“Calm Down, You’ll Make it Worse”: Nussbaum’s Transition-Anger as Affective Injustice

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Abstract

Martha Nussbaum’s account of anger follows on neatly from the work of her liberal Western forebears. In her view, anger has neither intrinsic nor instrumental value. Anger is both normatively problematic, and counter-productive, in that it succeeds only in exacerbating injustices rather than solving them. One exception to this negative account is what she calls “Transition-Anger”, a species of anger more akin to compassionate hope that aims for positive change and amelioration. Individuals, says Nussbaum, should try to move to Transition-Anger as quickly as possible when they feel angry. Amia Srinivasan presents a striking counterargument to the traditional Western view of anger. She points out that the counterproductivity criticism gives rise to a type of affective injustice in that requiring an individual to not get aptly angry in the face of injustice out of fear of the consequences is a double injustice. In this paper, I criticise Nussbaum’s Transition-Anger by showing that it is a paradigmatic case of the affective injustice to which Srinivasan refers.

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"Keep this thought handy when you feel a fit of rage coming on—it isn't manly to be enraged. Rather, gentleness and civility are more human, and therefore manlier. A real man doesn't give way to anger and discontent, and such a person has strength, courage, and endurance—unlike the angry and complaining. The nearer a man comes to a calm mind, the closer he is to strength."
- Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 11.18.

"If you're not angry, you're either a stone, or you're too sick to be angry. You should be angry."
- Maya Angelou (2006)

Introduction

Martha Nussbaum's account of anger is a culmination of thousands of years of Western liberal thought.[1] Other than a few feminist and black thinkers[2], philosophical examinations of anger have been largely negative and have focused on its negative instrumental value. Nussbaum's is no different. Amia Srinivasan brings a fresh and challenging account of anger to the table and provides a number of valid criticisms that can be usefully applied to Nussbaum's theory.

In this paper, I will place Srinivasan's account in direct opposition to Nussbaum's, revealing some pertinent issues in the traditional view of anger. I will begin by looking at the two theorists' respective views on anger's intrinsic value or lack thereof. This will start with an overview of Nussbaum's Aristotelian account of anger and her criticisms of the payback-error and status-error, and then Srinivasan's theory of apt anger. I then turn to instrumental evaluations of anger, specifically the counterproductivity critique. Here, I discuss Nussbaum's suggested alternative to 'regular' anger, Transition-anger. I hypothesise that while she does not directly address Nussbaum's Transition-anger, Srinivasan's critique of the counterproductivity argument and her idea of affective injustice can be applied to Nussbaum's theory, concluding that Transition-anger is a form of affective injustice. I investigate arguments that show how affective injustice contains elements of emotion regulation and argue that this is a morally objectionable aspect of Nussbaum's Transition-anger.

Investigating the value of anger seems to be an especially important and relevant task in today's political arena. We live in a world fraught with anger and division. In South Africa, for example, students remain angry at the inaccessibility of tertiary education and the ever-present spectre of colonialism on campuses and in curriculums. The epidemic of Gender Based Violence and rape culture in the country has left women feeling both furious and exhausted. In the United States, anger at pervasive racism and police brutality is rampant. Texas's absurd abortion law has provided yet

[1] She herself states that she concurs with "a long philosophical tradition that includes Aristotle, the Greek and Roman Stoics, and Bishop Butler" (2016:5).

[2] Most notably Audre Lorde (1981/1984) and Frederik Douglass (1997).

another reason to be irate. Popular media and social networks fan the flames of this fury, causing anger to spread like wildfire online. Nussbaum and Srinivasan's discussions on political anger and systemic injustice are particularly relevant in this context and so I will focus specifically on this aspect of their respective accounts of anger.

Evaluating anger's intrinsic worth

Nussbaum's account of anger rests strongly on the Aristotelean definition of the emotion. Anger, in this account, always has some aspect of payback, it always implies that "it would be a good thing if the wrongdoer suffered some bad consequences somehow" (Nussbaum, 2016:5). It is therefore always intrinsically problematic. She describes two possibilities: "Either anger focuses on some significant injury […] or it focuses only on the significance of the wrongful act for the victim's relative status" (2015:41). She calls these two possibilities the payback-error and the status-error. In the case of the payback-error (the focus on significant injury), the angry party wishes some kind of harm on the offender to try to make up for the suffering they themselves have felt. This retaliatory project is what Nussbaum calls "magical thinking", because the idea that such payback has any kind of restorative force is irrational and nonsensical, and merely a type of "fantasy of replacement" (2015:47). It is erroneous because it "makes the mistake of thinking that the suffering of the wrongdoer somehow restores, or contributes to restoring, the important thing that was damaged" (Nussbaum, 2016:6). On the contrary, she argues, inflicting pain as payback does nothing to address the injury caused to the victim of the injustice or repair the situation in any way and thus any sane person will quickly move past this type of error (2015:48). While the payback-error is not necessarily a moral error, it is normatively objectionable because of its irrationality; it is based on beliefs that are "false and incoherent" (Nussbaum, 2016:6).

The second possibility is the status-error in which the angry party wants to get payback by degrading the offending party due to feeling that their own status has been injured. In this case, the harm that the offender has caused is interpreted as a kind of down-ranking or insult (2015:49). Nussbaum states that this often arises from insecurity in the offended party and a narcissistic focus on one's relative status. While retaliation will not reverse the injury inflicted, in the case of humiliation or down-ranking it may help with an evening out or balancing of standing or status (2015:48). In other words, the angry party restores the balance by humiliating the offender as she herself has been humiliated and bringing him down to her level. However, this focus on relative status is morally objectionable because of the way in which it makes "the world revolve around the desire of vulnerable selves for domination and control" (2015:51). Nussbaum (2015:51-52) summarises her position by saying, "when anger makes sense, it is normatively problematic (focused on status); when it is normatively reasonable (focused on the

injury), it doesn't make good sense, and is normatively problematic in that different way". Essentially, for these reasons she does not believe that anger is ever an apt response and that it holds no intrinsic value.

In terms of anger's intrinsic value, Srinivasan is in almost total disagreement with Nussbaum. She argues that not only does anger *not* always include a desire for payback, but that it can be apt and intrinsically worthwhile. Srinivasan questions Nussbaum's acceptance of Aristotle's definition of anger, saying that the "definition that anger always involves some urge for retaliation is maybe a bit outdated" (2018:129). She suggests that the nature of anger may have changed since antiquity to include at least some forms which do not involve the revenge impulse[3]. She also draws a distinction between the desire for revenge (in the Aristotelian sense of payback and down-ranking) and recognition. To illustrate this difference, Srinivasan paints a hypothetical scenario: her friend has betrayed her, making her angry, and while it is possible that she wants revenge, she might also rather just want her friend to recognise the pain that he has caused her by his betrayal. Srinivasan acknowledges that through this recognition the friend may feel pain but it is not merely indiscriminate or random pain. It is the specific pain which arises from him experiencing her own pain. She concludes that the assumption that anger (by definition) includes a desire for payback is erroneous (2018:130). This implies that anger does not always lead to either the payback-error or the status-error that Nussbaum describes and so can in fact be apt. Following this, Srinivasan gives a brief outline of what apt anger is comprised of. It would have to include a genuine moral violation (not merely a violation of non-moral wishes or desires), and should be justified by a personal reason, i.e., one that applies to and is known by the offended party. The anger would also need to be motivated by that reason and be proportional to that reason (*ibid.*).

Counter to Nussbaum, Srinivasan now argues that the capacity for apt anger, fulfilling these requirements, does have intrinsic value in terms of its cognitive content. Anger is a means for us to affectively appreciate injustice in a way that is analogous with the capacity to appreciate aesthetics. Having the knowledge that something is beautiful is very different from appreciating something's beauty. The same applies to the appreciation of injustice; to simply know that something is unjust does not have the same value as actually appreciating that injustice by getting aptly angry. In other words, "it is an intrinsically worthwhile thing not only to know but also to *feel* the ugly facts that structure our political reality" (Srinivasan, 2018:132, own emphasis). Anger is a reaction to a normative violation about how one believes things *ought* to be. Furthermore, apt anger has the added benefit that it is

[3] She refers to Myles Burnyeat's (1996; 2002) suggestion that a form of anger not involving a desire for revenge could have arisen in part because of the waning influence of Christianity's honour code (Srinivasan, 2018:129).

communicative and allows for a shared experience (*ibid.*). To have the capacity to feel apt anger in the face of injustice is a good thing in itself.

Evaluating anger's instrumental worth

Nussbaum is one amongst many philosophers who argue that anger is not only intrinsically morally objectionable, but also instrumentally problematic. Historically, most theorists have evaluated anger from a consequentialist angle. The customary argument is that anger has negative instrumental value because it is self-defeating, destructive, and provokes further conflict. The Stoics for example, most notably Seneca (1928), believed that the negative consequences of anger far outweighed any possible good and that it should be avoided all together for that reason. This view, that pragmatically anger has negative value, can be traced through the liberal canon. Srinivasan mentions, for example, William F. Buckley, who argued that black people should refrain from getting angry about racial oppression in the United States because it harms their cause, and Glen Pettigrove's (2012) argument, that anger negatively effects our capacity for epistemic rationality. The criticism that anger is instrumentally negative because it is counterproductive to the aims of the individuals experiencing injustice has been made many times—specifically with regards to political injustice. Nussbaum is a strong proponent of this criticism. She calls for compassion rather than anger because of its instrumental use for the cause of the oppressed; compassion, she says, is "crucial for motivating and sustaining altruistic action and egalitarian institutions" (Nussbaum, 2013:21). Further, she outlines a different kind of anger that she believes escapes the counterproductivity issue and should be cultivated, especially in the sphere of political injustice, due to its power to evoke positive change. She calls it: Transition-anger.

Transition-anger

Transition-anger is Nussbaum's one exception to her thesis that anger always contains an aspect of payback. While most people do get angry, a "healthy" and "sane" person will soon dismiss the feeling of anger because of its morally or normatively problematic aspect and instead turn towards "forward-looking thoughts of welfare and, accordingly, from anger into compassionate hope: the Transition" (2015:52). She likens Transition-Anger to an emotion like, but not identical to, indignation. She explains this move away from irrational anger as such (*ibid.*:51):

> [I]n a sane and not excessively anxious and status-focused person, anger's idea of retribution or payback is a brief dream or cloud, soon dispelled by saner thoughts of personal and social welfare. So, anger (if we understand it to involve, internally, a wish for retributive suffering) quickly puts itself out of business, in that even the residual focus on punishing the offender is soon seen as part of a set of projects for improving both offenders and society - and the emotion that has this goal is not so easy to see as anger. It looks more like compassionate hope.

This form of anger is unlike all others and is extremely rare. Transition-anger is neither concerned with status, nor with making the offender suffer as retribution for his act(s). The feeling of outrage at a given offence might remain, but it is future-focused and concerned with the search for strategies that can be used to prevent other such acts. Transition-anger is characterised by "constructive thinking about future good" (*ibid.*). It is focused on reacting in a way that would be most helpful for reaching a solution to the injustice at hand. And while this may include punishment, it is punishment with the goal of amelioration, not retaliation (*ibid.*:50). Nussbaum says that most people will feel anger for a short while but then, if they are sane and rational beings, will make the Transition. Making the Transition is achieved by cultivating a "good sympathetic understanding of the positions and motives of other people" which allows one to see "the situation from the other person's viewpoint" (*ibid.*:54). This means that one is "no longer exclusively focused on [one's] own status" and can instead look to the future and "search for strategies" to improve the unjust state of affairs that lead to one getting angry (*ibid.*). This avoids both the status-error and the payback-error. However, some rare and exceptional individuals skip the first ("garden-variety") stage of anger altogether and immediately feel Transition-Anger in the face of an offence, i.e., rather than first getting angry and then moving to the Transition. This type of reaction is extremely unusual and takes much self-discipline, as it is contrary to the natural retaliatory human response (*ibid.*). Nussbaum uses Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi as examples of individuals who embody Transition-anger in the face of injustice. She analyses King's famous "Dream" speech and how he encourages black Americans to fight for future justice and brotherhood, calmly and rationally, rather than demonise white people and give in to rage (*ibid.*:52).

While Transition-anger is useful due to it not having the intrinsically negative traits that payback anger has (it does not make the status-error or payback-error), the true value of this unique form of anger is rooted in its instrumental value and the positive consequences that arise from it.[4] Unlike regular retributive anger, Transition-anger is not counterproductive in the fight against injustice. Rather, it allows the victims of injustice to work towards successfully bettering their situation and righting the wrongs that have been committed. Nussbaum's Transition-Anger fits neatly into the consequentialist discussion of anger. Its value is that it is forward-thinking and aimed at improving the situation rather than aiming for futile retribution which would be counterproductive to the cause at hand.

[4] Nussbaum herself characterises it as a very Utilitarian idea (2015:51).

Affective injustice and the counterproductivity critique

Srinivasan's influential paper, "Aptness of Anger" (2018), is dedicated to addressing the consequentialist account of anger and the counterproductivity argument. Her first point in response to the counterproductivity critic is that the criticism rests on questionable empirical grounds. To say that anger and its expression is always counterproductive and self-destructive in the face of political injustice is to basically ignore historical instances when this was not the case. For example, she states that it is naïve to believe that it was purely Martin Luther King's peaceful protesting that resulted in desegregation, and not also Malcom X's threatening anger (2018:126). This is not to say that anger, especially political anger, is not often counterproductive, merely that this is not an unequivocal and consistent fact. Her next challenge to the critic is to ask why it is the case, if this counterproductive anger is apt, that "reasons of prudence trump reasons of aptness" (*ibid.*:127). That is to say, the critic cannot propose why apt anger's counterproductivity is reason enough to prohibit the anger entirely or why it overrides the normative need to appreciate injustice. She argues that without an answer to this, the counterproductivity critique could be seen as "more often an attempt at social control than a manifestation of genuine concern" (*ibid.*:134).

The crux of Srinivasan's counter-argument, however, is as follows: to deny the victim of injustice the opportunity to feel and express their apt anger is a form of injustice in itself, a form that she calls affective injustice. Affective injustice is defined as: "the injustice of having to negotiate between one's apt emotional response to the injustice of one's situation and one's desire to better one's situation—a conflict of responsibilities that are all but irreconcilable" (2018:135). This is ethically objectionable in that it shifts the focus and the responsibility away from the perpetrator of the injustice who has caused the apt anger towards the victim of the injustice and their reaction. The victim now faces a kind of second-order injustice; the original injustice of the perpetrator and the consequent injustice of being prohibited from getting angry in case she exacerbates the situation. Apt counterproductive anger presents a normative conflict which necessarily requires a sacrifice on the part of the victim.

I argue that Srinivasan's response to the counterproductivity criticism applies to Nussbaum's idea of Transition-anger as well. Srinivasan questions whether there is not something problematic and coercive in asking the individuals who have experienced injustice to then have compassion and consideration for their oppressors. This question poses a serious problem for Nussbaum's argument. The Transition requires the victim of injustice to not only refrain from getting angry, but to attempt to put herself in the shoes of her perpetrator (Nussbaum, 2015:54). Furthermore, the ability to respond to injustice

with Transition-anger takes much self-discipline and this ability has to be cultivated over time. Srinivasan agrees with Nussbaum that it is possible to change the way that one's anger manifests behaviourally through cultural training or spiritual re-training. Individuals from different cultures and different upbringings exhibit anger in different ways and thus, it is possible to change this through "radical affective retraining" (Srinivasan, 2018:138). However, to tell someone that they may only get angry about an injustice (especially systemic political injustice) after they have undergone affective retraining[5] or put themselves in the shoes of the perpetrator is precisely the kind of idea that Srinivasan criticises when she speaks of second-order injustice. It once again shifts the focus and responsibility away from the perpetrator and onto the victim. Nussbaum's Transition-anger forces the victim of injustice to consider matters of prudence over matters of aptness, to use Srinivasan's language.

Especially in the political arena, the counterproductivity critique and the request that victims of injustice channel their anger or use empathy or put themselves in the shoes of the oppressor is ethically questionable. By looking to the victim rather than the perpetrator, it assumes that the injustice is a fixed fact and that an angry reaction being counterproductive is thus also a fixed fact; this instead of viewing it as a "contingent feature of social reality" (Srinivasan, 2018:133). Archer and Mills helpfully elaborate on this aspect of affective injustice, pointing out that when victims of oppression, rather than their oppressors, take on the burden of emotion regulation, it amounts to something like "affective exploitation" (2019:90). Why is it that victims of systemic injustice are asked to undergo the often psychologically exhausting task of regulating their emotional response in case they further upset or trigger their perpetrators instead of asking perpetrators to regulate their aggravated response to apt anger? Most women can relate to the feeling of intense frustration that arises when a man makes a sexist or derogatory comment in a conversation, maybe around a dinner table or at a social gathering. Instead of voicing her anger angrily, the woman must instead calmly explain why this comment is problematic. She knows and has been told time and again that if she does not regulate her fury, she runs the risk of alienating the sexist man (who, it is often argued, could be a potential ally—if only he were more educated on the topic) or being labelled an overly-sensitive hysterical feminist[6]. It seems deeply unjust that she has been repeatedly advised (by figures from Seneca to

[5] Archer and Mills (2019) point out that affective injustice essentially requires that the victim of injustice must undergo a process of emotion regulation. They explore the different ways in which emotion regulation takes place (attentional deployment, cognitive reappraisal, response modulation, and situation management) and, using studies in clinical psychology, expose the dangers of each.

[6] This is not to say that it is *not* the case that a calmer reaction is often a more effective way to explain why the statement is problematic or even to "convert" the man into an ally. On the contrary, this is most likely the case, revealing the normative conflict at the core of this issue.

Nussbaum) to regulate her anger because it is counterproductive and will almost definitely aggravate her oppressor, instead of focusing more on advising her oppressor to regulate his response to apt anger. In short, why is the affective labour of emotion regulation expected more of the oppressed than the oppressor?[7] Nussbaum's call for Transition-anger runs the risk of merely entrenching the status quo.

I propose another counterargument to Nussbaum's transition-anger. It may also, at times, be the case that either perpetrators or third-parties only truly *appreciate* the extent of the injustice (rather than just knowing it) when they are confronted by the apt anger of the victim or witnesses. When the response is one of apt anger, the depth of the injustice is revealed more than it would be through a rational and calm explanation or a display of "compassionate hope". I will present a personal example: In 2019, after the horrific rape and murder of Uyinene Mrewetyana, a 19-year-old UCT student, at the hands of a civil servant, there was a collective outcry from the women of South Africa. Thousands of people protested outside the Houses of Parliament in Cape Town and the UCT campus was shut down for two days. While attending a protest, a photo was taken and posted online of me comforting a friend who was sobbing with tears of utter outrage. I was contacted by a male friend who expressed to me that this photo, communicating our pure, unregulated, uncensored anger, was a moment of awakening for him. We had had many rational conversations about rape culture and misogyny in the past. There had been many an evening where, in his company, someone had employed 'transition-anger' to address a problematic joke or comment. But it was only when he was confronted with our raw anger that he truly, deeply *appreciated* the injustice we had been trying for so long to communicate. When confronted with a tempered discussion, he had listened, but when we got angry, he actually heard. That raw anger can be communicative and instructive in a way that transition-anger cannot, is something that Nussbaum seems to ignore.

Conclusion

In *Political Emotions*, Nussbaum argues that the political emotion that should be encouraged above all in and by the liberal state, is compassion (2013:21). But the belief that liberal societies should work to "inculcate a spirit of compassion in its citizenry", says Srinivasan, is concerning (Forthcoming:4). She believes we should be suspicious "of any top-down programme that encourages those who have greatest reason to be angry to transform that anger into compassionate love" (*ibid.*:12). And strikingly: "if a rational politics has no room for anger, then it has no room

[7] This line of argument draws strongly on the work Archer and Mills (2019). They refer to Robin DiAngelo's (2011) exploration of how white people, in all their white fragility, often become almost immediately sensitive and defensive in conversations about racial injustice. This white fragility and the lack of emotion regulation on the part of white people consistently places the burden of emotion regulation on black people.

for one of the few weapons available to the oppressed" (Srinivasan, 2018:141). This is a crucial element of her argument and the problem that it poses to the traditional liberal Nussbaumian view should be taken seriously.

Nussbaum's negative view of anger is not surprising, given her position in the traditional Western liberal canon. She builds upon a deeply entrenched outlook that has frequently been expressed from the perspective of those with relative power and is often applied to the issues and expressions of those fighting oppression. Srinivasan's account brings a much-needed fresh perspective to the discussion. She does not ask the furious women protesting the senseless murder of a young girl to put themselves in the shoes of the murderer; rather, she grounds her argument in concern for the victims of systemic injustice and the need to recognise and acknowledge their lived experiences of oppression. In a tradition that has approached victims of systemic injustice with a "calm down, you'll make it worse" attitude, Srinivasan's contribution is invaluable and deserves further exploration.

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