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Understanding Aristotle's Notion of the Mean:
A Case Study in Anger

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that purely quantitative understandings of Aristotle's concept of "the mean" (as presented in Nicomachean Ethics) are oversimplified, and I make this argument by analyzing the particular emotion of anger. Anger, I contend, helps to complicate the purely quantitative understanding of the mean, insofar as, I argue, the amount of anger experienced is not the morally salient feature in determining whether or not the anger is virtuous. Rather, anger is one example of an emotion or trait for which other, non-quantitative parameters of the mean are more salient, giving us a more nuanced understanding of what the mean is. Anger is virtuous not when it is in the right measurable degree, but rather when it is directed at the proper target. In this way, the virtue-making property of anger is distinctly qualitative. Examining anger provides insight into the concept of the mean and its role in Aristotle's ethics, and also helps to shed light on contemporary debates about political anger.

Keywords: Aristotle, anger, injustice, ethics, emotions

> Attempts to find in the doctrine of the mean a mathematical algorithm that will determine an appraisal (or decision) seem doomed, while interpretations of it as a principle ('always act moderately') violate the obvious truth that many circumstances simply do not call for moderation. *Extreme anger may sometimes be just the right response.* (Sherman 1989, 35)

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), Aristotle aims to give an account of the highest human good achievable in action, which he takes to be happiness. Happiness, Aristotle con-

tends, is both complete and self-sufficient. In other words, happiness is an end that is always choiceworthy in its own right (not for some further end) and which on its own makes a life choiceworthy and lacking nothing (*NE* 1097b). Aristotle goes on to argue for his conclusion that happiness is the highest end of human action – that at which humans ultimately aim – by way of his classic function argument, which suggests that we can come to know what the highest good for human beings is by looking at their characteristic function. To do so, we look at what sets human beings apart from other species, which Aristotle concludes is "activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason" (*NE* 1098a).[1] Aristotle further develops this idea to suggest that to complete their function well, humans must act in accordance with virtue over a complete life (*NE* 1098a).[2] Aristotle thus concludes book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* with an introduction to the concept of "virtue" and the two distinct forms virtue can take, namely *virtues of thought* and *virtues of character*.

While both sets of virtues – those of thought and those of character – play an important role in Aristotle's overall work on ethics, in what follows I want to specifically focus in on Aristotle's presentation of the virtues of character, as developed primarily in the second book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. More specifically, I want to examine Aristotle's notion of "the mean," and attempt to make sense of what Aristotle means by his claim that virtue exists in the mean between extremes of excess and deficiency (*NE* 1106b). Aristotle sets out multiple "parameters" of the mean, namely that in order to be virtuous, an act or emotion must be "towards the right object, to the right degree, at the right time, for the sake of the right end, and in the right way" (*NE* 1109a28).[3] Ultimately, I argue that thinking of the mean in terms of a simple quantitative mid-point between two extremes obscures the complexity inherent in the concept of the mean, as a result of these multiple parameters. Not all of the individual parameters that make up the concept of the mean lend themselves to being understood in this way, that is, as a measurement of quantity (i.e., experiencing something between "too much" and "too little," understood quantitatively). While it is clear that, at the very least, the second condition (namely, that the mean exists in the proper de-

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[1] For a further analysis of Aristotle's conception of the distinctive parts of the soul, see Aristotle's *De Anima,* book 2, chapter 3.

[2] Another way of articulating this point is that specifically *human excellence* involves a "disposition in virtue of which we are well disposed in respect of feelings" (Hursthouse 1999, 105). To be well disposed with respect to feelings, and to act in accordance with that disposition, is to perform the characteristically human function well, or finely.

[3] I am grateful to Devin Henry for helping me clarify this point.

gree) is a quantitative notion (that is, on this condition, it makes sense to say the mean falls between "too much" and "too little"), it is less clear that the other parameters can similarly be understood in this way. For example, it is not clear in what sense "towards the right object" can be understood in terms of quantitative measurement of more or less, or "too much" or "too little."

Despite the fact that Aristotle sets out these various parameters of the mean, discussions of the what the mean is, or how to identify it, often reduce the concept to a quantitative measure (i.e., we teach and discuss the notion of the mean as if it were simply the halfway point between doing or experiencing "too much" or "too little" of some action or emotion).[4] In what follows, I contend that it is oversimplified to understand the mean in terms of this sort of simple quantitative measurement, and I demonstrate this by analyzing the particular emotion of anger. With respect to anger, I argue that to understand anger as virtuous or vicious has little to do with the amount or degree of anger, but rather, the salient parameter of the mean with respect to anger is whether or not it is *directed at proper objects* – a feature of the mean which cannot be reduced to a more/less measurement. More precisely, I argue that it does not make sense to think of anger as something that properly exists in a mean between "too much" or "too little," viz., an excess or deficiency of anger. Rather, the virtue associated with anger is a virtue or a vice insofar as it is directed at proper objects or isn't, respectively. I will suggest that such proper objects of anger include (at the

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[4] See, for example, how "the mean" is described on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy page covering "Aristotle's Ethics." It states: Furthermore, every ethical virtue is a condition intermediate (a "golden mean" as it is popularly known) between two other states, one involving excess, and the other deficiency (1106a26–b28). In this respect, Aristotle says, the virtues are no different from technical skills: every skilled worker knows how to avoid excess and deficiency, and is in a condition intermediate between two extremes. The courageous person, for example, judges that some dangers are worth facing and others not, and experiences fear to a degree that is appropriate to his circumstances. He lies between the coward, who flees every danger and experiences excessive fear, and the rash person, who judges every danger worth facing and experiences little or no fear. Aristotle holds that this same topography applies to every ethical virtue: all are located on a map that places the virtues between states of excess and deficiency" (Kraut 2018). W.F.R Hardie describes how the "concept of a mathematical mean" makes sense when viewed alongside of Aristotle's philosophy and that of his predecessors (Hardie 1965).

very least) instances of social and political injustice. In these cases, I will argue, it does not make sense to speak of "too much anger," or "anger in excess." Rather, as Myisha Cherry (2014) has argued, when the object of anger is a significant moral or political injustice, *more anger might be better,* insofar as it has motivational and productive qualities that can prompt responses to that injustice.[5] While we can experience varying amounts of anger at a given circumstance, the *amount* of anger is not what makes the experience of anger virtuous or not. Rather, it is the *object* at which the anger is targeted.[6] Thinking about anger, then, allows us to reconsider common understandings of Aristotle's mean and its relation to character virtue. An analysis of anger helps to complicate oversimplified notions of the mean as a measurable distance midway between two quantifiable extremes of excess and deficiency. In so doing, it makes the notion of the mean both more nuanced and more interesting in contemporary moral and political discussion.

1. "The Mean": First Considerations

Aristotle introduces the concept of "the mean" in *Nicomachean Ethics* book 2, chapter 6. The mean, Aristotle argues, serves as a target at which to aim, and also represents a standard for virtuous action (*NE* 1106a). Consistently and reliably acting in accordance with the mean is the mark of a virtuous person. As Jessica Moss (2015) writes, character virtues are, by definition, dispositions "to act and feel passions in ways that hit the mean" (Moss 2015, 5). Given the centrality of the notion of the mean to Aristotle's theory of virtue, then, it is important to have an accurate understanding of what the mean consists in, or how we ought to think about the concept of the mean in relation to Aristotle's moral theory. Aristotle articulates the mean as being an intermediate condition, falling between two extremes: excesses and deficiencies (*NE* 1106a). Importantly, this mean is "not one, and is not the same for all." Rather, the mean Aristotle describes is "relative to us" (*NE* 1106a). The mean will be something that "preserves a good result" in a particular case, while the ex-

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[5] See also Chemaly 2018.

[6] To be clear, I am advancing what I take to be a plausible interpretation of the parameters Aristotle sets out for the mean. I am not committed to the view that were Aristotle in front of me, he would necessarily endorse this interpretation as the sole or even the best way of making sense of the mean. My more modest claim is that this as a reasonable interpretation of what Aristotle says in *Nicomachean Ethics,* which can also help to make the concept of the mean more applicable to contemporary discussions.

treme conditions of excess and deficiency ruin it (*NE* 1106b). These conditions of excess and deficiency, and their relative intermediate, are about feelings and actions, including fear, confidence, anger, appetites, and so on.[7] Each of these, Aristotle argues, can be felt "too much and too little," both ways which are "not well" or proper to virtue. What *is* proper to virtue with respect to feelings and actions, rather, is to experience or do them "at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way" (*NE* 1106b). It is this intermediate condition – which meets the listed criteria – that is proper of virtue, and thereby worthy of praise. The extreme conditions, which violate one or more of these criteria, are by contrast blameworthy.

Aristotle's articulation of the mean, and its use in subsequent discussions in the *Nicomachean Ethics* raises several questions. First and foremost, it remains unclear *what* precisely the mean is – a quantitative sum (i.e., not "too much" or "too little") or a qualitative property (i.e., directed at the appropriate things and enacted in the appropriate ways). It is also possible that different parameters of the mean (i.e., that it be towards the right object, to the right degree, at the right time, for the sake of the right end, and in the right way) are different in this regard, such that some parameters lend themselves to quantitative measurement while others only make sense qualitatively. Furthermore, it remains unclear what Aristotle means by stating that the mean is "relative to us." This could be taken to suggest that the mean takes into account relevant features of each particular agent as well as the particulars of the circumstance in which they are acting, but it could also simply be reiterating that the mean is context-dependent (that is, features of the agent, such as their social identity, are not taken to be relevant particulars in a given situation). Finally, it is unclear what Aristotle takes the mean to be *about* – is the mean found in instances of emotion and action, or in settled states of character?[8] These remain challenging puzzles for those attempting to understand Aristotle's overall ethical picture.

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[7] It is important to note the connection between being well-disposed with respect to how we experience appetites and emotions (which are guided by pleasure and pain) to how we act. Hursthouse (1999) writes that being well disposed with respect to feelings leads us to be well disposed with respect to action, too. Being well-disposed with respect to feelings and appetites reflects a stably virtuous character, from which proper, virtuous actions will flow (Hursthouse 1999, 106).

[8] Charles Young (1996), for instance, attributes to J.O Urmson the interpretation of the *location* of the mean as being located in states of character, as opposed to being located in particular actions. However, this is not a settled debate.

Despite the numerous questions raised by the idea of the mean, at least one thing seems clear – the concept of the mean (and Aristotle's ethical theory more generally) is not intended to give us a clear-cut decision procedure for action. For Aristotle, the right thing to do cannot be surmised by applying some general principle in all future cases; rather, the right thing to do depends upon properly grasping the morally salient features in the given case (Kraut 2014). This too might raise more questions than it answers: how do we know what features are morally salient in a given context? Will all agents be equally well-suited to grasp the morally salient features, or does the agent's identity play a role in this?[9] Do the morally salient features change in different social and political contexts?[10] In the following sections, I intend to bring these questions into conversation, and explore potential answers through the lens of a particular emotion, namely, the emotion of anger.

2. The Mean as Object-Oriented

Before turning the attention to anger, I must first say more about how the mean is being interpreted in contemporary literature, with respect to the many challenging questions Aristotle's articulation of the doctrine raises. One influential interpretation of the doctrine of the mean has been put forward by J.O Urmson (1973). In Urmson's reading of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, one can err in exactly two diametrically opposed ways, suggesting an inherent symmetry in the idea of the mean with respect to the two extremes (that is, an equally measurable distance between them). Some scholars have pointed out that Aristotle makes this point clear by analogizing the mean to the center point between symmetrical body parts, such as a nose marks the measurable midpoint between a set of eyes (Leunissen 2017). This reading seems to imply a fairly simplistic mathematical approach to locating

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[9] Standpoint epistemology, for instance, might lead us to consider the possibility that one's identity and socio-political standpoint have an effect on what an agent can see, know, and perceive as relevant. In particular, standpoint theory argues that some socio-political standpoints have privileged access to some morally salient information. For a general overview of standpoint theory, see Anderson 2015 and Wylie 2003, 2012.

[10] One might think that different social contexts give rise to different needs, and different understandings of what the most morally salient features of a given case are. For example, Lisa Tessman (2005) has argued that under conditions of social oppression, the oppressed might be less likely to act in the ways standardly perceived as "moral," and less likely to see what is "moral" in the same ways as the dominant groups. What *is* moral might itself be radically different in varying social and political contexts.

the mean between two symmetrical points marked by excess and deficiency – a point which Aristotle himself explicitly rejects (1106a).

Rosalind Hursthouse (1999) challenges Urmson's reading of Aristotle, arguing that even if one reads book 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as committing Aristotle to this sort of view about the mean, when he goes on to develop the specific virtues in book 3, he treats the "symmetry reading" of the mean as false (Hursthosue 1999, 107-8). So, while some interpreters of Aristotle are inclined to fill out the idea of excess and deficiency as *quantitative* opposites[11], Hursthouse argues that Aristotle himself did not fill out the ideas of "too much" or "too little" in any clear way, viz., Hursthouse denies that anything like this quantitative reading of the mean (as found in Urmson's work) can be attributed to Aristotle himself. She writes, "The idea that the concept of right reason could be captured by specifying it as a mean between too many reasons and too few reasons has only to be stated to be seen as absurd…" She then continues: "*Right occasion* and *right object* cannot be specified as means… [and] some vices cannot be understood as dispositions to exhibit or feel an emotion too much or too little" (Hursthouse 1999, 109, emphasis in original). Hursthouse analyzes various emotions which she does not think fit the sort of interpretation of the mean advanced by Urmson (that the mean is a quantitative feature between precisely two opposed extremes), however I want to turn specifically to her analysis of patience and anger, and bring them into conversation with other, more recent, philosophical analyses of anger. Doing so, I contend, demonstrates the usefulness of understanding the concept of the mean in a more nuanced way – a way that is not limited by a mere quantitative analysis, but rather is sensitive to other parameters as well.

Before turning to anger, I want to say a bit more about Hursthouse's general approach to the doctrine of the mean. Contra Urmson's quantitative approach to the mean, Hursthouse offers a *qualitative* approach, namely, an *object-driven* approach to acting with respect to a mean. Virtuous disposition with respect to emotion and appetite (and thus with respect to actions) is not about quantity, frequency, or intensity of those emotions or appe-

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[11] Hursthouse (1999) reads Urmson as filling out excess and deficiency in precisely these ways, namely as *quantitative* properties. On her reading of Urmson, Urmson spells out excess as referring to doing an action on too many occasions, or with too much intensity (again, a matter of degree). Similarly, she takes Urmson to spell out deficiency as referring to performing an action on too few occasions, or performing these actions with too little intensity (too weakly). Despite Urmson's enthusiasm about this reading, Hursthouse compellingly argues that Aristotle himself is not committed to anything like this reading (Hursthouse 1999, 109).

tites, but rather about the object at which they are directed (Hursthouse 1999, 118). On her view then, it might be perfectly appropriate to experience certain emotions frequently and with high degrees of intensity, so long as those emotions are directed at "appropriate objects." This applies directly to the idea of anger: Hursthouse wants to show, contra Urmson, that it can be proper to virtue to experience *a lot* of anger *a lot* of the time. The vice condition (i.e., irascibility) is not about feeling "too much," anger, or feeling anger too often, but rather about directing anger at the *wrong objects*. It is this particular line of thinking that I want to develop in greater detail in the following section.

3. A Closer Look at Anger

Hursthouse argues that the idea that anger itself can be represented within the idea of the mean is imposed on Aristotle, but is not a view that Aristotle is himself committed to [12]. She writes, "Interestingly enough, it is Urmson, not Aristotle, who makes the (as it happens) false assumption about human beings which is required to guarantee that the right disposition with respect to anger is a disposition in a [quantifiable] mean" (Hursthouse 1999, 117). She quotes Urmson, who says:

> The man whose character is such that he feels only mild annoyance at a trivial slight and is enraged by torture (of his wife?) has a character which is in a mean between one which exhibits rage on trivial as well as important occasions and one which can cooly contemplate the greatest outrages (Urmson 1973, 225).

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[12] In considering the particular virtues of character, Aristotle does indeed address the issue of anger. On anger, Aristotle writes: "Anger also admits of an excess, deficiency, and mean. These are all practically nameless, but since we call the intermediate person mild, let us call the mean mildness. Among the extreme people, let the excessive person be irascible, and his vice irascibility, and let the deficient person be a sort of inirascible person, and his deficiency inarasicibility" (*NE* 1108a). Note however that this does not commit Aristotle to a particular picture of what the intermediate condition, mildness, consists in. Aristotle can be read as being neutral (or, at least unclear) about whether the mean is quantitative as Urmson argues (feeling the right amount of anger or right degree of anger) or qualitative as Hursthouse argues (directed at proper objects). For more analysis of Aristotle on anger, see Koziak 2000, Sokolon 2006.

Hursthouse argues that in order to make sense of Urmson's point here, we must "assume that the man who can cooly contemplate the greatest outrages is also someone which cooly contemplates trivial slights, in order to make sense of the first man's character as being in a mean" (Hursthouse 1999, 117). However, she argues, we have no reason to assume any such thing. Rather, she argues:

> *If* we assume that human beings mostly fall on a range that goes from being angered by nearly everything (the trivial *and* the important) to being angered by hardly anything (neither the trivial nor the important), and conveniently passes through being angered by the important but not by the trivial, then we could indeed say that *praotes*, patience, like courage, is a disposition that lies in a mean between excess and deficiency. But the assumption is false. The defect many of us have is to be angered by the trivial and *not* by the important…. (Hursthouse 1999, 117).

The point, then, is that what goes wrong when one acts in a way representative of vice with respect to anger, is not that they feel "too much" anger, as Urmson would have it. Rather, the problematic condition with respect to anger involves directing anger *at the wrong things,* or *failing to get angry* at that which is appropriate for inspiring anger.

Moreover, while Hursthouse herself does not address this, we might also press Urmson's view by questioning whether or not it is always morally virtuous to approach so-called trivial slights "cooly," and furthermore, what goes into determining what constitutes a "trivial slight" in the first place. For instance, recent literature on microaggressions defines them as "verbal or non-verbal slights, snubs, or insults, either intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (Freeman and Stewart 2018; Sue 2010). While some consider microaggressions "trivial," and thus not the proper object of our attention or anger (Friedersdorf 2015, Haidt & Lukianoff 2017, Lilienfeld 2017, and others), others have recently provided accounts of the multiple and cumulative harms of microaggressions (Nadal 2012, Runyowa 2015, Freeman & Stewart 2018, among others), which suggest that they might in fact be closer to moral/political "outrages" of the sort Urmson identifies as being proper objects of anger. The point is that determining what are proper objects of anger, and what degree of anger is appropriate in response to them, might differ radically between differentially positioned agents, in varying socio-political contexts, with varying degrees of oppression, power, and domination operating. To assume that there is always a mean between "too much" and "too little" anger, directed at trivial slights and objects of outrage respectively, seems misguided when considered from the starting point of non-ideal

circumstances, and the recognition that people experience varying degrees of oppression within them, which justifies varying degrees of response. While for some, a particular sort of slight might be trivial, for others, insofar as it is linked to ongoing systems of injustice or oppression, it is an appropriate object of anger. When this is the case, the response should not be to try to avoid anger at these seemingly small slights (i.e., at microaggressions or racial slurs or other allegedly trivial slights) in the name of virtue, but rather to allow one-self to feel angry about them, the injustice they represent and are a constitutive part of, and to use that anger to try to begin rectifying the underlying injustice.

It is this way of thinking which has compelled some theorists to argue that under conditions of pervasive social and political oppression, anger directed at proper objects (namely, moral injustices or sources of oppression, regardless of scale or size) is virtuous (Bell 2009, Cherry 2014, Potter 2009, Tessman 2005, Traister 2018). Insofar as anger at injustice (regardless of size) is virtuous, it is to be further cultivated, not suppressed or viewed as vice *a priori*.

The particular defense of anger as a virtue when directed at proper objects that I find most productive is advanced in the work of Black feminist scholar Myisha Cherry. Cherry (2014) argues that moral anger (a subclass of anger) arises in response to a *moral wrong*. In other words, this is anger that has *as its object* a moral injustice or other moral wrongdoing, whereas non-moral anger can arise in response to any number of non-moral reasons, in the absence of any injustice or moral wrong at all. In response to Glen Pettigrove (2012) who argues that anger is unproductive and should be replaced by meekness [13], Cherry defends this particular subclass of moral anger on motivational and pragmatic grounds. Against Pettigrove, Cherry argues that moral anger should not be displaced, but rather held onto, and channeled into productive ends.

What reasons do we have to hold onto moral anger? First, Cherry argues that moral anger has an intensely *motivational force* (3). Pointing to empirical studies in psychology,

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[13] Pettigrove (2012) argues that meekness is desirable for its ability to control other undesirable traits (i.e., anger), thereby reflecting self-control, gentleness, and benevolence. Cherry argues that display-ing this sort of meekness (subduing anger to promote gentleness, etc.) can function to excuse injus-tice, or at least let it continue unchallenged (Cherry 2014, 4). Moral anger, on the other hand, forces us to make moral judgments about what we witness and experience, and to confront difficult matters head on. "Erasing moral anger," she writes, "can cause us to erase the moral judgment" (Cherry 2014, 4). Subduing moral anger can amount to turning a blind eye to injustice, while channeling moral anger forces us to morally assess the injustice—to confront it and prompt ourselves towards action.

Cherry demonstrates how anger can help to motivate agents either by activating parts of the brain that encourage us to approach the objects of our anger, or by increasing desire to do something about the anger we feel. Additionally, Cherry argues, anger motivates us because it is uncomfortable – we are motivated to rid ourselves of the discomfort caused by moral anger by seeking to rid ourselves of the injustice or moral wrong that caused it (here, by pursuing justice). "Justice," Cherry writes, "alleviates the discomfort of moral anger."[14] The only way to ultimately alleviate the discomfort of moral anger caused by injustice is to actually achieve justice, so the morally angry are always motivated to continue working towards it.

In addition to the motivational force of moral anger, Cherry also argues that moral anger makes us more productive at undermining injustices. The morally angry, she argues, are more apt to join together, to form "initiatives, movements, and organizing" that allow their shared anger to be heard, for plans to be made, and to struggle together until justice is reached. We are better at this, she argues, when we have the moral anger that prompts us to organize, collectivize, and strategize. The point, then, is that in non-ideal conditions, where injustices occur with regularity, moral anger – and doing something in response to it – can help promote justice. In such circumstances, it does not make sense to speak of "too much" anger, as someone like Urmson might do, or to associate virtue with an intermediate condition of "mildness" or "meekness." Rather, when anger is directed at proper objects, such as systemic oppression or other social injustice – feeling significant degrees of anger and channeling that anger into productive ends might be the best thing for an agent to do.

This all raises one final question – how do we attune ourselves to the proper objects of anger, so that we can know we are acting in ways that are appropriate to virtue? While answering this question in significant detail would warrant a paper of its own, I briefly turn to the work of Martha Nussbaum to offer a preliminary answer. Nussbaum (1999) writes of grasping the morally salient particulars[15] of a given situation through a particular sort of

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[14] One potential objection at this point is that to struggle for justice in the interest of ending one's own discomfort is egoistic, and justice ought to always be pursued for its own sake. Cherry defends her position against this objection by arguing that emotions are not purely egoistic, but rather they match our desires. In the case of moral anger, the intense feelings experienced map onto altruistic desires to end injustice. "The goal of justice makes moral anger altruistic at the heart of it" (Cherry 2014, 2).

[15] Nancy Sherman (1989) also writes about the importance of *discerning the particulars* as a crucial step to determining the mean, and subsequently acting virtuously. This involves, Sherman explains,

moral perception. Reiterating the previously made point that Aristotle rejects the idea of "one size fits all" moral rules that can be applied to all cases, Nussbaum argues that Aristotle instead defends the *priority of perception* (Nussbaum 1999, 155). "That practical wisdom cannot be a systematic science concerned throughout with universal and general principles," she argues, "is evidently a defense of the priority of concrete situational judgements of a more informal and intuitive kind" (Nussbaum 1999, 155). This is, she explains, an ability to perceive and discern the particulars of a complex ethical situation, within the context of the entire situation itself (Nussbaum 1999, 158).

This sort of moral perception that Nussbaum defends is, of course, going to be trained within specific social and political contexts, by particular socially-situated individuals. In this way, one will, over time, learn to become attuned to the morally salient features with respect to the particular social and political environment they find themselves in. In this way, those brought up within the context of systemic oppression and/or structural injustice might have a heightened awareness of injustice, and thus be more able to *perceive* injustices when they encounter them.[16] For this reason, we might think an oppressed agent in non-ideal social and political circumstances is *better suited* to perceive injustice, to respond with moral anger, and to channel that moral anger into productive outcomes in the service of promoting justice. And that, to me, seems virtuous.

4. Objections and Replies

Before concluding, I want to briefly acknowledge two possible objections and begin to articulate replies to either. The first objection that I want to consider is alluded to above, though I have not yet made it explicit. The objection is that when I say that anger is virtuous when it is responsive to injustice, I am still making a quantitative claim. This sort of objection can take two more precise routes. First, one could argue that what makes an injustice unjust in the first place is itself a matter of degree or quantity, viz., an injustice is a more problematic (or morally worse) state of affairs vis-à-vis some more just (or morally

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determining "what we perceive as relevant in the case… [and] how we describe the situation" (Sherman 1989, 25). Note that this seems, prima facie, to be agent dependent.

[16] Once more, standpoint epistemology might be relevant to consider here: those who occupy socially subordinate positons might be epistemically and morally privileged with respect to the ability to perceive injustice. I do not intend to argue for the claims of standpoint theory here, rather I leave it as an open and interesting possibility to be considered.

better or preferable) state of affairs. This would make the anger that responds to that injustice a product of degree by proxy. The amount of anger that is appropriate piggybacks on something that is inherently a quantitative characteristic. The second iteration of this objection involves the claim that what makes anger virtuous is if it is qualitatively calibrated to the degree of injustice experienced, viz., the appropriate amount of anger is a product of the degree of injustice experienced, where the anger ought to be proportional to the size of the wrong or injustice perceived.[17] I think both lines of this objection are misguided, and that responding to each helps us to see that the salient virtue-making feature of anger is something qualitative, not quantitative.

With regards to the first, I contend that it is not merely "being worse than some other state of affairs" that makes an injustice unjust. Some state of affairs could be quantitatively, or measurably worse than some alternative state of affairs, and still not be unjust. If I, upon fair and consistent grading, assign a student a "C" on their exam when they could have received an "A" or a "B," they find themselves in a worse position than they could have, but they have not experienced an injustice. The unjust making feature of injustice has to be more than its being quantitatively worse when compared to something else; there has to be something qualitatively unique about injustice that makes us recognize it as such, and not just as a "less just" or "morally neutral, but not perfect" state of affairs. Rather, identifying something as a situation of injustice requires understanding what justice is, and what constitutes a meaningful deviation from or failure of justice. Such an understanding is not reducible to a numbers game, or a comparative scale of which scenario is better or worse.

With regards to the second formulation of this objection, namely, that virtuous anger is determined by its being quantitatively proportional to the degree of injustice (or moral wrong) perceived, I return to something suggested above, namely, that some injustices that are reasonably perceived as minor (or, at least smaller or more subtle than other types of injustice) still warrant significant anger, and sometimes a degree of anger that far outweighs the apparent "size" or the moral wrong. The examples highlighted above include the phenomenon of microaggressions, as well as the phenomenon of racial and other slurs. In both cases, the source of moral wrong or injustice is the speech of another person, often a seemingly small passing comment or remark. This, one might argue, is a measurably smaller (some might argue less significant) moral infraction than, for example, an instance of a

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[17] For an analysis of and response to anger evaluation of this sort, see Cherry 2018.

racially motivated police brutality, or an instance of overt hiring discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. It would follow from the objection that while it makes sense to experience intense and significant anger at the latter examples (the brutality or the hiring discrimination), it would be inappropriate to experience similar levels of anger at a measurably smaller infraction, such as a microaggressive comment or a slur muttered by a passerby. To determine how much anger is appropriate based on a hierarchal scale of moral infraction, however, is misguided, because it treats injustice in an overly simplified manner. Systems of injustice are too complex to capture in a scale that attempts to rank which injustices are "worse," and thereby warrant more anger. This is because seemingly small infractions (i.e., microaggressions) are connected to, and in many ways contribute to, the larger infractions, and they relate to each other in a complex web of interactions that uphold structures of injustice. For this reason, it doesn't make sense to suggest that it is lacking in virtue to get angry about what is perceived to be a smaller infraction, because the smaller infraction is inextricably linked to larger ones, through larger histories and systems of injustice and oppression. So, what makes the anger virtuous is still qualitative; it is about whether the anger is directed at an appropriate target, in this case, moral injustice. When one is angry about experience instances of microaggression, they are indeed angry about the morally appropriate thing. How angry they are is largely irrelevant.

The second possible objection, that I want to briefly acknowledge, is that there are still other parameters (other than those marked by quantitative measurement) that could be relevant for determining the virtuousness of anger, including the "in the right way" condition. In other words, even if anger is appropriately directed, for it to be fully virtuous would require that it is expressed in the morally right way. I am willing to accept that this is the case, and that there are better or worse environments in which to express one's anger, and better and worse ways to make one's anger evident.[18] Recall above that Cherry (2014), following the legacy of Audre Lorde, is interested in thinking through how anger can be

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[18] For example, in a not-yet-published article (obtained through private correspondence), Amitabha Palmer grants the potential for productive uses of anger, but argues that the particular conditions of the virtual world (particularly social media) make these platforms the wrong place to express otherwise morally appropriate anger. It is possible that certain social environments are such that the productive qualities of anger will be blocked, and the moral value of the anger will be curtailed. In such conditions, the virtuous person will seek more productive spaces for expressing their anger in ways that can motivate the sort of organizing and solidarity that Cherry (2014) describes as necessary for the promotion of justice.

productively channeled to maximize its motivational and pragmatic force. For this reason, I think it is morally appropriate to take these factors into consideration, and the maximally virtuous demonstrations of anger will take these factors into account; that is, demonstrations or expressions of anger will be sensitive to environment and context, and try to reserve expressions of anger for when they will be most productive in the service of promoting justice. Bearing that in mind, however, I still think the primary, or most salient, parameter of the mean with respect to anger is *what one is angry about*. If someone is angry about something that doesn't warrant anger (i.e., traffic on the highway), it doesn't matter how they choose to express or demonstrate that anger, the anger is already reflective of vice, insofar as it is directed at an inappropriate target. How one expresses anger (and when and where) is secondary to the question of what they are angry about. The latter is the key to identifying virtuous and vicious anger.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that highlighting the complexity of ancient texts helps us to realize just how many centuries old questions there are to answer and difficult puzzles to solve. Bringing those ancient puzzles and questions into dialogue with contemporary moral and political philosophy can help keep ancient texts relevant and exciting, but can also help to shed new light on the contemporary work as well. In this case, looking to Aristotle can help us to better understand how to be angry in a morally appropriate way. And, since our current political climate feels filled to the brim with anger, we can draw on the tools in Aristotle to try to understand where that anger is helpful, productive, and moral, and where it is counterproductive, harmful, and vicious. As such, attempting to solve puzzles of the past can better equip us to understand our morally complex present.

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