

Aristotelian Flourishing and Self-Respect without Anger

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Abstract

Dating back to Aristotle, philosophers have argued that virtue requires wronged agents to hold on to anger until a wrong has been fully recompensed, since anger reflects appropriate self-respect. However, I argue here that even when anger is proportionate, it is not always virtuous. Since the connection between virtue and flourishing should be taken seriously, the evidence about the detrimental effect anger has on an individual's mental and physical health suggest that anger undermines the capacity of an agent to foster her own flourishing. I argue that while acknowledging wrongdoing is important for maintaining self-respect, this does not require holding on to anger since prioritizing one's own flourishing is an important way of valuing oneself. As a result, identifying the mean with regards to anger is more complicated than often thought, since it will require agents to balance their own flourishing against abstract requirements of desert.

Keywords: Anger, Self-respect, Flourishing, Virtue, Aristotle.

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1 ANGER, VIRTUE, AND SELF-RESPECT

Philosophers have a long history, dating back (at least) to Aristotle of defending the moral importance of anger. These defenses of anger contend that anger is epistemically valuable, useful for motivating protest and change, and constitutive of the proper moral response to injustice. On the strongest version of these arguments, correctly responding to injustice is constituted by feelings of anger,

so anger is not merely morally permissible but virtuous. Here I will focus on this latter claim, and particularly as it appears in Aristotle's ethical account. Aristotle argues that proportional anger is a necessary virtue, since anger reflects a proper sense of self-respect and failing to feel angry shows servility. Anger is appropriate when a harmed person is undeservedly slighted (for example, her superiority has been ignored or belittled), indicating that the wronged agent was not being treated with an appropriate amount of respect.¹ While too much anger is a vice of excess, Aristotle claims that a person who fails to express anger to those who slight her, or who gives up anger too easily, is slavish since such a person shows insufficient concern for her status and what she deserves.²

According to Aristotle, justice demands that the wronged party receive back exactly what he has lost (not more or less), so Aristotle agrees with Homer that it is unseemly to be angry at those who have died, since the offender has already received retribution, which restores the harmed agent's honor already.³ This is also why the wrongdoer debasing himself and making restitution are also circumstances in which letting go of anger are appropriate, since one's honor is also restored by public acknowledgment of wrongdoing. While demanding too much back from the wrongdoer demonstrates an excess in claiming goods for oneself, failing to demand the goods that one deserves is a vice of deficiency. Since Aristotle's account of justice demands that everything the wronged agent has lost be restored before letting go of blame, anger, and resentment, it is only once this occurs (either through restitution, the wrongdoer's self-abasement, or successful revenge) that the wronged agent may then let go of anger and resentment.⁴ To give anger up before complete restoration would not be fair or just, since it would indicate that the wronged agent was insufficiently concerned with getting what they deserve. Enough self-abasement and full restoration of the wrong may provide appropriate conditions to give up anger, but short of that, Aristotle's claim is that the virtuous agent will not do so. Since forgiveness paradigmatically involves giving up anger and blame in cases where the wrongdoer does not – perhaps could never – deserve it, this shows that the justifications for forgiveness are fundamentally incompatible with Aristotle's conception of virtuous anger.⁵

¹ARISTOTLE, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. and ed. by G. A. Kennedy, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007², 1378a30–31.

²IDEM, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. and ed. by T. H. Irwin, Hackett, Indianapolis 1999², 1126a4–8; *Rhetoric*, cit., 1367a24–25.

³IDEM, *Rhetoric*, cit., 1380b25–30.

⁴*Ibidem*, 1378b14–25.

⁵C. PHILLIPS-GARRETT, *Why Aristotle's Virtuous Agent Won't Forgive: Aristotle on Sungnōmē, Praotēs, and Megalopsychia*, in *Conflict and Resolution: The Ethics of Forgiveness, Revenge, and Punishment*, ed. by P. Satne, K. M. Scheiter, Springer, Cham 2022, pp. 189–205.

2 VIRTUE AND FLOURISHING

In contrast to Aristotle's claim that continuing to be angry until the wrongdoer deserves otherwise is the only virtuous course of action, I will argue that maintaining anger may not always be a virtuous requirement since it is important to take seriously another element relevant to identifying virtuous behavior: its relationship to flourishing. Even when anger is appropriate (when the harm is real, and the wrongdoer has failed to make restitution or even is unrepentant), I argue that it may be virtuous to give up anger by forgiving the wrongdoer.

To identify whether and why particular emotions and desires enable flourishing, we need to examine the kind of creatures that we are. Human beings, Aristotle says, are rational animals. Unlike the Cartesian or Platonic pictures, human beings are a unified substance; there is no mind-body separation.⁶ For Aristotle, human beings are composed of three parts, each of which must flourish for the whole being to flourish: the nutritive part, which is connected to the growth and development of our bodies; the sensitive part of the soul, concerned with moving, desiring, and feeling; and the rational part of our soul, which allows us to think, speak, and make decisions. As human beings, we are rational animals, so human flourishing will involve not only the rational part, but also our physical and psychological being. The virtues are what enable all parts of us to flourish. Given this, to identify whether and why particular emotions and desires enable flourishing we need to know whether a particular emotion supports the flourishing of the whole person.

In the Aristotelian tradition of virtue, virtues are those dispositions that are conducive to a virtuous agent's flourishing. As such, identifying the mean within a particular sphere of action must be guided by what contributes to human flourishing itself. Therefore, it is necessary to take seriously the wealth of evidence about the effect that emotions have on human beings, and not just theorize from the armchair about the likely effects, as philosophers have commonly done. The empirical evidence on anger and forgiveness therefore provides us with important evidence for when anger may undermine flourishing.

3 THE COST OF ANGER

When it comes to the question of anger and its relationship to both psychic and physical flourishing, the empirical evidence raises serious doubts about the role that anger plays in virtue for Aristotle. In comparing individuals who maintain their anger long-term versus those who decide to forgive and let go of their anger, the psychological evidence seems to support the idea that forgiveness is more ef-

⁶ARISTOTLE, *De Anima*, 412b6; 413a3-5.

fective at helping agents to move past the wrongs done to them, heal, and reorient toward their future, while continued anger traps wronged agents in the past. This literature is extensive, showing a very strong positive correlation between forgiveness and reduction in a variety of negative mental health symptoms, suggesting that the process of forgiveness helps to resolve psychological symptoms that stem from past hurts. In comparison to maintaining anger, forgiveness is associated with reductions in anxiety and depression, as well as increasing measures of overall positive affect, including happiness, satisfaction, confidence, and hope.⁷ Likewise, since PTSD and other symptoms of severe psychological distress are rooted in and worsened by remaining stuck in the past rather than being oriented toward the future,⁸ it is not surprising that studies show that harboring anger is correlated with worsening PTSD symptoms, in comparison with PTSD sufferers who choose to forgive and let go of anger.⁹

Additionally, holding on to anger and blame risks engendering a victim mindset into wronged individuals. The cost of remaining in a state of anger and thus continuing to ruminate on how one was wronged goes beyond the immediate psychological distress that it immediately engenders by undermining the chance of success even in areas entirely unrelated to the initial transgression. For instance, in a study where participants were unconsciously primed to think of themselves as victims, they performed much more slowly and passively and gave up more quickly on problem-solving tasks compared with control subjects.¹⁰ This

⁷B. W. LUNDAHL *et al.*, *Process-Based Forgiveness Interventions: A Meta-Analytic Review*, «Research on Social Work Practice», 18/5 (2008), pp. 465-478; N. G. WADE *et al.*, *Efficacy of Psychotherapeutic Interventions to Promote Forgiveness: A Meta-Analysis*, «Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology», 82/1 (2014), pp. 154-170; S. AKHTAR, J. BARLOW, *Forgiveness Therapy for the Promotion of Mental Well-Being: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*, «Trauma, Violence, & Abuse», 19/1 (2018), pp. 107-122. Cf. L. TOUSSAINT, J. R. WEBB, *Theoretical and Empirical Connections Between Forgiveness, Mental Health, and Well-Being*, in *Handbook of Forgiveness*, ed. by E. L. Worthington, Jr., Routledge, New York 2005, pp. 349-362; K. A. LAWLER-ROW, R. L. PIFERI, *The Forgiving Personality: Describing a Life Well Lived?*, «Personality and Individual Differences», 41 (2006), pp. 1009-1020.

⁸E. A. HOLMAN, R. C. SILVER, *Getting 'Stuck' in the Past: Temporal Orientation and Coping with Trauma*, «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology», 74/5 (1998), pp. 1146-1163; M. HALLIGAN *et al.*, *Rumination in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*, «Depression and Anxiety», 24/5 (2007), pp. 307-317.

⁹B. LOPES CARDOZO *et al.*, *Mental Health, Social Functioning, and Feelings of Hatred and Revenge of Kosovar Albanians One Year After the War in Kosovo*, «Journal of Traumatic Stress», 16/4 (2003), pp. 351-360; C. V. O. WITVLIET *et al.*, *Posttraumatic Mental and Physical Health Correlates of Forgiveness and Religious Coping in Military Veterans*, «Journal of Traumatic Stress», 17/3 (2004), pp. 269-273; U. ORTH, E. WIELAND, *Anger, Hostility, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Trauma-Exposed Adults: A Meta-Analysis*, «Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology», 74/4 (2006), pp. 698-706.

¹⁰D. M. TICE, S. HASTINGS, K. L. SOMMER, *Effects of Priming the Victim Role on Task Performance*, unpublished findings, Case Western Reserve University, 1997, referenced in R. F. BAUMEISTER, J. J. EXLINE, K. L. SOMMER, *The Victim Role, Grudge Theory, and Two Dimensions of Forgiveness*, in

is why re-framing the situation is often so powerful for those who have suffered serious wrongs: in refusing to remain a victim, the wronged individual takes back control over her own psychological health and narrative identity. Coming to think of herself as a survivor rather than as a victim is the first step, and is facilitated by the process of letting go of the anger, hatred, and blame stemming from the past to be able to focus on reshaping and reclaiming the future.

Given the evidence that long-term anger is deleterious to health (both physical and mental) and that mental and physical health are intimately connected, it is also not surprising that maintaining negative reactive attitudes (such as anger and resentment) is correlated with increased levels of stress and a variety of negative health impacts, particularly on cardiovascular health¹¹ and blood pressure.¹² And, unfortunately for those who do suffer ill health effects, anger also seems to be correlated with reduced capacity to manage pain.¹³ Since flourishing involves the health of the entire human being, anger's effects illustrate the complex interactions between psychic and physical health. Human beings are not merely rational beings, so our health is an important component of whether life goes well for an agent.

What this suggests is that holding on to anger may be a useful coping strategy in the beginning, but it is like taking painkillers for a serious and painful infection: they are helpful when the pain is so overwhelming that focusing on anything else is impossible, but not because they help the wound to heal. To heal, the wound must be cleaned and repaired. Similarly, anger may blunt sorrow initially and motivate a victim to keep going after a severe injury, but ultimately, it will do nothing to help healing since what is necessary is to purge and fix the wound itself. If the wound continues to fester, the agent will be unable to fully recover.

Dimensions of Forgiveness, ed. by E. L. Worthington, Jr., Templeton Foundation Press, Philadelphia 1998, pp. 79-104.

¹¹P. ANGERER *et al.*, *Impact of Social Support, Cynical Hostility and Anger Expression on Progression of Coronary Atherosclerosis*, «Journal of the American College of Cardiology», 36/6 (2000), pp. 1781-1788; Y. CHIDA, A. STEPTOE, *The Association of Anger and Hostility With Future Coronary Heart Disease: A Meta-Analytic Review of Prospective Evidence*, «Journal of the American College of Cardiology», 53/11 (2009), pp. 936-946; D. S. KRANTZ *et al.*, *Anger, Hostility, and Cardiac Symptoms in Women with Suspected Coronary Artery Disease: The Women's Ischemia Syndrome Evaluation (WISE) Study*, «Journal of Women's Health», 15/10 (2006), pp. 1214-1223; J. SULS, *Anger and the Heart: Perspectives on Cardiac Risk, Mechanisms and Interventions*, «Progress in Cardiovascular Disease», 55 (2013), pp. 538-547; O. E. TITOVA *et al.*, *Anger Frequency and Risk of Cardiovascular Morbidity and Mortality*, «European Heart Journal Open», 2 (2022), pp. 1-8.

¹²J. SULS, C. K. WAN, P. T. COSTA, JR., *Relationship of Trait Anger to Resting Blood Pressure: A Meta-Analysis*, «Health Psychology», 14/5 (1995), pp. 444-456.

¹³K. A. GREENWOOD *et al.*, *Anger and Persistent Pain: Current Status and Future Directions*, «Pain», 103 (2003), pp. 1-5; J. W. CARSON *et al.*, *Forgiveness and Chronic Low Back Pain: A Preliminary Study Examining the Relationship of Forgiveness to Pain, Anger, and Psychological Distress*, «The Journal of Pain», 6/2 (2005), pp. 84-91.

Likewise, holding on to anger does not allow either party to heal; it traps both the wronged individual and the wrongdoer at the worst moments of their lives. Forgiveness, however, allows the wronged person to move on without remaining mired in permanent anger. By focusing on working through and resolving the anger and hurt, forgiveness discharges it, which appears to be causally efficacious in healing the underlying trauma that is the root of the symptoms. When an agent's health is not undermined by anger, she is able to focus on her own goals and plans for the future instead of what has happened to her in the past. Forgiveness thus plays an important role in promoting both physical and mental flourishing, while maintaining anger as long as it is fitting to do so inhibits this. The ways in which this undermines the capacity of an individual to foster their own flourishing are worrying, and if the connection between virtue and flourishing is to be taken seriously, we should question whether maintaining such anger is virtuous at all.

4 SELF-RESPECT AND ANGER, REVISITED

So far, none of this shows that giving up anger will in fact be virtuous; perhaps it is just an unfortunate fact that we live in a world where acting in accord with the virtues will often not benefit us. I accept much of this claim: we do not live in an ideal world, and so I accept it is impossible that in every circumstance, the virtues will directly promote an agent's own flourishing. Nevertheless, I think there is a way of explaining why even unconditional forgiveness need not undermine self-respect, which was the problem I started with. I contend that while acknowledging wrongdoing is important for recognizing one's own value, maintaining self-respect does not require holding on to anger, especially if doing so undermines the agent's own flourishing. In other words, it is not servile to give up anger if this is the best means of promoting one's own flourishing.

Earlier I argued that the empirical evidence strongly supports the idea that forgiveness seems much more successful than maintaining anger long-term for promoting psychological healing. One reason for the role that forgiveness plays in healing is the way it allows the wronged agent to reorient the narrative from the wrongdoer back to the wronged agent herself. Forgiveness allows the victim to move on and concentrate on rebuilding her own life rather than remaining focused on the wrongdoer. By shifting the focus, the wronged agent need not wait on the actions of the wrongdoer to begin moving on. Waiting on the wrongdoer to make everything equal again keeps the victim trapped in what was done to her by the wrongdoer, especially since some wrongs can never be fully recompensed and some wrongdoers will never come to see the necessity of even trying. But rather than remaining trapped in stewing over the wrong that was done, forgiveness

allows the victim to focus on the future, not the past. With forgiveness, the victim can begin to heal on her own terms, not the wrongdoers's.

If a wronged agent chooses to forgive and give up her anger because it is best for her own flourishing, her choice to forgive is not indicative of a lack of self-respect. To the contrary, when forgiving and giving up anger would increase her own emotional health and sense of agency, refusing to do so simply to maintain an abstract principle seems to allow the wrongdoer to control how the wronged individual is able to flourish. Holding out to demand repentance that may never be forthcoming might be the worst option for her own flourishing, and it seems odd to demand that she sacrifice her own flourishing in the name of self-respect. Rather than undermining her own flourishing, giving up anger in this case is what allows her to flourish, so forgiving the wrongdoer does not indicate that she lacks proper understanding of her own worth. Indeed, what shows proper recognition of her worth is trusting her own judgment and commitment to her own good. The person who truly respects herself knows her own worth, and deciding to forgive does not mean that she accepts the implicit judgment that she is less valuable or important. If she truly knows what she is worth, she will recognize that the wrongdoer's implicit assessment is confused, since she knows that her value is no less than any other individual's, whatever the wrongdoer's action might suggest.

Giving up anger even when the wrongdoer deserves continued anger does not show that the wronged agent fails to take justice or herself seriously; rather, if she chooses to give up anger because it is undermining her own well-being, she seems to be directly prioritizing what is best for her. Such a choice is far from being servile, since it is, in fact, conducive to her flourishing. Rather than undermining her honor and self-respect, giving up anger may actually be the vehicle through which it is preserved.

Nothing I argue for here should be taken to disagree with the claim that anger can play an important role in a wronged individual's coming to understand the wrongs that she has suffered and in motivating her to demand accountability. We might reasonably think that someone who never feels anger at being wronged, even for a moment, does fail to take her own value seriously enough. Nevertheless, giving up anger before accountability is fully achieved does not suggest that the wrong is simply tolerated or that the forgiver simply turns a blind eye to the offense; to the contrary, in forgiving, the wronged individual must acknowledge the blameworthiness of the wrongdoer first in order to forgive. A virtuous individual can call for accountability even though she has given up her anger, and this choice to prioritize her own flourishing over continued anger reflects neither servility nor irascibility. Such a choice shows how she might reasonably act in accordance with the mean without continuing to hold on to her anger.

If this is right, identifying the mean with regards to anger will more complex than merely figuring out what it is that each agent deserves. This is not to

suggest, of course, that identifying what it is that each of us deserve is a simple matter! Rather, the claim is that even once the difficult task of identifying what desert requires is completed, this does not settle the matter of what a virtuous agent ought to do. Identifying the mean will require an agent to balance her own flourishing against an abstract expectation of getting what she deserves, and so a virtuous agent need not necessarily continue to hold on to anger until the wrongdoer makes full restoration of the wrong. To do so is not incompatible with accountability, since it is possible for her to continue to hold the wrongdoer to account through calls for his repentance and restoration without continuing to feel the anger that may be so destructive to her own flourishing.

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