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# Reframing Affective Injustice: On the Right to Anger and the Priority of Moral Reasons

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## Abstract

This paper responds to the dilemma of affective injustice by distinguishing between three forms of anger and recommending a model of virtuous anger the expression of which is consistent with the productive pursuit of justice. It argues that anger may in the first instance be either passive or active, that is, a passive affective register and morally inert experience, or something that is manifest in action towards other agents. Active anger may then be grounded in moral norms, or not. Anger that is properly grounded and guided by morality is consistent with virtuous agency and the productive pursuit of moral ends. In constructing this model of anger we draw inspiration from the Kantian account of virtue. We argue that this model provides a sound structure for morally productive anger while remaining vigilant towards anger's darker possibilities. To demonstrate the comparative strength of this model, we outline some challenges with the idea of apt anger, arguing that moral norms and constraints are better suited to guide our evaluation of anger. We apply this model to educational settings, where we argue that it is beneficial to channel anger through moral norms, rather than attempt to calibrate its proper magnitude. All things considered, the moral status of anger is equivocal: it can both aid and hinder the pursuit of justice, so it is best to take a cautious while permissive stance towards its use in our common life.

**Keywords** Anger · Affective injustice · Virtue · Education · Kant

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## Introduction

Anger is an entirely natural and seemingly appropriate response to many forms of wrongdoing. This may be the case even where the expression of that anger hinders one's ability to address or resolve the wrongdoing in question. The claim that anger ought to be avoided because it is counterproductive to resolving wrongdoing and achieving just outcomes is referred to as the counterproductivity critique. When directed towards those who have good reason to be angry, the counterproductivity critique can imply a difficult choice: does one choose to be angry when anger is an apt emotional response to injustice, or does one forego one's anger for the sake of correcting the injustice? This dilemma is at the heart of the problem of affective injustice as described by Amia Srinivasan. The injustice, according to Srinivasan, lies primarily in forcing one to choose between getting aptly angry and acting prudentially in pursuit of justice. That is, in appreciating the world as it is or making the world as it should be (Srinivasan 2018). Affective injustice has otherwise been identified with an interlocutor's refusal to be appropriately moved by the apt anger of another (Whitney 2018), an inappropriate extrinsic demand for emotion regulation (Archer and Matheson 2022), and a deprivation of affective goods that one is owed (Gallegos 2022). In this paper, we focus on Srinivasan's definition and the associated counterproductivity critique. We argue that the discussion surrounding affective injustice is better framed in terms of moral reasons, motivations, and rights. We seek to deflate the dilemma while affirming the intuition behind it—that one is entitled to express anger in response to wrongdoing—without granting anger too prominent a role in interpersonal discourse.

On the face of it, the notion of affective injustice might seem clear enough, but on closer examination there are a variety of complex questions associated with how it is defined and consequently addressed. Among these are important questions about the nature of anger. How does one know when one's anger or that of another is apt, should a disposition to be (aptly) angry be cultivated, and how angry should the ideal moral agent be? As we argue below, there is good reason to be sceptical about the moral value of anger, but it does not follow from this that feelings or expressions of anger should necessarily be subdued where they occur. We distinguish between three types of anger: passive anger that is morally inert, active anger that is morally grounded, and active anger that is not morally grounded or that is unconstrained. We then argue in favour of a privilege-based right to have and express the first two forms of anger. Yet one may have a right to express anger while at the same time wrong doing can be understood and its status qua wrong communicated without anger. Anger should not stand in for moral reasoning and action, which does the deeper work in addressing conditions of injustice. These conditions are the root cause of affective injustice and as such are what ultimately need to be corrected.[1] This can be done either with or without anger and it may be the case that anger is unhelpful in making this cor-

[1] See Katie Stockdale who makes a similar point, arguing that the injustice concerned "operates primarily outside of us: in affective norms and practices, and relationships that are embedded in social conditions of injustice" (2023). We do not address the injustice of affective norms, which we agree exist, instead developing an account that targets social conditions of injustice directly.

rection. Anger in itself is morally ambivalent: it may align with a righteous cause yet can easily lead an agent astray, so it is reasonable to be both sceptical and cautiously permissive about its place in moral agency. This suggests that there is some truth in the counterproductivity critique, which can be understood in more than one way.

In section one of this paper, we outline the three forms of anger mentioned above. Following that, we raise questions concerning the aptness of anger, suggesting there is reason to reject this mode of classification. Anger is natural and may be morally permitted, even useful, but it is more difficult to say that it can be apt.[2] In section two, we articulate what moral anger might look like on a Kantian account of moral agency and norms, which we believe best frames the discussion surrounding affective injustice. We suggest that anger is consistent with virtuous agency where it is grounded in moral principles and governed by an agent's choice (self-control) alongside self-knowledge and sympathy, key Kantian virtues. This responds to the Stoic concern that expressions of anger are often unwieldy and unproductive, without requiring that anger be eliminated from an individual's psychology or its expressions from a community's discourse. In section three, we address the question of how anger might be educated given its delicate status as a natural and prima facie justified while at times unhelpful and even harmful emotion that one is entitled to. We argue that the Kantian model developed in section two is well suited to guide the process of educating anger and we discuss some examples that demonstrate why. Its success in this practical application lends plausibility to the case that this model articulates a sound structure for anger that is morally productive and consistent with virtuous agency. Though if the same ends can be achieved without anger, there is, all things considered, less reason to be angry. Further, if being angry risks not achieving, or violating, moral ends, then there are additional reasons to not be angry. So, while one is entitled to one's anger and should not be silenced for expressing it, it is still probably better all things considered to cultivate it away.

## The Types and Nature of Anger

### Passive, Active, Moral

It makes sense that a person on the receiving end of a damaging or disrespectful act would experience anger upon recognition of that act. Anger is a natural and prima facie justified response, and we agree that it will form a part of a healthy person's disposition at some stage of development (Kristjánsson 2007). Yet a person may be justified and rational, if not completely natural, in choosing to not respond with anger

[2] To evaluate anger as apt is to treat it like perception, which directly matches the way the world is. Instead, we understand that anger can be a natural response to some circumstances, indicating that it is common and intelligible to respond with anger while it can be equally intelligible not to. This reflects the idea that emotions are subjective while not wholly distinct from their objects, for example, as argued by Robert Solomon ("the emotion is determined by its object just as it is the emotion that constitutes its object", in Solomon 1993). This may mean that affective injustice in a strict sense does not obtain, if the anger denied must be *apt*. Yet, even if anger cannot be evaluated as apt, it can still be wrong to tell someone not to feel or express it. We clarify this in what follows.

to such acts. For example, without further explanation it seems just as rational to ignore a a colleague's slight as to respond with mild anger and confront them about it. There is a tension between the apparent rationality of these responses that we want to explore. We want to ask what it means to respond in anger and to do so rationally. Our aim is to synthesize the intuition behind each response, illuminating how anger may and may not be rational.

In a first sense, we can understand anger as something that one simply experiences. Imagine another scenario involving the betrayal of trust, in which Abigail has entrusted something valuable to Brianna. This could be sensitive personal information or some form of intellectual property. Say Brianna then violates that trust by using that information for personal gain and against Abigail's wishes, say in a competitive setting at a later point in time (the two could be competing for the same job or research grant). It would be entirely natural that on learning of this, Abigail would be angry, and we may take her anger to be justified. Yet, in a sense, this anger is something that *happens* to her. It is something she experiences, an involuntary register of moral facts on her affective state, not unlike a state of perception (though she may feel more disappointment than anger, or she might not feel anger at all, which casts doubt on the analogy between anger and perception).[3] The anger she might feel is passive because it is not entirely under her conscious control; it does not engage her agency as it is not something she chooses.[4] However, acting *from* that anger in response to Brianna involves an exercise of choice and therefore engages her agency. Anger like this may be described as active and evaluated as virtuous, or not, depending on the actions that follow from it.

The difference between passive and active anger is unclear in the above analysis of affective injustice. The normative conflict it outlines between reasons of aptness and reasons of prudence asserts that, in many cases, apt anger and prudential action are mutually exclusive (Srinivasan 2018). However, if an agent can experience apt anger without acting from that anger, then it looks like anger and action may come apart generally. So, the dilemma is either a false one or it needs to be clarified. Not acting from feelings of anger is different from not feeling angry at all. This allows that one may feel anger, whether apt or otherwise, while pursuing the ends of justice. If the counterproductivity critique means to say that victims of injustice ought not to *feel* anger in response to wrongdoing, this is indeed unjust—or more accurately, oppressive (Stockdale 2023)—but it would also appear to be confused or naïve because there is an obvious way out.[5] If understood just in this way, the purported dilemma of affective injustice could be dissolved by distinguishing between passive and active anger: one may feel anger while taking effective action to achieve justice, because anger is not necessarily tied to action.

[3] For an example of the analogy between affect and perception, see Johnston (2001). See also note 2 above.

[4] Prior acts of (intentional) habituation and character formation aside.

[5] As Stockdale points out, the forced choice between apt and prudent emotions is a part of everyday life, so this is better described as a case of oppression (2023).

What should take on more significance in these circumstances is what one does with one's anger.[6] When directed towards action—the pursuit of moral ends—does it enable the achievement of justice, or not? Here, as Srinivasan notes, there is a tradition of reflection that provides a favourable evaluation of the nature and use of anger for moral purposes generally. Feminist philosophers like Marilyn Frye, Alison Jaggar, and Uma Narayan highlight the epistemic value of anger (Frye 1983; Jaggar 1989; Narayan 1988). Audre Lorde writes that anger "is loaded with information and energy" meaning that it can be a valuable source of motivation as well as a form of moral perception (1984). It can mobilize communities to pursue justice when enough people perceive that injustice exists (Thompson 2006). Anger and prudential action are not mutually exclusive on this tradition, which emphasizes this emotion's value in enabling the active pursuit of justice.[7] We agree that this is true in some circumstances: anger can be constructive for, as well as consistent with, moral action.

We therefore suggest that where it is active, anger should be understood in two further ways. Action may follow from anger in the sense that it is accompanied by feelings of anger while those feelings remain grounded in moral values and motivations, or it may follow from anger in the absence of these conditions, i.e., not morally grounded or constrained. Anger absent of moral constraint is prone to be damaging to social relationships and the goods they pursue. It is unwieldy, liable to mislead an agent, and in this way unintelligent as the Stoic position holds.[8] However, anger that is grounded in moral values and motivations, including recognition of the equal dignity and wellbeing of persons, is less likely to be damaging because it is simultaneously committed to respecting the good of an interlocutor, opponent, or offender with whom one is engaged.[9] On this picture, action following from morally grounded anger is either morally constructive or permissible as is the passive affective experience of anger. It is consistent with the idea that anger may be loaded with information and energy that can be harnessed for good, as the above tradition maintains. However, action that is motivated by anger in the absence of moral constraint is dangerous and its cultivation not desirable.

We therefore propose a tripartite distinction between (a) the affective experience of anger, i.e., ***passive anger***, (b) action proceeding from anger that is grounded in moral considerations, i.e., ***virtuous anger***, and (c) action proceeding from anger in the absence of moral constraint, i.e., ***unconstrained anger***. Anger in form (a) or (b) is morally unproblematic and in principle consistent with prudential action; anger in

[6] We therefore favour a form of disjunctivism about anger. Srinivasan favours a moderate functionalism on which anger is partly constituted by its stereotypical expression (2018). However, this assumes that its recognition conditions are more stable across cultures than they are, whereas expressions of anger can vary significantly between cultures and sometimes within them, as Owen Flanagan points out. For example, Americans associate anger with yelling, shouting, and hitting, whereas Belgians associate it with ignoring and withdrawing, and for Japanese, anger "is commonly met with smiling, nodding, and acquiescence" (Flanagan). The Nepalese Tamang strongly discourage anger in children because they believe that it creates disharmony, whereas the Nepalese Brahmins encourage it in children because they believe it is an appropriate expression of their cultural dominance (Flanagan).

[7] See also Cherry (2021) on the moral value of anger and its cultivation.

[8] See, e.g., Seneca (1928 ) or Nussbaum (2016).

[9] See Hooks (1995).

form (c) is not. Anger may be expressed in various ways in (a) through (c), and, while if it is unclear what should qualify as an *expression* of anger, it is clear enough when an action violates moral prohibitions, and the priority is that moral considerations guide and constrain actions that involve anger. This is to qualify the idea of affective injustice, reframing it in terms of the moral reasons underlying the original injustice that gives rise to anger, and not to reject it outright. We sketch a framework for the moral psychology of this anger in section three.

So far, we have argued that it is both unjust and confused to forbid victims of injustice from feeling anger (and likely naïve to think that the tradition identified with the counterproductivity critique is saying this). But this cannot be the whole story. Perhaps the counterproductivity critique means instead that victims cannot *express* the anger which they rightly feel, should they want their claim to justice to be heard. This is to make a different point, because expressions of anger are more than feelings, as they are constituted by external actions or speech. This request, too, would be unjust. For these claims should be heard regardless of how they are expressed, so that the relevant injustices can be corrected. This is probably closer to how Srinivasan reads the exchange between William Buckley and James Baldwin, with Buckley telling us that "black anger is wrong because counterproductive to black people themselves" (Srinivasan 2018). As we have defined it above, virtuous anger is consistent with the expression of anger in action and speech. It is virtuous because it is grounded in principles that respect the good of all parties. Importantly, on this picture there are no non-moral reasons to not express anger provided that that anger does not lead to moral violations. We therefore suggest that, given the absence of a duty to not express anger, there is a privilege-based right to express it.[10] So, victims should not be required to downplay their anger or cleanse all expressions of its trace. Anger is a response to which one is entitled and it is unjust to deny this response. One should be permitted to express one's anger however one sees fit within moral constraints. This is different from saying, as we have also said above, that one may feel anger *passively* in response to wrongdoing while remaining cool and calm in trying to correct that wrongdoing and obtain justice. Angry expression, too, is permitted regardless of how uncomfortable one's interlocutors may find it to be.

### Difficulties with Aptness

This is further distinct from the question of whether anger is morally productive or not. For it can be true that one is entitled to respond in anger while it is also true that anger is counterproductive for achieving just ends. There is a third way of understanding the counterproductivity critique, taking it to embody a general truth about anger, namely that anger is often unhelpful in attaining justice and good results on the whole. We suggest that this can be true while acknowledging that the above attempt to silence anger is unjust. In this section, we sketch a brief, preliminary argument rejecting aptness as a useful mode of classification for anger. If aptness is not a useful way of understanding anger, this adds further support to the tripartite definition

[10] One has a privilege to φ where one does not have a duty not to φ (Wenar and Cruft 2025); see also Alfred Archer and Benjamin Matheson (2022) on affective rights, which they define along similar lines.

above: anger may either be simply felt as something passive and morally inert, or expressed in action and speech, where it may then be guided and governed by moral principles, or not.

Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobsen measure aptness with two criteria, shape and size. An emotion's shape accounts for whether the subject's reasons for feeling that emotion correspond to correct features in the world that evoke those reasons (i.e., right-kind vs. wrong-kind reasons). In the example they use, one's envy is not apt if it portrays a rival as having features that they do not in fact have (2000). An emotion's size, or magnitude, accounts for whether it is, for example, an overreaction to something that merits a lesser response. If one's anger is too large, it will not be apt; similarly, if it is too small. On what basis should size be determined? It is often difficult to draw these boundaries in practice. Anger is a subjective first-personal experience, and its behavioural expressions can vary significantly. This may be a result of factors that include personality, cognitive wiring, and culture. Denouncing with a loud shout may or may not be understood as an apt response to a mean-spirited comment depending on factors like these. The same goes for responding to the same comment with silence, and someone with a healthy sense of self-respect could conceivably do either. Personality and culture further complicate the attempt to set standards of aptness in these circumstances: people and communities differ, for example, in how they respond to the same act.

Regarding anger's capacity to aid moral judgement, Glen Pettigrove and Koji Tanaka have identified several challenges based on work in experimental psychology. A person who is angry tends to overattribute responsibility to others, rely on stereotypes inappropriately by associating negative features with outgroups, and be less likely to revise judgement in the face of evidence that they would otherwise find compelling (Pettigrove and Tanaka 2014). It follows from this that anger can subject an agent to significant bias. It can incline them towards misidentifying the reasons or objects of behaviour that would justify anger, rather than identifying the correct ones.[11] This enables us to appreciate why anger is sometimes thought of as a 'red mist' that obscures clear thinking.[12] While it is a response to the world that we can explore, as Krista Thomason argues, and may draw our attention to things which we *ought* to explore, it is hardly a reliable form of perception (2024).

This is particularly salient given its association with violence and susceptibility to spill from one domain into another. Spillover is "the transfer of attitudes, feelings, and behaviors from one domain to the other," as when one carries anger from the workplace to the home and directs it towards their spouse or children (Westman 2002). Anger's susceptibility to this effect provides reasons to doubt its practical moral value as well as its measurability for aptness. Examples can be found in Susan Carruthers's book, *Dear John: Love and Loyalty in Wartime America*, testifying to the destructive effects of spillover anger during times of war (Carruthers 2022; see

[11] See the "smoke detector principle" in Nesse (2005) and cited in Pettigrove and Tanaka.

[12] For an argument concerning the moral value of the "red mist" see Lepoutre (2023). Maxime Lepoutre argues that the epistemic cost of anger can perform a morally valuable function by enabling a victim to assert her sense of dignity and self-respect when she might otherwise be afraid to do so: "the red mist both helps to reduce our exposure to a degrading message, *and* facilitates a dignifying counter-message" (2023).

Chap. 6 in particular). Carruthers's study of the relationships and correspondence between men and women reveals how women were at times physically and emotionally damaged by men who had been at war, as these men were themselves damaged by war. The men were often unconsciously seeking an object on which to release feelings of isolation, abandonment, rejection, and anger. Anger arising elsewhere in their lives spilled into the intimate sphere, to be inflicted on the women with whom they were involved. In a similar example, Hooks describes how black women in the early twentieth-century United States "learned when we were very little that black people could die from feeling rage and expressing it to the wrong white folks," thus leading to the situation where "Rage was reserved for life at home—for one another," being transferred to a safer, more feasible context for expression in unfair circumstances (Hooks 1995).

The proximal trigger in cases like these was often the actions of an unfaithful spouse or lover. The complication is that anger stirred up by infidelity, something towards which anger would seem a justified response, blends with a host of other feelings from the agent's point of view (for example, as with anger towards violence suffered in war and a homeland felt to have abandoned one). The anger in each instance would be independently justified. There are right-kind reasons in each case, so the shape criterion provided by D'Arms and Jacobsen can count as having been fulfilled. But as it spills from one domain into another the feelings combine, and the anger increases in size. On what basis then does an agent determine when they are angrier about one of these things than they ought to be? How does one identify the correct size? It is both in principle and in practice difficult to do this. If both experiences, say, bring the foundations of one's life projects and sense of meaning into question, it could make sense that a good deal of anger is appropriate. But how much is too much? It is difficult to say, as anger is a subjective first-personal experience. Two people may experience the same magnitude of anger while one is inclined to respond with violence and the other with sadness, reflection, and restraint.

In these circumstances, therefore, it is more advisable to apply moral considerations than considerations of fit. No matter how frustrated one might get, the moral prohibitions on behaviour following from anger are constant. As are the moral concerns that ought to ground one's behaviour, whether angry or otherwise, which should include respect for persons and their wellbeing. One might ask, then, why bother employing the concept of aptness to evaluate anger in the first place? Our suggestion is that aptness is unhelpful here and possibly distracting.[13] On the one hand, any amount of passive anger may be acceptable. Who is to say how a person should feel about major life upheavals like infidelity and betrayal? On the other hand, once that anger becomes active, it should be assessed by how well moral principles guide and constrain it.

[13] There is a rich discussion and growing body of literature concerning the fittingness of emotions. We are sympathetic to aretaic accounts that incorporate virtue-theoretic or value-based considerations into assessments of fittingness, or aptness (see Yao 2024; Achs and Na'aman 2023; and Naar 2021). Though we do not wish to weigh in on the debate about how fittingness should be defined, so limit our discussion to the definition provided by D'Arms and Jacobsen. While a more comprehensive discussion of fittingness is beyond the scope of this paper, we align our position with a broadly Kantian account of the emotions and their role in virtue (see note 22 below).

While anger should not be suppressed, and the suppression of anger may have negative moral consequences (Parrott 2014), the spillover effect encourages caution towards the space we give to it in our personal and political lives. It can help to advance justice, but equally, it can lead to violence when not properly regulated. Anger is natural and justified in some circumstances, but it is also unruly, which is why we need moral principles to govern it. Because it is hard to know what apt anger is, we instead suggest that it be classified as passive, then active and virtuous, or active and unconstrained—and evaluated in moral terms.

## Outlining a Kantian Model of Virtuous Anger

We further argue that sympathy, self-knowledge, and self-restraint are valuable alongside anger, enabling it to be consistent with virtuous form. Because these are central features of Kantian virtue, we contend that a Kantian account of virtue is best suited to ground a model of virtuous anger. Kant does not have a sufficiently clear or systematic position on anger. Within his system it makes sense to associate it with affect, which he defines as a sudden onrush of feeling that interrupts and suspends one's mental composure, like water breaking through a dam. Affect is contrasted with passion, which is defined as a deeply rooted hatred that "like a river digs itself deeper and deeper into its bed" (Kant 7:251–-5 2).[14] Both are described as illnesses and do not count as virtues.[15] It is possible to agree that some forms of anger interrupt and suspend good judgement while holding that there are other forms of anger that do not. Anger of the latter kind could be understood as a feature of a more general moral sensitivity, an ability to register and understand morally relevant facts in the world. Kant describes moral sensibility as "a *faculty* and *power* which either permits or prevents both the state of pleasure as well as displeasure from entering the mind, and thus possesses choice" (Kant 7:235–36). It implies the possession of "sympathy" and "delicate feeling" by which one can judge the sensation and experience of others (Kant 7:236). Feelings like these, among which anger could be included, could be used as a moral register for external actions, signalling acts that are damaging to the dignity of oneself or another, for example.[16] Anger of this kind would remain under the reflective supervision of moral principles, and actions that follow from it would remain under an agent's control. We therefore construct a model of virtuous anger inspired by Kant and broadly consistent with his account of virtue.[17]

On the Kantian account, the core of virtuous character is the good will (Kant 4:393). Following that, as outlined in the later *Doctrine of Virtue*, two prominent

[14] Kant's works will be cited by volume and page number of the 1902 Berlin Academy edition .

[15] Passions warp one's process of reflection, so cannot be virtuous because they provide false or pseudo-moral content. Affects bypass "consultation with an agent's higher faculties of cognition and desire" altogether and cannot be incorporated into maxims, which are necessary for virtue in the Kantian sense (Frierson 2014).

[16] Nancy Sherman similarly describes this as a form of moral indignation, "an emotionally registered moral disapproval conceptually dependent upon respect for persons" (Sherman 2011).

[17] Our purpose is not necessarily to produce an interpretation faithful to Kant's texts and historical setting, but to draw inspiration from Kant in responding to the problems outlined above.

character traits the virtuous agent will possess are sympathy and self-knowledge.[18] Both may be understood as moral aptitudes—active and intelligent habits—each being "a facility in acting and a subjective perfection of choice" (Kant 6:407). The involvement of choice is necessary for these character traits to be virtues, because Kantian virtue is freely chosen and implies self-constraint and fortitude (both features of the will) with respect to things that have a tendency to oppose morality, including affect and passion as described above.[19] Another reason these virtues imply choice is that they are grounded in the good will, which chooses to live by the moral law that respects the dignity and wellbeing of persons. Self-control or fortitude, a central feature of Kantian virtue, entails an ability to do this successfully and resist the inclination to do otherwise (Kant 6:380).

Contrary to some readings, the Kantian virtue of sympathy is not a tendency to feel sympathetic towards those who are suffering, but an ability to understand their suffering alongside a commitment to act for their betterment (Hildebrand 2023).[20] It is a primarily cognitive disposition that enhances one's ability to act beneficently and in doing so fulfil the moral law. Feeling may enable this by providing information about the wellbeing of others, for example, when we affectively share in their suffering on visiting sickrooms and debtors' prisons. But feelings have only instrumental value for Kantian virtue and are neither necessary nor sufficient for the possession of Kantian sympathy (Kant 6:456–5 7 and Hildebrand 2023). In this way, Kantian sympathy anticipates what psychologists presently describe as cognitive empathy.[21] Self-knowledge is similarly a cognitive virtue. In Kant's words, it requires that one know one's heart, whether it is good or evil, and whether the source of one's actions is pure or impure (that is, whether they are grounded in moral reasons or something else) (Kant 6:441). Combined with sympathy and self-knowledge, self-control implies an ability to restrain oneself from acting on impure motives or in ways that would damage the dignity of others and oneself (for example, when one discovers that either of those things would happen as a result of one's action).

This account of virtue provides a plausible moral psychological basis for the tripartite distinction outlined above. *Virtuous anger* may be a feature of moral sensitivity,

[18] See Kant 6:441 for self-knowledge and 6:456–5 8 for sympathy. For a combined account of the role of these virtues in the development of moral character, see Hildebrand (2023).

[19] Kant 6:380–8 3. In contrast with other, lesser forms of habit that Kant recognizes, moral aptitude is necessary for virtue in the full sense (Hildebrand 2022a, 2022b).

[20] For the view that Kantian sympathy is a disposition to feel sympathetic towards those who are suffering, see Fahmy (2009) and Merritt (2018).

[21] For example, Paul Bloom distinguishes cognitive from emotional empathy, referring to the former as rational compassion (2016). Martin Hoffman similarly tells us that empathy "has been defined by psychologists in two ways: (a) empathy is the cognitive awareness of another person's internal states, that is, his thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and intentions […]; (b) empathy is the vicarious affective response to another person" (2000). Hoffman refers to William Ickes for research on cognitive empathy, also known as empathic inference, the process by which cognitive processes are deployed to achieve insight into the subjective experience of others (1997). Other studies provide additional evidence to support a distinction between these two forms of empathy. For example, Jean Decety and Philip Jackson outline the higher cognitive functions that support cognitive as opposed to merely emotional empathy (2004), while Simone Shamay-Tsoory et al. establish that the emotional and cognitive systems underlying each form of empathy are neuroanatomically distinct and exclusive of one another (2009).

where it functions analogously to sympathy. It may enable one to better appreciate the world as it is so that one can act to make it as it ought to be. Grounded in the good will and a commitment to moral principles, this form of anger is accompanied by a motivation to bring about that justice which the world in its current state lacks. It may add additional force or drive to one's motivation, but that force would be grounded in moral reasons. It would be active insofar as it leads to action, but that action would not contravene the moral principles on which it is grounded. *Unconstrained anger* on this picture may be motivating but lacks the moral grounding and constraint of virtuous anger.

Merely *passive anger*, by contrast, refers to the affective experience of anger and as such is not open for assessment on moral grounds. It is involuntary and simply *is*—a morally inert experience. Kantian virtue is generally permissive with respect to the passive experience of feelings.[22] Until this anger transitions into action it is not evaluated morally, but at the point it moves one to action it becomes something other than the passive experience of anger and is classified differently. So long as it does not contravene moral principles or overwhelm one's capacity for thought, as in the case of affect as described by Kant above, it makes sense to have a liberal attitude towards it. There is no need, therefore, to ask an agent to repress the anger which they feel in response to injustice. Unless that anger is unconstrained by moral considerations, it is consistent with virtuous agency.

However, this does not mean that anger is necessary or, on balance, good for moral agency. It just means that you can experience anger and still be a virtuous person. Sometimes that anger can help you to register important moral facts, sometimes it might energize you to right social wrongs, while at other times it might mislead you to do things that are wrong. This might be why Kantian virtue makes room for feelings like anger while not calling for their cultivation. Where we experience feelings like anger, we may as well make use of them for good, but that is different from deliberately cultivating anger where it is morally permitted and apparently justified.

## Educating Anger

The problem described by Srinivasan parallels a practical problem in education concerning the ideal formation of emotion, agency, and virtue in children. While the experience of affect is a given feature of childhood, cognitive activity is required to develop the virtues of sympathy, self-knowledge, and self-control. This requires understanding of oneself and one's relationship with others amidst the circumstances of society, which takes place through socialization at home and in school. In an important sense then, education (as well as informal socialization) can enable young people to develop virtuous anger: or it can entrench patterns of affective injustice if the assumption of educators is that anger cannot be moral. Showing how the model

[22] Except insofar as one has indirect voluntary control over the feelings one experiences, a point about which Kant is sceptical. See, for example, the Preface to the *Groundwork* or the discussion of moral worth in Section One. One's affective disposition and inclinations are not under one's direct control, so not reflective of one's agency and not an appropriate target for moral evaluation (see Kant 4:388–92, 4:397–401, and Hildebrand 2024).

of virtuous anger above handles this problem helps to demonstrate its plausibility as an account of this virtue.

The counterproductivity critique reasons that anger may be apt but not the basis for prudent behaviour. This aligns with the beliefs of many parents and educators who observe that children and teenagers regularly act out of expressions of anger in ways that are counterproductive, for instance harming others or being destructive to property. While their anger might be an apt response to wrongdoings suffered, in a sufficient number of circumstances it is difficult to determine when anger is apt, as argued above. But more importantly, instruction against anger is also necessary for meeting educational aims that are compromised when anger and angry action distract students' ability to focus on learning and engage in productive classroom behaviour. Because young people's uncontrolled anger is seen as a serious risk to themselves and others, parents and educators echo concerns consistent with the counterproductivity critique in holding that anger is basically counterproductive for the achievement of good ends, even if sometimes it is justified (White 2012; Jackson 2020).

However, if there is too much of a focus on self-control in the face of justified anger, such education can err on the side of encouraging students to accept the status quo rather than more critically consider it. This can encourage passive acceptance of conditions of injustice when active resistance is morally preferred. It is in this context that there is a special educational interest in teaching young people about the possibility of virtuous anger. It is also through educational processes that people can and do learn virtues of sympathy and self-knowledge. Together, sympathy and self-knowledge enable young people to examine the nature of society and use their feelings about the world around them alongside information from other sources to develop a capacity for making a positive difference. In education, young people systematically explore the social world, the nature of their emotional processes (and those of others), and mechanisms to exert increasing control over their expressions and behaviours.

These competing concerns, both for and against the expression of anger, make the educational environment a complex place and make it difficult to know how a strong emotion like anger should be managed and directed. Amidst this complexity, affective injustice could be a feature of the educational environment itself, so there is good reason to provide a way out of the dilemma it presents (between apt anger and the attainment of justice). Parents and teachers have their own interests in preserving a status quo—a peaceful, stable, productive home life or classroom. Given this interest and their position, they may be motivated to frame anger as entirely counterproductive. Pragmatically, in the context of the family home or classroom, parents or teachers may be unlikely to see challenges to their authority as justified by children, understanding their authority as founded in their greater knowledge of the world and what is best for young people. Children may learn by implication in such ordinary cases that anger is always counterproductive and should never be expressed.

This enables affective injustice at two levels. First, children's potentially justified anger is not tolerated in specific moments. Second, they apply this lesson, repeatedly learned over the course of childhood, to future situations, precluding their recognizing the possibility for virtuous anger. This embeds affective injustice at the level of character. Young people learn that self-control is more important than sympathy,

self-understanding, and the achievement of justice when parents and educators discourage expressions of anger as if it were never justified despite justified cases and the impossibility of never experiencing anger. This can result in psychological harm to young people who ultimately learn from socialization to repress their feelings of anger despite the desirability of such feelings when reflected upon and expressed within the constraints of morality (Jackson 2020). It can also thwart social progress more generally as their anger can potentially be used as fuel to productively challenge an unjust status quo when handled effectively.

To respond to the problem of affective injustice at this level, educators can teach about the possibility for virtuous anger along the lines outlined above. This would involve helping students to understand the importance of self-control alongside self-knowledge and sympathy, and the pursuit of justice. Additionally, that anger is a part of life and has positive potential that can be explored despite its apparent counter-productivity in the classroom. Rather than lecturing explicitly that anger is useless and immoral, teachers should impart a more complex perspective that recognizes its potential in the context of virtuous reflection. Here, the tripartite distinction and Kantian model of virtuous anger developed above is beneficial. Passive anger which refers to the largely involuntary experience of feelings of anger, for example, in the face of wrongdoing, is morally neutral. By taking a more permissive attitude towards this kind of anger in the classroom, educators can invite students to reflect on what caused these feelings and what these feelings lead them to want to do. This creates the space for students to learn about the benefits and dangers of anger without encouraging them to repress angry feelings. The two forms of active anger—unconstrained anger and virtuous anger—may then be introduced, and possibilities for action, as well as the consequences of those actions, explored using imagination. Students can be encouraged to appreciate how anger can sometimes be informative and motivate action to remedy injustice when it is grounded in and constrained by moral norms, just as it can be harmful when unconstrained by these norms. An ability to understand this and harness one's anger for justice demonstrates virtuous anger. This is consistent with any reasonable magnitude of merely passive anger.

We argue that this provides an advantage over the Aristotelian model of anger education which depends on something akin to aptness in its ideal of right proportion (Kristjánsson 2007). As argued above, it is particularly difficult to measure anger for aptness, or correct proportion (size), due to its subjective nature and complexities around things like the spillover effect. Considering by contrast the clarity that standard moral norms provide, it is therefore better to focus on anger's relationship with moral norms and the achievement of moral action than it is to focus on attaining the correct proportion of anger in one's affective life. Bringing emotions within one's own agency, as Kristjánsson suggests, is a good aim but there are limits to the degree to which this can be done (2007). It is better to focus on building the powers of moral agency itself, both epistemic and motivational, as the Kantian model would emphasize.

There are a few ways that such an education can take place. The first is a matter of imparting principles. As advised by Kristjánsson, one can reflect on anger philosophically in education, citing, for example, Aristotle on the potential of anger and Kant on the nature of sympathy (2007). In relation, one can explore the history of social

movements and their use of anger, considering the way that figures such as King and Gandhi explored anger in mixed ways in their work, and reading their speeches and examining in the classroom whether and how they used and expressed anger (Peters 2012).[23] In secondary and higher education, such reflection could also extend to focus on the nature of affective injustice in society and related topics including whose anger is respected and whose is not in the media.[24] In primary education, that anger is a normal, common experience should be shared in place of imparting only intolerant messages about anger.

Secondly, as mentioned above, educators can encourage students to reflect critically on their own experiences of anger. They can invite students to consider circumstances when they are angry, and times when they have managed their anger effectively in relation to sympathy, self-knowledge, and self-control. Such conversations are likely to touch on the unfairness that young people perceive and experience around them. In this case, educators can encourage students to consider the need to balance recognition of feelings of anger with the importance of self-control in harnessing that anger for moral ends. At the same time, sympathy and self-understanding remain vital in such experiences to consider the impact of situations on diverse parties, including situations that might be caused by varied attempts to fruitfully manage and respond to anger. Encouraging students to reflect on instances when others have been angry at them in response to their behaviour can further encourage the development of sympathy and self-understanding along with an understanding of virtuous anger (Brandenburg 2019).[25]

Such an education will seem counterproductive in cultural environments where (i) the moral authority of adults over children, (ii) the need for obedience to authority, and (iii) the need for preservation of the status quo are taken for granted as absolute. On the other hand, it is in such settings that anger can be particularly seen to boil and erupt, when there is no productive outlet available and no respect for the potential and possibility of virtuous anger among diverse actors across social positions (for instance, as mentioned previously, during wartime and among those who face racial injustice and violence). These are situations where affective injustice is an expected and accepted part of life. Thus, by moving towards this model of virtuous anger and away from enabling affective injustice, educators can enhance the conditions for a society that upholds self-respect, healthy emotional and moral development, effective communication regarding injustice and wrongdoing, and tolerance of diversity. This model provides a pathway towards a solution to the above problem identified by Srinivasan.

[23] In particular, see King's speech on why he refused to become adjusted rather than maladjusted in relation to injustice (2018).

[24] See, for example, Zerilli (2014).

[25] Daphne Brandenburg develops an account of reproach, which may include anger but is absent of blame, on which children and other agents that are not fully developed may be held responsible for morally objectionable behaviour "in so far as they are capable of minimal moral communication and sensitive to the moral agency cultivation of [this form of] reproach" (2019).

## Conclusion

We have responded to a prominent definition of affective injustice by disambiguating where the injustice lies, then arguing for a tripartite distinction, in the first case between passive and active anger, then between active anger that is unconstrained and active anger that is virtuous. Following that, we outlined a Kantian model of virtuous anger, on which anger is virtuous when it is grounded in the moral law (which entails respect for persons and their wellbeing). This form of anger proceeds from moral considerations and may add additional motivational force to moral action. Understood as a feature of what Kant calls moral sensibility, it may illuminate moral facts. It can add energy to the positive pursuit of justice. It will also be constrained by moral concerns, for example, not leading to acts of violence or disrespect towards others. It differs from unconstrained anger which does not share these constraints or this structure. Until anger is united with agency, it is morally inert, an experience that cannot be evaluated as good or bad because it just *is*. Insofar as anger is analogous to a passive register of moral facts (as in the case of passive anger), it is consistent with virtue and the productive pursuit of justice. In other words, any degree of passive anger is consistent with virtue in the Kantian sense.

This would dissolve the dilemma of affective injustice, if the counterproductivity critique from which it issues means to say that victims of injustice should not feel anger in response to wrongdoing. Such a demand would be unjust, or more accurately, oppressive, but it would also be odd, since one can experience any degree of anger without necessarily acting on it. We further explored whether the counterproductivity critique might be telling victims to not express their anger if they want to receive justice. This would be unjust, too, for these claims should be heard whether they are expressed angrily or otherwise. People have a right to express anger where the actions that constitute those expressions do not violate moral concerns (e.g., they are not violent, are consistent with respect for persons, etc.). Interlocutors then have a duty to listen to those claims to the extent that they have a duty to listen to any justice-related claims, regardless of how uncomfortable they may be .[26] What is most important in these circumstances is that justice is sought and, ideally, achieved. Anger may help or hinder this process in myriad ways. Its capacity to bring us to violate moral concerns is a good reason to be cautious about it. This is a general truth also buried and sometimes distorted in the counterproductivity critique: we should not be naïve about the moral value of anger.

Given its equivocal status on the whole, it would be unwise to cultivate a disposition to be angry even where anger is apparently justified.[27] Still, anger will need to be educated. So, we applied this model to educational settings, which present a uniquely challenging case study, because they suggest that the anger of young people be controlled for the benefit of all, while at the same time (we believe) they should allow young people to learn about the experience and healthy expression of anger. We argue that the Kantian model is well suited to these challenging environments.

[26] For one account of a duty to listen, see Joshi and McKenna (2025).

[27] As noted above, where the purported benefits of anger can be achieved by other means, there is, all things considered, less reason to be angry (see Paytas 2024).

Throughout this paper we hope to have acknowledged the truth behind both anger-optimism and anger-eliminativism, acknowledging that anger can be morally beneficial without underestimating its negative moral possibilities. What then of affective injustice? There may be such a thing but it may be less interesting than has been suggested. For it amounts to the idea that we should not tell people how to feel, nor should we silence demands for justice merely because they are expressed with anger. The real world is complex. Charles Mills is right that we should not ask people to behave as "ideal" agents and cleanse themselves of anger just to be heard (2005). Yet we suggest that the tradition stemming from Stoicism and Christian theology, developed more recently by Nussbaum (2016) and Pettigrove (2012), articulates a more significant truth, namely that holding on to one's anger and possibly deepening it makes less sense overall than cultivating it away. While there is no easy path to a more just society, it is overall better if we are led by compassion while seeking what may be rightfully ours. Anger may in the above sense be lawful, but it will not always be beneficial, hence the injunction to "Be angry, but sin not: let not the sun go down on your wrath."[28]

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[28] Ephesians 4:26.

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