Courage and Moral Anger
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Introduction

On at least one prominent and traditional view, courage involves actions undertaken to accomplish an important objective in the face of danger to the person performing the action. The danger may be to one’s physical or psychological well being, or to one’s reputation, professional standing, or personal relationships. Such actions are, moreover, usually distinguished from rash, foolish, or reckless actions, though this is not always a stable distinction. On this view, courage as a virtue is thought to be the dispositional state that underlies and prompts courageous acts, and as such has traditionally been viewed as constituted, in part, by fear and the use of practical reasoning to make correct judgments about dangerous situations in which one is tempted or otherwise inclined to yield to fear. In short, courage involves controlling the passion of fear through reason, striking a mean between over-confidence and exaggerated timidity.¹

In this paper, I argue that there is a form of anger often involved in courage, namely, what is sometimes referred to as righteous anger but which I will refer to as moral anger. I argue, moreover, that this emotion is not merely ancillary or a contingent companion to the fear traditionally believed to be central to courage. Rather, moral anger

¹ Thus Aristotle says of courage that “it is a mean with regard to feelings of fear and confidence … and plainly the things we fear are fearful things, and these are, to speak without qualification, evils; for which reason people even define fear as expectation of evil. Now we fear all evils, e.g. disgrace, poverty, disease, friendlessness, death …” The Nicomachean Ethics. (Oxford University Press, 1980. Translated by David Ross): 63-64.
sometimes constitutes the emotional core of courage, even though it is not dispositional, but only episodic anger.

1. *Anger and Moral Anger*\(^2\)

Philosophy has always been concerned with human nature, and since emotions play a large role in human nature, philosophers have devoted a considerable amount of attention to answering three key questions about them: what is an emotion? How do we distinguish between different emotions? And what is the relationship between emotions and a morally good life? These queries may also be used to structure an investigation into specific emotions such as anger, which is a central concept of this essay.

Although there is disagreement about how to conceive of emotions (e.g. are emotions feelings, sensations, cognitions, physiological conditions, behavioral patterns, tendencies, or some combination of these?), I shall assume for the sake of this article that emotions inhere in agents, and that many emotions linked to morality (e.g. pride, guilt, and resentment) are combinations of feelings and cognitions. Cognitivism, as this view has come to be known, is, in one form or another, the prevailing paradigm among contemporary analytic philosophical theories of emotion.\(^3\) Cognitivism is the view that beliefs, evaluations, propositional attitudes, or other such cognitions are partially constitutive of complex emotions like shame, regret, and envy, and that such emotions are recognizable on the basis of the different cognitions involved in their production. On this approach, angry emotions such as indignation, scorn, hatred, and contempt are

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distinguishable in virtue of the cognitions that partly constitute them. This cognitivist framework offers a useful and straightforward way of delineating the angry emotions and their relation to morality. In the reminder of this discussion I shall use beliefs as the cognitions which combine with feelings to produce such emotions.

Anger admits of at least three forms, the first of which corresponds to what Bishop Butler called “hasty and sudden” anger, a kind of anger connected to the impulse for self-preservation. This is the sort of anger persons and animals may experience when feeling tormented or trapped. The second sense, “settled and deliberate” anger, is anger constituted in part by an agent’s beliefs about how she is perceived and treated by others. P.F. Strawson’s notion of a “reactive attitude” helps amplify this sense of anger. For Strawson, reactive attitudes involve personal feelings which “depend upon, or involve” our beliefs about the attitudes, intentions, and actions of others toward us. Thus, for example, resentment is a reactive attitude typically felt toward another you believe intended to wrong you. Indeed, resentment is ordinarily defined as taking offense, umbrage, or exception to the perceptions or deeds of others, and such notions as “taking umbrage” or “offense” presuppose moral beliefs or judgments. By contrast, resentment is not typically felt toward those who harm you accidentally or inadvertently, for such harms do not reveal another’s wrongful feelings, intentions, or actions toward you.

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4 See Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel*. Edited by T.A. Roberts. London: S.P.C.K. 1970 [1726], especially Sermon VII “Upon Resentment.” The phrase “settled and deliberate” may suggest that anger is on Butler’s view dispositional. But in his discussion of forgiveness, the main context in which Butler discusses anger (especially resentment), he clearly means anger in an episodic sense relevant to occasions of forgiving others their wrongful actions. Moreover, Butler does not discuss forgivingness per se, which is generally understood as a settled character trait. Thus, I take the notion of “settled” and “deliberate” anger as Butler uses that notion to refer not to character traits, but to judgments about morality in general, and others’ intentions, actions, and attitudes toward us, in particular.


6 Thus, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, volume XIII, p.696 defines resentment as “an indignant sense of injury or insult received, or of wrong or affront done to some person or thing to which one is attached.”
Consequently, resentment is a paradigm of moral anger because of the nature of the beliefs involved in it. Instinctive anger and anger as a reactive attitude are typically episodic, whereas some forms of anger are relatively fixed dispositions. This third form of anger, of which such postures as irritability, sullenness, or churlishness are examples, link anger more to character traits than to instincts or cognitions. Of these general types of anger, episodic anger involving cognitions and dispositional anger are clearly related to morality, though in different ways. The two main ways in which angry emotions connect with moral concerns are that, on the one hand, some angry emotions are “moral” by their very nature, insofar as they are partially constituted by moral beliefs. On the other hand, episodic and dispositional anger may motivate action, in some cases morally laudable action.

Using resentment as a model, we can clarify the way in which some angry emotions are moral by their very nature. As noted, resentment typically involves the belief that you have been wronged, and this is a moral belief. This belief, in turn, implies both that the object of resentment be perceived as a moral agent, for only moral agents can commit wrongs, and that the subject of resentment (i.e. those on whose behalf such anger is stimulated) be a moral subject. Since resentment is a paradigmatic instance of moral anger, we may conjecture that the belief that oneself or some other moral subject has been wronged will be characteristic of all forms of moral anger, and so moral anger of any sort is a reactive attitude felt toward another you believe has wronged a moral subject. To refer to anger as “moral” in this sense is merely to describe the moral content of such feelings, not to judge them as praiseworthy or blameworthy, virtuous or vicious.
Since moral anger can be aroused only on behalf of a moral subject and a moral subject is anything that has moral standing (i.e., anything that is vested with moral rights, interests, or claims to respect), then persons, individually or collectively, animals, and perhaps other parts of the natural environment, are appropriate subjects of moral anger. We might then say that when moral anger is generated primarily on behalf of oneself, it is personal moral anger; when it is aroused primarily for the sake of other moral subjects, it is vicarious moral anger. The distinction between personal and vicarious moral anger further allows us to classify the various forms of moral anger such as resentment, indignation, scorn, and contempt based on the beliefs typical of those emotions. For instance, if I react angrily over an injustice done to a stranger, then since the constitutive belief of my anger is that another moral subject has been wronged, then my anger is more plausibly regarded as indignation or another form of moral anger other than resentment, which is personal moral anger.

This latter observation highlights the second way in which angry emotions connect to morality, namely, by motivating actions, some of which may be morally worthy. This includes individual and group actions. It is important to acknowledge the reality of collective anger, for anger may reside within and across persons simultaneously, often motivating group action such as riots, political boycotts, and even revolution. Marx's effort to inspire the violent overthrow of capitalism by appealing to the anger of the proletariat is an example, as is the late twentieth century feminist claim to have appropriated anger (heretofore an essentially “male” emotion) as the emotion of choice for fueling the struggle against sexism. Many other ongoing political and moral struggles (e.g. pro choice and anti-abortion movements, the struggle for animal rights, etc.) are also
grounded, at least in part, in moral outrage. And collective anger takes formal institutional expressions as well, as when a society imposes sanctions for the violations of its legal rules. Though I will not pursue the notion of collective moral anger further in this paper, surely some acts motivated by it are courageous, as was, for instance, much of the civil disobedience in the Southern States of the United States during the civil rights era.7

2. A Traditional Account of Courage

For Aristotle, virtue of any kind is a matter of habit; the inculcation of certain dispositions or character traits. In his general account of how moral virtue is to be attained, he asserts that

By doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts we do in the presence of danger, and by being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent or irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities.8

As this passage suggests, courageous actions are actions undertaken to accomplish an important objective in the face of danger to the person performing the action. The danger may to one’s physical or psychological well-being, or to one’s professional standing or reputation, or to one’s personal relationships. Such actions are, on Aristotle’s view,

7Cf. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Reprinted in Joel Feinberg and Jules Coleman, Philosophy of Law, seventh edition (Thomson-Wadsworth Publishing, 2004): 213-221, for an example of how righteous indignation over the evil of racial segregation was offered as the motivation for morally justified civil disobedience.
8 Ibid., p.29
distinguished from rash, foolish, or reckless actions, with which they are sometimes confused. For Aristotle, courage is the virtue that involves the feelings of fear and confidence. The paradigmatic situation in which courage or cowardice arise concerns the fear of death in battle, for as Aristotle notes “death is the most fearful of all things.”

Courage, on this view, is a mean between the extremes of rashness and cowardice. The courageous man does not fear a noble death, but fears an ignoble one. Put differently and more generally, the courageous man chooses what is noble, or endures things like poverty or other painful things because it is ignoble not to endure them.

Beyond this core sense of the concept, Aristotle discusses five kinds of courage “improperly so-called,” including a kind of courage closely aligned to passion. Quoting Homer, Aristotle lists examples of people rushing into dangerous circumstances because their “blood boiled” or because they were motivated by “spirit and passion.” And he allows that these may be genuinely brave or courageous actions if “choice and motive be added” to them. The key to whether they are not bona fide instances of courage seems to be whether or not the motive behind the action is the correct one. For Aristotle, the motive of courage is honor, not in the sense of being honored by other people or winning “honors” from them, but instead in the sense of living nobly. Note, however, that when Aristotle claims that

Men, then, as well as beasts, suffer pain when they are angry, and are pleased when they exact their revenge; those who fight for these reasons, however, are pugnacious but not brave; for they do not act for honor’s sake nor as the rule directs, but from strength of feeling; they have, however, something akin to courage.  

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9 Ibid., p. 64.
10 Ibid., p. 70
he seems to ignore the possibility that when anger is the passion that drives a man to brave deeds it could be honorable and, thus, genuinely courageous. Indeed, Aristotle’s claim here seems arbitrary, and should make one wonder whether he is in this context trying to introduce too much precision into matters that do not admit of such fine distinctions. Consider first that the phrase *those who fight for these reasons* refers to seeking revenge, which is hardly the only, even if it is a common, case of facing danger from anger. Moreover, the assertion that *they do not act for honor’s sake* can only mean, given the context, that it is not honorable to seek revenge, not that acting from anger for some other purpose is never honorable, or that acting from anger is always incompatible with the motive of honor. Finally, acting from *strength of feeling* need not be the whole story about why someone faces danger when they are angry. Of course, if they face danger *merely* because they are very angry then that cannot be the virtue of courage, but Aristotle’s concession that even in such a case *they have something ...akin to courage* begs the question whether acting from anger could ever be truly courageous.

3. Courage and Moral Anger

Although Aristotle does not distinguish moral from non-moral anger, his discussion in IV.5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on the virtue relative to anger, namely, good-temper, suggests that he would be amenable to such a classification. Specifically, in his discussion of the mean relative to a deficiency or excess of anger, Aristotle makes clear that rationality enables the good tempered man to understand when, and with regard to what, anger is an appropriate response. Indeed, the very idea that it is possible to be angry “at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought
and as long as he ought”\textsuperscript{11} presupposes that the correct sorts of moral judgments are being made about the circumstances within which one finds oneself. Moreover, Aristotle’s description of the “hot-tempered” person parallels Butler’s notion of “hasty and sudden” anger, since such people are quick to be angered with the wrong people or things or angry in the wrong degree. Such persons also quickly move beyond their anger, suggesting that their emotion is not concretely grounded in stable cognitions.

The account of moral anger I offered above, in which anger is partly constituted by moral judgments of wrongful victimization, suggests an account of courage in which the emotion of fear may be replaced by anger, an account, moreover, that Aristotle could endorse. Specifically, the canonical account of courage involves an emotional reaction in the face of danger, typically, the emotion of fear. The courageous person, as opposed to the coward, is he who in the face of danger uses practical reason to control his fear in a manner that allows him to act in a way that is neither reckless nor overly timorous. As Aristotle puts it, he is angry “with the right people, at the right things, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought.”\textsuperscript{12} Surely, people sometimes accomplish this when the constitutive passion is anger, not fear. Consider the case of a parent enraged over an injustice visited upon his child. Such a parent may well face danger in confronting the agent of injustice, and it is easy enough to imagine that parent over or under reacting to the situation by being blinded by anger to the realities of the danger, or by failing to appreciate their true nature and not being angry enough. Yet just as surely people sometimes, with the help of practical reason, meet danger in a measured and righteously angry way. This may be the courage of civil rights workers in the 1960’s who

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, p.96
\textsuperscript{12} Aristotle, ibid.
faced angry politicians, police officers in full combat gear, and vicious police dogs as they non-violently demonstrated for social equality.

4. Some Objections with Replies

It may be objected that the sketch account of courage I offer here is unconvincing, especially if anger of any sort is regarded as a vice and never as a virtue, as traditional Christian views seem to imply in categorizing anger as one of the seven deadly sins. And even on Nietzsche’s unique spin on this theme, where through the lens of *ressentiment* as sublimated anger/envy directed at the noble few by the pathetic multitude, anger does not fare well morally since it is a sign of weakness, not strength. Thus, anger in the form of irascibility, contempt, or bitterness may be a sin, or a manifestation of weakness, and cannot therefore be partially constitutive of courage, which is a virtue.¹³

I suggest that this objection misses the mark, for moral anger is typically episodic, not dispositional. Indeed, the idea that a person may be dispositionally resentful or indignant borders on incoherence if, as I have argued, these angry emotions embody moral judgments that a moral subject has been wronged. Short of believing that one’s life or the lives of others is a great moral wrong it is difficult to imagine dispositional moral anger.¹⁴

¹³ This is consistent with Aristotle’s observations on the excessive anger of choleric and sulky people. See ibid., p.97.
¹⁴ This is not to deny that there are dispositional angers, such as the choleric and sulky people Aristotle refers to who are quickly aroused to anger “with everything and on every occasion” (choleric) or whose anger lasts too long because it is repressed or even nurtured (sulkiness). But note that Aristotle acknowledges that such people cannot be reasoned with, that is, that their anger is *incorrIGRIGLE* in the
Another objection may be culled from the thinking of the Stoic Seneca. According to him, all forms of anger are inconsistent with the good life because they dispose us to cruelty and vengeance, which emotions encourage us to view other people as less than fully human. On this view, the person of virtue is one who strives to extirpate, not merely control, anger.

However, Seneca’s worry that anger incites people to the excesses of cruelty and vengeance is a consequentialist one, and, thus, must be balanced against the positive behavioral effects of anger in general. Whether or not anger is typically productive of vicious excess or whether, instead, it is equally or even more likely to produce morally productive behavior is an empirical question. Certainly, anger at least sometimes motivates action in defense of one’s bodily integrity or self-respect, and in such cases is a good thing, as even Aristotle acknowledges when he notes that those deficient in anger may fail to defend themselves or slavishly tolerate insult’s to one’s friends.\textsuperscript{15}

A third concern may be that the canonical account of courage is compatible with the idea that moral anger may be involved in that virtue without its being the essential emotion characteristic of it. This is because the fact that anger may overshadow fear does not entail that it is constitutive of courage. Indeed, in such cases the moral anger involved in such an instance of courage presupposes the fear it eclipses. And so fear of danger may yet be the emotion paradigmatic of courage even in those cases where moral anger is the more prominent emotion in a given instance of courage.

I know of no way to demonstrate, conclusively, that fear of danger \textit{must} be a core element of courage, but even if there is such a method I have not tried to claim in this

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 97.
paper that moral anger is more typically the relevant emotion in courage than is fear of
danger. My argument, instead, has attempted to show only that there are occasions of
courageous action in which the crucial emotional component is moral anger, not fear of
danger. Though such cases may be observationally indistinguishable from cases in which
courage is constituted by overcoming fear it does not follow that courage is never
constituted in part by moral anger.

5. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that courage is sometimes partially constituted by moral
anger rather than fear of danger. Moral anger is anger that involves as an essential
element the agent’s belief that someone has been the victim of a wrong, and this may
motivate as well as constitute courageous acts, which are virtuous. When a person,
angered by his own mistreatment or that of others, faces danger in an effort to defend
himself or other people, or to protest that mistreatment, she exhibits courage. The form of
anger that is central to this form of courage is morally good, and so courage that involves
moral anger is virtuous. Though such cases of courage may be observationally
indistinguishable from courage constituted by overcoming fear, they are analytically and
morally distinct types of courage. The distinction between moral and nonmoral anger at
the core of this analysis shows how and to what extent this is the case.

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