

Political Rage and the Value of Valuing^{1*}

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the question of political anger's non-instrumental justification. I argue that the case for anger is strong where anger expresses a valuable form of valuing the good. It does so only when properly integrated with non-angry emotional responsiveness to the good. The account allows us to acknowledge the non-instrumentally bad side of anger while still delivering the intuitive verdict that anger is often justified. Moreover, it provides an avenue for criticizing much of the anger run amok in contemporary political life without directly engaging entrenched moral and political views.

1. Introduction

Concerned with the signs of a deeply antagonistic and polarized political culture, some prominent scholars have recently argued that anger has little or no place in public life. Martha Nussbaum (2016), for example, argues that anger is counterproductive for the achievement

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of important moral ends.² Its aim for ‘payback’, moreover, reflects distorted moral priorities or irrational beliefs about how real moral improvements can be made in the wake of wrongdoing and harm.

As compelling as the arguments of anger skeptics are is the simple thought that certain parties have ‘every right’ to be angry. Here one thinks of a woman whose access to reproductive health services has been severely limited by a recent US Supreme Court decision, or a group whose freedom of movement has been significantly restricted by Brexit, or an advocate for affordable prescription drugs for older adults, whose efforts are countered by Big Pharma lobbying. To many, the suggestion that moral anger is out of place, at least in cases like these, is counterintuitive at best.

This paper argues that such anger can be justified in virtue of its role in valuing the good. Just as anger’s role in valuing can explain how it can be justified, so can it explain how it can become unjustified. In short, where anger is not integrated in a certain way with *non-angry* emotion, it expresses a defective valuation of a valued object. This criterion will give us a resource for criticizing much of the outsized anger around us, a resource that does not require us to directly engage entrenched substantive moral and political views.

Much of the recent philosophical and political discussion regarding the justification of political anger has focused on its downstream effects. Some parties to this discussion foreground beneficial effects of anger. They argue, for example, that anger can help us detect moral offence and can motivate us to correct injustices.³ Others have emphasized anger’s harmful tendencies, arguing that anger compromises judgement, degrades the quality of deliberative relations among

² By ‘anger’, ‘political anger’, and the like, I have in mind a form of moral anger. Moral anger is a type of anger that is responsive to perceived moral offence. Here the focus is on a more fiery moral anger over matters of public interest, but much of what is said will apply to moral anger more generally. I try here to stay as neutral as possible among various psychological accounts of anger (and emotion generally). As will become clear later, however, I do take subjective affective experience (i.e., feeling) to be very closely connected with, if not constitutive of, the emotion in its episodic form. And I take effects on attention and salience to be very closely connected with, if not constitutive of, the emotion in its persistent form. In a moment, I will say a brief word on why I do not accept a view on which anger always brings a desire for retribution.

³ There is a rich and complex history of discussion on anger’s beneficial functions in the social/political context. For a powerful recent contribution to the discussion see Cherry (2021).

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citizens, and the like.⁴ This paper, however, will look to understand what might be said for or against anger without appealing to its consequences – whether and why anger might be *non-instrumentally* justified. From here on, in fact, I will have only non-instrumental justification in mind when I write of justification.

The focus on the uses and consequences of political anger is a notable reversal of the kind of focus one finds in much of the philosophical discussion on the very closely related topic of moral blame. In this discussion, questions of the instrumental value of blaming attitudes like resentment and indignation are often treated as of significantly less interest than questions of their non-instrumental value. The primary reasons for or against resentment and indignation, anyway, are taken by most to be just the reasons that make, or do not make, such attitudes apt, fitting, merited, deserved, or the like. Moreover, it is stressed that we seem at least psychologically unable to experience resentment or indignation directly on the basis of instrumental considerations.

If the primary reasons for or against blame are non-instrumental considerations, then, one suspects, so are the primary reasons for or against anger. Indeed, it is arguably the ‘angry emotional core’ of blaming attitudes that explains the importance of non-instrumental considerations to their justification (Shoemaker, 2018). The primary reasons for being angry seem just to be the reasons that make, or do not make, anger apt, fitting, merited, deserved, or the like. And it would seem that, as a psychological matter, one cannot become angry directly by considering the good consequences of being angry.⁵ Nor can one block anger just by considering its unwelcome downstream effects.⁶ If we want to draw on the good effects of anger in political life, or avoid the bad, it will help to understand whether, and if so when, anger is non-instrumentally justified.

Anger has a ‘bad side’, as I will call it, which must be accounted for in an evaluation of its overall non-instrumental value: it is adversarial; it involves at least a limited withdrawal of good will; it pits people

⁴ See, for example, Pettigrove (2012).

⁵ One might, however, induce anger in oneself by turning one’s attention to considerations one considers appropriate reasons for being angry (Greenspan, 2000).

⁶ Sarah Buss pointed out that it does seem we are sometimes able to at least moderate our anger by considering the stakes – as when one realizes that one’s anger could cost him an important relationship. This effect, however, may be mediated by some ‘emotion regulation strategy’ or other, which is not best thought of involving a more direct form of control over emotion. See Gross (2015). At the very least, as Sam Ridge stressed to me, we can influence the extent to which anger shapes our practical reasoning and action.

against each other in a way that is bad in a respect for the target of anger and the angry party alike.⁷ Given these bad features of anger what could there be to say for anger from the perspective of non-instrumental value? How could anger be justified? What might separate the seemingly legitimate anger in our midst from the seemingly illegitimate? The remainder of the paper outlines an approach to answering these very difficult questions. In Section 2, I distinguish my understanding of the bad side of anger from a view that I take to exaggerate anger's bad side and a different view which I take to minimize it – i.e. from Martha Nussbaum (2016) and Amia Srinivasan's (2018) views respectively. In Section 3, I discuss a connection that a number of philosophers have drawn between anger and valuing. I suggest that where anger is a necessary component of a form of valuing that is itself sufficiently valuable, morality does not forbid anger on account of its bad side.⁸ In Section 4, I argue that anger is a component of this way of valuing only where it expresses a certain pattern of emotional responsiveness to the valued object. This criterion is a resource for evaluating much of the intuitively problematic anger on the political scene today. In Section 5, I defend the view against three objections that may come to mind for the reader along the way.

2. Anger's Bad Side

On one picture of anger it can seem difficult to see how the emotion ever could be justified. This is a picture according to which anger by

⁷ R. Jay Wallace makes a similar observation about a way in which anger is bad for the angry party. 'For those subject to it,' he writes, 'anger pushes them to stand up to others and oppose them, putting them into a form of social relation that we are typically strongly motivated to avoid' (2019, p. 542).

⁸ Christopher Franklin (2013) and Antti Kauppinen (2018) have argued for similar conclusions. There are some differences in their routes to the conclusions and mine – it is not clear to me, for example, that either recognizes a *non-instrumental* 'bad side' to anger – but I will not be able to chronicle them in much detail here. I discuss an aspect of Franklin's view in 3.3. Kauppinen and I cover similar ground in several places. Kauppinen employs Bennett Helm's (2001) notion of 'tonal commitments' of emotion (which I borrow for my own purposes) to argue that it is constitutive of valuing certain people, relationships, and things that one exhibit a certain range of emotional susceptibility, including susceptibility to anger where normative expectations concerning the treatment of these objects are not met. I am not aware of work that has taken the general approach Franklin, Kauppinen, and I share in the direction I discuss in Section 4.

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its nature expresses a desire that the target of anger suffer for her moral offence. Martha Nussbaum (2016) is perhaps the most prominent contemporary defender of this way of understanding anger. This desire for suffering, as Nussbaum conceives of it, indicates a narcissistic obsession with status or an irrational belief that the badness of a moral injury can be addressed in a morally meaningful way by causing the suffering of the offender.

I will not be arguing that anger so understood is justified. As compelling as I find aspects of Nussbaum's account of anger, I am inclined to side with those who think that anger as it often presents itself in our lives comes with nothing resembling a desire for payback of quite the sort Nussbaum has in mind.⁹ This is perhaps most easily seen in anger directed toward the near and dear. Peeved at your friend for once again leaving you waiting a long while by yourself at the restaurant, you seem to have no desire whatsoever that she receive her comeuppance for her tardiness. But we also see anger without a desire for payback in response to the stranger. Angered by the driver who just cut you off in traffic, your anger dissipates as soon as you receive a mere wave of acknowledgment. No satisfaction of a desire for payback needed. To be sure, anger sometimes indicates a desire for payback. Were you to 'road rage' your way past this driver to cut them off in turn – to impose a harm on them comparable to the one they imposed on you – you would be satisfying just such a desire. But it is natural to think that anger of this sort is a kind of perversion of the normal form. Normal in the prescriptive sense and normal *enough* even in political life, one hopes, in the descriptive sense.

Amia Srinivasan (2018) sketches a picture of anger according to which it involves a desire for a kind of recognition or appreciation of the morally problematic nature of one's conduct. The angry

⁹ Nussbaum's reasons for insisting that the desire for payback is central to anger as we typically experience it are very sophisticated, requiring more care and attention than I am able to give them here. See Chapter 2 of (Nussbaum, 2016). See Silva (2021) for an empirically driven criticism of 'retributive' accounts of anger. David Shoemaker (2018) argues that moral anger's 'fundamental encompassing action tendency' is communicative rather than retributive in nature. When angry, one may think or even say something like, 'I am so tired of his haughtiness, I hope he has a crummy time at that fancy workshop he'll be attending'. A thought like this might be unsavoury, but it typically amounts to nothing more than loose fantasy had in an ironic spirit. That it need not indicate a genuine desire, let alone an intention, that someone be harmed is evidenced to some degree by the fact that one typically finds no motivation whatsoever in oneself to do anything that might help realize the outcome.

person desires suffering for the offender only to the extent that this suffering is constitutive of her recognizing the wrong she has done.

Suppose my friend betrays me, and I am angry with her [...] might I not want – have we not all wanted – the friend to recognise the pain she has caused me, the wrong she has done me? It might be that this sort of recognition itself involves suffering. If so then, in a sense, I want my friend to suffer. But I don't want her to suffer willy-nilly; my anger hardly calls out for her to break her leg, or fall ill. Rather I want her to experience that suffering that comes precisely from taking part in my own. If this is a possible mode of anger – and I suspect it is not just possible but common – then it is misguided to claim that anger essentially involves the desire for revenge. For the desire for recognition is not the same as a desire for revenge. (Srinivasan, 2018, pp. 129–30).

While it is plausible that the dominant desire of anger as we often experience it is a desire for this sort of recognition – and perhaps that there is nothing morally bad in the pain of recognizing one's wrongdoing – anger's bad side remains. The problem with anger, we could say, is with the *angry way* in which it expresses a desire for recognition. Anger is hostile; it involves at least a limited withdrawal of good will; it pits people against each other. These bad-making features of anger must be accounted for in an explanation of how it is justified non-instrumentally.

Stories of how anger could be justified often centre on an account of features of the morally responsible wrongdoer. Such an account promises an explanation of the wrongdoer's 'meriting' or 'deserving' the aversive aspects of anger in virtue of facts about the nature of her agency. There are, famously, many candidate proposals. The morally responsible agent: exercises a substantial sort of control with respect to her morally relevant conduct; expresses her 'deep self' in the conduct under evaluation; enjoys fair opportunity to avoid being the target of attitudes like anger; *etc.*¹⁰

Although I won't argue for the position here, I am sceptical that features of moral offenders' agency could take the lead role in justifying the bads of anger.¹¹ The thought I will explore is that anger is justified principally by its role in valuing the good. Valuing the good in

¹⁰ The literature on the various accounts of moral responsibility is vast. Mathew Talbert (2019) provides a helpful overview.

¹¹ An anonymous reviewer helpfully pointed out that one might have particularly strong reasons for scepticism that features of the moral

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the way we do when we become angry at its mistreatment can be importantly valuable in its own right. It is implausible, the thought goes, that morality asks us to forego this value in order to avoid the bad side of anger. The next task on our way to this conclusion will be to note a presupposition, a plausible and commonly accepted one, that valuing involves a vulnerability to a range of emotions in connection with the welfare and treatment of the valued object. And to argue that anger is among those emotions.

3. Anger, Delight, and Other Ways of Valuing

3.1 *Valuing and emotion*

Alexander is the father of a young girl, Zaida. Alexander typically feels a subtle happiness at the first sight of Zaida each day. Often when he sees Zaida enjoying carefree fun with her friends, Alexander feels joy. When he sees Zaida uncomfortable with a toothache or cold, Alexander feels concern and a tinge of sadness. When Zaida learns something new that excites her, he is inclined to feel a mix of pride and wonder. Alexander is grateful toward teachers who stimulate her curiosity. Something of normative significance seems to unify this collection of emotional dispositions exhibited by Alexander: his *valuing* his child.¹²

Several philosophers have noted the connection between valuing and emotional responsiveness to the valued of the sort displayed by Alexander. Elizabeth Anderson writes that:

[...] a mode of valuation includes distinctive emotional responses to the apprehension, achievement, and loss of things related to what is valued. Romantic love involves feeling grief when the beloved dies, despondency at her lack of reciprocation, exultation at her confession of a reciprocal love, jealousy when her affections are turned to another, alarm at her being harmed. (Anderson, 1993, p. 11)

Samuel Scheffler (2010), too, takes emotion to be central to valuing. Among the necessary conditions of valuing someone/something, he

offender's agency could explain why the angry party has reason to subject *herself* to aversive aspects of anger.

¹² This pattern of responsiveness as it is exhibited by a *parent* no doubt also indicates love and security-based attachment. See Wonderly (2016).

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tells us, is a ‘susceptibility to experience a range of context-dependent emotions regarding [it]’ (p. 29).

Several philosophers have explicitly included anger among the emotions of valuing. Agnieszka Jaworska (2007) makes a place for anger in particular in caring (a phenomenon closely related to valuing). Caring typically involves:

[...] joy and satisfaction when the object of one’s care is flourishing and frustration over its misfortunes; anger at agents who heedlessly cause such misfortunes; pride in the successes of the object of care and disappointment over its failures; the desire to help ensure those successes and to help avoid the failures; fear when the object of care is in danger and relief when it escapes unharmed; grief at the loss of the object, and the subsequent nostalgia. (Jaworska, 2007, p. 560)

It seems reasonably clear that anger at least sometimes functions as an expression of valuing. Let’s return to Alexander and Zaida to remind ourselves how this looks on the ground. Suppose Zaida has a medical condition that requires careful monitoring by professionals. Alexander notices a symptom that may indicate the need for an adjustment to her medication and takes her in for an appointment. Valuing Zaida as he does, he is concerned by the symptom. But he feels heartened by Zaida’s expressions of resilience. It is a long visit at the hospital, with multiple tests run. But the right medication adjustment is eventually made, and Zaida will soon feel much better. Alexander is pleased and grateful.

Suppose that on their way out Alexander learns that a young medical resident physician involved with Zaida’s care did something that just may have saved Zaida’s life. Having noticed the constitutionally overconfident doctor in charge of Zaida’s care several times recently fail to perform a routine double-check on the compatibility of medications, she checked herself. In the process the resident caught a mistake that could have resulted in a life-threatening reaction to the medications.

We can imagine Alexander’s first response to this news is relief that his child was not harmed, and gratitude toward the resident for her conscientiousness.¹³ When Alexander’s attention moves to the doctor’s seemingly negligent conduct, his gratitude temporarily

¹³ Alexander might also quickly get to work on seeing that Zaida (and others) receive better care going forward. There is more to valuing, no doubt, than the emotional dispositions that I focus on here.

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turns to anger. ‘How could the doctor be so *careless*?’, Alexander thinks.

Alexander’s anger clearly seems to be of a piece with the gratitude experienced just before – indeed, with the wide range of emotions we have imagined him to experience as different circumstances bearing on the welfare or treatment of Zaida arise. It is implausible that Alexander’s transition from the feeling of gratitude to the feeling of anger marks an abrupt shift from a valuing emotion to a non-valuing emotion. Although Alexander’s anger is directed toward the doctor, it is no less about Zaida than his other emotions.¹⁴ I will call the object that anger is about in this sense the *valued object*.

3.2 Might the value of valuing justify anger?

It can be easy to lose track of the position anger often occupies in a larger pattern of responses to people and things we value – a pattern of emotional responses to conditions bearing on the welfare or treatment of these valued objects that seems practically inseparable from valuing itself. Insofar as anger is a component of valuing, indeed a necessary component, consider what it would come to for morality to demand that we excise anger from our lives.¹⁵ It would be for morality to demand that we abandon a basic avenue for actively valuing those things we find most valuable.¹⁶ It would seem for morality to demand that Alexander, as he comes to think that the doctor’s negligence put his daughter’s life at risk, not respond as a valuer. It is quite

¹⁴ Pamela Hieronymi (2019) helpfully distinguishes between the individual moral criticism is *of* and the individual it is *about*: ‘[A]pt moral criticism is criticism of the wrongdoer, but it is about the one wronged. If you are the apt target of blame, the blame is not really about you’ (p. 80). In Bennett Helm’s (2001) language, the set of emotional responses exhibited by Alexander share a *focus* – namely, Zaida. This focus makes his anger toward the doctor intelligible (similarly, his gratitude toward the resident physician and so on for Alexander’s other emotional responses). I refer to that which anger is about as the *object* of anger or valuing, or the *valued object*.

¹⁵ In a moment I will sketch some of the reasons one might think anger is sometimes *necessary* for valuing.

¹⁶ One might worry that the view being sketched ends up making the bad side of anger instrumentally valuable with respect to the non-instrumental value of valuing. But this worry incorrectly assimilates non-intrinsic value to instrumental value. The so-called bad side of anger might be conceived of as an *extrinsic* non-instrumental good. See Korsgaard (1983).

implausible that the bad side of anger is of such seriousness that morality would make this sort of demand.

Valuing the valuable is itself valuable. One does not simply want one's friend to *judge* him valuable or even to act in ways that reflect this judgement. One justifiably wants him to feel happiness in light of one's own triumphs, sadness at one's setbacks – one wants one's friend to really 'give a damn' about him, indeed to be a bit angered when he is badly done wrong.

Emotional engagement with the valuable, moreover, adds value to a life. Imagine someone who justifiably takes himself to have a successful career which makes a positive difference in the lives of others. Yet, he has only the most muted disposition toward gratitude at the thought of his vocation; toward delight at news of a person his work has helped; toward anger at news that an opportunistic politician threatens to slash the funds of the institution through which he does his work. His 'deadness' to that which he genuinely takes to be valuable, and toward which he directs a good bit of his efforts, seems to be a significant bad for *him*.

Amia Srinivasan (2018) has suggested that the value of apt anger is 'a cognitive good, like true belief or knowledge – not a mere feeling, but (when apt) an appreciation of the facts' (p. 141).

Just as appreciating the beautiful or the sublime has a value distinct from the value of knowing that something is beautiful or sublime, there might well be a value to appreciating the injustice of the world through one's apt anger – a value that is distinct from that of simply knowing that the world is unjust. (Srinivasan, 2018, p. 132)¹⁷

If a person altogether avoids anger at the mistreatment of valued objects, then she is deprived of a vital way of *valuing* them – as well as proper appreciation of the moral facts about their mistreatment. Indeed, as I will suggest below, she may even be restricted in her capacity for valuing more generally. This is so whether she eschews anger to prevent bad consequences (for herself or others) or whether she eschews anger to avoid its non-instrumentally bad features.

It seems to me squarely on the anger sceptic to convince us that anger's bad side is so weighty that morality demands that we forego non-instrumental goods like these toward which I have gestured. More plausible is the thought that morality asks us to abandon

¹⁷ Srinivasan argues that an 'affective injustice' is suffered where one must choose between being aptly angry and avoiding counterproductive consequences of one's anger (Srinivasan, 2018, p. 127).

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anger or any other way of valuing where value is, in fact, not to be found.¹⁸ In other words, anger is unjustified if it is experienced in relation to an object that is not in fact valuable or whose value is not commensurate with the degree of anger experienced. Soon I will argue that anger is unjustified also where improperly integrated with non-angry emotions.

3.3 *A substitute for anger?*

One might agree that emotional responsiveness to the mistreatment of the valued object is necessary for valuing, while thinking that a less problematic emotion might replace anger in the role. Indeed, several philosophers recently have argued as much.¹⁹ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into the details of this debate, I certainly owe at least the briefest sketch of some strategies for defending the necessity claim (a sketch of *varieties* of the necessity claim, really). I hope one or more of these defences will strike you as promising, but I will soon ask you to bracket any scepticism and move ahead with me to an issue that has received less attention than the question of whether anger is necessary for valuing in the face of wrongdoing. This is roughly the question of when it is sufficient for valuing (well) in the face of wrongdoing.

There is a 'conceptual' brand of denial and a 'psychological' brand of denial concerning the claim that anger can be replaced by non-angry emotion. The former has it that there is a conceptual connection between anger and valuing the mistreated *qua* mistreated. Christopher Franklin (2013) argues for a view along these lines, claiming that angry blame alone can fill the vital role of 'defending and protecting moral values' against challenges to them by moral offenders (p. 220). A non-angry emotion like sadness, he argues, merely marks the harms typically associated with offence. It is not a proper vehicle for *condemning* 'free disvaluations of objects of moral value' in the manner necessary for defending and protecting moral values, for standing up for moral values (p. 217). One might add that

¹⁸ The consequences of feeling anger surely sometimes make it all-things-considered best to avoid. An advantage of the view on offer is that it helps explain why we are often prepared to accept more than trivial consequences of experiencing our anger: it is a *valuing* response, significantly valuable in its own right.

¹⁹ Derk Pereboom (2013) and Owen Flanagan (2016) are among those who argue that non-angry emotions can and should be substituted for anger.

anger not only allows us to stand up for moral values in this distinctive way; it allows us to *stand with* the mistreated. This valuable affiliative feature of anger is the flipside of its oppositional feature. To the extent that anger pits us against wrongdoers by its nature, so does it ‘pit us with’ the wronged.

Now consider the psychological connection between anger and valuing. It may be a near psychological impossibility for most ordinary moral agents to altogether replace anger with non-angry emotion – without, anyway, weakening their emotional responsiveness to the mistreatment of things they value. Indeed, it may be that most of us could not excise anger without generally attenuating our susceptibility to the *wider* suite of valuing emotions.²⁰ At least as a matter of psychological fact, the idea goes, one often cannot pick and choose among the basic ways we tend to respond emotionally to the things we value. One cannot remove or radically dampen a disposition toward anger without cultivating a degree of general emotional detachment with respect to the valued. Such detachment would come at significant expense to valuing as most of us know it.

A still more limited claim is that it may be psychologically possible for some to replace anger with non-angry emotions without constricting oneself as a valuer. However, this thoroughgoing removal of anger is not immediately achievable. It surely would be a matter of personal transformation that takes significant time.

Imagine how this would look for Alexander. Suppose Alexander has begun this work of removing anger from his valuing repertoire. Perhaps he engages in certain mindfulness practices toward this end. But he is not yet there. When Alexander learns of the way in which Zaida’s doctor’s negligence has put her life at risk, then will he have to avoid anger? It seems not. That is, it seems morality makes room for Alexander to value the way he can at this time: by being angry. Perhaps, then, anger turns out to be a kind of second-best way of valuing the mistreated, permissible under circumstances in which a better way of valuing the mistreated remains out of reach. For those who cannot value fully without anger, and for those who have not yet completely displaced anger, morality makes room.

²⁰ Seth Shabo (2012) has argued that as a psychological matter we cannot participate fully in personal relationships without a proneness to the reactive attitudes. The suggestion I am floating here is that valuing attitudes more broadly might depend on a degree of susceptibility to anger in the face of mistreatment of the valued. That dependency would not need to be exceptionless to be an important one. Needless to say, the various psychological theses sketched so briefly here are subject to empirical criticism.

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Let me proceed with the thought that one of these ways, or perhaps another, of defending the necessity claim holds promise. If even this last most minimalistic defence of the necessity of anger is promising, then anger often may be vindicated. The next task will be to explore the possibility that anger can cease to fill its proper role in a wider network of valuing emotions, with the result that it loses the justification it might otherwise enjoy in connection with valuing.

4. Unjustified Anger

4.1 *Ascopic anger*

Getting angry is not always a way of valuing. Overwhelmed by work and feeling under the weather, you might find yourself truly peeved at your partner for the way in which he loads the toilet paper holder. On the plausible assumption that one must be inclined to find something valuable in order to value it, your anger is not an expression of valuing a certain way of loading toilet paper (I boldly assume you don't actually think it particularly valuable to load toilet paper in your way).²¹

Where anger is a (more straightforward) expression of valuing it can nevertheless be unjustified. One's anger may express unjustified moral beliefs, it may be excessive in intensity, it may be motivated independently of one's moral beliefs, and so on. Here I argue that anger is unjustified where it is not properly integrated with other emotions. I'll begin with a case that gives us an intuitive feel for the sort of anger I have in mind. I will highlight the way in which information concerning mistreatment of the valued object is disproportionately salient, and the way in which the angry party is disproportionately disposed to episodes of angry feeling. Then I will point to a handful of reasons anger with these features leaves something to be desired. The objective is to continue to articulate the broad outlines of a view that might help us get critical leverage on problematic anger in public life while also explaining how the anger of the oppressed, and often their allies, is justified.

Brynn is quite outspoken on social media, often leaving angry comments about gun control legislation, gender-affirming care, the removal of Confederate monuments, and more. Lately, abortion has been at the centre of her attention. Brynn was perturbed when

²¹ Your partner's behaviour certainly could reflect a broader pattern of disregard for your preferences, which *does* have to do with something you find valuable.

she first saw images of people marching at the Supreme Court in support of upholding *Roe v. Wade*. Indeed, she is angered nearly each time she hears of these people she sees as having practically no regard for ‘the lives of innocent children’. News, social media posts, and other information about support for women’s access to abortion services seem rarely to miss her notice. She has been pre-occupied with a story she saw on a certain cable news network concerning a Pentagon policy that allows service members to receive funding for travel to states where abortion services are available. She hunts down online pieces lambasting the policy, and shares links to them on social media platforms. When Brynn learned of the decision overturning *Roe* she found herself relishing the ‘defeat’ of those on the opposing side of the issue.

Pro-choice activists, Pentagon officials, and the like are the targets of Brynn’s anger as it concerns abortion. From listening to Brynn’s own talk one might gather that the primary object of her anger are ‘innocent children’.²² However, Brynn is not much engaged by information concerning, say, improved access to maternal health and education resources – even as improvements benefit mothers and children of unplanned pregnancies. She is little disposed to feel sadness or concern at news of cuts to programmes aimed at shielding foetuses from environmental exposure to toxins. An opportunity online to make a small but meaningful contribution toward a campaign to reduce infant and maternal mortality is unlikely to capture her attention, while an opportunity to express contempt toward those on the other side of the abortion issue will jump out at her. In short, Brynn is very much differentially disposed to notice, deliberate about, and respond with feeling to a narrow range of information concerning the welfare and treatment of the valued object.

Our first instinct upon encountering a pattern of response like that exhibited by Brynn usually is, or should be, to look for underlying attitudes that might rationalize it.²³ Brynn’s response to users and

²² I am much indebted to Peter Railton for the way I characterize Brynn in this paragraph.

²³ To do otherwise is arguably to treat the person with disrespect. See Schroeder (2019). I should stress that nothing I say here commits us to thinking that it is particularly easy to justify a judgement that someone’s anger is like the anger I will stipulate Brynn to have – an anger that expresses an unbalanced responsiveness to information concerning the welfare or treatment of the valued object. We should take even greater care in assigning blame for it. The forces that often help explain anger like Brynn’s are very strong: from political agents who fuel it for votes to social media algorithms that privilege negative information. For present purposes I will ask the

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supporters of abortion services, as compared to her response to those who fail to promote positive outcomes for vulnerable children and their families, could reflect a belief, say, that doing harm is generally a much more morally serious matter than allowing it to happen. But there is reason to think that a substantial part of the outsized anger in the current climate does not admit of rationalization of this tidier sort. Recent work by political scientists, philosophers, and others have given us the resources for any number of alternative explanations for patterns of anger like Brynn's.²⁴ Brynn's outsized anger might be driven in part by fear and anxiety over threatened cultural status (Mutz, 2018). Or by identarian inclinations exacerbated by deepened social sorting (Mason, 2015). Or by a preoccupation with representing oneself, to others and oneself, as morally credentialed (Tosi and Warmke, 2016). Or even by the compulsive pursuit of 'the sheer pleasure of the feeling of outrage itself' (Nguyen and Williams, 2020, p. 149).

The extent to which the more pronounced anger around us might be captured by explanations of these sorts is a complex empirical question – as is the question whether these explanations fit one side of the political spectrum better than the other. I will leave these questions to those with the needed expertise. What seems reasonably uncontroversial is that there are a nontrivial number of individuals similar enough to Brynn in our midst, representing various political orientations. This, at least, is all we need to assume to get on with the ideas I will explore.

I am among those who think we need look no further than the moral and political beliefs expressed in Brynn's anger in order to find grounds for criticizing it. But I will keep our attention elsewhere here. There is, I think, more to criticize. And it could be of some practical use for us to develop critical resources that sidestep a head-on challenge to the entrenched substantive moral and political views of individuals like Brynn. The hope will be that people of different

reader to assume that we have made the effort to rationalize Brynn's pattern of response, and we have found ourselves unsuccessful. I have several people to thank for encouraging me to consider ways in which the anger of a person like Brynn can reflect a more or less internally coherent evaluate outlook: Sarah Buss, Justin Coates, Jacob MacDavid, Peter Railton, and an anonymous reviewer provided particularly helpful feedback here.

²⁴ As Liz Anderson stressed to me, each of these causes of ascopic anger may generate its distinctive pathologies of valuing which are very much worth investigating on their own terms. Here, however, I will have to focus on what is defective about ascopic anger as such. Both Tosi and Warmke (2016) and Nguyen and Williams (2020) explore moral criticisms of the phenomena they, respectively, address.

moral and political persuasions might be able to agree that properly valuing something requires more from us emotionally than anger, and that they can gain at least a small degree of insight into their own deficiencies in this regard.²⁵

I will ask us to grant Brynn the relevant evaluative beliefs expressed in her anger for present purposes (e.g., that abortion is deeply wrong). Let's grant also that the size of Brynn's anger is commensurate with the perceived moral badness of the conduct, people, policies, *etc.* at which it is targeted. Something still seems wrong with Brynn's anger. Intuitively, it expresses an overly narrow or internally disproportionate emotional responsiveness to the valued object more generally. It is, as I will say, *ascopic*. In its most extreme form *ascopic* anger is anger that occurs entirely apart from a broader pattern of emotional dispositions of the sort typically involved in valuing. *Ascopic* anger presents more subtly in the wild.

Brynn's anger has an episodic component and a more persistent component. She experiences episodes of anger, which involve more or less acute bouts of affect or *feeling*. But she also remains angry between such episodes. This persistent or ongoing anger is marked by a certain pattern of *salience*.²⁶ Existing beliefs and new information concerning the perceived mistreatment of the valued object are significantly more salient than existing beliefs and new information about other evaluatively significant matters affecting the valued object. To say that this information concerning perceived wrongdoing is salient for Brynn is to say in short that it is more accessible to her than other information.²⁷ While Brynn may be aware of information concerning, say, a campaign to reduce infant and maternal mortality, this information is much less easily incorporated into processes involving feeling, deliberation, and action than information about Pentagon support for abortion-related travel. Information

²⁵ Admittedly, it may turn out that the angrier voices among us are no less resistant to this sort of criticism than they are to criticism of their tightly held substantive views. If so, then we will at least have one more imperfect critical resource available to us.

²⁶ Salience is often discussed in connection with episodic emotion rather than persistent emotion. Cf. Picardo *et al.* (2016).

²⁷ I borrow features of Jessie Munton's (2021) account of salience as differential accessibility of information. Munton stresses that our patterns of salience are partly a function of 'facts about the individual's social and physical environment' (p. 13). No doubt, Brynn's external environment (e.g., an online environment that dramatically privileges certain types of information) is an extremely important part of a more complete story of what is salient for her.

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concerning the improved access to maternal health and education resources is some distance from the foreground of her thought. It is unlikely to prompt her to inquire into other means (besides further restricting access to abortion services) of effectively addressing her basic concerns – or to lead her to feeling hope that something can be done in this direction, or interest in herself being involved.

When Brynn's attention centres on information on the welfare or treatment of the valued object which does not concern perceived mistreatment, there is a less frequent and milder affective response. That is, she is a good bit more disposed to respond to mistreatment information with acute angry feeling than she is disposed to respond with acute non-angry feeling of the appropriate sorts to other information bearing on the welfare and treatment of the valued object. Attention given to pro-choice marchers, supportive abortion policy, and the like very often brings notable episodes of angry feeling, a strong inclination to share her feeling with others, and so on; attention to information on successes at improving maternal health, reducing infant mortality, and the like brings a weaker and less frequent affective response.

4.2 The defects of ascopic anger

The ascopic character of Brynn's anger compromises its value in three ways. One, it makes for a kind of rational incoherence. Two, it constitutes a distinctive form of hypocrisy. Three, it represents a significant failure to appreciate the comparative value of various morally relevant outcomes affecting the valued object. I discuss each in turn.

I follow Bennett Helm (2010) in thinking that our emotional responses typically commit us rationally to a range of complementary emotional responses in the circumstances they respectively fit. They do this insofar as they imply that the object they are about is of 'import'.

Emotions are often treated as if they were isolated states of feeling, but it is important not to overlook the complex rational connections they have to other mental states. In part, these connections are among the emotions themselves: to experience one emotion is in effect to commit oneself to feeling other emotions with the same focus [i.e., object] in the relevant actual and counterfactual situations because of the import of that focus. Thus, if you are hopeful that some end can be achieved, then you normally ought also to be afraid when its accomplishment is threatened, relieved when the threat does not materialize, angry at those who intentionally obstruct progress toward it, and satisfied when you finally achieve it (or disappointed when you fail). (Helm, 2010, p. 59)

If Brynn is angry at those who purposely prevent progress (or what Brynn takes to be progress) toward more restrictive abortion laws and policy, then typically she is committed to feeling hope that this progress will be realized, fear if it threatens to be stalled – indeed, sadness for those affected that the goal is not achieved, delight at the difference made if it is, *etc.* Presumably it is not enough that she experiences these non-angry emotions at all; there must be a *proportionate* tendency toward them.²⁸ If there is only a minimal tendency toward the other emotions, then this suggests that the matter is of limited import to Brynn. She in turn commits herself to a more limited response in anger.²⁹

Ascopic anger like Brynn's has at least a faint odour of hypocrisy to it.³⁰ Imagine how Brynn herself might respond upon getting some perspective on the ascopic character of her anger. It would be reasonable enough for Brynn to think to herself, if not in so many words, 'Maybe I should limit my angry preoccupation with others until I myself exhibit a bit more robust care for the "innocent lives" I often discuss'. The thought is not that one's emotional attunement to the valued object must be perfectly even for one to criticize others for (putatively) mistreating it. Rather one must be attuned evenly *enough*, and Brynn is sensibly concerned that she is not.

Patterns of salience and feeling like Brynn's express a significant failure to appreciate the comparative value of different outcomes affecting the valued object. Consider an outcome in which the mistreatment of something you care about is responded to with angry emotion. Now consider an outcome in which the harm done by way of this mistreatment is corrected. Surely the latter is typically more valuable than the former. Brynn's patterns of salience and affect suggest otherwise, however. An opportunity on social media, say, to contribute to a thread of angry comments from like-minded critics of liberal abortion ideas generates more attention and

²⁸ Helm himself writes, 'Other things being equal, to feel an emotion with a particular intensity is to be committed to feel with similar intensity other emotions having the same focus when otherwise appropriate' (2001, p. 108). I would add that feeling an emotion with a particular frequency all else equal commits one to feeling other emotions with a similar frequency.

²⁹ It seems to me plausible that there is similar pressure for rational consistency in patterns of salience as well, although I cannot pursue the point here.

³⁰ I thank Sandy Goldberg for encouraging me to consider the relevance of hypocrisy in a moral evaluation of ascopic anger.

enthusiasm than an opportunity online to make a small but meaningful donation that directly benefits the cause as she sees it.

Consider now the comparative goodness of, on the one hand, meeting a favourable development for the valued object with morally significant positive emotion (joy, gratitude, hope, *etc.*) and, on the other hand, meeting a comparably significant unfavourable development for the valued object with morally significant negative emotion (sadness, anger, despair, *etc.*).³¹ Some may incline toward the thought that, all else equal, the former is typically more valuable than the latter. Recall Alexander and Zaida. If Alexander had to forego an opportunity to experience or express gratitude toward the resident physician who saved Zaida's life, or anger toward the doctor who risked it, he would justifiably forego the latter. If valuing in the way of non-anger is not generally *more* valuable than valuing in the way of anger, then it is surely at least roughly on a par in value. Again, the pattern of salience and affect expressed in Brynn's anger misrepresents the significance of various outcomes affecting the valued object. Opportunities for responding with anger to perceived mistreatment generally loom large for her, and she takes them significantly more often than she takes opportunities for responding with positive affect.

It seems to me implausible that anger with these defects, at least to the degree to which Brynn's anger exhibits them, is valuable to the extent necessary to qualify as good overall. This is especially so given the independently identified bad side of anger. Admittedly, this is little more than a plausible conjecture. To confirm it would require more precision on the axiological front than I will attempt here. I will instead turn to addressing three worries that strike me as even more pressing.

5. Three Worries

5.1 *To dial down or to dial up?*

Why not think that Brynn should 'dial up' her non-angry emotion rather than dial down her anger?³² After all, we are assuming for argument's sake that her moral views are correct and that her anger does not exaggerate the significance of the putative moral badness to which

³¹ This argument is modelled on an argument from Justin Coates (2019) concerning the comparative non-instrumental value of gratitude and resentment.

³² Probing comments from Jacob MacDavid helped me see the importance of addressing the issues of this subsection.

it is a response. It seems, the thought continues, that the only thing to criticize is the failure of Brynn's non-angry emotions to be adequate in relation to the significance of the morally relevant facts (as she sees them) at which they are targeted.

This worry begs the question against the claim that there is something important to having internal proportionality in one's emotional responsiveness to the valued object – the claim, in particular, that asopic anger is defective even where one's anger matches the badness of its target.³³ The case of Brynn provides intuitive support for the claim. Moreover, we have been given reasons to think that asopic anger is in fact defective: it makes for a kind of incoherence, hypocrisy, and serious misrepresentation of the significance of outcomes impacting the valued object.

Now, it is true that Brynn could in principle make her anger scopic by dialling up non-angry emotion just as well as she could by dialling down her anger. If she were to succeed, then there would nothing left to do to challenge her anger but to contest her substantive views. But we cannot dial up emotion, angry or non-angry, at will. Brynn would have to see whether the valued object actually is the sort of thing that for her can inspire internally proportionate emotional responsiveness.³⁴ Her current deficit in responsiveness may already indicate that it cannot. In any case, the hope is that her efforts to equilibrate the non-angry emotions in herself with her angry emotion would be met with at least some resistance from the facts about what actually matters morally.

5.2 Below the surface of anger

Earlier I gestured toward several possible psychological explanations of asopic anger – that it reflects a kind of concern with one's group *qua*

³³ One, however, might accept that internal proportionality matters, but argue that it is less important than having anger that is commensurate with the badness of its target (as I have stipulated Brynn's anger to be). I am sympathetic to the idea that something like this thought may be true of *non-angry* emotions – that the deficit of internal proportionality in 'asopic gratitude', if you will, does not typically give us overriding reason to moderate it. But non-angry emotions lack anger's bad side. Moreover, they do not trigger the hypocrisy worry. Nor do most misorder the significance of outcomes affecting the valued object.

³⁴ To dial up her non-angry emotions, Brynn might do what she can to highlight for herself the features of the valued object which non-angry emotions would fit. To dial *down* her anger Brynn can do what she can to moderate the amount of attention she gives to its sources.

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bearer of cultural status, one's moral credentials, *etc.* One might worry that explanations of this sort create a problem for the view. These explanations suggest the existence of what we might call *latent objects* of valuing. With respect to these latent objects of valuing, the thought goes, the angry party will exhibit the pattern of emotional responsiveness required for scopic anger. One might worry that, for everything I have said here, anger like Brynn's will be justified after all.³⁵

To the extent that anger like Brynn's can properly be thought of as being 'about' one's partisan identity or the like, it often does not even qualify as a case of valuing something. This is so anyway on the plausible assumption that one values something only if one would on reflection judge it *valuable*. Surely many would answer 'No' if honest about whether they think identitarianism as such, say, is valuable. Insofar as anger is justified in connection with valuing, then anger about identitarianism or the like will lack justification.

Sometimes angry parties would answer 'Yes' if questioned about the value of the so-called latent object. Presumably this would be the case, for example, where one's anger indicates an underlying fear or anxiety about economic insecurity. In this case the agent would subscribe to something like the reasonable evaluative judgment that her economic security matters. In other cases there will be a deeply problematic evaluative judgment to which the angry party would cling. Brynn's stance on abortion, say, at bottom might be animated by internalized patriarchal norms.³⁶ But such cases of anger should not be thought of as concerning their latent objects only, if they are properly thought of as being about these objects at all. They are about their *manifest objects* (too). The angry parties that concern us here typically represent their anger as appropriate to these objects. Insofar as this is the case, the parties are subject to the criticisms discussed above. With respect to the manifest valued object they are guilty of a sort of rational inconsistency, hypocrisy, and misapprehension of the goodness of outcomes bearing on the welfare and treatment of the object.³⁷

³⁵ I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising a similar concern.

³⁶ I thank Liz Anderson for this observation.

³⁷ There are any number of other criticisms that could apply depending upon the details of the case. The anger may be displaced onto people who are not its proper targets, for example.

5.3 Whose anger is justified?

One might worry that the approach will imply that typically only those who have a close relationship with wronged parties – the near and dear or members of a community with whom a strong sense of identity is shared – are ever justified in their anger.³⁸ For only in such cases, the thought goes, will parties exhibit the required degree of susceptibility to non-angry emotion required for one's anger to count as scopic. The result is counterintuitive. It would seem to imply, for example, that the anger of an exceedingly large number of those who protested the murder of George Floyd was unjustified.³⁹

I have been intentionally vague about just exactly what level of susceptibility to non-angry emotion might be required for scopic anger. This is in part because I suspect that there is no one level to point to – that various factors determine what is required and that it would be very difficult to provide anything approximating an algorithm for classifying cases. It seems to me, however, that a reasonable judge will be sensitive to facts concerning the angry party's relation to the object of his anger, the seriousness and pervasiveness of the moral offence(s) to which he is responding, perhaps even features of his own psychology and history. In any case, allies of the oppressed often are reasonably sensitive to a wide range of information concerning the welfare and treatment of those who are the objects of their anger. Many of those involved with the George Floyd protests undoubtedly fit the bill. They were not just angered but were heart-broken when they saw the video in which life began to leave his body. They felt a degree of hope when they saw the massive

³⁸ Amia Srinivasan (2018) considers and rejects a condition on apt anger according to which one must have a 'personal connection' to the wronged party. She rejects the condition on the grounds that it is indistinguishable from 'a troubling moral parochialism' (p. 130). I follow Srinivasan's lead. The aim in this section is to argue that my view does not entail such a condition (or a condition that is more or less extensionally equivalent to it).

³⁹ I do not want to gloss over the fact that there was a good deal of problematic anger displayed by some who presented themselves to be (and, presumably, typically took themselves to be) in solidarity with black communities impacted by systemic racism. In fact, I hope the view I'm sketching contributes a small resource for thinking about it critically. Stacey Patton (2020) discusses some of the misguided and counterproductive ways in which white people participated in the George Floyd protests in her excellent *Washington Post* piece on problems with white solidarity – along with ideas about what real solidarity might look like.

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numbers of people joining in at marches. Their thoughts went to the many more things to be done besides the prosecution of those directly involved in Floyd's murder.

Many who share Brynn's politics themselves will count as exhibiting scopic anger. It would be quite uncharitable to deny this. Of course, their anger can still be criticized for getting the moral and political facts wrong. There surely are also many on the opposite side of Brynn's politics whose anger is asopic. Their anger may also reflect identitarianism, grandstanding, or the like. While I myself find their politics much closer to being correct than Brynn's, their anger will be criticisable on the grounds I have sketched here (and, perhaps, other grounds).

I should emphasize in closing that the view on offer has been concerned with a more potent anger of the sort to which many in our political environments take themselves to be entitled. I have tried to offer some resources toward helping us challenge that entitlement where it seems most questionable. Nothing said here is meant to imply that, if a person is anything less than fully emotionally invested in a cause, then any sense of indignation whatsoever at wrongdoing or injustice is out of place. But an account of the sort of indignation that is appropriate to the more 'casual' valuer is a matter for another occasion.

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