



Agnes Callard: Anger as a Social Emotion – Anger as an Appeal for Relationship Repair

Andrej Démuth^{1*}, and Slávka Démuthová²

¹ Centre for Cognitive Studies, Faculty of Law, Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia

² Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Trnava, Slovakia

Abstract

The proposed study focuses on anger as a social emotion, as depicted in the work of Agnes Callard: "On Anger." Anger is portrayed here as a signal of relational abuse and a call for its rectification. The authors reflect on Callard's text, contemplating anger as a manifestation of disrupted intimate relationships between individuals and considering the possibilities of a Schillerian understanding of anger within the bounds of charm and dignity. They point out that such charming anger would miss its effect; anger should primarily signal injustice. At the same time, they appreciate Callard's shift of focus from conveying a message of retaliation and revenge to an interest in restoring the original relationship. They emphasize that anger should not destroy relationships but rather seek to repair them, although it does not always succeed in doing so. The work is part of broader reflections by the authors on anger and its cognitive, moral, and social roles in our lives.

Keywords: anger, social, emotion, relationship, signalisation

1. Introduction

In recent times, a series of remarkable works on the topic of anger have emerged, attracting significant attention from various philosophers and scholars (e.g., Nussbaum 2018, Flanagan 2018, 2021). Among these, the works of Agnes Callard stand out particularly. These works are notable not only for sparking extensive and lively discussions among a host of prominent intellectuals but also for Callard's unconventional understanding of anger and forgiveness. In the year 2020, The Boston Review published a discussion forum initiated by the philosopher Agnes Callard on the topic of Anger (Callard 2020b). Agnes Callard, affiliated with the University of Chicago, presented a text that catalyzed an engaging discourse, attracting the participation of notable thinkers including Paul Bloom, Jesse Prinz, Elisabeth Bruenig, Desmond Jajmohan, Victoria Spring, Daryl Cameron, Myisha Cherry, Rachel Achs, Barbara Herman, Oded Na'aman, and several other prominent intellectuals. Callard concluded her deliberation with responses to inquiries, suggesting that anger is symptomatic of something

unhealthy yet simultaneously functions as an immune response directed towards health, akin to fever (Callard 2020c). The forum was a reaction to her previously published article "The Reason to be Angry Forever," which appeared in the book "The Moral Psychology of Anger" (Callard 2017), edited by Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan in 2017. Subsequently, the entire discussion was published in book form by MIT Press, and expanded to include studies by Martha C. Nussbaum, Judith Butler, David Constan, Whitney Phillips, and Amy Olberding (Callard 2020a). In the forthcoming discussion, our aim is to offer a few remarks on Callard's perspective on anger and its potential implications. We do not intend to provide a critical evaluation of her concept but rather engage in philosophical and psychological reflections on her text and its central premise, namely, that while anger is natural, forgiveness requires elucidation (Nussbaum 2018).

2. Callard's perception of anger

2.1 Eternal anger

In her essay on eternal anger, Agnes Callard (Callard 2017, 2020) argues correctly that if the reason for our anger is that someone betrayed our trust at some point, it should be a reason to be angry forever. The fact that they apologise, make amends, and so on, does not change the fact that they betrayed my trust at time t_1 . The fact of betrayal remains a fact forever.

This perspective on anger is peculiar. It is logically stringent and correct, yet it does not function in practice. Why is this so? Why do we generally not remain angry forever, and why do we forgive? Most classical philosophical works depict anger as a moral emotion—such as a call for retribution (Aristotle 2019), the dominance of passions over reason (Seneca 1928), a brief madness (Horatius 1888 – for a more detailed analysis of philosophical and psychological theories, see: Démuth, A., Démuthová, S., & Keceli, Y. (2022), Démuth, Démuthová (2023)), or in psychology as an instinct (Darwin, James, Freud, and Lorenz), an expression of frustration (Miller), adaptation, or social learning (Bandura) (see: DiGiuseppe, Tafrate 2006). However, Callard offers a completely different and original perspective on anger.

2.2. A plea for the restoration of a relationship

According to Callard, anger is not just a reaction to injustice or a desire to solve a problem (fix the situation). According to her, it is rather a plea for help - it is an acknowledgment that something in our relationship is disrupted, or destroyed. It is proof that if we have a reason to be angry at someone, it is because they have disrupted the essence of our relationship, and ignored our needs, will or interests. What irritates us is the contempt the perpetrator has for our mutual relationship, as they prioritised their own interests over the existence and quality of our relationship. What can we do about it?

2.3. Taking justice into one's own hands cannot mend the relationship

It is understandable, therefore, that in such cases, we take justice into our own hands. That we show anger, that we are ready to fight for ourselves and our interests, that we want the perpetrator to acknowledge their mistake and make amends. It is understandable that we must first show them that we are here too, that our worldview must be emphasised and we must use our voice and all possible means to draw attention to us and our rejection of the situation, as up to now, they have not perceived our unwillingness. It is even understandable that we figuratively take justice into our own hands and make the partner from the original relationship a mere statistic. We banish them from our world, stop talking to them, and to us, they cease to exist.

But this type of solution is no different from the immoral solution of the perpetrator that led to anger and the dent in our relationship. In the beginning, they were our insensitive and inattentive partner when they failed to consider our worldview. But now, it is us who are inattentive and domineering when we disregard the feelings and autonomy of the other. If we decide to solve the problem ourselves (whether by scolding someone or by ignoring them), we overlook an important part of anger and even its essence.

Agnes Callard is convinced that anger is more of a justified call for help than a desire to correct an injustice. However, if we talk about a call for help, it must also be said that what needs to be corrected is not just the consequences of unacceptable behaviour (alleged injustice), but rather the fact that they allowed our relationship to deteriorate to such an extent that it caused this moral asymmetry. Guilt, harm and injustice are the result of the fact that the other did not care about their relationship with us. They sacrificed it for the potential benefits that might arise from the decline or disruption of this relationship. What we are angry about and what our anger announces are not just the consequences – the alleged injustice. According to Callard, the subject of our anger is a lament for the loss of the relationship, trust, and friendship after the violation of the relationship. The violator is the one we are angry with. "Anger is not a desire to fix something but a way of grasping the fact that it is broken: The canonical expression of anger is, 'How could you have done that?!' When you are angry at me, you care about that wrong thing I did, not as a way of bringing some good about but rather because you are someone whom my evildoing touches. Anger is uniquely poised to apprehend the disvaluational significance – the wrongness – of some action, but this apprehension itself comes at an apprehensional cost. When I anger you, I inflict a valuational injury on you by withdrawing support from our shared project" (Callard 2017, 135).

Anger is thus a lament that the other did not think it worthwhile to have a correct relationship with us. It is a reproach that they hurt us because they hurt our relationship. However, if that is the case, then anger is a call for help and its very essence should be to call the other back into the relationship so that we can repair it. Of course, we expect that the initiative and level of activity must primarily come from the one who was predominantly responsible for the decline and destruction of the relationship. We expect an acknowledgment of guilt, an apology, repentance, but above all, an understanding that the relationship cannot continue in this way in the future, that it must avoid possible devaluation, disruption, destruction in the future. Only such an apology makes sense at all. Without it, repentance is just an empty, pointless, and confusing platitude.

The problem with both forms of anger is that taking justice into our own hands is egocentricity. If the reason for our anger is the pain over a damaged or destroyed relationship between individual actors, it is understandable that when angry, we call for help because we need help. The relationship cannot be unilaterally repaired. We cannot solve the problem on our own because we did not cause it on our own. The solution presupposes the involvement of the other. From them, we expect a change, they must return to the original relationship they had with our relationship. Therefore, the unilateral assumption of justice is never an appropriate solution. By doing so, we prevent the other from ever being able to return to our relationship, to renew it. Instead, with our anger we commit the exact same offense that we accuse them of. We do not consider their relationship to our relationship, their motives, desires, motivations; we dictate the form of our relationship and deny the autonomy of the other as a co-creator.

"What I did will always be wrong; it will always constitute a violation of the norms of our relationship and therefore a disvaluation of that relationship (Callard 2017, 135)" Perhaps it is not about compensation, compensation, and satisfaction. "Both my concern for what you did (anger) and your concern for what I did (contrition) can be replaced by our joint concern for our relationship (co-valuation). If this happens, we can be said to have solved the problem between us—the problem I created by doing what you did." The idea that my action represents

a problem to which the solution is your return to valuing does not emerge until we add my thoughts and feelings to the story. The problem is our problem, not your problem; the solution is our return to valuing, not yours alone. The problem-solving view misses this bilaterality because it treats the angry person as too autonomous, self-possessed, and too aloof from the damage the other has inflicted on him or her" (Callard 2017, 135).

2.4. Anger as signaling

Thus, being angry does not mean to demand the elimination of wrongness. Being angry means calling for the restoration of the relationship. However, if we ignore the other, if we take justice into our own hands, how can we expect the original relationship to be restored? If we hide our face, avoid contact, if we do not communicate, do we give/leave space for the other to return? If we attack, do we give space for the other to understand and want to do something about the relationship? It is clear that only the perpetrator of the damage to our relationship can restore it. The repair must therefore come from them, but by taking justice into our hands, we clearly prevent this.

How, then, can we help the other party repair the relationship?

3. Problems and discussion

Anger must serve a signaling role (Démuth 2021). It communicates that something is wrong, assigning blame to the other for perceived injustice and the resultant damage to the relationship. For anger to fulfill this role, it must convey its message reliably. Expressing anger with humility, charm, or love is counterproductive, as it confuses the recipient and obscures the seriousness of the relationship's violation, the intensity of the pain, and the potential consequences.

Thus, anger must be clear and unambiguous, showing the perpetrator the extent of the hurt they caused, not only through the consequences but by the very act of damaging the relationship. They deprived both parties of mutual benefits from the relationship, necessitating visible acknowledgment of the harm and responsibility. The perpetrator must recognize the relationship's destruction and understand that to continue, they must restore trust and respect.

Anger also signals a rejection of unacceptable events, prompting the other to change their behavior to preserve the relationship. However, inappropriate expressions of anger often lead to new conflicts rather than resolution. If a partner fails to notice or care about the harm, a more aggressive approach might be necessary to communicate the message.

Social reactions do not align with Newton's third law of motion. Aristotelian justice demands more than mere restitution; it seeks apology, compensation, and assurance against recurrence. Simple restitution is insufficient as it does not prevent future harm. Anger, thus, implies revenge, expecting additional measures as a sanction and deterrent.

However, revenge escalates suffering, preventing a return to the original state. Retaliation leads to a cycle of increasing conflict. For instance, retaliatory strikes following serious offenses may provoke further violence, perpetuating a cycle of revenge.

To avoid unsustainable anger responses, it is advisable to present anger calmly and rationally, focusing on the message rather than intensity. This approach, though challenging and sometimes impractical, counters the natural impulse to express anger as a significant signal of revenge or retaliation.

4. Conclusion

What is remarkable about Callard's understanding of anger is the transfer of the focus of the message from revenge and retaliation to an interest in restoring the original relationship. If we

are angry, it shows that something is very important to us. If we are angry with someone, it is because we care about the relationship that the other defiled and damaged. Therefore, if we are angry about the damage to the relationship, we should express our anger in a way that does not damage the relationship even further. Certainly, we may choose to use harsh expressions, words, and gestures so that the partner understands that something has happened, but we should choose them in such a way that we also show the partner that we care about them, that we are interested in the restoration of the original relationship, trust, partnership. If anger is a call for help, its manifestations should indicate that we long for the original, correct relationship and not for the mathematics of revenge and retaliation. Anger must, therefore, be aligned towards the future, not only to look back at the past, at past injustices and problems. These lead to hysterical reactions, the core of which lies in an inability to shift the focus from injustice that was already committed to something we should strive for in the future. Only in this way can the eternal spiral of anger and revenge it generates be broken. Callard's appeal to understand anger as a cry over a broken relationship allows us to focus on repair and the authentic building of living relationships, rather than just the harsh arithmetic of justice. This perspective is relevant and applicable not only to personal conflicts but also to cultural wars. Peace, after all, requires not only forgiveness but also the acknowledgement of guilt, an apology, and a mutual prioritization of interest in the relationship.

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