Anger, and Courage*

One of the ways in which the tempering of anger is effected in the *Republic* is through musical education. In *Republic* III, Socrates notes that those in whom the spirited part of the soul is strong or predominant need the tempering of music, as to become more moderate and gentle. Without this training, citizens will tend towards a kind of instability, becoming quickly angered and easily provoked (411c1). The θυμοειδής is the part of soul responsible for courage, but only when it is well-ordered and rid not only of fears but also of reactive impulses for revenge.

#### 4.3 *The Philosopher's Art of Weaving: Tempering Anger with Calmness in the Statesman*

In the *Statesman*, Plato shows concern with the dangers of excessive anger in the citizenry if it is not appropriately tamed. The final sections of the dialogue suggest that anger is an indispensable emotion for good citizens, without which they become spineless and accommodated, or "cowardly and lethargic" (307c). Without anger, citizens become insensitive to injustice and excessively concerned with private matters. Anger is essential to make people passionate for justice and unafraid of making changes and intervening when society goes in the wrong direction.

However, just as in the *Republic*, anger needs to be tamed because otherwise it grows "excessive and manic" (307b) and has destructive effects. For this reason, Plato proposes the art of weaving, where anger is interweaved with moderation, as the main art in which the good politician is an expert (305eff.). The goal of the art of weaving is not to eliminate anger, or eliminate shame, but to weave them together in the souls of citizens so that a balance can be reached.

The *Statesman* offers evidence, then, that Plato thinks that it is important to preserve anger as a positive force that is needed for psychic balance and the

well-functioning of the community. Although untamed anger is dangerous, the kind of good anger that results from the mix with moderation or shame is crucial for social harmony and stability.

## 5 Conclusion: Plato's Transformation of Anger

I have shown that although Plato rejects retaliatory anger, he reserves a significant positive role for a transformed version of anger both in our intellectual development and in our moral formation. Retaliatory anger is typically grounded on an inflated assessment of our own knowledge, and on the assumption that wrongdoing and moral error are caused by bad intentions. If Socrates's claim that wrongdoing is the result of ignorance is right, then returning harm for harm will result futile. Moreover, if at least some of the knowledge that is relevant for virtue is teachable, then the education of the wrongdoer turns out to be the best strategy. In that framework, retaliatory anger is either useless or contraproductive, and for that reason Plato's goal is to rechannel it into a more self-aware and positive kind of anger that aims at learning and self-reform. The transformation of anger that Plato proposes includes, on the one hand, making anger less reactive and more self-oriented, and on the other, making anger gentler and more constructive.

As a result of this transformation, anger becomes crucial for self-betterment and for social transformation. Concretely, in the context of learning and knowledge, anger can take the role of keeping us alert against false beliefs and wrong assumptions, and particularly maintains us alert to our own ignorance, while it keeps us open-minded about the possibility of making progress through conversation. In addition, in the moral and political sphere, anger helps us tame our bad appetites and guards us against the greed and injustices committed by others, but it can do so while promoting respectively internal harmony and social harmony, instead of struggle, confrontation, and war. Once transformed, then, Plato considers anger to be crucial for learning, for properly dealing with ignorance in oneself and others, for having a well-regulated soul, and for being a good and engaged citizen.

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