

Ancient Philosophical Resources For Understanding and Dealing With Anger

GREGORY SADLER

MILWAUKEE INSTITUTE OF ART AND DESIGN, WISCONSIN

Abstract

Ancient philosophical schools developed and discussed perspectives and practices on the emotion of anger useful in contemporary philosophical practice with clients, groups, and organizations. This paper argues the case for incorporating these insights from four main philosophical schools (Platonist, Aristotelian, Epicurean, and Stoic) sets out eight practices drawn from these schools, and discusses how these insights can be used by philosophical practitioners with clients.

Keywords: *anger, emotion, practices, Aristotle, Plato, Epicurus, Seneca, Epictetus*

The topic and goals of my presentation to the American Philosophical Practitioners Association are rather limited in scope. It is entirely focused on the emotion of anger. More specifically, it deals with how we, as practitioners and with our clients, can better understand, manage, and address anger. And zeroing in even further, what resources are available for us to study, draw upon, and apply in ancient Western philosophy.

This paper is divided into seven sections. The first examines why it is useful for philosophical practitioners to develop and possess a robust understanding of anger in its various dimensions, as well as having resources at the ready. The second part addresses a common objection likely to arise, namely why philosophical practitioners should draw upon ancient philosophy when they could simply turn to modern psychology for those resources and understanding. The third part looks at anger as a significant focus in ancient Near East and Mediterranean culture, and discusses some challenges involved in using ancient philosophy to address anger. The fourth part specifies which ancient authors, texts, and schools provide us with useful perspectives on anger. The fifth part compares and contrasts several of these schools with each other, looking at what they share and where they differ. The sixth part examines eight useful practices derived from those schools bearing on anger are set out. In the seventh and final part, we briefly discuss how these insights, perspectives, and practices can be applied in philosophical practice with clients in the present.

Anger as a Common Issue

As with many other matters important in our lives, relationships, work, and personal development, most people in late modern societies tend to get relatively little formal education, training, or even helpful advice about anger. In elementary and secondary education in the United States, for instance, most students are unlikely to encounter more than passing discussions bearing on that emotion, and with the exception of certain classes and majors (e.g., psychology, or philosophy of emotion), one is unlikely to engage in any systematic study of anger. Workplace training, seminars, and courses, under the rubric of “professional development” have become more common in recent years, but these infrequently include content on understanding and managing emotions, let alone address these in robust and systematic ways. When it comes to anger specifically, this lack of attention in education and training is even more so the case.

People do learn all sorts of lessons about the emotions, and about anger in particular, in a variety of other ways and from multiple sources. Families we grow up in provide us models, for better or for worse, about how anger ought to be perceived, felt, expressed, acted upon, about whether anger is good or bad, and who gets to be angry and who doesn't. People similarly learn lessons about anger through our involvements in other groups, organizations, and institutions. In our media-saturated late modern environment, the broader culture and the media we consume and enjoy also offers us notions about anger. Often what we derive from all of these is piecemeal, incoherent, even contradictory, not providing us with adequate resources to address the anger we inevitably feel on our own parts, provoke in other people, or even witness or suffer.

What resources are readily available for people who struggle with anger? If you visit a library or bookstore, and look around, you will find a large literature already out there dealing with the emotion of anger. You can find workbooks intended to help an angry person become less so through engaging in practices. There are books in the categories of self-help, relationships, and personal development that aim to provide guidance to their readers. Going online, and looking for advice about anger, there is a plethora of blog posts, videos, podcasts, and other sources of information on the emotion. Of course, all of these resources vary wildly in quality, from those that are well-researched, systematic, insightful, and effective to those at the opposite end of a spectrum.

One additional way quite a few people end up learning about anger is through anger management classes, workshops, support groups, therapy, or curricula. This typically takes place after a person has been identified as having "anger problems", generally after getting themselves in trouble through their anger in their work, school, or personal relationships. This can be quite helpful for many, since they end up getting introduced to more robustly and systematically developed perspectives and practices. But again, the quality of information provided can vary considerably.

Anger is a common and significant problem in our contemporary society and culture, and the clients we are likely to encounter in our work as philosophical practitioners may be struggling with their own anger, dealing with other people's anger, finding themselves without adequate resources for understanding the emotion, or even laboring under misconceptions about anger and its workings.

Because one main area of my own research over the last several decades has been philosophical theories of emotion and specifically anger, a good number of my clients come to me wanting to develop better perspectives on, and to be more in control of, their anger. With others, we discover along the way in the course of philosophical counseling, or in consulting work in organizations, that anger is a component in the larger set of problems they are dealing with, and that working on anger can be beneficial. Since anger is such a widespread and problematic emotion, it can be quite useful for philosophical practitioners who don't specialize in it to understand it, to know where they can turn for resources, and to have some insights, perspectives, sources, and practices at their disposal.

Why not Psychology Instead of Philosophy?

Someone might object against my suggestion that, in order to understand and deal with anger productively, we would do well to go not just to philosophy, but specifically ancient philosophy. Why

not instead draw upon resources, theories, and approaches from the contemporary discipline of psychology? Wouldn't that be more scientific, better based in recent research, perhaps even more legitimate? After all psychology is the discipline that specifically takes the human emotions, the "passions of the human soul", the psyche, as one of its many subject-matters, is it not?

A first and admittedly flippant answer would be to note that psychology, like so many of its academic scientific brethren disciplines, was originally a part and portion of philosophy and only in the last several centuries set itself up as an independent and autonomous field. However emotionally satisfying that response might prove to provide, it is not supplying an adequate reason for focusing on ancient philosophy instead of late modern psychology. There are, however, several salient points that should be made.

The first of these is that psychology does not possess any monopoly on insights about the emotions in general or anger in particular. Not only does philosophy have a long history of providing insights, practices, and even systematic theories of emotion, other disciplines can make contributions as well, including other social sciences besides psychology, as well as humanities such as literature, history, religious studies, and drama. This is readily recognized by some experts working in the field of psychology. Just to take a few examples, cognitive approaches such as Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy are indebted to Stoic philosophy. With approaches and perspectives including contemporary psychoanalysis, existentialist psychotherapy, and positive psychology, references to and reliances upon other philosophical concepts are evident. Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* (2005) for instance begins with a quote from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* specifically about anger (p.xix).

A second point to keep in mind is that understood as a literature and discipline "psychology" names an incredibly varied set of theories, approaches, perspectives often explicitly at odds with each other. When it comes to the emotions in general and anger in particular, this is very much the case. Not only do different sub-disciplines within the field of psychology operate from very different sets of assumptions and established doctrines about emotions, but there is also no consensus about emotions within the field. For example, while anger is very often included among the basic or primary emotions, lists of these that psychologists put forward vary considerably on what emotions are regarded as basic, how many there are, and their relations to each other. More practical matters of how anger ought best to be understood, evaluated, managed, or otherwise addressed also reveal not only lack of consensus but even contradictory advice.

I would like to suggest this situation we philosophical practitioners find ourselves in can embolden us to seek out for ourselves what resources on anger are to be found within the literature of our discipline. This is not to say we should confine ourselves solely to drawing upon philosophy and ignore what various approaches in psychology have to offer, which would be rather foolish, even perhaps in some sense anti-philosophical. But we should grant ourselves and our clients the freedom to reasonably study, explore, discuss, and apply multiple approaches towards anger. As it turns out, ancient philosophy has a lot to offer.

Ancient Philosophy

In using the term "ancient philosophy" here, I must clarify that I refer to what we often call "Western philosophy" from the ancient period, that is, philosophy as found in Near Eastern and Medi-

terranean culture, written primarily in Greek and Latin, running from around the 7th century BCE to the 5th century CE. This is not in any way to suggest that other cultural spheres (for instance in ancient India or China) in which philosophy developed during that era have nothing of value to offer when it comes to understanding anger. There are indeed excellent resources one can derive from those extensive bodies of thought, but my area of specialization and expertise does not extend into those, and I draw heavily on ancient Western philosophical traditions in my own philosophical practice.

In ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean culture, anger was taken seriously as a problematic emotion. This is evidenced not only by the many discussions of it in philosophy itself, but also by the references, depictions, analyses, and advice that we find in other important bodies of literature. These include poetry (epic, lyric, tragic, comic, among others), medical writings, religious literature, and even rhetoric. Anger is viewed as an ever-present possibility for conflict, leading to aggression and rivalry, escalating into cycles of revenge and retribution. It is also closely tied in with conceptions of moral values such as right and wrong, better and worse, noble and base. We see a variety of distinct approaches to anger developed over the course of centuries, including a lot of incorporation of empirical or experiential observation and reflection, and developing many useful practices and criteria. As Judaism and Christianity become widespread in later ancient Mediterranean culture, religious teachings, frameworks, models, and practices are assimilated in rich ways with, as well as contrasted against the existing philosophies. A prime example of this is afforded by Lactantius' treatise *On The Anger of God*, which critically engages Epicurean, Stoic, Skeptic, and even Jewish and other Christian thought.

In turning to ancient philosophy as a resource, there are some challenges that arise. None of these are insurmountable, but they are all worth noting. One of these is the fact that, although many ancient philosophers are very interested in anger, relatively few full treatises specifically focused on the emotion have survived, so we have to put in the work (or rely upon that of others) in order to piece together composite accounts of anger from the available works. A second issue is that in the works we have, philosophers may be approaching the phenomenon of anger from different perspectives. Aristotle points out in *On The Soul* that a person interested in anger as a physical or corporeal phenomenon will view it as blood boiling around the heart, while the dialectical philosopher will focus on it as a desire for imposing suffering through retaliation (p. 17, 403a27-b3). A third obstacle can arise from the differences in language and terminology, for instance with the rich Greek term "*thumos*," which sometimes simply means anger or irritation, at other times signifies a more intense kind of anger, and in the Platonic tradition means the part of soul in which anger has its seat and activity.

As a side-note, there is also a practical problem we may encounter in philosophical practice. Certain clients might be distrustful of our bringing in ancient philosophy either at all or through specific ancient schools or traditions of philosophy. Some might be distrustful of philosophy for a variety of reasons ranging from religious instruction to bad previous experiences with philosophy classes or instructors. They may be skeptical about prospects for thinkers from antiquity having anything valuable to offer to us late modern people. They might even be fans of one philosopher or school and regard others as enemies, for instance viewing Aristotle as good and Plato as bad, or vice-versa. When working with such clients, my preferred strategy is to introduce the ideas and practices, stressing that they prove useful, and only revealing where they originate from after the clients already have formed positive associations.

Resources in Ancient Philosophy

If we are to turn to ancient philosophy for robust, well-developed, and readily applicable resources for understanding and managing anger, where specifically should we go? My suggestions here should not be taken as an exhaustive or comprehensive list, but rather as highlighting those thinkers, schools, and texts with which philosophical practitioners who are not experts in ancient philosophy might get the most proverbial “bang for the buck.”

A first place to start is with Plato’s texts and the Platonic tradition, extending into middle Platonism and neo-Platonism. While anger is not systematically analyzed in Plato’s dialogues, causes, workings, dynamics, and moral evaluation of anger are explored in the *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Apology*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and *Timaeus*. With middle Platonic thinkers, we do see further development of Platonic perspectives on anger, for example in Alcinous’ *Handbook of Platonism*, or Plutarch’s *On Controlling Anger* and *On Moral Virtue*, among other texts.

Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition offer more systematically worked out perspectives on anger. That emotion is examined in detail and from multiple perspectives in works such as the *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*, the *Rhetoric*, the *Politics*, *History of Animals*, and *Parts of Animals*. Anger gets examined in less detail, but in ways that still contribute some understanding of the emotion, in a number of other Aristotelian texts, ranging from *On The Soul* to the *Topics*, from the *Athenian Constitution* to *On Sophistical Refutations*. Later Aristotelians, from Aristotle’s successor Theophrastus to the great commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias, further develop the perspective of the school. It is unfortunate that one early work specifically on anger, authored by the Aristotelian philosopher Jerome, is lost.

The Epicureans were also quite concerned with anger. Nearly all of Epicurus own works, as well as those of his immediate successors in the Epicurean school, are also lost, but in what we still do possess from Epicurus, there are a number of short teachings bearing on anger. The philosophical poem by Lucretius, *On The Nature of Things*, adds several significant discussions bearing on anger as well. But we learn even more from the recovered works of Philodemus, recovered from Herculaneum, which include the (unfortunately damaged) treatise *On Anger*, and another relevant text, *On Frank Criticism*.

With the Stoic school, once again there are many lost texts that clearly would have added to our understanding of anger since they focus on ethics or the passions. But we also do possess a significant body of work that not only offers us theoretical perspectives but a variety of useful exercises or practices bearing on anger. A number of passages and even chapters in Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* and Epictetus’ *Discourses* prove helpful, and Seneca actually has an entire treatise titled *On Anger*.

There are also some eclectic authors in antiquity who can significantly contribute useful perspectives and practices dealing with anger. One who particularly stands out is Cicero, who critically draws upon Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Skeptic, and other traditions. The two texts of his that are probably most useful in this respect, *On Duties* and *Tusculan Disputations*, engage particularly with Stoic thought. We might also note that Jewish and Christian thought from this period typically engages multiple schools of ancient philosophy, critically reframing them within broader theological

perspectives. Lactantius has already been mentioned, but Jewish thinkers like Philo of Alexandria, the deuterocanonical book of the Wisdom of Ben Sirach, and other early Christian thinkers like John Cassian, Augustine of Hippo, or John Chrysostom may certainly be of interest to the philosophical practitioner interested in robustly developed ancient philosophical insights about anger.

Comparison of Schools

As outlined shortly, there are significant differences between the ancient schools of philosophy when it comes to anger and the human emotions. Nevertheless, there are also a number of commonalities as well that are worth pointing out, not least because these prove useful when incorporated into philosophical practice. There are a number of basic assumptions shared by ancient philosophical traditions that can be at odds with common conceptions people, particularly our clients, labor under in our current culture.

Ancient philosophical approaches to emotion are complex because they do not view emotions merely as affective states or action-responses. For Platonists, Aristotelians, Epicureans, Stoics, and eclectic philosophers alike, emotions all possess what we typically call a “cognitive” component or dimension. Emotions possess directedness and orientation, involve judgements and reasoning processes, and can be articulated and evaluated in terms of thinking as well as feeling. This proves to be very important for those who desire to understand and deal with emotions, because reconstructing or revealing the cognitive dimension of one’s emotional responses is one main way to render emotions tractable. Instead of being something we simply suffer and have no real role in or control over, emotions become something that we can change, question, or redirect. This realization that becoming aware of and changing how we think affects how we feel can be very liberating.

Ancient philosophers also offer us well-worked-out criteria for sophisticated moral or ethical evaluation of emotions, including that of anger. This is also at odds with some commonly assumed and expressed viewpoints on emotions prevalent in late modern society. People will say things like: “Anger isn’t good or bad. It just is. It’s what you feel, and feelings aren’t good or bad.” This rather dogmatic disavowal of any ethical dimension to emotions prevents people from doing what has been done from ancient times onward, making good judgements about whether the emotional responses they have are useful or harmful, just or unjust, honorable or shameful, good or bad. And those are evaluations we do need to make. Alternately, some people may assign ethical values to emotions, but do so in crude, underdeveloped, stereotyped ways. Ancient philosophical approaches offer us more nuanced, developed, rational perspectives.

Another feature most ancient schools of philosophy share is that they examine the emotions through the lens of virtue ethics. This means, practically speaking, that they are attentive not only to the cognitive dimension of emotion, but also to the interplay between the agency we have as human beings and the effects and conditions of that agency. Put quite simply, this means that they recognize that agency as choices, commitments, and prioritizations and they realize that identifying, evaluating, developing, and replacing habits through the use of that agency is centrally important. A second aspect of virtue ethics approaches explicitly recognized in the present, but also important in ancient thought, is the importance of narrative, that is. how we interpret actions, choices, and motivation, how we human beings understand ourselves through our emotional responses. Virtue ethics also advocates developing the human person fully within matrices of relationships, and this outlines a

sometimes difficult and ongoing project involving attention, deliberate practices, taking stock of one's failures and progress, and orienting oneself by comparison to role-models.

While sharing these commonalities, significant differences between ancient schools of philosophy must not be overlooked. One of the most important divisions for us here is between schools and thinkers that view anger as an emotion that is always negative or problematic, like the Stoics and Cicero do, and those who think that there is some positive role that anger can play. Those who adopt this latter perspective also differ on precisely what anger's legitimate role is. For example, in his work *On Anger*, Philodemus will frame what he takes to be the proper Epicurean perspective on anger as one situated between extreme positions of Stoics and Aristotelians (p. 181 and 261-3). We should note that early Christian evaluations of anger also vary considerably, ranging from thinkers like John Cassian who agree with the Stoics in condemning it entirely (p. 197-8), through thinkers like Augustine or John Chrysostom, with someone like Lactantius (who will argue that God must exhibit anger) at the opposite end of the continuum.

There are "bigger-picture" differences between these schools as well, bearing not only on anger itself, or even just the emotions more generally, but on what we can call the overall moral psychology of the human person. Whether anger is situated in its own specific part of the human soul or personality, as Platonists maintain, or whether it is simply one modality of desire, situated within and corruptive of the rational and ruling part, as the Stoics claim, represents a significant difference. Another important way in which the schools diverge from each other is that some of them explicitly offer us philosophical practices which we can cull out of their texts and directly apply ourselves or suggest to our clients. The Stoics stand out in this regard, but the texts of middle Platonists like Plutarch and Epicureans like Philodemus also offer useful practices. Aristotle and his followers provide many insights that can be systematized into a coherent viewpoint on anger, but very few explicitly spelled out practices. In such cases, it is up to us to derive and develop actionable practices from those perspectives.

Each of these schools offers a robustly developed distinctive approach. The Platonist tradition focuses heavily upon proper use, guidance, and development of the thumotic part of the soul, the site not only of anger and retribution, or concerns of social status, but also of the virtue of courage. Plato's dialogues offer us insights about causes and dynamics of anger, including perceptions of being treated wrongly, viewing others as responsible for their own moral failings, pretenses to have knowledge or skill when one lacks this, and differing conceptions and applications of moral values. Aristotle's works offer a number of more fully developed discussions of anger analyzed in psychological, ethical, legal, or political, and even physical or somatic dimensions, which can be integrated within a systematic perspective. Aristotle provides rich analyses of the causes and workings of anger, differences between anger and other emotions, how anger works with lack or loss of self-control, and moral evaluation of anger in terms of virtue and vice.

The Epicurean tradition offers other distinctive insights about anger, means for ethical evaluation, and useful practices. The distinction between "natural" and "empty" or "vain" anger, originally articulated by Epicurus and further developed by Philodemus is one prime example. Then there are the Stoics, who stress the need to lessen, control, and ideally drive out anger, motivated by the goal to live tranquilly and free to experience positive affects. In their school, we arguably see the strongest emphasis on examining and modifying anger's cognitive dimension, framed not only in

terms of understanding the emotion itself, but also on developing knowledge of oneself, discipline or training (*askēsis*), and attentiveness or mindfulness (*prosokhē*)

Eight Philosophical Practices

These four schools of ancient philosophy, supplemented by eclectic interpreters, offer to us a vast field of distinct philosophical practices useful for addressing anger, many of which can be applied within philosophical practice. This section outlines eight of these practices, providing two from each of the four schools of ancient philosophy we have discussed up to this point. Each of these is either taken directly from key texts of those philosophical traditions or derived by reinterpreting discussions of anger in those texts.

Plato's *Euthyphro* provides us with the first useful practice. In the course of their dialogue about the virtue of piety, Socrates notes that both human beings and gods disagree about important and seemingly irresolvable or intractable matters. These tend to be over what is just or unjust, noble or base, good or bad, whether what these are in general, or how they apply to matters in specific cases. Plato has Socrates note that these provoke enmity and anger in those who don't see eye to eye over these moral (or even aesthetic) values (p. 8-9). So far, this is just an insight into what generates anger between people. How can this be transformed into a practice that can be applied? When finding ourselves getting angry or already angered in the course of disagreement, we can remind ourselves of this common dynamic and caution ourselves to rein in the irrational though understandable anger response on our own part. We can also keep ourselves from responding in anger to the anger felt and exhibited by the person with which we are in disagreement.

Plutarch's work *On Controlling Anger* sets out a number of practices aimed at doing precisely what that title suggests. One that can be particularly useful is his caution against justifying our anger and the actions we express that emotion with by misidentifying our anger with another affective state expressive of a moral judgement. In Greek, this other state is *misoponeria*, which literally means "hatred of wickedness" and is often translated as "righteous indignation" (p. 151, 462B). Plutarch tells us that by choosing that terminology for their feelings and motivations, people mislead themselves into viewing their anger, as well as the expressions and actions flowing from it, as more legitimate than it might be. If we can place ourselves on guard against this tendency to equate our perception of being wronged or slighted as evildoing on the part of the person we get angry with, and the notion that we are actually rightly punishing or opposing evil by acting on that anger, we can maintain better perspective about what it is that we are feeling.

One of the analogies Aristotle draws about anger in the *Nicomachean Ethics* also provides us with raw materials for developing a useful practice. Anger, he tells us, is like a hasty servant who, without listening attentively to the entirety of an order, goes off immediately and begins doing what it thinks the person in charge wants it to carry out, getting matters wrong in the process. Anger notes the perception that someone has slighted us in some way, and then infers that the right thing to do is imposing some sort of payback or retribution (p. 405-7, 1149a26-b1). The language that Aristotle uses for this process of inference is quite revealing, since anger literally "syllogizes", that is, follows out a reasoning process involving some sort of argumentative structure. Realizing and reminding ourselves of this affords the possibility to do two things. One is to slow things down, to refuse to allow the servant to go off half-cocked and decide for us what ought to be done. The other is to

use that pause to bring to light and examine the “syllogizing” the emotion, hijacking our practical rationality, has produced, determining whether it is sound reasoning or not.

Another very useful practice can be derived from Aristotle’s examination of anger in terms of virtues and vices. Many are familiar with the concept of the “virtuous mean” that in Western philosophy Aristotle is one of the first thinkers to explicitly develop. The general idea is that the good character trait, or virtue, lies in a middle position between two extremes, vices of excess and deficiency. One can get angry too much or too little, and this quantitative dimension can be understood not only in terms of the intensity of emotion, but also in how quickly one gets angry, and how long one holds onto the anger. That isn’t all there is to the mean, however. Aristotle notes that we can get angry with the right or wrong people, for right or wrong reasons, or express that anger in the right or wrong ways (p. 231-3, 1125b32-1126a11). When we find ourselves or others getting angry, each of these considerations provides us with a tool for evaluating whether or not the emotion itself is being felt rightly, reasonably, and appropriately, or not.

From Epicurus, we can use one of the central doctrines of his school, namely that one cannot live a good life, that is, pleasantly, without also living prudently, nobly, and justly (p. 665). Does anger have a place in that good life? While Epicurus does not exclude the emotion entirely, in the writings we still possess by him (three letters and two listings of key teachings), it is clear that there is at best only minor scope for anger in the good life. Divine beings themselves, he tells us, do not feel anger. Anger does not appear very attractive or honorable, so it has little place in the noble or fine life. Living in accordance with prudence or practical wisdom is also unlikely to be furthered by indulging in anger, which not only is a painful emotion to feel, but steers us towards desiring temporary pleasures of retribution that are likely to lead to further pains. The point of justice is that we neither harm nor be harmed, and anger aims directly at imposing harm on the one viewed as responsible for angering, so it is unlikely to contribute to living justly. Again, we have here a cognitively structured remedy. If we want a life more pleasant than painful, we will need to be careful what role and room we permit anger to take.

The later Epicurean philosopher Philodemus connects two distinctions that Epicurus himself made. One of these is between “natural anger” (*orge phusikē*), which is a rational response to deliberate harm, and “empty” or “vain anger (*orge kenē*). The latter arises from empty or vain, that is, irrational and ultimately baseless opinions (*doxai*) or assumptions (*hupoleipseis*) about matters (p. 40-45). These correspond to desires for things Epicurus stresses are neither natural nor necessary for human beings. If we were to apply this insight, again, when we find anger arising, we can ask ourselves why we are angry, and look carefully at the explanation provided to see whether it does not involve these empty opinions. If that is the case, then we can steer ourselves away from acting upon, and perhaps with time, even feeling that anger.

Seneca suggests many remedies in his book *On Anger*. One that I personally have found very helpful is his pointing out that we often get angry with other people for doing the same things as we ourselves do (p. 53-54). If we think that it is reasonable or right for us to act in that way, why do we inconsistently not extend the same permission to other people? Or if we maintain that what they do is wrong, why don’t we place the focus on the fact we indulge in the same behavior? Seneca also cuts off some of the likely objections we might make, namely that we don’t actually do what those other people do, or at least not as much or as often, noting that we still have the desire to do, and

to excuse in ourselves, what we consider wrong, even if we manage to hold ourselves back from it. This reminder that “we all make mistakes” can be quite useful for controlling or dampening anger.

Finally, Epictetus, at several places in his *Discourses*, outlines another practice clearly common within the Stoic school. If we consider why people do things that we think, or even know, are bad, to ourselves or to those we concern ourselves with, there is always some mistaken judgement about what is genuinely good and bad on that person’s part. If they steal from us, for instance, on some level, they mistakenly think that taking other people’s property is a good and reasonable thing for them to do. Is the right and rational response on our part to get angry with them, and desire to punish them? Epictetus says this reflects our own mixed-up understanding of good and bad, and that a more appropriate emotion to feel towards them would be pity or compassion (*elēos*), if we need to feel anything at all (p. 119-121). If we can do so in a way that is not demeaning, we can even say to ourselves “you poor, mixed-up schmuck” of those people whose wrongdoing might otherwise lead us to rage.

Applying Resources for Anger with Clients

There are a number of ways that philosophical practice can take insights, perspectives, and practices bearing on anger derived from ancient philosophy and apply them in work with clients (as well as on ourselves as practitioners). I will not attempt to summarize all of the possible modes of practice, not least since I can rightly say I am likely ignorant of some of them. Instead, I will finish up here by simply sharing those I have found particularly useful in my own work with individual philosophical counseling clients, and in workshops and training with groups and organizations.

“Bibliotherapy,” that is, assigning or suggesting relevant philosophical readings on the topic, and then engaging in analysis and discussion of those readings, is often quite helpful for people who are willing to spend the time required for reading and reflection. Some clients are willing, even eager, to study entire books like those we have already referred to, and then discuss their contents. With others it proves more helpful to provide them with excerpts of sections or passages that they would find most relevant to their specific problems at that point. I often direct people towards additional resources that might be useful for them for understanding what philosophical authors are offering them, including short lecture videos, podcast episodes, handouts, or short blog posts.

Dialogical discussion oriented by insights on anger from ancient philosophy, whether carried out one-on-one or in groups, can also be very useful. People can start by bringing up specific situations, the things that “really grind their gears” at present in their interpersonal relationships, workplaces, or communities, and then those can be examined and explored. This may also lead into looking at larger and lasting dynamics, unfolding personal life-narratives and histories, looking for common patterns, assumptions about anger, and good or bad models that have been provided since childhood by one’s experiences and our common culture and media.

Three main focuses have proven particularly effective in my own practice with clients over the last decade. One of these is entirely unsurprising, given the topic of this talk, and that is providing them with discrete philosophical practices they can study, experiment with, and note what results from application. Another main focus is deliberately and explicitly examining and evaluating assumptions, claims, and lines of reasoning that lead to a person feeling anger, holding on to anger, directing anger, intensifying anger, or even responding to the anger of others. Very important in this is

guiding clients away from all-or-nothing approaches to assertions they might make, and towards adopting more nuanced and qualified perspectives, allowing them to understand how something can be right in one sense but wrong in another. The third focus is on developing one's capacities, informed by philosophical insights and perspectives to distinguish between legitimate and understandable feelings of anger and problematic ones, which can then lead to determining appropriate and well-directed rather than wrongheaded and damaging responses to feeling the emotion.

One last bit of advice I would like to close on is something to stress for our clients, since I expect that philosophical practitioners are already well aware of it. Human beings are very complicated beings, with personalities developed over decades in myriad manners and responding to many factors, often unaware about how deeply rooted their habits and dispositions, their matrices of motives, choices, experiences, actions, beliefs, judgements, commitments, and sufferings, run within them. There can be a tendency to expect too much too soon from heavily cognitively-focused approaches like those in ancient philosophy. Changing oneself for the better isn't a matter of simply getting one's views right about anger and then just doing what one needs to. Philosophical practitioners will likely need to continually counsel and support, and perhaps even model, patience on the part of those who they intend to help better understand, live with, and deal with anger.

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Gregory Sadler teaches at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. He is an APPA-certified philosophical practitioner, the president of ReasonIO, a Modern Stoicism team member, and the producer of popular videos, podcasts, and writings on philosophical topics, texts, and thinkers.

Correspondence: greg@reasonio.com

