

The Reason to Be Angry Forever

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We get angry for reasons—or, at any rate, for what we take to be reasons. If asked “why are you angry?” you will cite something (that you think) someone did or failed to do. That action or omission is what you are angry about. Getting angry is easy to understand: I wrong you, by, for example, betraying your trust; you find out; that makes you angry, and now you are angry, at me, for having betrayed you. What is harder to understand is why you might cease to be angry.¹

Consider what I will call “the eternal anger argument”:

P1: My betrayal of you at t_1 is your reason for being angry with me at t_2 .

P2: If it is true at t_2 that I betrayed you at t_1 , then it will also be true at t_3 , t_4 , t_5 , and so on that I betrayed you at t_1 .

Conclusion: If you have a reason to be angry with me, you will have a reason to be angry with me forever.

The argument says that if I have generated a reason for you to be angry with me, then there is nothing I can now do to address that reason. For suppose that I offer compensation, apologize profusely, promise never to do it again, radically and convincingly transform my character. None of that seems to touch the thing you are angry about, which is that, at t_1 , I wronged you. It is still true that I did that, and it is still true that I shouldn’t have. Your reason for anger is eternal because I can’t change what you are angry about.

If I could go back in time and un-wrong you, then I could eliminate the grounds of your anger. Though it is impossible to change the past, it is possible to change someone’s understanding of the past. I could prove to you that I never betrayed you or that I did it by accident or that I was forced to do it by someone else. By revising your understanding of the past, I might succeed in dissolving your anger or directing it away from myself. But I would be doing so by showing you that you never had any reason to be angry with me, because I never behaved badly in the first place. This leaves the eternal anger argument standing: If you *did* have a reason, you’d have it forever.

The argument doesn’t purport to establish that anger is eternal or even that it would be rational to be angry forever. Long-term anger is unpleasant, unattractive, and exhausting; one has many reasons for bringing it about that one’s anger cease. What the argument does try to show is that these reasons must leave the original reason to be angry in place. If the argument works, it follows that a person gives up

¹ I am grateful to participants at the 2010 Saint Louis Area Conference on Reasons and Rationality (SLACRR), the UC Berkeley Wollheim Society, the Franke Lunchtime talks series, the Northwestern Practical Philosophy Workshop, the UChicago Practical Philosophy Workshop, and the 2016 conference “The Temporality of the Emotions” at the University of Leipzig for comments on earlier incarnations of this chapter; thanks also to Pamela Hieronymi for generous and insightful written comments on an earlier draft. Above all I thank Berislav Marušić for many years of conversations on the putative eternality of anger.

his or her anger not because the issue has been resolved or even addressed in any way but merely because, for example, he or she sees that he or she will be better off in a nonangry condition. Pragmatic reasons for ceasing to be angry have positive counterparts: pragmatic reasons to *get* angry.² (For example, I work myself into an angry state before entering the car dealership, in the belief that a menacing appearance will put me in an improved negotiating position.) If the eternal anger argument is correct, proper (i.e., nonpragmatic) reasons for anger—reasons akin to those cited in P1—have no negative counterparts.

The Problem-solving Account of Anger

On one popular account of anger, the eternal anger argument is unsound because P1 is false. I will call this account the “problem-solving account.” The problem-solving account maintains that your reason for being angry with me is not simply the betrayal. Rather, your reason is constituted by some continuing problem generated by the betrayal, a problem your anger motivates you to resolve. On the problem-solving account, anger is desire-like: It responds to reasons to make (what the agent perceives as) a positive change in the world. If the reasons to be angry are reasons to, for example, take measures that prevent future violations of the relevant kind, then they will not be eternal. Martha Nussbaum presents this as the correct account not of anger as such but of a species of anger she calls “transition anger.”³ Others have argued that anger is an attempt to protest a threatening message, to the effect that the victim is deserving of bad treatment;⁴ to reverse the ongoing misbehavior of a wrongdoer who, in failing to apologize, acts as though the wrong were acceptable;⁵ to get the wrongdoer to understand what he or she has done;⁶ to be restored to the status from which the

² Hieronymi (2005) calls such reasons for getting angry (and presumably also the counterpart reasons for ceasing to be angry) “extrinsic” and assimilates them to the “wrong kinds of reason” of which the paradigmatic examples are pragmatic reasons for belief. This seems correct to me.

³ Nussbaum (2016). Nussbaum considers anger to be, on the whole, irrational. Transition anger is the exception on the grounds of being “future-directed thinking” whose “entire content is ‘How outrageous. Something should be done about that.’ ” However, she qualifies even this limited concession as to the possibility of normatively appropriate anger: “Most real-life cases of Transition-Anger are infected with the payback wish” (6).

⁴ Hieronymi (2001): “In resenting it, you challenge it. If there is nothing else that would mark out that event as wrong, there is at least your resentment” (546). Note also that the claim in question is, on her view, one *currently being made* by the (past) action.

⁵ Helmreich (2015). Here I extrapolate an account of anger from his account of apology as an act that “put[s] in place a new way of treating the victim, which itself reverses a prior way of mistreating the victim that began with the initial wrongdoing” (90).

⁶ Srinivasan (2016): “Many of us experience anger that calls ... for the wrongdoer to see just what he has done.”

wrongdoing demoted one;⁷ and to secure the wrongdoer's commitment to the norm he or she violated.⁸

On such a view, what we are (really) angry at is not the wrongs themselves but the fact that the wrongs are unapologized for, un-disavowed, and undetached from the meaning or message they now have but don't necessarily need to have, or that the wrongdoers are uneducated, uncommitted, or unlowered in relative status. We're angry not at the fact that the person violated some norm but at the person's *present* lack of commitment to that norm, or the fact that the person is, by not apologizing, *now* behaving as if the wrong was acceptable. It presents angry people as educators and normative crusaders, taking a stand against injustice in order to make the world a more perfect realization of some normative order. Anger, on this picture, is productive management of the aftershocks of the wrong action; it attempts to address and mitigate the damage done.

I find this to be an overly sanguine picture of an emotion whose manifestations are not only often but characteristically destructive and cruel. To take just one example, consider the fact that when we are angry at someone we love, we are liable to say insulting things we don't mean in order to hurt them. Anger begets more anger as often as it begets apology; a patient, calm, and angerless explanation of wrongdoing would typically have greater educational promise than an angry outburst. If we are trying to solve normative problems—to make the world a better place—it looks as though we have better tools at our disposal than anger. But my chief objection to the problem-solving account obtains even if we set aside worries about the hyper-optimism of these accounts. The oldest version of the problem-solving view is Aristotle's, and it cannot be charged with sanguinity.

Anger may be defined as an impulse, accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight directed without justification towards what concerns oneself or towards what concerns one's friends... . It must always be attended by a certain pleasure—that which arises from the expectation of revenge. For since nobody aims at what he thinks he cannot attain, the angry man is aiming at what he can attain, and the belief that you will attain your aim is pleasant. Hence it has been well said about wrath,

Sweeter it is by far than the honeycomb dripping with sweetness,

And spreads through the hearts of men.⁹

⁷ Bovens (2008). Here, as with Helmreich, I extrapolate an account of anger from the account of apology: "There is a complex economy in the simple social interchange of 'apologies offered' and 'apologies accepted.' The victim of the wrongdoing was not treated with due respect. The offender pays excess respect to the victim to restore this deficit and transfers power to the victim as a form of respect to the victim" (233).

⁸ Martin (2010): "Resentment is itself a normative expectation that one become properly committed" (545).

⁹ *Rhetoric* II.2, 1378a31–1378b9.

Aristotle understands anger as a desire for revenge: Anger aims to solve the problem that the slight is unavenged. One must grant to Aristotle that if this were a problem, anger would in fact be the way to solve it. Aristotle's version of the problem-solving view pays heed to the peculiar efficacy of anger, recognizing it as uniquely conducive to the accomplishment of revenge. If one wanted someone to seek revenge, one would try to get him or her angry. Nonetheless, I think that Aristotle cannot be right to identify revenge as the object of anger. For we can imagine a strange character with a disposition to take such pleasure from vengeance that he or she actively puts himself or herself in circumstances where he or she would be likely to be wronged, so that he or she could thereupon avenge himself or herself. Such a person could be said to have a desire for revenge against slights, full stop. The angry person is unlike the character I've just described. He or she only desires revenge against slights because he or she has suffered a slight and is, in the first place, angered by the slight. His or her desire for revenge isn't identical to his or her anger; it is explained by his or her anger.

Angry people are, of course, motivated to seek revenge or apology or restitution, and they are sometimes moved to prevent future infractions. But anger does not, in the first instance, seem to be a response to the fact that some wrong action hasn't yet been avenged, apologized for, or disavowed, or that it may recur in the future. Rather, it seems to be a way of concerning oneself with the (unchangeable) fact that some wrong was done.

Valuational Vulnerability

The desire to vindicate anger as a *moral emotion* has led to a tendency to ignore the violence, hatred, and vindictiveness to which anger renders us susceptible.¹⁰ Proponents of the problem-solving account may defend themselves by noting that they were interested in a particular species of anger, namely righteous or morally correct anger. But there is a real question whether, in picking out this salutary kind of anger, they take themselves to have picked out features that are essential to or revelatory of what anger is. For there are, for example, cases of sadness where one is sad about some specifically moral failure, and yet it would be a mistake to point to those cases as evidence that sadness is a "moral emotion." Even in the least "moral" cases—unjustified, irrational, spiteful, petty, vengeful anger—the angry person feels what I think can rightly be called a moral emotion. For he or she feels full to the brim with his or her own rectitude. Correlatively, even in the most "moral" cases—righteous, morally principled, justified anger—anger is not an attempt to fix what is wrong. This is not, I will argue, because the problem cannot be fixed but because the problem does not belong to the angry person, considered as such.

I suggest, then, that there is some reason not to restrict ourselves to some privileged cases of "good anger" but to consider the emotion, warts and all. Let me begin by

¹⁰ This is a trend against which Nussbaum (ibid.) rightly presses.

situating it in a larger emotional context. Sometimes we care about one thing because, in the first instance, we care about another thing. Therefore, I may care that I arrive at the bus stop on time because I am excited to meet you. In this example, both the primary and the secondary objects of my care are good things. If I miss the bus, I will feel disappointed. My disappointment constitutes my caring about something bad. Notice that I care that I missed the bus because I care, more fundamentally, about something good (our reunion). Our care for good things makes us liable to the negative emotions by which we can, under the relevant circumstances, come to care about bad things. It is part and parcel of being such as to have good things really matter to you that you are also the kind of being to whom, under unfortunate circumstances, bad things will also matter. I will call this feature of the human experience *valuational vulnerability*.

Consider some more examples: Sadness at the prospect of emigration is a sign of loving one's homeland; my anger at his or her failure to call means our friendship matters to me; fear of a low grade on the test is a product of commitment to academic excellence. Someone who, by contrast with these people, lacked the relevant positive interests would also be invulnerable when the corresponding objects come under attack. The difference between such responses marks a difference in *values*. For when someone cares deeply about his or her friend, country, or education, we say that he or she *values* it. Unlike "caring," however, "valuing" is something that we do only in relation to things that we take to be good.¹¹ Hence you *value* our friendship, but you do not therefore *value* my betrayal of you. Rather, we say that you *care* about my betrayal or that it matters to you or that it has significance for you. And all of these facts obtain *because* our friendship is something you value—and something that matters to you, that you care about, and that has significance for you.

Anger, fear, sadness, disappointment, jealousy—these are signs of caring. Indeed, they are ways of caring. But they are not the primary ways, since valuing proper involves feeling positive emotions, emotions that respond to the goodness of the good object. Our reasons for caring about bad things derive from our reasons for valuing good things: The reason we have for being angry or sad or afraid is the (potential) value damage at which our anger or sadness or fear is directed. My love for my country manifests as sadness at the prospect of departing from it. Love turns to sadness when its object is withdrawn. The paradigmatic form of valuing—joyful engagement with

¹¹ For an account of the activity of valuing that argues against its being identified either with desiring or with believing valuable, see Scheffler (2010). I follow Scheffler in connecting valuing with anger and sadness: He identifies emotional vulnerability as partly constitutive of valuing. Scheffler notes that there is a slip between "cares" and "values": We can say "I value your sense of humor" but not "I care about your sense of humor" (25). I take this to mark a relatively superficial linguistic difference: We sometimes reserve caring for a form of valuing in which one's agency relative to the object is that of preserving, protecting, and taking care of. But it can also be used as virtually synonymous with valuing, as when I say "I care that we spend time together," that is, I value our time together. I use it in the latter way throughout this chapter.

the valued object—is closed off for such a person. The person’s concern for the good thing in question—the object of value—manifests itself in the form of a concern for the injurious action or event. The sad or angry person is thereby relegated to caring about bad things. My anger at his or her failure to call is the only way in which my valuation of our friendship can, under these nonideal circumstances, manifest itself.

If negative emotions are forms of valuational vulnerability, then your reason for being in a negative emotional state is whatever rationalizes your devolution from valuing proper to that negative emotional condition. In the case of anger, this will be, for example, my betrayal. Your reason for ceasing to be angry will, likewise, be whatever rationally explains your transition back to the positive emotions characteristic of valuing. Thus, there may be something—apology, reparation, (commitment to) character change, acknowledgment of wrongdoing, revenge—that constitutes a reason for you to cease being angry.

But it is too fast to think that this general account of anger as a form of valuational vulnerability solves our problem as to how anger can get rationally resolved. As we are about to see, the specter of the eternality argument and the problem-solving view rises up as soon as we ask ourselves: What is the rational relation between my reason for getting angry (i.e., my reason to depart from valuing) and my reason for ceasing to be angry (i.e., my reason to return to valuing)?

The Eternality-practicality Dilemma

Let us call your reason for getting angry R1 and your reason for ceasing to be angry R2. It seems we are caught in the following dilemma:

Either

(i) R2 comes at a tangent to R1

or

(ii) R2 addresses R1

If (i), then you have a reason to be angry forever. If (ii), then the problem-solving view is correct.

Let me explain. In case (i), R2 leaves R1 standing. If your reason to cease being angry is that anger impedes wealth acquisition or that you have a distaste for remaining angry, then your reason for ceasing to be angry has been left unaddressed. Your financial or aesthetic reason for giving up your anger doesn’t speak to the wrongness of what you experienced. Nothing has been done about what you were angry about. Thus, it follows that your reason for anger, R1, is eternal—even if your anger, as it happens, is not.

In case (ii), R2 resolves or addresses the problem picked out by R1. Because the issue you were concerned about has been addressed, you no longer have a reason for

being angry. Thus, the advent of R2 marks the elimination of R1. In this sort of a case, we can say that your anger sought satisfaction all along—you were angry about something practicable. Your anger was targeted at a positive change in the world, and when that change is made, it constitutes a reason (R2), for you to cease being angry.

In order for R1 to be such as to lend itself to satisfaction, it seems it must be anger *about* something practicable—something that *can* be changed. Recall Aristotle: “For since nobody aims at what he thinks he cannot attain, the angry man is aiming at what he can attain.” Problem-solvers feel the need to posit something else—something other than what was done—as the true, that is, practicable, target of anger. The fact that *I betrayed you* cannot constitute the totality of what you are angry about, for there is nothing I can do about that fact. If what angers you is that I haven’t yet apologized for betraying you, that I might betray you again, or that I don’t understand that it was wrong to betray you, then your anger seems internally amenable to remedial response.

There is, thus, a dilemma for the valuational vulnerability account of anger I have just been presenting. Either your anger is exhausted by the fact that you care about what I did, or it is not. In the first case, the best that can happen is that I can distract you from this concern and get you to care about something else—for example, how much money I’m offering for you to take the anger-dissolution pill. But your concern, namely the fact that I betrayed you, remains standing. It does and will stand at your disposal forever, irrespective of anything I ever do or suffer, as a reason for being angry with me.

Alternatively, your anger is *not* exhausted by the fact that you care about what I did. Instead, we are to suppose that you care about what I did because you care about something else more fundamentally, namely, our friendship. You are angry at me for betraying you *because* my betrayal constitutes damage to something that you value and wish to see repaired. As soon as I take the relevant reparatory steps (acknowledgment of wrongdoing, apology, self-transformation, etc.), I have satisfied your anger. Your concern is not so much that I betrayed you but that we return to good terms.

Both of these options are deeply unsatisfying. Reasons for anger are not eternal. People who store away grievances for years only to “reactivate” them when it is convenient to do so are not rational. They are displaying a vice: that of holding a grudge. There ought to be something that counts, for them, as the matter having been sufficiently dealt with. Even if they were right to be angry in the first place, they are not right to continue to harbor the grievance. (I am only claiming that there are *some* cases like this, not that it is never rational to harbor a grievance.)

Nor does it seem true that the angry person seeks satisfaction or a return to friendship. If you are really angry with me, the last thing you want is to be friends again. After all, you are filled with anger. You are not seeking to repair our relationship. Your coming to want this would be a sign that your anger was on its way out. In the throes of anger, you are motivated to lash out at me, to hurt me in the way that I hurt you. It does not seem true to say that my betrayal stands proxy for some more fundamental

concern. The thing you really, fundamentally care about is the fact that I betrayed you.

Can it be true that reasons for anger are *neither* eternal nor practicable? Yes. But in order to see how that is possible, we must locate these reasons in the context of the relationships in which they are embedded.

Co-valuation

Anger responds to someone's violation of some norm. But, once again, we are not upset by just *any* norm violations, only those that somehow touch on our valuational projects. I propose that someone's norm violation angers me when that violation constitutes his or her defection from our shared valuational project. In this case, my valuational efforts are thwarted by my partner's withdrawal of valuational support. Anger devolves from a special kind of valuing: shared valuing.

Among the objects valued by human beings, some are, as I will put it, "co-valued." By "co-valuation" I intend the valuational counterpart to shared agency;¹² co-valuation is to be distinguished from two people severally valuing the same object. Suppose you and I severally value classical music—we both happen to value it, though neither of us cares that the other does. At some point, chance events lead us to form a friendship around classical music: We begin to make efforts to attend performances together, discuss music, buy each other musically themed gifts, and so on. Our co-valuation of music is different—richer—than our separate valuation was. We can enjoy music in a new way because we now are in a position to enjoy it *together*. When we value music together, we spend time together, we perform activities together, and we rely on each other: We have a relationship. The word "relationship" can be used in many ways, but I think it is not implausible to claim that one of its core meanings is simply to designate a case of co-valuation. When you and I are in a relationship, we coordinate our shared valuing by way of explicit or (more usually) implicit rules—norms—that constitute our relationship as the particular form of co-valuation it is. We each manifest our co-valuation of that relationship in the adherence to the relevant set of norms. These norms are the backbone of our relationship; by following them, we value it.

Anger is occasioned by actions that, in violating those norms, constitute defections from such co-valuational activity. My violation of a norm constitutive of our relationship is a failure to care about what we can only care about together. When I defect, I reduce you to anger. Anger is the form that your co-valuation of our relationship takes in response to the action by which I (seem to you to) withdraw from co-valuing with you. Because you cannot care (value) together with me, you care about (are angered by) it.

My failure to, for example, do the laundry or remember your birthday angers you because in violating the norms of our relationship—"you, of all people, are supposed to

¹² cf. Bratman (1992).

remember!”—I leave you in the valuational lurch. Let me introduce the term “disvalue” to describe such a failure to value. Disvaluation will take different forms in different relationships, and these different forms will track the norms of the respective relationships. When my behavior violates a norm, adherence to which is constitutive of valuing our relationship, I give you grounds for anger. Let me consider a few examples. If I fail to read the paper my student submitted to me, I thereby disvalue our student–teacher relationship. If I ignore a colleague’s objection to my proposal in a faculty meeting, I disvalue our professional relationship. My passing comment on my spouse’s weight gain can be a source of anger because mutual sexual attraction is part of how we value our romantic relationship. If I falsely testify against you in a court of law, or if I engage in discriminatory hiring or commercial practices at your expense, I disvalue our relationship as fellow citizens. If I rob you, rape you, or kill you, I disvalue our relationship as fellow human beings.¹³ Even small “injustices” such as cutting someone off at an intersection or pushing past someone in line constitute disvaluations of my relationship with the people around me. When I do these things, I thereby defect from a shared valuing practice: I refrain from holding up my end of the valuational burden, making it impossible for you to hold up yours in any way other than anger.¹⁴

Sometimes, having done one of these things, I present you with an excuse. Excuses constitute explanations of why, in a given case, some failure to fulfill a norm does *not* constitute a true or full violation of the norm. I didn’t read my student’s paper because my computer died; my comment about your weight was a stupid joke—I am no less attracted to you than I ever was; I fail to acknowledge my colleague’s point because, being momentarily distracted, I did not notice that he had spoken; I drove recklessly because I was rushing an injured person to the emergency room. The person offering the excuse presents special circumstances under which his or her nonfulfillment of norms of some relationship, nonetheless, fails to constitute a defection from valuing.¹⁵ My excuse attempts to dispel your anger, by convincing you that you don’t have, and never did have, any reason to be angry with me. (Though it was reasonable that you believed you did: I am providing you with the information necessary for you to recognize that what appeared to be a norm violation was merely a failure to fulfill the norm.) When I make an excuse, I deny any failure to hold up my end of the valuational project. Notice that apology is different from excuse. When I apologize, I am granting

¹³ For a discussion of how to extend an account of anger that takes close personal relationships as paradigmatic to cases of stranger anger, see Scanlon (2013). Like Scanlon (90), I take there to be a basic moral relationship in which we stand with all human beings.

¹⁴ Note that the examples in this paragraph should be taken as nothing more than illustrative suggestions as to how one might pair norms with relationships. A discussion of that topic would take us far afield.

¹⁵ Note that it does not follow from the fact that one needs to cite additional features of the situation to explain why nonfulfillment fails to constitute norm violation that one is under a similar explanatory burden with respect to cases in which nonfulfillment *does* constitute norm violation. There is an asymmetry here: norm-nonfulfillment constitutes norm violation, unless excused.

that you had and have a reason to be angry with me: I violated a norm constitutive of our relationship and thereby disvalued it.

Assuming, that I have no excuse, my disrespectful or thoughtless or cruel action truly does constitute a disvaluation of our relationship. In response, your valuation of our relationship rightly devolves into a concern for—that is, anger about—my action. You should care that I did that. My defection from our co-valuing rationally transforms yours into anger. What comes next? How can I give you reason to stop caring that I did that?

In the next section, I explain how the shared nature of the valuational vulnerability characteristic of anger helps us resolve the eternality-practicality dilemma.

Rational Resolution of Anger

We can put the dilemma as follows: If your reason for ceasing to be angry is going to escape eternality, it must be such as to be able to be addressed by whatever subsequent action or event would constitute a response to it. And this means that you must be angry about something practicable, which is to say, something that allows for there to be conditions under which your anger is “satisfied.” Your anger must have terms for resolution so that those terms can be met. Otherwise, it is eternal.

But this dilemma is not exhaustive. Notice, first, that there is some space between, on the one hand, addressing your reason for being angry and, on the other hand, addressing your reason *by satisfying it*. Desires are capable of satisfaction, in that they anticipate what would address them. Likewise, we can say that an assertion or a command has satisfaction conditions, in that it tells you what the world would have to be like in order for it to be, respectively, true or obeyed. Something is amenable to satisfaction when the shape of the proper or fitting response is written into that to which it responds. But proper responses cannot always be, in this way, anticipated.

Consider questions—genuine questions. When I ask you something, and I truly want to know the answer, your rational response doesn’t “satisfy” my question. It seems appropriate to speak of satisfaction in the case of those less-than-genuine questions in which the asker is out to discover something other than the answer, for example, whether the respondent knows the answer. In what are not my proudest moments as a teacher, I ask my students a question expecting a specific answer, for which I proceed to fish until I find the person who will say what I was looking to hear. Why, the students seem to be wondering, am I performing this elaborate act of ventriloquism, having *them* say *my* thoughts? (Indeed.) Those are not real questions. Real questions do not “test” a person. Instead, they hand over to the answerer the job of providing the content of the answer. They cannot be satisfied precisely because the asker takes himself or herself to be in some way defective—the asker doesn’t know what he or she wants the interlocutor to say, which is precisely why he or she is asking a question.

Anger is, like a genuine question, amenable to a fitting response without being satisfiable. Let me argue for this point by way of what I take to be one fitting response to anger: apology.¹⁶ If I say, “Ok, I’m sorry, now are you satisfied?!” it’s likely that you won’t be. If I am saying what I think you want to hear, it won’t be what you want to hear. You don’t want to be satisfied. The “sorry” of apology is no bloodless and abstract concession of rectitude—it is not: “You win. You’re right and I’m wrong.” Like sadness and anger, being sorry is a way of *caring* about an evil. When I express contrition, I am telling you not only that you are right to feel the way you do but that, in a certain sense, *I feel it too*. Just as my action made its mark on you, devolving your love into anger, so too it made its mark on me: My disvaluation of our relationship is something that matters to me. In order to become angry with me, you must have cared about our relationship; in order to feel sorry, I must likewise have cared. If I am sincere, then my expression of contrition springs from the same place as your anger: value. This is why my contrition puts me in a position to reach out my hand in a suggestion of renewed co-valuation.

Just as the transition from co-valuation “down” to anger involves a move from “we” to “I,” so too the transition “up” from anger involves moving from “I” to “we.” And that is not a move you can anticipate in the loneliness of your anger. Remember that the angry person can’t straightforwardly value the relationship and therefore doesn’t feel motivated to return to it. What he or she cares about is the wrong done. Like the questioner, he or she is waiting for a response he or she cannot anticipate; like the questioner, he or she is needy and dependent. Unlike the questioner, his or her dependence is one he or she finds intolerable. Consider two characteristic, but irrational, manifestations of anger: avoidance and cruelty. When you are angry at me, you are inclined to gravitate to either cold denial or burning hatred. The first is your *modus operandi* when you pretend that you don’t care about what I did; that your anger doesn’t exist; that, perhaps, you never even valued our relationship in the first place. “Hot” anger is described by Aristotle: When you try to hurt me, to spite me, to avenge yourself on me, to “teach me a lesson,” you arrogate to yourself the resources to solve our problem on your own. Either way, you claim an independence and self-sufficiency that you do not have.

Anger feels like being trapped in a room with the last person in the world you want to talk to. Even when I am not around, you find yourself making angry speeches at me in your head.¹⁷ My apology testifies to fact that there is a real response—a real feeling—out there that stands as a correlate to yours. You couldn’t ask for it or anticipate it, even if you fantasized a hundred times about how abjectly I would grovel before you. What you discover you needed from me when I eventually do apologize is

¹⁶ I discuss apology not because I suppose it to be the only rational response to anger but because I take it to be a kind of test case: If one couldn’t rationally address anger by apologizing, it would be reasonable to conclude that no other responses would serve either.

¹⁷ Thanks to Ben Jeffery for this observation.

precisely what must go missing from every fantasy: that I be no imaginary interlocutor but a real person with real feelings that answer to your real feelings.

We will escape the bind of the eternity-practicality dilemma if we distinguish between, on the one hand, your (angry) understanding of my wrongdoing and my (contrite) understanding of my wrongdoing when those are taken severally and, on the other hand, our (eventual) shared understanding of my wrongdoing. The shared feeling we can come to about my wrongdoing is that it doesn't matter; we don't care about it; we are past it. Once we have returned to co-valuation, we no longer care about an evil (what I did) but rather a good (our relationship). And my contrition helps explain this return to valuing: It was when you recognized that each of us, considered severally, cared about what I did that you began to see that it could be possible for the two of us, considered jointly, to come to cease caring about it. For the fact that we both (severally) care about what I did means that co-valuation is a real prospect for us. When you cease caring about it, you do so not by eliminating some mode of ethical apprehension—condoning injustice—but rather by evolving your caring into valuing. My contrition is a correlate to your anger, but when we combine those feelings into one common activity of valuing, we both shift our focus in a positive direction. The transformation of anger and contrition into reconciliation reveals the depth of the difference between what each of us can do on our own, value-wise, and what we can do when we value together.

Each horn of the eternity-practicality dilemma captures a truth about anger: If we think of the subject of anger as the lone and lonely “I,” his or her anger will strike us as eternal; if we think of the subject as the “we” of our relationship, anger will strike us as an eminently resolvable practical problem. Those who press the eternity argument sound overly pessimistic because they insist that there is nowhere to go from anger, whereas problem-solvers err in the direction of optimism, framing anger in terms of a desire for repair whose advent presupposes the successful resolution of the anger. Both sides fail to depict the central movement of anger resolution, which is the transition from I to we.

Conclusion

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. But that may not always matter. We may stop caring that I disvalued our relationship. Both your concern for what I did (anger) and my 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 I did. Why, then, is the problem-solving approach to anger mistaken? It is a mistake to think that the angry person, considered on his or her own, *has*, let alone is in a position to solve, the problem in question. 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. When I apologize and you forgive me, we solve a problem, repairing our damaged relationship. But anger, considered by itself, is not an attempt to repair a damaged relationship. In order to be motivated to repair it, one would need to value it, and valuing our relationship is something we do together. But this shared activity is exactly what my action has impeded.

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. And this is just what it means to be vulnerable to someone: His or her actions can damage your very faculty of ethical apprehension. When we are in relationships, our values—which is to say, our selves—are on the line. The brokenness of our relationship is something you cannot apprehend without yourself becoming broken.

I have said that ignoring me and punishing me are characteristically irrational ways of managing anger, because, like the problem-solving view, they underestimate your dependence on me. If, instead of hiding or lashing out, you opt to show me how you feel, that might provoke me to (show you that I) feel correspondingly. We can then take steps to, once again, feel together. Confrontation is a rational response to anger, because it is a cry for the help that the angry person really does need. When I have wronged you, I am the one who can free you from what is, in the solitary throes of your anger, bound to look to you like a reason to be angry with me forever.

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