

# The Aptness of Anger

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*Be angry, but sin not.* Ephesians 4:26

## 1.

In 1965, the Cambridge Union held a debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley, Jr on the motion “The American dream is at the expense of the American Negro.” Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* had been published two years earlier; Buckley had been editor-in-chief of the *National Review*, which he founded, for a decade. Both men were at the height of their fame, the most important public intellectuals, respectively, in the American civil rights movement and the American conservative movement. Baldwin began in a quiet, recalcitrant tone: “I find myself not for the first time in the position of a kind of Jeremiah.” He came to deliver bad news, but not of the future. Instead he offered a sort of prophecy into history, the unrecognised truth about the material preconditions of the American dream:

I am stating very seriously, and this is not an overstatement: that *I* picked the cotton, and *I* carried to market, and *I* built the railroads, under someone else’s whip, for *nothing* . . . for *nothing*. The southern oligarchy which has until today so much power in Washington, and therefore some power in the world, was created by my labour and my sweat, and the violation of my women and the murder of my children. This, in the land of the free and the home of the brave. And no one can challenge that statement. It is a matter of historical record.

Buckley responded not with disagreement, but a pragmatic challenge:

What in fact shall we do about it? What shall we in America try to do...to eliminate those psychic humiliations which I join Mr Baldwin in believing are the very worst aspects of this discrimination?...I agree with you that we have a dastardly situation, but I’m asking you not to make politics as the crow flies...[Negroes] have done a great deal to

focus on the fact of White discrimination against Negroes. They have done a great deal to agitate a moral concern. But where in fact do they go now?

Politics “as the crow flies” is a politics that insists on what should have been rather than what is, a politics that refuses to turn its gaze from past atrocity. It is also a politics, as Baldwin made clear, of uninterrupted anger. In its place Buckley exhorts a pragmatic politics, a politics that turns its gaze from the failures of the past in order to achieve the next-best outcome in the future. Whatever its ugly history, Buckley went on to argue, the American dream was now the best hope for the American Negro. Where better to improve his lot than in the United States, the “most mobile society in the world”? What other dream to which to aspire than the American one? A bitter insistence on past injustice would only result in foolish self-destruction. Negroes must avoid “the kind of cynicism, the kind of despair, the kind of iconoclasm” represented by Baldwin. For in the end, Negro anger would be met, Buckley warned, with White violence:

If it does finally come to a confrontation, a radical confrontation...then we will fight the issue, not only in the Cambridge Union, but we will fight it...on beaches and on hills and on mountains and on landing grounds.

Tolerance might be extended to Negroes, but not to their anger. Fiery prophecy must give way to cool pragmatism.

## 2.

Buckley’s pragmatic condemnation of Black anger – his insistence that Black anger is wrong because counterproductive for Blacks themselves – places him in a long intellectual tradition. Seneca thought that anger was unwarranted in any circumstance because it undermines *ataraxia*, psychic tranquillity. Thus “the happy man” is he who “is satisfied and on friendly terms with the conditions of his life...whatever they may be” (1900, VI). The early Christian mystic and theologian John Cassian counselled that we “ought never...be angry at all, whether for good or bad reasons” (1894, 8:12), for anger threatens to darken the “main light of our heart” with “shadows” (1894, 8:12). More recently, Glen Pettigrove (2012) and Michael Huemer (m.s., 2012) have argued that anger is to be avoided for its tendency to contaminate our capacity for epistemic rationality – in turn giving rise to what Huemer calls “irrational politics”. And Pettigrove (ibid) and Martha Nussbaum (2014) both argue that anger is to be avoided even in circumstances of political injustice because it alienates would-be allies, aggravates conflict and ultimately undermines the pursuit of just outcomes. In the place of political anger, Pettigrove recommends the virtue of meekness, while Nussbaum suggests a spirit of civic love.

This “counterproductivity critique” of anger also takes concrete, politicised form, as in the debate between Baldwin and Buckley. Martin Luther King, Jr wrote of Malcolm X that, in “articulating the despair of the Negro without offering any positive, creative alternative” he has “done himself and our people a great disservice” for “[f]iery, demagogic oratory in the Black ghettos can reap nothing but grief (1998, chp. 25). The American journalist Jonathan Chait defended Barack Obama’s reluctance to get publicly angry about White racism on the grounds that Obama was employing the “sensible practice” of encouraging Black people to “concentrate on the things they can control” rather than “lash[ing] out” (2014). Writing on recent events in Gaza, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof exhorted Palestinians to abandon the anger that “has accomplished nothing but increasing the misery of the Palestinian people”; if only Palestinians would adopt to model of Gandhi, he argued, the result would “reverberate around the world and Palestinian would achieve statehood and freedom” (2014).<sup>1</sup> Women have long been told that feminist progress would be swifter if they would only be less shrill about it. LGBT activists are often reminded by their allies that progress takes time, and that stridency gets in the way. The recent riots in Ferguson, Missouri in response to the Grand Jury’s failure to indict an officer for murdering an unarmed Black teenager again prompt calls for reasonableness and calm from many liberal sympathisers. The counterproductivity of one’s anger is seen as dispositive reason not to be angry, whatever the circumstances. Often this counsel is issued in a spirit, as it with Buckley, of at least putative sympathy: a concern for the wellbeing of the victim of injustice himself.

The counterproductivity critique tradition has its opposing twin in a tradition, one largely based in feminist and anti-racist traditions, that challenges the presupposition that anger is only a weapon for self-harm. In “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” (1981), the Black feminist Audre Lorde writes:

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change...[A]nger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification...Anger is loaded with information and energy...When we turn from anger we turn from insight, saying we will accept only the designs already known, deadly and safely familiar (1981).

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<sup>1</sup> Kristof is concerned not only with Palestinian anger, but also Palestinian violence. Because of the close (but non-necessary) connection between anger and violence, a critique of the one often goes hand-in-hand with the critique of the latter. My topic here is anger alone, not angry violence, though what I say here might (depending on one’s view of the normative status of violence) be extended to violence as well. Of course, if one thinks that violence is always (or generally) bad, then the fact that anger at least sometimes leads to violence is another reason to think that anger is counterproductive.

Anger can be a source of power, a precision tool and an epistemic resource.<sup>2</sup> It is a thing to be harnessed, not suppressed, a tool with which the master's house might be dismantled.

The counter-tradition represented by Lorde is welcome in part because it reminds us that the counterproductivity critique often turns on questionable empirical assumptions. It is historically naïve, after all, to think that White America would have been so willing to embrace Martin Luther King's vision of a unified, post-racial nation, if not for the threat of Malcolm X's angry defiance. And it is psychologically naïve to think anger contains no salutary psychic possibilities for someone whose self-conception has been shaped by loathing and terror.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, inasmuch as we – with our many privileges – find ourselves intuitively attracted to the idea that anger is counterproductive, both psychically and politically, we should be suspicious. For whatever else it is, anger is threatening to privilege. And so it would be convenient for us if it turned out that anger had no crucial psychic or political role to play in the march toward justice.

All that said, this debate – between proponents of the counterproductivity critique and its opponents – tends to obscure something rather basic about anger. It is this: anger isn't normatively evaluable only according to its *effects*. The question of whether anger is appropriate or not – whether we ought to get angry or not – is not reducible to, or settled or disposed of by, the question of what the outcome of such anger would be. Indeed, the natural framework for anger's evaluation is not effects-centred, not consequentialist at all.

### 3.

There is a striking difference between how anger is discussed in political contexts – that is, contexts of injustice and oppression – and how we talk about anger in “everyday” contexts.<sup>4</sup> In ordinary conversation, we can and do talk about whether anger, independent of its effects, is the *apt* response to a state-of-affairs; whether the state-of-affairs provides one *reason* to be angry; whether one's anger is a *justified* response to the state-of-affairs. We talk, I want to say, as if anger exists within the space of “intrinsic reasons”. I ask you, my friend, what reason you have for being

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<sup>2</sup> For similar defences of anger's productivity, see Marilyn Frye (1983), Uma Narayanan (1988), Alison Jaggar (1989), Lisa Tessman (2005), Lucas Swaine (1996), Marcus Wenning (2009) and Myisha Cherry (m.s.)

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Douglass wrote of the moment when he finally resisted the violent attack of the slave-breaker: “It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery” (1997, 79).

<sup>4</sup> I write “everyday” in scare quotes because, for many, daily life is so structured by injustice and oppression that no real distinction can be drawn.

angry with me. You respond: “because you were late again!” I say: “well, you shouldn’t be. I *told* you I was going to be late.” The subject of our conversation is whether your anger about my lateness is justified; whether my lateness constitutes genuine reason for your anger; whether your anger is the apt response to my lateness. The likely effects of your anger – even the possibility that your anger might make me *more* prone to be late rather than less – does not come into it. And in ordinary conversation, we can and do mark a distinction between intrinsic and instrumental reasons for getting angry. If you are someone who takes great pleasure in getting angry I might say to you “I know it makes you feel good to get angry, but you really have no reason to be.” Here I contrast your instrumental reason for getting angry – it gives you pleasure – and your (lack of) intrinsic reason for getting angry.

It is also striking that in ordinary, everyday situations, a shift of focus from intrinsic to instrumental justification for anger often comes across as a non sequitur (at best) and morally obtuse (at worst). If an unfaithful lover says in response to your anger: “you shouldn’t get angry because it’s just going to make me cheat more”, you have just been giving additional reason for anger. For two wrongs have been done: first, the betrayal of your trust, and second, the refusal to treat your anger at that betrayal as it deserves to be treated, as existing within the space of intrinsic reasons.

The proponents of the counterproductivity critique, inasmuch as they imply that anger’s normative status reduces to anger’s effects,<sup>5</sup> run the risk of this second sort of wrong. It is a normative wrong that has something in common – in structure, if not intent – with the most obviously oppressive ways of speaking about anger. The overt misogynist dismisses a woman’s anger by calling her shrill or strident; the overt racist dismisses the Black person’s anger by calling him a thug or an animal. These are not mere insults. These are powerful rhetorical strategies that subtly shift the explanatory context for the subject’s anger from the space of reasons to the space of causes. The misogynist or racist *explains away* the woman or Black person’s anger as a product of inferior character: she’s only angry because she’s shrill; he’s only angry because he’s a thug. He interprets the question “why is this person angry?” as a request for a causal explanation rather than a normative one. And in so doing, he obscures the possibility that the woman or Black person’s anger is apt. The counterproductivity critique – again, in structure, if not in intent (and perhaps more insidiously for that) – achieves a similar effect. We move from the space of intrinsic reason to the space of *instrumental* reason. In so doing, we again obscure the possibility that the person’s anger, whatever its putative effects, is apt.

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<sup>5</sup> I am not committed to the thought that all the thinkers I associate with the counterproductivity critique really are wedded to this thought. It might be, for example, that some of them endorse the view that the question of what one ought to do only in the pragmatic or prudential sense of ‘ought’ is settled by anger’s effects. But inasmuch as they do not signal the precise sense of ought they are using, they imply that the question of whether we ought to get angry understood unrestrictedly (‘ought’ in the general or privileged sense) is settled by anger’s effects.

This is all to say: we have at the very least *prima facie* reason to think that anger exists within the space of intrinsic reason. And if it does, we cannot hope to settle the question of whether victims of injustice ought to get angry simply by gesturing to the (putatively) bad effects of doing so.

I want here to grant the empirical presupposition of the counterproductivity critique: that anger at injustice is counterproductive for the victims of that injustice. *Counterproductive* in the sense that it makes the angry person worse off than she would otherwise be if she did not get angry – psychically, politically, or both. I want to grant this for the sake of argument, but also because I think it is at least in many cases – even recognising all that the defenders of anger’s productivity have to say – true. Anger, especially the anger of the disenfranchised, is generally taken as a reason to dismiss a genuine political claim. A claim made in anger is “uncivil” and “unreasonable”, and has no place in a calm, deliberative politics. And such anger, as I said before, is threatening to the powerful, and so when not met with dismissal, is often met with reprisal. Eloquent, articulate anger – like Baldwin’s anger – can have enormous persuasive, and thus political, power. So can anger when it is expressed en masse, when it erupts into acts of daring solidarity, as with the Stonewall Riots, and one hopes with Ferguson. But it is naïve to think that anger is always productive in this way, that getting angry at injustice does not often result in great personal costs, that it does not often result in a worsening of individuals’ life chances, that it does not invite more violence against already beaten bodies. Indeed, I think we do not arrive at a full understanding of injustice and oppression if we do not acknowledge that our political arrangements provide ample occasions for anger that is at once apt *and* counterproductive: anger that is the justified response to the political facts, but nonetheless instrumentally unjustified. Thinking carefully about non-ideal politics – that is, our politics – requires us to think carefully about the phenomenon of apt counterproductive anger. My central aim here is to think through just this phenomenon. But I will defer that aim in order, first, to say something more about what I take anger to be – and why, in particular, I think its normative status is irreducible to its effects.

#### 4.

How can it be, as I have suggested, that anger has this rich normative profile – that it is evaluable as apt or not, intrinsically justified or not, responsive to intrinsic reasons or not? What sort of thing must anger be such that it is evaluable in these ways? Obviously, anger must be more than just a feeling or a bit of phenomenology, like a headache. A standard answer is that *cognitivism* about anger is true: anger just is a judgment or belief, for example *that John did me wrong*.<sup>6</sup> Anger is richly

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<sup>6</sup> Proponents of this sort of (pure) cognitivism about the emotions include Solomon (1980), Neu (2000) and Nussbaum (2001). Nussbaum (2014) argues that anger is both instrumentally *and*

normative, then, because belief is: a belief can be evaluated as being apt, justified and responsive to reason. And we can and do distinguish between intrinsic and instrumental justification or reasons when it comes to belief: the evidence might support my believing that God doesn't exist, but if that belief is going to make me very unhappy, I might have instrumental reason not to form that belief. My belief that God doesn't exist would be at once apt and counterproductive.

So a cognitivist account of anger is a natural way of making sense of the rich normativity of anger, and in turn the phenomenon of apt counterproductive anger. But many think cognitivism deeply unattractive, and so might think in turn that – however we might talk about anger in our ordinary practice – it in fact has no place in the space of intrinsic reasons. Then we will be left with the thought that, after all, anger can only be evaluated according to its good or bad effects. Or we might be left with the thought that anger is best treated as a purely natural phenomenon, like a lightning or a headache, about which normative talk is largely out of place.

Why dislike cognitivism about anger? First, cognitivism seems to over-intellectualise anger, both in the sense of making it unavailable to young humans or sophisticated animals who lack concepts (such as *wrong*) that are supposed to be constitutive elements of the “angry thought”, and in the sense of leaving out the non-cognitive elements of anger: the *feel* of anger. The modified cognitivism that responds to the second sort of worry by factorising anger into a thought (*John has done me wrong*) and a phenomenal component (the *feel* of anger)<sup>7</sup> leaves unexplained why the justification conditions for the entire package (thought plus feel) reduce to the justification conditions of just one of its elements (the thought). The second kind of worry about cognitivism has to do with apparent cases of mismatch between explicit thoughts and the thoughts that anger putatively consist in. I might, after all, be angry that John was late to meet me, while explicitly believing that he was not wrong to do so; I might believe, for instance, that his reasons for meeting me on time were trumped by his obligation to help his unwell mother. And vice versa. I might believe that John did me wrong in failing to meet me on time without being at all angry with him: I just can't bring myself to care enough, say, giving the long history of John's being late. So there is some reason to worry about a cognitivist account of anger. And since such an account most easily vindicates the rich normativity of anger, there is some reason to worry whether anger can indeed be richly normative in the way I suggest it is.

For those moved by such a worry, I want to suggest an alternative sort of account of anger that sidesteps the worries about cognitivism but still stands to vindicate anger as existing within the space of intrinsic reasons. The basic move is not to assimilate

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intrinsically unjustified – the latter because anger (usually) involves the false belief that the person at whom one is angry deserves to suffer revenge.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Broad (1971), Lyons (1980), Marks (1982) and Oakley (1992) for this sort of approach to emotions. Callard (m.s.) seems to endorse a similar view of anger.

anger to belief, but instead to think of anger as sharing many features with belief – namely, those features that give rise to belief’s normative profile. What is belief? It is a propositional attitude that represents as true some content – say, *John was late*. Why is it that belief is richly normative? Because belief constitutively aims at something – namely, truth – and so it is *justified* or *rational* just in case it displays an appropriate sensitivity to that constitutive aim. Thus my belief that John is late is justified or rational just in case it displays an appropriate sensitivity to the goal of truth, for example by being the product of a reliable mechanism.<sup>8</sup>

Now suppose something analogous were true of anger. Then anger would be a propositional attitude that represents *as a moral violation* some content – say, *John was late*. Anger would constitutively aim at getting onto moral violations in the world. And finally, anger would be justified or rational just in case it displayed appropriate sensitivity to that constitutive aim, for example by being the product of a mechanism that reliably tracks moral violations. On this proposal, my anger that John was late and my belief that John was late share the identical content: *that John was late*. My anger does *not* have the content “John’s being late was a moral violation” any more than my belief that John was late has the content “It is true that John was late.” In both cases the content is simply *that John was late*. It is in the nature of belief that it represents its content as true, and it is in the nature of anger that it represents its content as a moral violation. Belief is a *representing-as-true* of some content, while anger is a *representing-as-moral-violation* of some content.<sup>9</sup>

Such an account has some advantages over the cognitivist strategy for vindicating the rich normativity of anger.<sup>10,11</sup> First, it is an anti-intellectualist account. Getting

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<sup>8</sup> Epistemic internalists and externalists will disagree about what constitutes ‘appropriate sensitivity’; what I have to say is supposed to be neutral on debates about the nature of epistemic justification or rationality.

<sup>9</sup> On this view, an episode of anger is necessarily contentful. One cannot be ‘just angry’. One of course can be *disposed* to get angry, and in this sense be ‘just angry’. And one might be angry without knowing the content of one’s anger; one might have to submit oneself to deep psychoanalysis to uncover the content. But one cannot have an occurrent emotion without content. Another way of putting this is that anger is always angry *that*. But what about anger that seems to be merely angry *at*? Is it not possible for me to be angry at John without being angry about anything at all? (Notice that there is a parallel question about belief: we can say that *I believe that there is milk in the fridge* but I can also say *I believe John*.) Again, I want to say that one cannot be ‘just angry’ at John; one is angry about something (presumably that John did, but not necessarily), even if one does not know what it is. One of course might be disposed to be angry at John.

<sup>10</sup> A similar approach could be taken by those who are sympathetic to perceptual accounts of anger. Standard perceptual accounts of anger take anger to be a quasi-perception of a moral fact (in the good case). One might think that a better version of a perceptual account would take anger to be a kind of *seeing as* of a non-moral fact. If one has a view according to which perception itself is richly normative – i.e. that one can perceive for reasons – then such an account stands to vindicate anger’s rich normativity without the vices associated with cognitivism. I focus on building an account around the analogy with belief only because belief is uncontroversially within the space of intrinsic reasons, unlike perception.

<sup>11</sup> Zoltan Szabo asks why we cannot simply take anger to be a contentless feeling that nothing has reasons? So when I say “I’m angry that John was late”, while my anger doesn’t have the content *that John was late*, *that John was late* is nonetheless the reason for my anger? This would be to think of anger as a sort of action, and would raise standard questions about what sort of epistemic relation (if

angry that John was late doesn't require any moral concepts, including the concept of moral violation, just as believing that John was late doesn't require the concept of truth. (Recall, the 'moral violation' aspect of anger is, on the account I'm proposing, built into the kind of representation anger is, just as the 'truth' aspect of belief is built into the kind of representation that belief is.) Second, this anti-intellectualism in turn leaves plenty of room for affective-doxastic mismatch. I can be angry about John's lateness (that is, represent-as-a-moral-violation John's lateness) while believing that John's lateness doesn't constitute a moral violation (that is, represent-as-true that John's lateness is a moral violation). Or vice versa: I might believe that John's lateness was a moral violation without representing-as-a-moral violation (i.e. getting angry) that John was late. Third, the account has an answer the 'factorisation' worry. Anger is not a complex of a belief and a phenomenal component. Rather, it is a unified attitude, like belief. The phenomenal component of anger is not in addition to the representational component; to get angry at a state-of-affairs – to represent it as a normative violation – just *is* to feel it as a normative violation. The representational aspect of anger just is its phenomenal aspect.

In addition to all this, thinking of anger along these lines offers a new way of making sense of the close connection that many draw between anger and knowledge. Lorde says that “[a]nger is loaded with information”; David Bromwich echoes her when he says “there is such a thing as angry knowledge” (2015). A standard way of making sense of the connection between anger and knowledge is to think of anger as generative of knowledge through reflection and inference. Thus someone might find herself angry, reflect on her anger, and thereby come to know that, say, some previously unrecognised injustice has taken place (Frye 1983, Narayan 1988, Jaggar 1989). But if anger is, like belief, itself a kind of representational attitude, then a different connection between anger and knowledge can be drawn. A belief, in the good case – roughly, when the belief is both true and appropriately sensitive to the truth – constitutes knowledge. Analogously, anger, in the good case – roughly, when it is about a genuine moral violation and is appropriately sensitive to moral violation – might constitute a kind of *affective* knowledge.

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any) one would need in order for a proposition to constitute a reason for one, whether that proposition must be true, and so on. I'm happy with this approach, but it would suit my needs here, since I am trying to outline an account of anger that explains rather than simply takes for granted anger's rich normativity. Szabo also asks why, if anger is a propositional attitude, it does not license inferences in the same way as belief. I can infer from “Alex is angry that there is no milk” to “Alex is angry”; and yet it seems I can't analogously infer from “Alex believes there is no milk” to “Alex believes”. I'm unsure how deep this problem really is, and so unsure how strong of a response I need. My attempt at an answer is this: anger tends to have a rich and interesting dispositional profile, while belief does not. So it is pragmatically worthwhile to say of Alex that she is angry even without specifying the content of her anger, while it is not similarly worthwhile to say of Alex that she believes without specifying the content of the belief. We cannot learn anything interesting about Alex (what she is likely to do, for example) from the fact that she believes; but there is much interesting to learned from the fact that Alex is angry (e.g. that she might lash out, that this isn't the right time to ask her for a favour) even without knowing the content of that anger.

What do I mean by ‘affective knowledge’? It is one thing to know that Black Americans are victims of systematic racism. It is another thing to represent-as-a-normative-violation the fact that Black Americans are victims of systematic racism. What we should we say about the person who knows that Black Americans are victims of racism, but does not get angry at this fact? We might want to say: does she *really* know the extent to which Black Americans are subjected to racism? does she *really* know that racism is bad? The failure to get angry can seem itself like a kind of ignorance. My suggestion here is that it is possible for someone to know both that racism is bad and that Black Americans are victims of systematic racism, and yet be relevantly ignorant. The ignorance doesn’t consist in a failure to know the relevant propositions, but instead to *affectively* grasp those same proposition – to *appreciate* those propositions.<sup>12</sup> In failing to get angry at the fact of racism, one fails to represent the world aright. One can know that racism is bad, and know that Blacks are victims of systematic racism, and yet (in failing to get angry about it) reveal one’s failure to *appreciate* these facts. ‘Appreciation’ is angry knowledge.

I have now returned to where I began: the normative profile of anger. On the view I’m proposing, one’s anger is *intrinsically justified* just in case one’s anger is appropriately sensitive to moral violations, say by being the product of a mechanism that reliably tracks moral violations. One has *reason* to be angry when one’s anger represents-as-a-moral-violation something that is a genuine moral violation.<sup>13</sup> And one’s anger is *apt* when it constitutes a kind of quasi-knowledge or appreciation of the facts: when it is a justified response to genuine reasons to be angry. Apt counterproductive anger, then, is like knowledge that makes us worse off – a justified, veridical representation we’d be better off not having.

## 5.

As I said, my main purpose here is to discuss the phenomenon of apt counterproductive anger, and to draw lessons from it for how to think about politics more generally. The account of anger I sketched will help me do that, first by (I hope) assuaging worries that I am presupposing an untenable, cognitivist view of anger, and second by allowing me to draw the analogy with counterproductive knowledge. But at this point I can imagine proponents of the counterproductivity critique protesting that I have all along misrepresented their view, and that this misrepresentation turns on my mischaracterisation of anger. So let me give voice to these imagined critics.

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<sup>12</sup> The use of the term ‘appreciation’ comes from Stephen Darwall.

<sup>13</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I am assuming objectivism about anger’s intrinsic reasons: that is, the fact that some state-of-affairs constitutes or involves a moral violation makes that state-of-affairs a reason to be angry. By contrast, a subjectivist would endorse some sort of epistemic constraint on anger’s reasons: for example, one might need to be in a position to know a fact for it to constitute a reason (for you).

Here is the worry. Let us grant that anger is a propositional attitude, like belief; and that, like belief, it has a mind-to-world direction of fit: it aims to represent the world correctly. Still, one might insist that anger, unlike belief, also has a *world-to-mind* direction of fit. Anger doesn't just aim at passively, neutrally tracking states-of-affairs as moral violations. It is an energised state, a state the seeks to change things in the world. In other words, anger isn't just *belief-like*; it is also *desire-like*. Anger is not merely *cognitive*; it is also *conative*. What change in the world does anger hunger for? An obvious answer is: it wants to change the *very thing* that is its object. If I am angry that John is always late, that anger is in part a desire for that state-of-affairs to change: I want John to stop being late. In that sense, anger wants to take away its own reasons, to make it the case that it no longer has any reason. We might say: anger aims at the destruction of its own intrinsic reasons.

With this picture of anger in hand, we can offer a more refined version of the counterproductivity critique. Proponents of the counterproductivity critique often claim that anger at a state-of-affairs makes *that very* state-of-affairs worse, or at least no better.<sup>14</sup> Anger at racism begets more racism; anger at oppression strengthens oppression; anger at misogyny fuels misogyny. If anger constitutively aims not only getting onto moral violation, but also at *undoing* moral violation, then anger that worsens its objection in this way faces a kind of practical self-defeat. Suppose that getting angry that John is often late leads to John's increased lateness. It might be true that John's lateness constitutes an intrinsic reason for anger, but nonetheless the anger, if it constitutively aims at making John less late, faces a sort of practical incoherence. It is analogous to a desire for X that makes the acquisition of X less likely, that pushes X away. (Suppose, for example, that X is feline affection.) Even if X is intrinsically desirable, we might think there is something deviant about this desire; overall, we might think, it is a desire we ought not have. Similarly, if anger at X worsens (or makes no better) X, then we might think – however intrinsically justified anger at X might be – it is anger we ought not have. We ought not be counterproductively angry<sup>15</sup>, then, not because the negative consequences of doing so are all that matter, or because those negative consequences outweigh whatever intrinsic reasons we might have for being angry, but because apt counterproductive anger is practically self-defeating: it is anger that fails to achieve its own constitutive aim.

The refined version of the counterproductivity critique, I want to suggest, should be rejected on the grounds that it implausibly rules out a large class of anger as normatively impermissible. Suppose that I'm angry about the structural racism that

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<sup>14</sup> Not all proponents of the counterproductivity critique claim this. Some (as discussed at the end of section 2) focus instead on the way in which anger makes the angry person worse off by impairing their psychic well-being, say by undermining psychic tranquillity or epistemic rationality. The refined version of the counterproductivity critique I am presenting here does not apply to this line of attack.

<sup>15</sup> By which I mean only that class of anger worsens the very state of affairs at which one is angry (see n. 14 for further discussion).

grips the United States. That supposition is ambiguous. I might be angry that *structural racism grips the United States* or I might be angry that *structural racism grips the United States at time t*, where *t* is now (the time of writing this sentence: late 2014). In other words, the content of my anger might be *non-eternal* (the fact that now structural racism grips the U.S.) or *eternal* (the fact that structural racism grips the U.S. at the time of my writing this, i.e. late 2014).<sup>16</sup> In the first case, I'm angry at a state-of-affairs that might change: it could be that in some time, structural racism will be eradicated, and so it will no longer be true that structural racism grips the U.S. In the second case, I'm angry at a state-of-affairs that is eternal: it will always be the case that, in late 2014, structural racism gripped the U.S. In the first case, the reasons for my anger might disappear. In the second, the reasons for my anger will never disappear. In the second case, we have what we might call "eternal anger": anger whose content will never be untrue, anger whose reasons will always exist.<sup>17</sup>

There seems nothing amiss with eternal anger. Indeed, it would be strange indeed to rule it out as normatively impermissible, as something we ought not feel. For then it would turn out that it would be somehow amiss to be angry that Native Americans were subjected to genocide, that Palestinians were expelled from their home, that millions of Jews were put to death, that the ancestors of many Black Americans were enslaved, tortured and murdered at the hands of the ancestors of many White Americans, or that officer Darren Wilson was acquitted by a grand jury for killing Michael Brown. But if anger constitutively aims at the destruction of its own intrinsic reasons – as the refined counterproductivity critique holds – then such anger is *a fortiori* normatively impermissible. For eternal anger is anger that can never destroy its own reasons, for the simple fact that its reasons, being eternal, are indestructible. The cost of rejecting the normative permissibility of eternal anger is too high; we should reject the refined counterproductivity critique's claim that anger constitutively aims at destroying its own reasons.<sup>18,19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This distinction between eternal and non-eternal contents in the context of talking about anger I borrow gratefully from Agnes Callard (m.s.) Callard argues that anger's reasons are *always* eternal; she thinks that anger at non-eternal contents (what I call 'standing conditions') is either deviant or not in fact anger. By contrast, Callard argues, sadness appropriately takes (only) non-eternal contents. My only reason for disagreeing with Callard on this point is that it seems to me plausible that one can be (non-deviantly) angry at, say, the non-eternal fact of present inequality in the U.S.

<sup>17</sup> Note that such eternal anger need not have as its content some fact about the past. If, for example, it is a fact (as I take it to be) that structural racism will grip the U.S. for the foreseeable future, then that future fact can constitute an eternal reason to be angry, now.

<sup>18</sup> One might of course want to say that non-eternal anger *does* have as (one of) its constitutive aims the destruction of its own intrinsic reasons, viz. the remedying of the standing condition that is the object of the anger. I am slightly wary, however, of positing such a definitive conative goal for even non-eternal anger, for reasons I briefly mention shortly.

<sup>19</sup> We might worry that eternal anger poses a different sort of problem – namely, that it makes the rationality of retribution and forgiveness untenable. This is a worry that Callard (m.s.) addresses. Retribution, if justified, is justified in the 'deontic' sense, she says: it is simply what *ought* to happen, in light of the injustice perpetrated. Retribution does not, however, 'undo' or 'cancel' the injustice. Forgiveness – which involves letting go of one's anger – can also be a rational response inasmuch, Callard says, that we care about things other than our intrinsic reasons for anger: our psychic wellbeing or our relationships, for example.

But what then of the conative dimension of anger? Am I insisting that, after all, anger is merely cognitive, that it involves no desire-like component?<sup>20</sup> For all I've said about non-eternal anger, there seems to be something crucially right in the revised counterproductivity critique: that anger involves more than just a passive clocking of moral violation, that anger is an *energised* state.

I don't wish to deny this, and yet I want to suggest caution in thinking about anger's conative dimension. Desires – the prototypical conative state – usually call out to us clearly. They name the conditions of their own satisfaction. If I desire ice cream, or love, or fame, then the desire demands a specific alteration of the world: the alteration such that I come to possess ice cream, or love, or fame.<sup>21</sup> But anger does not speak like this; it does not usually name the conditions of its own satisfaction. I might *think* that anger is calling on me to lash out, or seek revenge, or harm myself, or stew silently – or, in the 'productive' case, to alter the thing at which I am angry, if it is indeed alterable – but, when I act as anger seems to demand, I so often find that none of these things have answered anger's call.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the experience of anger is so often of something that calls out, but for nothing in particular. It is energising, but with no pre-approved plan for action. That is why it is so sad and yet so unsurprising when people declare that their act of revenge made them no less angry. Why would it?

So I want to accept that anger is not purely 'cognitive', if that's taken to mean passive and unenergised and (absent desire) unconnected with agency. But I want at the same to deny that anger is 'conative', if that means involving a specific desire. Rather, what it is to represent-as-a-normative-violation a state-of-affairs is to *feel* it as a moral violation, and that feeling in turn is a feeling of non-teleological energisation, something closer to *being possessed* than desire. On this view, anger can take many behavioural forms, from the canonical (shouting, violence, lashing out) to non-canonical but nonetheless commonplace (stewing, 'cold' anger). It might even take, in appropriately radical circumstances, radical behaviour. I have said that someone who doesn't get angry at moral injustice fails to appreciate something about the world. An obvious retort is: what about Gandhi? What about Mandela? Were they 'missing' something? What I want to say is this: either Gandhi and Mandela weren't angry, in which case there was something they didn't appreciate about the world, or they *were* angry, but their anger took (through much self-

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<sup>20</sup> It's important to distinguish between a 'cognitivist' view of anger and the view that anger is 'cognitive'. The former terms picks out the view that anger is (or is partly constituted) by some *moral* belief (e.g. that John did me wrong, that such-and-such is a moral violation). But one can reject that view and still endorse a cognitive view of anger, according to which anger has propositional content. One can have a cognitive but non-cognitivist view of anger by thinking that the content of anger isn't itself moral.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, just because my desire for X calls out for a change in the world such that I possess X doesn't mean that *I* call out for this change. What might satisfy me most is not responding to the desire's call; as we know, it often is more pleasurable to desire something than have it.

<sup>22</sup> This is distinct from the phenomenon of acting on a desire and yet feeling oneself unhappy or unsatisfied. There, the *desire* is satisfied but we are not. Here, it is the anger itself that is unsatisfied.

discipline) highly unusual behavioural forms. I tend to believe the latter, but if the former is true – if Gandhi and Mandela were not angry – then I think there was something they were failing to appreciate about the world. It might very well be that a full appreciation of the world, in a world such as ours, will – as a matter of human psychology – leave one despairing, apraxic, incapable of right action. Perhaps for Gandhi and Mandela to behave as they did, they had to exorcise from themselves the capacity to represent-as-moral-violation, the capacity to get angry. In light of such psychic limitations, perhaps it is best overall to cultivate a sense of detachment that sees moral violations only as a matter for disappointment. Perhaps we are incapable of both appreciating our world and acting as it calls on us to do.

## 6.

If occasions for apt counterproductive anger are as common as I think they are – if our politics are festering with such occasions – then victims of injustice and oppression are faced with a conflict between their reasons for getting angry and their reasons for not getting angry. Just what sort of conflict is this?

Prudence recommends against counterproductive anger; such anger is not in the self-interest of the oppressed person.<sup>23</sup> But there is more normative upshot to anger's counterproductivity than simply this.<sup>24</sup> For inasmuch as one has a duty to self-care, then morality itself recommends against counterproductive anger. Indeed, if getting aptly but counterproductively angry is going to dramatically worsen one's situation – greatly diminishing one's life chances, or inviting violence against one's body – then such anger might even constitute a form of self-harm. And inasmuch as one has a duty to remedy the injustice one sees in the world, then getting aptly but counterproductively angry might constitute a failure to act on an other-directed moral duty. So apt counterproductive anger isn't just prudentially irrational – an action that one *qua* self-interested agent shouldn't take – but also in some cases ethically problematic.

What normative upshot does the aptness of anger have? When anger is apt, I have said, it is like a kind of knowledge of the world: an *appreciation* of the world. If I believe the racism is wrong but do not get angry at the racism I see – if I am left cold, say, by police brutality against Black bodies – then there is something I am failing to grasp about the world. My representation of the world is incomplete, even disjointed. I know that racism is wrong; and I know that police systematically enact

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<sup>23</sup> I'm not supposing here that anger doesn't have some sort of positive psychic pay-off – that there is no pleasure, for example, to be taken in anger. (Aristotle describes the pleasure of anger as the pleasure we take in the anticipation of enacting revenge.) Rather, I'm supposing that whatever the positive pay-off of anger, the anger leaves the agent all-things-considered worse off than she would otherwise be.

<sup>24</sup> Thus I was unfair in suggesting that Buckley's argument against Black anger was merely 'pragmatic'.

violence against Blacks. And yet I do not represent-as-a-moral-violation the latter fact. I do not *feel* it as a moral violation. This, I take it, is itself a kind of normative failure: a failure that is both ethical and epistemic.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, if I feel apt anger at an unjust state-of-affairs and then give up my anger for some other reasons, then there is a sense in which I am turning away from truth, making myself purposefully ignorant. This too is a kind of normative failure.

Since victims of systematic injustice are best positioned to get aptly but counterproductively angry,<sup>26</sup> such victims are caught in a serious conflict. The conflict is not merely psychically painful; it is a genuinely *normative* conflict, a conflict involving competing and significant normative goods that are apparently incomparable. On the one hand we have the reasons of prudence, self-care, and the promotion of justice; on the other we have the reasons of apt representation, the demand that we *get the world right*. This normative conflict is parasitic on injustice. Where there is systematic injustice, there is the breeding ground for apt counterproductive anger – and with it, unenviable normative conflict.

One might think this implausible. How could it be that those who already suffer from systematic injustice *also* suffer from this sort of normative conflict? Doesn't this make things 'too hard' for the victims of systematic injustice? After all, if our theory implies that the lot of the worst off is even worse than we thought – if our theory 'punishes' the worst off with its negative implications – then haven't we made a mistake in our theory? This sort of response is motivated, I think, by a well-intentioned confusion about where justice happens. Justice does not happen in theory, but in the world; we cannot make people better off simply by selecting a different description of their situation.<sup>27</sup> That a theory tells us that the worst off are even worse off than we ordinarily think is no count against it. Indeed, we have learned again and again that the costs of injustice are in general far worse than we ordinarily suppose. It is only through the work of feminists, for example, that men have come close to understanding the psychic (and not just material) costs of patriarchy. We should only expect that first-order injustice will give rise to second-

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<sup>25</sup> I am not arguing that the mere fact that anger is evaluable as *apt* or not gives rise to the claim that there is something (importantly) normatively problematic about failing to have anger when it would be apt. Imagine a game called *evil prison guard*. Suppose that playing that game properly involves various heinous acts of subjugation, humiliation and torture. There are going to be many cases in which doing what is *apt* in the game conflicts with what is demanded by morality – and yet it would be wrong to think that there is any genuine normative conflict here. The reason that I think anger's aptness conditions matter normatively are precisely because they are tied so strongly to both morality and epistemic normativity.

<sup>26</sup> I don't mean by this that we ought only to get angry at injustices perpetrated against us or our loved ones or our communities; indeed I think this is false. I just mean that, as a matter of fact, victims of systematic injustice are in a position to know more about facts that constitute moral violations, and are thus in a position to be aptly angry about more things. Moreover, victims of *systematic* injustice are more likely to find their apt anger to be counterproductive precisely because their anger is more likely to be dismissed than the apt anger of a relatively more privileged person.

<sup>27</sup> I don't mean to suggest here that theory has no effect on the world. A change in description, if publicised and internalised, might very well alter the distribution of justice. But a *mere* change in description will not do this.

order costs usually hidden from those who do not bear them. These hidden costs themselves constitute a form of injustice: what we might call *epiphenomenal* injustice. The conflict represented by apt counterproductive anger is one such kind of epiphenomenal injustice. In the first instance one is systematically discriminated against, humiliated, deprived; in the second, one is forced to choose between aptly representing one's situation and making one's situation better.

This first-personal conflict faced by the victim of systematic injustice has a second-personal counterpart. The proponents of the Counterproductivity Critique mostly position themselves as well-meaning allies. They are concerned, they say, with the interests of those treated unjustly. But there is something morally insensitive in their rallying cry: "don't get angry, it only makes things worse!" It suggests that the moral violation is not so bad, just a practical problem to be solved, rather than an atrocity to which its victim must bear witness. It suggests that the primary locus of responsibility for fixing the problem lies with the victim rather than the perpetrator.<sup>28</sup> It suggests all these things even if it doesn't *say* or *intend* any of these things. And yet, there is also something morally irresponsible about the opposing rallying cry: "nurse your anger!" In this we hear a lack of care for the suffering agent herself, for her wellbeing; we hear the threat that she will be instrumentalised for a cause. Neither of these slogans is morally right on its own, and yet both contain some truth. We want to say both at once, and yet that will be to offer practically incoherent advice. As experienced by the sympathetic ally, this second-personal conflict does not generally carry with it the psychic sting of the first-personal conflict. But it might, if we imagine its subject not to be a privileged ally, but the parent of a child who is facing an occasion for apt counterproductive anger. How does the parent advise his or her child? Here the conflict is raised acutely, with all the sting (perhaps more) of the first-personal conflict.

Contexts of systematic injustice provide occasions for apt counterproductive anger, and thus occasions for debilitating psychic and normative conflicts. What should we do about such conflicts? There is a standard philosophical way of hearing that question, and a standard philosophical way of answering it. We hear it as a question about what, in general, agents facing these conflicts ought to do, and we answer it by saying: these agents ought to do what they have all things considered reason to do, or what they *practically* ought to do, or so on. There are those who are resistant to the idea that, in such cases, there is a fact of the matter about what we have 'all

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<sup>28</sup> Analogously, there is something similarly morally disquieting about those who give well-intentioned advice to girls and women about how to avoid getting raped (avoiding alcohol, revealing clothing, late nights out). The problem isn't that such advice rests on false empirical premises, or that there isn't a genuine prudential reason for girls and women to conform to such advice. The problem with such advice – and the reason why it is condemned by feminists as rape apologism – is that it suggests that the moral responsibility for minimising rape lies primarily with girls and women. Such advice can be sincerely defended as "encouraging people to focus on what they have control over", as a merely pragmatic or prudential counsel. But that defence fails to understand how the insistence on oppressed people's pragmatic interests can itself be oppressive.

things considered reason' to do, or that there is some normatively supreme 'practical' ought that governs all others, and reconciles all conflicts. This scepticism is often motivated by phenomenological considerations: these conflicts just *feel* too hard, too irresolvable, for there to be such an easy way through. But even if we concede that there might be such a fact of the matter, we are left still wanting to know what to do when we find ourselves in these situations, when these conflicts become concrete for us. This is the pressing political question. But heard as a request for a real-life guidance, the question of what we should do is not adequately answered in the standard philosophical way. But no genuinely guiding answer seems forthcoming either, except to say that we should be guided by both moral sensitivity and responsibility, by a concern for appreciating the world as it is and a desire to make the world as it ought to be. But that is a pleasant way of redescribing a troubling problem.

An alternative way of hearing the question of what we should do comes from Hegel. For Hegel, the political utility of tragic spectatorship lies in tragedy's ability to dramatise the conflicts to which our contingent political arrangements give rise; the canonical case is that of Antigone's conflict between her filial and civic duties. Tragedy calls on us to achieve reconciliation: the re-arrangement of our political circumstances so that such conflicts no longer arise, or at least not so often. In a Hegelian spirit, we can ask: what would need to change for there no longer to be occasions for apt counterproductive anger? Two options present themselves. First, we could make it the case that there were no longer any occasions for *apt* anger – in other words, that there were no moral violations. Such a moral utopia would certainly offer a solution to the problems posed by apt counterproductive anger,<sup>29</sup> but it feels not much more guiding than the pleasant platitude above. Alternatively, we could push the other lever at hand: not anger's *aptness*, but anger's *counterproductivity*. What would it take, then, to lessen the counterproductivity of anger, to expand and galvanise its progressive potential?

## 7.

Buckley's response to Baldwin was a sneering threat, but it contained a truth: the anger of the oppressed, however apt, is sometimes – perhaps often – at the expense of the oppressed. The reasons for this supplied by the proponents of the

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<sup>29</sup> Would it? Not if we think that some moral violations extend beyond things for which we are morally responsible – for example, the harms that result from natural disasters and illness, but also the harms for which agents are agent-responsible but not culpable, e.g. unrequited love or friendlessness. (On the latter sort of harm and its relation to the reactive attitudes, see Carlsson m.s.) Perhaps these kinds of harms aren't "moral violations". But it does strike me that agents are entirely justified (and not just excused) for being angry about such harms. (The man who has no friends but badly wants them is, I think, justified in being angry about that fact – though he wouldn't be justified in being angry *at* those who 'fail' to be his friends, since no one is obligated to be a friend.) If so, then kinds of harms are indeed moral violations after all (instances of cosmic unfairness, perhaps) or the aptness conditions of anger extend beyond moral violation.

counterproductivity critique are numerous: anger undermines the agent's psychic tranquillity or epistemic rationality, anger alienates would-be allies, anger encourages reprisal, anger leads to cycles of violence and greater injustice. To this list we should add, indeed above all the rest: the presumed opposition between anger and reason. Seneca tells us the happy man is not only the man who avoids anger, but he "whose reason recommends to him the whole posture of his affairs" (1900, VI). Rationality counsels against anger; anger corrupts rationality. Inasmuch as we cleave to the liberal aspiration for a rational politics, anger has no place in the political sphere. Little wonder then that defenders of anger tend to be suspicious of the liberal enchantment with the idea of a rational politics. A rational politics has no room for anger, and so no room for one of the few weapons available to the oppressed. Thus the invocation of 'rationality' (like the invocation of 'civility' and 'calm deliberation') becomes an invocation of the status quo.

Inasmuch as a rational politics has no place for anger, I am tempted to think: so much the worse for rational politics. But we should challenge the idea that anger has no place in a rational politics. If anger is rationally evaluable – if it is something we do for reasons, good or bad – then it has at least a *prima facie* place in a rational politics. Opponents of anger, like Huemer and Pettigrove, might respond that even if anger is sometimes in this sense rational, its downstream effects on epistemic rationality are so grave that it should be, in the end, excluded from politics. But notice that, if we accept (as I want to suggest) that apt anger itself is a cognitive good – that, when apt, it is a veridical and justified representation of the facts – then it is an open question whether, all things considered, the positive value of 'angry knowledge' outweighs its (putatively) negative cognitive effects. Many cognitive goods have some sort of downstream negative effect; plausibly, every belief we have (no matter how true or justified) makes us less sensitive to countervailing evidence, and thus less rational. So if we were to rule out as impermissible any cognitive activity with downstream negative effects on our rationality, we would have to place a ban on belief, too. Presumably, we would not want to place such a ban since the overall cognitive benefits of believing – namely, getting to know – outweigh its bad effects. So even if apt anger has some negative downstream effects, it doesn't immediately followed that it has no place in rational politics.

Moreover, it remains an open *normative* question whether we are ever obligated to sacrifice one cognitive good in the interest of acquiring others: whether we should ever, for example, sacrifice an instance of angry knowledge for an increased ability to evaluate the evidence neutrally. For it is not at all clear that we are obligated to maximise the value of our total cognitive economy. Should I give up my belief that God doesn't exist just because it might make me a more enthusiastic knowledge-seeker? Should I dupe myself into believing that I am destined to make a groundbreaking discovery just to increase the odds ever so slightly that I will? The epistemic consequentialist is happy to answer yes to all such questions. But this

answer is not obviously compelling. Like the claim that the one should always be sacrificed for the many, epistemic consequentialism has a whiff of repugnance about it, a seeming failure to grasp the intrinsic, non-fungible value of some goods.

Angry knowledge is such a good: it is an intrinsically worthwhile thing to grasp the world as it is, to not only know but to appreciate the ugly facts that structure our political reality. What would it look like if this thought became an internalised principle of our political life? Anger would not be a thing to turn away from, but instead an invitation to listen more closely, however unwelcome and jarring the message. In turn, apt anger would not be so destructive to those most positioned to feel it. The conflict between appreciating the world as it is and making the world as it ought to be would lessen.

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