Anger and Moral Struggle in Light of Systemic Injustice

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> Our anger was a fury sparked by profound injustices. Wrongs that deserved ire. And with that rage we ripped a hole in the status quo.
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> Heumann (2020), 162.

> To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won't destroy you. Part of the rage is this: it isn't only what is happening to you, but it's what happening all around you all the time, in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, the indifference and ignorance of most white people in this country.
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> Balwin et al. (1961), 206.

1 Introduction

Guiding assumptions:

1. Anger is often morally appropriate, such as in response to systemic injustice.

2. There is a virtue (or virtues) that is the disposition toward appropriate anger.

3. Systemic injustices often cannot be easily rectified.

4. Virtues are supposed to contribute to our well-being or flourishing, rather than detract from it.[1]

Chronically sustained anger in the face of systemic injustice, even if appropriate, looks to be bad for us insofar as it doesn't contribute to and plausibly detracts from our well-being. This might lead us to wonder how we are to be properly angry in the face of systemic injustice without that anger undermining our well-being and getting in the way of flourishing. Macalester Bell: "how [can] one could defend a virtue of appropriate anger in the grossly non-ideal conditions that characterize life under oppression"?[2]

Central thesis: under non-ideal circumstances, the demands of virtue can require anger of us even if that anger detracts from our well-being. Anger, even if we are not among the set of those against whom the injustice is directed, can be in Lisa Tessman's terminology a 'burdened virtue'.[3]

2   An Example and Non-Ideal Constraints

Example: disability advocacy. Advocacy is 'the point of entry' for the work to bring about, or at least try to, the transition toward justice. Barrett Emerick on love: sloganistic accounts of love can "encourage inaction by suggesting that individuals' responsibility is adequately discharged simply by being differently oriented to oppressed others or by letting things unfold naturally."[4]

> One reason why this point is worth making is that to view love as a force that brings about goodness in the world–to believe not only in fate but in fate that spirals progressively upwards towards justice–is that it encourages inaction or quietism. If love really does win, if it is the destiny of love to vanquish hate, then I don't have to work to bring that about. This concern becomes more pronounced when coupled with the sentimental account of love developed in the previous section: if love really is all that others need, if it is the most powerful tool or weapon at our disposal, and if love is an emotion or an attitude internal to me, then by simply having love in my heart or being lovingly oriented towards the world, I have done what morality requires of me and am in that way a conduit for that force to do

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[1]In this paper, I use 'well-being' and 'flourishing' interchangeably.
[2]Bell (2009), 165.
[3]Tessman (2005).
[4]Emerick (forthcoming), 2 in manuscript.

> its work, a place for fate to unfold. In short, understanding love as fate helps to justify my inaction.
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> Such inaction is totally understandable: there is so much injustice in the world that having to take on the task of working to make it better is terribly overwhelming. It is therefore very tempting to adopt a worldview that relieves you of that responsibility. Moreover, it's not just tempting but often positively needed. Research in social psychology supports the claim that we need to believe in the just world hypothesis: that the world is basically just, that social arrangements are fundamentally stable and dependable, and that I as an individual actor am essentially good, even if I sometimes do bad things. To fail to take up this perspective is to open oneself to the threat of being crushed not just by the weight of how much work there is to be done, and not only to my own near constant moral failure, by the utter horror that pervades the world and of which people are capable.[5]

Charles Mills: "what distinguishes ideal theory is the reliance on idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual."[6] Laura Valentini differentiates three distinct meanings given to the 'ideal' vs. 'non-ideal' contrast:

1. <u>full compliance vs. partial compliance</u>: can we assume that all the members of the relevant political or social community will be motivated by justice and working toward justice?

2. <u>utopian vs. realistic</u>: does some sort of feasibility requirement need to constrain our theorizing or not?

3. <u>end-state vs. transitional</u>: are our theories aimed at identifying an ideal of societal perfection, or should they instead focus on accomplishing incremental improvements to our present societal structures and procedures?[7]

The expectation that our chronic anger won't negatively affect our well-being strikes me as utopian. And as I address in the next section, a key role for anger to play is in motivating transitional work to get our social systems to be more just than they are at present. While ideal theory might have its place, especially as a needed element to help establish the goal that we're working toward, in working to achieve that goal we're "inevitably constrained by the empirical reality that already defines the practices."[8] If we want our end-state systems to be just, we have to pay attention on how to move social systems closer to that goal. And that point of entry will often involve and be motivated by anger.

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[5] Emerick (forthcoming), 12 in manuscript.
[6] Mills (2005), 166.
[7] Valentini (2012), 654.
[8] Kittay (2009), 125.

3   Moral Anger, Love, and Unjust Social Systems

There are certainly moral dangers involved with the emotion of anger, and these have been well explored by scholars within the virtue ethics tradition. Myisha Cherry refers to 'moral anger',[9] instances of anger that are the result of the exercise of a virtue. Moral anger is an important source of motivation to work toward moral improvement, and misguided fear of anger gone wrong can prevent us from taking actions that can lead to justice. Anger motivates not only for individual moral progress, but for political as well. Numerous feminist scholars have notice how moral anger can contribute to political improvement.[10]

In struggling for justice, we care for the well-being of those whose lives we're seeking to make better. But presumably we also care for our own well-being as well, for we too are part of the moral community. The kinds of unjust social systems that I have in mind and the need for long-term sustained moral anger as a fitting response seem to threaten the well-being of the person who is in a state of long term or chronic anger at them. What we can recognize in such situations is that "the traits the enable resistance [to ableism and other forms of disability-based injustice] and the traits that enable human flourishing [including that of the person from whom the anger and advocacy is required by the demands of virtue] often fail to coincide."[11] Given the systemic injustice, failing to be pained and angered by the situation would involve a failing of virtue. But "the demand to cultivate a virtue that is intrinsically painful produces quite a burden."[12]

4   Moral Damage from Moral Anger

Tessman is primarily concerned with two kinds of cases in which oppression can undermine flourishing:

1. cases in which "the self under oppresses can be morally damaged, preventing from developing or exercising some of the virtues.... Moral damage occurs when there is a certain sort of a self that one ought to be, but the unconducive conditions of oppression bar one from cultivating this self."[13]

2. cases in which individuals under oppression are able to develop and exercise the virtues, but don't emerge unscathed; the virtue or virtues that they need to resist the oppression come with a cost.

In response to the second kind of case, Tessman introduces burdened virtues: "virtues that have the unusual feature of being disjointed from their bearer's

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[9]Cherry (2019), 160.

[10]Cherry (2019), Lorde (1984), Spelman (1996), Bell (2009), and Frye (1983).

[11]Tessman (2005), 114.

[12]Tessman (2005), 95.

[13]Tessman (2005), 4.

own flourishing."[14] Especially in non-idealized contexts such as oppression, we shouldn't expect all virtues to always contribute to well-being. Burdened virtues are 'mixed' in that "the character traits recommended [or needed] for resistant often disable resisters themselves from flourishing"[15] and are thus a burden to the well-being of those who have them.

The claim isn't merely that the virtues are not sufficient for flourishing; the claim is while that having the virtue of moral agent might be good for the agent in one sense insofar as it's a characterological excellence, having that virtue in conditions of systemic injustice might be bad for the agent in other ways that override or outweigh the excellence of the virtue itself. Tessman admits that "as necessary as anger may be, anger also can function as a virtue on its bearer, especially when the level of anger that is called for is great."[16] It's our flourishing not our moral character that's in jeopardy. And while the threat to the agent's flourishing is ultimately caused by the unjust social systems that their anger is rightly oriented against, without the virtue they would be insulated from at least negative effects of those social systems and thus, in this way, are made worse-off by the virtue in a particular circumstance.

Moral anger can be a burden to its bearer because it is disconnected from the agent's own flourishing. Accepting the risk of moral damage is one way of taking responsibility for the flourishing of others in one's community, for loving others and being willing to work toward their good even at substantial, and perhaps eudaimonistic, cost to one's self. The burdened nature of some virtues is yet another social cost that unjust social systems impose on communities.

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[14]Tessman (2005), 4; see also 124.
[15]Tessman (2005), 8.
[16]Tessman (2005), 30.

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