The Reason to Be Angry Forever

This is a paper in eight parts: A. Anger, B. Rage, C. World & Mind, D. Sadness, E. Change, F. Punishment and G. Justice and H. Vengeance.

A. Anger

We are often troubled when we perceive a gap between how things are and how they should be; sometimes, when the gap is big enough, we get angry. Anger lies “in the space of reasons”: we can say “he’s angry for a reason,” namely, that the world is not as it should be. Sensitivity to such normative gaps is what sometimes earns anger, in philosophical circles, entry into that august class of moral emotions.

But philosophers sometimes want to reserve the term ‘moral emotion’ for particular forms of anger, which they call ‘resentment’ and ‘indignation’—they define resentment as anger about immoral actions done to oneself, and indignation as anger about immoral actions done to other people. Resentment and indignation are singled out as deserving the name of ‘moral emotion’ because they are angry responses to actions which violate ‘genuine moral norms.’ I want to set aside questions about what it takes for a norm to count as ‘genuine’ or ‘moral.’ My topic includes indignant and resentful anger, but is not limited to them. Anger, as I conceive of it, can be occasioned by violations of nonmoral norms e.g. those of etiquette, or grammar; and the fact which violates that norm does not need to be a fact about what anyone did, nor does it need to be a fact about what anyone suffered. I can be angry at just about anything: that there’s no snow on Christmas, that my pants don’t fit, that my children will one day leave home, that Pluto is no longer considered a planet, that Brasidas was killed at Amphipolis—a real-life example!

Anger is a reaction to the thought that the world or some part of it is, somehow or other, awry.

When we criticize someone, saying to him, “you have no reason to be angry,” we commit ourselves to the existence of the contrast case, the case where someone does have a reason. Anger is sometimes rational—by which I mean that there are circumstances under which it is right or appropriate or fitting for someone to be angry. When? I propose that anger must satisfy the following three conditions in order to qualify as

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1 I say “they call” and “the define” because this is not what the words mean in English. I can resent someone’s beating me at chess, or be indignant that a newcomer to our community failed to invite me, socialite and self-styled queen-bee, to her party. Resentment and indignation are words often used (by non-philosophers) precisely to pick out petty forms of anger.

2 e.g. Wallace, “what I have called the reactive emotions differ from such emotions as shame and anger in their presumptive connection with the kind of prohibitions or requirements that I have referred to as moral obligations.” (Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments, p.39)

3 A real-life example!
rational anger. First, the judgment or perception behind the anger (that is, the judgment that there is a gap between how the world is and how it should be) must be true. Second, the belief must be justified—the rationally angry person must have good evidence for the truth of his belief. (Evidence comes in degrees, and anger, if rational, will be proportional to the evidence.) Third, the significance of the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ matters to the rationality of anger—the more serious the fact that things are not as they should be, the more anger that fact calls for. To be rational, someone’s anger must meet all three of these conditions; it must be underwritten by truth and proportional to justification and seriousness. And, arguably, meeting them is also sufficient: a person whose anger meets these conditions has reason to be angry, and to be as angry as he is.

Suppose that you are angry on Tuesday because you believe that I took X from you on Monday and you believe I ought not to have done so. Suppose that on Wednesday I return X; I compensate you for any disadvantage occasioned by your not having had X for two days; I offer additional gifts to show my good will; I (sincerely) apologize for my theft as a moment of weakness; finally, I (sincerely) promise never to do it again. Suppose, in addition, that you believe my apology is sincere, and that I will keep my promise. I want to raise the following question: is it possible that, on Thursday, you have the very same anger that you had on Tuesday, and that it is just as rational? Could it be rational for you to be just as angry on Thursday as on Tuesday?

The standard answer here is “no”. The thought behind this answer is that you ought to take into account the ways in which the wrongdoing that prompted your anger has been addressed, via restitution, compensation, apology, and a promise. I have tried to make amends for my wrongdoing, in (let us assume) every possible way; if you continue to be just as angry as you were, it must (says the standard answer) be because you are being irrationally insensitive to those amends. In other words, the non-rational aspects of anger are expected to shoulder the explanatory burden for our well-known tendency to cling to anger through apologies and recompense, for years sometimes, to the detriment of all parties concerned. It is often supposed, specifically, that the explanation of not “letting go” of one’s anger must rest on something like a perverse pleasure in, or attachment to, that anger. (Thus Burns: “Whare sits our sulky sullen dame/Gathering her brows like gathering storm/Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.”)

Holding onto anger is, no doubt, often to be explained in terms of non-rational motives. But it is important to notice that there are also reasons to remain angry. The reasons are not hard to find: they are the same reasons as the reasons to get angry in the first place. Apologies, restitution and all the rest of it do nothing whatever to cancel or alter the fact that I stole, nor the fact that I ought not to have stolen. Nor do my penitential actions make your belief that I wrongly stole less justified (indeed, they will typically make it

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4 This condition is likely to go down easy among philosophers, but it can be called into question—would we say, to the paranoiac who happens to be right that X is out to get her, “you have no reason to be angry at X”? Maybe she does have a reason, even though her belief that X is out to get her is not justified. The fact that she has fastened (by whatever means) onto a way in which things are not as they ought might be sufficient to rationalize her anger. The issue doesn’t matter for this paper, however.

5 “Tam o’ Shanter”
more justified—if I’m not guilty, why am I trying to make amends?); nor do they make my action less morally serious (whatever features of theft make it wrong are still in place). But those facts were your reasons to be angry; so if they are not affected in the least by apology, compensation, etc., then you still have, after the deployment of these amends, the very same reasons to be angry, and the very same reasons to be exactly as angry as you were.

B. Rage

I am not saying that we ought, all things considered, to stay angry forever. Staying angry forever is ‘counterproductive,’ ‘self-destructive,’ etc. We have reasons, from the point of view of our own well-being and that of others, to let go of our anger. But those reasons do not have anything to do with our reasons for getting angry in the first place. Apology, compensation, etc. can all mollify anger, induce tranquility—and we can have reasons to accept them because of these effects—but they are no more responses to the reasons behind the anger than hitting a punching bag or taking an anger management class. It is only because we have reason to care about something other than the gaps we notice (between the world as it should be and the world as it is) that we have reason to let go of our anger.

Let’s imagine someone who doesn’t have such alternative reasons—someone with no emotions, concerns or interests outside whatever it is that angers him. I think the name for this all-encompassing form of anger is rage; it is the subject of Homer’s *Iliad*. Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks in their fight against the Trojans, enrages his best fighter, Achilles, by confiscating a prize Achilles had been awarded for his bravery. Angered by this slight, Achilles withdraws from the fighting and prays to the gods for vengeance—he wants the Greek side to start losing, so that they (and Agamemnon in particular) might come to see the error of their ways, and their need of him. The gods, being related to Achilles, do as he prays, and Agamemnon eventually realizes that he made a terrible mistake. He sends ambassadors to Achilles, to beg for help and shower Achilles with gifts—gifts which include, but extend far beyond, the original, contested prize. To no avail: Achilles cannot let go of his anger. Or is this the right way to describe him? Should we say that Achilles “cannot” let go of his anger, that he is possessed of it like a sickness? Or should we say that Achilles will not let go of his anger, that he refuses to let go of it?

For the sake of argument, assume that, given the facts and norms of Homeric life, Achilles is right to be angered, and right to be as angered as he is, by what Agamemnon did to him. The retraction of an earned prize rocks Achilles’ honor-centric world—if one’s honors are subject to the caprice of an Agamemnon, honor no longer seems worth fighting for. Deprived of his life’s goal, he finds himself with nothing to care about other than the fact that his prize ought not to have been taken away. His anger becomes his only project, his sole commitment. In this context, the ambassadors’ gifts and pleadings and arguments about how he will be better off if he comes back now—they all have the character of a non-sequitur: to Achilles, they must appear as attempts to distract him
from, rather than engage with, what concerns him. In ignoring Agamemnon’s arguments Achilles did the only rational thing he could do.

Achilles cannot simply ‘let go’ of what was done to him in the same sense that a person who is eaten by guilt cannot simply ‘let go’ of what he has done: their whole selves are turned toward a gap between ‘ought’ and ‘is.’ Those who are angry but unenraged are those who can be distracted from anger’s reasons: rage is the perfect or pure case of anger sensitizing us to a defect or failure in the world. Rage proves that someone who is angry might have no reason at all to desist from his anger. (Or, more carefully: no internal reason.) Consideration of the case of rage brings out why anger as such—and not only particular forms of anger, such as indignation and resentment—is a moral emotion.

C. World and Mind (A detour)

I am done arguing for

_the Eternal Anger Thesis:_ If I have a reason to be angry about $p$, then I have a reason to be eternally angry about $p$.

I want now to try to excavate what lies under the eternal anger thesis—I want to explain what it is that makes it eternal.

Let’s consider two promising explanations:
I) “The past can’t be changed” (= it is the world that makes anger eternal)
II) “Anger is not a practical” (= it is the mind that makes anger eternal)

I) World

It might seem as though the explanation for the eternal anger thesis is that we can’t change the past. After all, that looks like the problem: I can’t undo my theft, and so I can’t get at the heart of what is angering you—if only there were time machines, there would be a cure for anger. If the unchangeability of the past were the source of anger’s eternality, then anger about the future or present would differ from anger about the past in being susceptible to a rational response—at any rate, it would differ for non-determinists, who think that there is something we can do about the present and the future. But that is not so: the eternal anger thesis applies to all anger, and it does so irrespective of one’s stance on the free will debate.

Consider a case of future-anger. If I am angry about something in the future, I believe of some proposition, $p$ that

(A) $p$ will occur
(B) $p$ ought not to occur (in the future)

If I am angry because I believe (A) and (B), then, I claim, there is no rational response, by me or anyone else, to that anger—we are in exactly the same boat as we were with
past anger. You might think, ‘shouldn’t I try to stop p from happening, wouldn’t that be a rational response to my anger’? But if I believe (A) I will also believe

(C) I cannot prevent p from happening.

And arguably, it is not conceivable (let alone rational) to try to bring about the impossible. Perhaps I should replace (A) with something from which (C) will not follow, such as

(A*) there is a good chance that p will happen

If I believe (A*) and (B), then I will be on track for preventive action—but not for anger: recall that we were working with a conception of anger (as a moral or reactive sentiment) which required the angry man to believe of the very same p that it will and ought not happen. So let’s also replace (B) with

(B*) there ought not to be a good chance that p will happen

If I believe (A*) and (B*), I have something to be angry about. But now we are left, once again, with a state of affairs to be eternally angry about: even if I prevent p, I still have (the very same) reason to be angry that there was a good chance that p would happen—if that is really what I was angry about.

Let’s forget about (A*) and (B*) and return to (A) and (B). Perhaps it was a mistake to insist that (C) followed from (A). Certainly some compatibilists6 will deny this. So let us allow our compatibilist to assert (A) and (B) without (C). In fact, let’s go so far as to grant him

(D) I can prevent p from occurring

Does the compatibilist, believing (A), (B) and (D), have a reason to try to prevent p? Yes. And does he have a reason to be angry about p? Yes. But they are different reasons! His reason to be angry about p is the conjunction of (A) and (B). His reason to prevent p is the conjunction of (B) and (D). The compatibilist ‘reconciles’ my reason to be angry about the future with my reason to change the future, but he does not have any special trick which will bring these reasons into contact with one another. And this makes sense: compatibilism is designed to shield my reasons for action from my beliefs about what will happen—this is how they block the move from (A) to (C). But insofar as they render (A) ‘rationally inert’, compatibilists also turn anger and action into ships

6 I’m thinking of old-school compatibilists such as G.E. Moore (in his Ethics)—he is actually committed to something much stronger, which is that (D) is compatible with (E) necessarily, p will occur.

Contemporary compatibilists are more likely to accept the inference from (A) to (C) and prefer to deny instead that a proposition such as (C) is incompatible with something like (F) I freely bring about p.

But this issue is orthogonal to our discussion here. The point is that not even a Moorean compatibilist can think that anger about the future is any less eternal than anger about the past.
passing in the night. For if facts like (A) can have no bearing on my reason to prevent p, then my reason for anger, of which (A) is partly constitutive, can have no bearing on my reason to prevent p either.

Let me approach the same point from another angle. The absence of time machines which would allow us to go back and change things has nothing to do with the eternal anger thesis; we can see this without embedding ourselves in time-travel paradoxes by considering the world from the point of view of a moral luck theorist. Bernard Williams thinks that someone who wants to know whether or not it was immoral of Gaugin to abandon his family to go paint in Tahiti needs to consider the fact that Gaugin ends up, by dint of this choice, a great painter. Gaugin, sailing to Tahiti is (on this view) poised to influence what just happened. If he fails to paint, or fails to paint well, he contributes to the case that he did something immoral, in the past. Thus what he does at t2 can affect the rationality of his wife’s anger at him at t1—this is just the kind of counterintuitive bullet that the theorist of moral luck bites. He can make it the case that his wife, say, won’t have had reason to be indignant at him for leaving her—he can give her, at t2, a reason not to have been at t1, angry about what he did at t1. (Assuming, falsely, that his wife’s only reason for anger would be what philosophers call ‘indignation’!) But all that means is that his wife has to wait until after t1 to find out whether she has a reason to be angry about what Gaugin did at t1. It does not mean that her reason to be angry, if she has one, is amenable to anything Gaugin ever does in response to it. If Gaugin does triumph artistically at t2, here is the wrong description of Gaugin’s wife’s anger: she had a reason to be angry until t2 and then she had no reason. Here is the right one: she thought she had a reason but never did, and the fact that she never did is something she can only discover at t2. If there is moral luck, but no foreknowledge, then rational anger may come to us late—once it comes, however, it is eternal.

We are more prone to getting angry about the past than about the future, but that is due to uninteresting epistemic asymmetries: we have more reliable cognitive access to the facts about the past than the those about the future, and one of the components of anger is a belief about some facts. If we got much better at predicting the future, and much worse at remembering and recording the past, our balance of anger would shift to future-anger. The problem with addressing anger runs deeper than the contingent fact (if it is one) that we can’t go backwards in time, or affect what’s already happened. The problem seems to be that the angry perspective on the world is precisely a perspective on it as insusceptible to change. Anger does not direct us to make things other than they are, it directs us to notice that they are (already) not as they should be.

II. Mind

This prompts an alternative suggestion: maybe the eternal anger thesis is not a product of the kind of world we live in (one where the future is changeable, the past not so), but a product of the kind of mental state anger is—in particular, that it is not a (rationally) motivating mental state. Anger belongs to a category of mental states which we might describe as ‘valenced attitudes’: hunger and fear and lust and disgust and wish and happiness and sadness and relief and jealousy and curiosity and hope and despair and
shame and guilt and dread and irritation. I call these mental states ‘valenced attitudes’ because they are pro- or con- attitudes, containing some reference to a felt way the world should or should not be. Surprse and puzzlement would be examples of non-valenced attitudes, mental states that don’t give one any reason to get off the couch, anything to go for or flee from. The belief that the world ought to be a certain way is a non-valenced attitude, since it does not require one to feel that the world ought to be that way. All valenced attitudes can move an agent, but not all of those movements count as rational responses to the state in question: dread can move me to tear out my hair. I will call one of these states ‘practical’ if it does not merely move but motivates an agent by giving him a reason to do something. (I am not suggesting, by the way, that motivating states must be valenced—perhaps the belief that the world ought to be a certain way can, all by itself, motivate me to make it that way. My point is just that it does not motivate me by making me feel a certain way.)

Here is a suggestion as to a condition on practicality. We might think that valenced attitudes will be able to motivate if they go beyond making reference to what is to be brought about or avoided, and somehow invoke the thought that what happens is a matter of what I do, something I can influence. If this were right, it would mean that the thing one feels the attitude toward (the object of fear or dread or hope or curiosity etc.) would be the object of two attitudes: in addition to being seen in a pro- or con- way, it would also be seen as something which is up to me to bring about or prevent. This ‘double-attitude’ condition rules out wish and hope as motivating states: they involve pro-attitudes to states of affairs considered as happening or not happening independently of what I do or bring about—that is why I can wish counterfactually, and ‘hope-against-hope.’ I think that a version of the double-attitude condition, for which I argue elsewhere, is correct; but I want to set it aside in favor of a much weaker condition on practicality which will suffice for my purposes here. One might think that even if the motivating state doesn’t need to contain a thought that p is up to me, it cannot contain the thought that p is not up to me. I surely cannot be moved to try to bring p about by thinking that whether or not p happens is fixed independently of what I do. To motivate an agent to bring it about that p, a state must keep the question ‘whether p’ open—this is a weaker condition on practicality, which we might call the ‘open-question condition.’

If the practical state cannot contain a reference to the fact that it is (or will be) the case that p or the fact that it is not (or will not be) the case that p, then certain kinds of hope and wish are ruled out. Counterfactual wish, or hope for what I know to be impossible, come out (unsurprisingly) as non-motivating, but other kinds of hopes and wishes might motivate. Consider the difference between ‘fear’ and ‘dread’: ‘dread’ closes the question as to whether the evil will in fact occur—thus fear is motivating, whereas dread is paralyzing. (I can note, along the lines of my thoughts about compatibilism above, that I am not denying that someone who dreads that p can be moved to try to avoid p—since

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7 In “The Shape of Satisfaction,” unpublished.
8 I choose the phrase in deliberate, if slightly strained, analogy with Moore’s ‘open question’ argument. His point is that for any natural property, x, which purports to be an analysis of goodness, we will be able to ask, “is x good”? My point is that any mental state which moves us to bring about some proposition p must leave room for the question, “will p be the case?”
for all I’ve said, someone who dreads p might also fear p. I am only saying that in such a case I am not moved to avoid p by my dread of p but rather in spite of my dread of p.)

The proposal on the table is that the eternal anger thesis is true because anger fails the open-question condition: when I am angry about p, there is some fact such that I think that it ought to be (or ought to have been or ought to be about to be) the case, and I think that it is not (or was not or won’t be) the case. There are no reasons to get rid of one’s anger because there is nothing to be done about anger: it is not a practical state of mind. And this is because action would be an attempt to influence the answer to the question about whether the world matches/matched/will match the world to which I see it aspire—but insofar as I’m angry I see this question as ‘closed,’ that is, answered, independently of what I do, in the direction of “no.”

Anger does fail the open question condition. But this doesn’t explain why anger is eternal. There is more to being eternal than being impractical. A mental state which was impractical might yet be able to be rationally addressed by something other than the action of the agent in that state. “There’s nothing to be done about X” does not follow from “There’s nothing I can do about X.” My anger is rationally insusceptible not only to what I do but also to what others do, and what happens to me. The Open question condition cannot explain the utter insusceptibility of a mental state to rational extinction. I will bring this out by considering, in a moment, a valenced attitude that is noneternal but, like anger, closes off the question of whether p in the direction of “no.”

Let’s step back for a moment to take stock of our failed attempts. We have tried attributing the eternal anger thesis to something about the structure of the world—the fact that parts of it, namely the past parts, are unchangeable. When that did not work, we considered whether the eternal anger thesis instead reflects something about the structure of our minds—that anger is impractical because it contains a ‘question-closing’ thought as to whether p. ‘That is just the kind of world we live in’ and ‘that is just the kind of mental state anger is’ are, we now see, not answers to the question ‘why is anger eternal’? This should lead us to suspect that the answer somehow involves both mind and world. The eternality of anger turns on the connection between the kinds of thought we can have about the world and the fact that we are also in it.

D. Sadness

Consider two kinds of valenced attitudes that are evoked upon hearing bad news:

resentment, indignation, rage, annoyance or irritation, being incensed or mad or livid or up in arms.

depression, being downcast or wistful or gloomy or disheartened or crestfallen, misery, distress, unhappiness, dejection. ¹⁰

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¹⁰ To say that there are words that fall clearly into one of these two families is not to deny that there are words which could go in either: troubled, bothered, sullen, upset.
One and the same negative event often allows either a sadness-response or an anger-response, or both—but we typically see the sadness and the anger as responses to different features of the event. Some people reacted to the events of September 11, 2001 primarily with sadness—at the thought of the lives lost, the families devastated—others were primarily angered—by the evil acts of the terrorists—and many people felt both sadness and anger. Obviously, there is a difference between sadness and anger—each of these states has a particular phenomenology which typically corresponds to it. But I think that we have a strong intuition that this phenomenology corresponds to a deeper difference between these two states—they feel different because they are different. What is the difference?

Here’s my answer: The difference is that sadness is not eternal. We don’t have reason to be sad forever.

Consider the following conversation:

   t1 A asks, “Why are you sad?”
   B answers, “I lost my cat.”
   t2 A hands B his cat.
   t3 A asks, “Why are you sad now?”
   B answers, “Same reason as before, I’m sad that I didn’t have my cat at t1.”

Whether or not one ought to cry over spilled milk, it is really deeply irrational to do so once the mess has been cleaned up and the glass filled with fresh milk. If there is irrational sadness, there is also rational sadness: for instance, in the ordinary case, someone who loses his cat has reason to be sad. That’s because losing one’s cat is bad for the one to whom it happens—and it’s right to be sad when bad things happen to you. What is characteristic of rational sadness is its rectifiability. If I am sad because I don’t have any chocolate, or missed my flight to Paris, or my pet died, the presence of a solution to my troubles is just a contingent hop, skip or jump away. (Bringing the dead pet back to life would be a case of the ‘jump.’) Make a few changes in the world, or the laws of nature, and presto! from now on, I no longer have reason to be sad.

Couldn’t there be eternal sadness? Let’s try to construct a case: Scott is sad because Amundsen got to the South Pole before him. Scott's dream was to be the first man there, and now it won’t ever happen. Doesn’t Scott have a reason to be sad forever? Let’s prove that the answer is no, by ‘curing’ his sadness. We will have to ask him: why did you care about reaching the Pole? Was it the honor that reaching the Pole first would bring you (or the British Empire you represented)? Presto! I give you an even greater opportunity for honor. Was it because the Pole is the world's most inaccessible place? Then, presto: I’ve made a place even more inaccessible! Was it because reaching the Pole was what you took to be the highest physical achievement of which you were capable? Presto! I endow you with powers to perform a higher one. Was it in order to make your mother proud? Presto! Whatever it is that Scott wanted out of making the trek to the South Pole, I can help him get it elsewhere. And even if I cannot give him
everything he wants out of reaching the Pole (I wanted to reaching the most forbidding place at the time! Or, I wanted to reach the most naturally forbidding place!), I can give him some of what he wants, so that he has a reason to be less sad.

Let’s say Scott denies that he wanted to be the first to the South Pole because it is so inaccessible, or a great accomplishment—he insists (suppose, truthfully) that there is no description of what he aimed to do which could make clear to us why being the first to the Pole was a good thing for him, or anyone. He just wanted to do it. Do we still say that he had a reason to be sad? It certainly no longer seems clear what that reason is. But let’s allow that he does have a reason—because even in this case there’s something we can do to help—the sadness rectifier has a trump card up her sleeve. Part of Scott's reason for feeling sad about his failure is that he cared about being the first to the Pole. He may not be able to say why he cared, but he can say that he cared. And so, though he may not like or want it, we can silence his sadness by silencing his caring. If we make it the case that he stops caring about being the first to the Pole, we also make it the case that he no longer has a reason to be sad that he wasn’t. An objection may arise: can’t we do the same in the case of anger? Can’t we ‘silence’ someone’s anger by bringing it about that he no longer cares about the phenomena in question? Yes. But in the case of sadness, what we do, when taking away his caring, is take away his reason to be sad. In the case of anger, what we do, when taking away his caring, is simply take away the fact of his anger. The reason stands as ever.

When we are angry, we care about something because we have a reason to be angry; when we are sad, we have a reason to be sad because we care about something. It is only in the case of sadness that one’s reason is itself predicated on the antecedent fact of one’s caring, and so it is only in the case of sadness that we can make the reason go away by making the caring go away.

There is something out there that does a pretty good job of effecting precisely this kind of change, that is, changing contingent facts that relate to our disposition to care: time. Most of us are disposed to be less upset about ills in the distant past, as those in the less distant past; and we are less upset about those things than about things that happened quite recently, or are happening right now. Time can, as the saying goes, heal wounds—but, I assert, time can’t address grievances. Nothing can. You can deal with someone’s anger by calming him down or allowing him to vent—but what you thereby deal with are his manifestations of anger, or his feelings of anger, rather than his reasons for being angry. Whereas when you cheer someone up, you don’t just distract him from his reasons to be sad, you actually address those reasons.

The rectifiability of sadness is, I contend, the source of its peculiar poignancy: sadness, any sadness, would vanish without a trace if things from now on started to be just a bit different from how it looks like they will be. The sadness-ending road is a perfectly possible and coherent way the world could be—it just so happens that the sad man thinks, looking down it, that that isn’t the way he’s heading. Sadness glimpses the promised land; it feels happiness slipping through its fingers. The fact that sadness is endable doesn’t mean it comes to an end: some sadnesses are very long-lasting, and we carry
them with us till the end of our lives. But even that sadness which lasts the length of a life is not eternal: even un-ended sadnessess were endable.

So, I claim, whatever it is that explains the difference between anger and sadness will also be what lies behind the distinctive eternality of anger. So what is this difference? The difference between anger and sadness is a difference in the kinds of facts to which they are responsive. Let me take a moment to state the difference, as well as to acknowledge that an analysis of this difference would take us into metaphysical issues that lie outside the scope of this paper.

E. Change

If someone stands up, he changes the position of his limbs, but he doesn’t change or undo or reverse the fact that, at the time prior to that moment, he was sitting. Standing is the latest in a succession of poses in which his body has been arrayed since he was born: in standing, he adds a new member to this series, but does not otherwise alter it. Ordinary actions, on an ordinary conception of them, do not, simply in virtue of being or bringing about changes in the world, count as being or bringing about changes in the facts. And that’s because what’s fact is fact: facts don’t change.

Or, at least, not in those facts. But the man might reply, “There is a fact that I change when I stand: the fact about what I am now doing. ‘I am sitting’ is a sentence which used to be true of me and now it is false of me—and I’m responsible for that change. I made what was true, false, and I did so by changing a fact (that is, by standing up). What could be a clearer case of changing a fact than changing the truth value of the proposition made true by that fact? This fact, the fact that I am standing, is a special kind of fact—it is true for me, now. John Maynard Keynes was criticized, during the Great Depression, for changing his position on monetary policy. He responded: “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”¹¹ He was talking about this kind of fact.

Philosophers¹² are sometimes moved, in a scientific and objective spirit, to reduce the second kind of fact, the changeable kind, to the first kind, the unchangeable kind. Their thought is that the fact that I am sitting is shorthand for something like Agnes sits [tenselessly] at time t. This second fact is left unchanged by events occurring after t. But there are notorious problems with such a reduction. In particular, it seems as though there are attitudes which we sometimes have to the former fact that we never have to the latter, e.g. impatience. You can say, “Why’s Agnes still sitting?! I’ve been waiting for her to get up for ages.” What you are impatient at can only be captured by the phrase “Agnes sits [tenselessly] at time t” if we add “time t is now”—for your impatience vanishes, unlike the fact that Agnes sits [tenselessly] at time t, when I stand up.


¹² Reference to “Thank Goodness that’s over Literature, Quentin Smith paper, L.A. Paul paper (type-level B-theory as opp’d to token level).
Philosophers moved in perspectival spirit (perhaps someone like Nietzsche or Richard Rorty) might want to fly off in the opposite direction and assert that the only kind of fact there is is a fact about what *seems* true *to a person at a time*. The motto of this view, let’s call it humanistic reductivism, might be, “a view from nowhere is no view at all.” When the scientific reductivist asserts that it is a fact that Joe sits (tenselessly) at time t, the humanistic reductivist corrects him: it is a fact that it seems true to you, now that he sits (tenselessly) at time t—but this fact can change. Perhaps to me, now, or to you, later, it seems or will seem false that he sits (tenselessly) at time t. I think this thought is what lies behind at least some people’s assertions that there is no ‘absolute truth’ or that there is only ‘true for me’ or ‘what seems true.’ Such statements could be taken as evidence of a project of reducing unchangeable facts to changeable ones—and the word “seems” is a crucial tool in the toolkit of such a reductivist, since it can be used to convert any timeless, impersonal truth into timely, personal one.

(The hard case for the humanistic reductivist is not to explain mundane attitudes like that of relief or disappointment—those are the humanist’s bread and butter. The humanistic reductivist has trouble with large scale architectonic claims about the nature of truth, or logic, or the world. He may deny that there are any true claims of this kind, though there is that one will give him particular trouble, namely, the claim that unchangeable facts can be reduced to changeable ones.)

Whatever the prospects for either kind of reduction, everyone must allow that there is at least a *surface difference* between the two kinds of facts—that only from one kind of fact do the concepts corresponding to indexical terms such as “I” and “this” and “now” appear to be ineliminable. We might put the difference this way: such facts appear to make essential reference to their own being thought or understood or communicated or represented. These facts are the humanist’s facts, or, as I’ve been calling them, the changeable facts. The other kind, the scientist’s facts, are the unchangeable ones.

Changeable facts are important for making sense of most of the states that motivate human beings: hunger and fear and lust and disgust and wish and happiness and sadness and relief and jealousy and curiosity and hope and despair and shame and guilt and dread. I might express my hunger by saying that *I want some food now*—where I don’t mean that it would be good for person p to have food at time t.\(^\text{13}\) Even more obviously, *guilt* and *shame* involve essential reference to oneself as the one who did something she shouldn’t have done, or is not the way she should be. Opponents of scientific reductivism should make much of these mental states—and scientific reductivists should try to argue either that they have the resources to make sense of such states, or, alternatively, that the states are somehow incoherent or irrational.

Anger plays for the other team: it ought to be dear to the scientific reductivist, hated by the humanistic reductivist. Whereas sadness is a response to a changeable fact’s not

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\(^{13}\) If we convert my desire into a desire that *I have some food at time t*, where t is the time of utterance, my desire becomes unsatisfiable. (By the time I get food, time t has passed.) But *I can* do something about my hunger, that is, about the fact that I want food now—I can bring it about that “I have food now” is true, when asserted by me, at some time after t.
being the way it should be, anger is a response to an unchangeable fact’s not being the way it should be.

Let’s return to our cat owner. The person who is just as sad about having lost his cat after his cat is returned to him is someone whose sadness we might call pathological. Usually, this will be explained in terms of some mundane form of irrationality: for example, perhaps the whole episode was so traumatic that he can’t even really accept that he has been reunited with his cat. But suppose he resists these explanations of his continued sadness; suppose he is a philosopher, and he says, “I was sad (at t1) that I didn’t have Pickles at t1, and it’s still the case that I didn’t have Pickles at t1. Why should I feel any differently now than I did then, given that my feeling now is a response to the same fact as my feeling then?” We will answer: the reason you should feel differently is that the fact that you were sad about has changed. It is no longer true, for you, now, that you don’t have pickles—and that is the fact you were sad about.

Of course you may, thinking back on the sadness of yesterday, be sad, in a wistful way, that you ever lost your cat—after all, things would have been better for you if you hadn’t. This wistful sadness is a new sadness at the fact that you didn’t have your cat yesterday. Both of these facts—that is, the fact that you were originally sad about and the fact that you are now wistfully sad about—can be represented (unchangeably) as the fact that on Tuesday so-and-so (tenselessly) has no cat. But it is a mistake to represent them this way, as we can see from the fact that it obscures the difference between your two sadnesses.

Now let’s take a case of anger. Suppose it turns out that I stole the man’s cat, and he’s angry about that, but I return it, and apologize. Can we make the same criticism of him, if he stays angry about that, as we made of him for staying sad? We cannot. The return of cat and the apology should make him feel better—perhaps to the point of drowning out altogether his anger over the theft. But that is only true insofar as he cares about something other than the thing he was angry about—for instance, he might care about the changeable fact that he now has his cat, or the unchangeable fact that the guilty party both did and ought to have apologized. But as for the fact that I ought not have, yet did steal his cat—this is, was, and always will be a reason for that man to be angry.

What I am upset about, if I am sad that my cat was stolen, is the fact that I don’t have the cat now; what I’m upset about, if I am angry that my cat was stolen, is the fact that at some time, the cat was wrongly taken (from such-and-such a person, by such-and-such a person). Sadness is like fear or relief: it is a response to changeable facts. If there are reasons to be sad or afraid or relieved, there are also reasons to stop being sad and afraid and relieved: all that needs to happen is for the changeable facts to change. Anger is a response to the fact that the world, at a certain time, is (timelessly) a certain way: it is a reaction to the world qua unchangeable.

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14 The indexical in question needn’t be “I”—it can also be “we” (as in women, Americans, philosophers, humans, animals) or “my” (as in my friend, my mother, my boss, my senator). This would be the way to extend the analysis into sympathy and empathy—but I cannot do so here.
If anger is a relation to unchangeable facts, facts which we do not need terms like “I” and “here” and “now” and “this” to state, then it is something quite remarkable: it is an emotional state which is at the same time ‘a view from nowhere’. One might have thought that such a thing was impossible. Imagine someone who has an ‘out of body experience’ and amnesia at the same time: he finds himself looking down on the world, watching various organisms interacting with one another and their environment, wondering in which of these various things he is embodied. Some of these things are faring well, others badly—but he doesn’t know which one or ones to grieve with, to be happy for, because he doesn’t know, as he would put it, which one is me. What I have been arguing is that there is at least one emotion open to such an unfortunate creature: he can get angry at what he sees.

What is it to care about whether or not things are right with the world, when that caring takes place not from the point of view of occupying any particular piece of it, but sub specie aeternitatis? I submit that timeless and impersonal solicitude for the world’s being as it should be is nothing other than a sense of justice.

Now to speak of anger as a sense or thirst is to speak metaphorically—but I think that these metaphors help us conceive of how anger might be a response to the justice or injustice of a situation, per se, despite the fact that we are often not angered by perceived injustice. Vision is a sense of color, but we do not perceive all colors, only the ones in our immediate vicinity. Similarly, anger might be a directed at justice, even if it is only ‘activated’ by injustices done to me, or those I love, and only under certain psychologically favorable circumstances that do not themselves have anything to do with justice. (I do not perceive even proximate colors when my eyes are closed, or when there is no light.)

The metaphor of a sense is useful in helping us to avoid conflating the conditions under which we get angry with the content of anger, what we’re angry about. Even the pettiest anger is impersonal in this way: “how dare she fail to invite the most important person in town (i.e. me) to her party!” Just as anger can be petty, it can also be tied to relationships or ‘agent-relative’: perhaps sometimes I have reason to be angry about what befalls my husband, my friend, my colleague, where a stranger would not. We can say A has a reason to be angry about B’s treatment because (1) wives have reasons to be angry when their husbands are so treated and (2) A and B instantiate the schema wife, husband. Of course in order to get angry, A has to know that she is part of this schema—but this knowledge is merely a condition on her getting angry. It isn’t what she’s angry about. Even when I need an essentially indexical thought to give me purchase on the fact that I have a reason to be angry, that thought isn’t itself part of my reason. (Someone who has such an ‘agent-relative’ reason to get angry might put the point this way: I’m angry because he’s my husband but anyone who was his wife would be right to feel the same way.)

But the angry man does more than sense justice; he longs for it. It is the angry man who hungers or thirsts after righteousness. And he does so in full awareness that he can’t have it. This awareness that the game is up—incorrigibly, unchangeably, up—that is what
gives anger its peculiar fieriness, whereas the feel of the game being corrigibly, changeably up—that is the piquancy of sadness.

So, to sum up: I have argued that we have a reason to be angry forever; and that that reason is Justice.

F) Punishment

If anger’s reasons are eternal, then the injustice to which anger sensitizes us is also eternal—we cannot (rationally) put it to rest. The eternality of injustice has implications for a social institution which, like anger, is directed at injustice: punishment.

Those who disagree on every other question about punishment (whether it should exist, what ought to constitute it, what motivates it, what justifies it, what efficacy it has, who ought to receive it, who ought to administer it, etc.) must, nonetheless, agree that punishment is in some way or other directed at a past normative failure of some kind. Even in the most defective kind of punishment, such as punishing a scapegoat for something he is known not to have done, there is still something for which the one being punished is being punished. Punishment is punishment for, which is to say that punishment must have, as its intentional object, something in the ballpark of a crime. While the ‘crime’ is typically a deed, an immoral or prohibited action of some kind, arguably it does not need to be. (Presumably, the reason why you shouldn’t shoot the messenger is that he is not responsible for the content of the message he carries, and, therefore, ought not to be punished for it. If the thought is not that the shooting would be (unjustified) punishment, then why not shoot the messenger?) The most minimal characterization of the crime would be that it is something that shouldn’t have happened. So what all theorists of punishment accept is that it is a response to the fact that what ought not to have happened, happened. It is a response to the kind of thing that one can have reason to be angry about. But anger is also eternal—there is no rational response to it. So we must wonder: how can punishment be a rational response to past injustice?

Consider an old story about anger and punishment: Cain is angry at God for not regarding his offering, so Cain kills Abel. Why Abel, we wonder? How does killing Abel have anything to do with what made Cain angry, which was the fact that God did not, but (as Cain thought) ought to have, regarded his offering? On the surface, the story doesn’t make sense.16 Let’s change the story to one that makes more sense: you kill my brother, so I kill your brother. But even straightforward retaliation of this kind does not make a lot of sense: if what made me angry is, not that your brother lives while mine does not,

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15 Perhaps punishment for future crime is intelligible (as in the movie Minority Report).
16 One way to interpret the story is this: Cain is trying to punish God (by robbing him of Abel). But even this interpretation is only as intelligible as punishment itself—in other words (as we will see momentarily), of limited intelligibility. On another interpretation, Cain’s anger is not a ‘moral emotion,’ not based on perceiving a gap between how the world is and how it ought to be, but mere hot-headedness. On this reading of Cain, he is “angry” only in a sense of the word “anger” I excluded from our discussion at the outset—pathologically angry. An indication that this is the wrong way to read the story is that God notices his anger, and responds to is as rational, asking Cain his reason for being angry: “Why are you incensed...” Genesis 4:6-7)
but, rather, that you killed my brother (as you ought not have done), then I have just as much reason to be angry after I take my revenge as before I take it. Let’s say that I respond to your killing of my brother by killing you instead of your brother. We seem to be getting closer to making sense—closer, it seems, to justice, which, I’ve argued, is what rational anger thirsts for. In this third case, the one who did wrong is, himself, getting punished. But note that my reasons for anger are intact as ever, since the punishment does not affect the facts that constitute those reasons. Let’s now get even closer to what we normally think of as justice: instead of killing you, I make sure you are prosecuted for your crime before a jury of your peers according to the law of the land. Still, if my anger fades, it does not do so rationally: my reason for anger—that you ought not to have killed my brother, and yet you did kill him—abides as ever. We have not, it seems, really moved a step away from the incoherence of Cain’s response to his anger: the reason for my anger, which is to say the reason that (in part) constitutes my anger as anger, does not favor having you prosecuted for your crime over, say, killing an innocent bystander.

How can it not matter, from the point of view of rational anger, whether we punish the guilty or the innocent? If rational anger is a thirst for justice, then shouldn’t it favor punishing the guilty? The peculiar way in which the eternal anger thesis threatens the rationality of (any) punishment can be brought out by comparison with the way in which the rationality of capital punishment is sometimes called into question. Opponents of capital punishment frequently say, “executing this murderer will not bring back his victim, so we ought not execute him.” The implication is that if executing a murderer were to cause the resurrection of the victim, it might thereby be justified. As far as the anger’s reasons go, the resurrection of the victim would make no difference at all. Subsequent resurrection doesn’t change the fact that the murder still happened, and that it ought not to have happened. If, per impossibile, executing a man somehow undid the murders he committed—made it the case that they never happened—only then might the justice to which anger is a response rationalize capital punishment. So suppose (again, per impossibile) that executing the murderer undid the murder without resurrecting the victim—suppose it somehow transformed the murder into a morally inoffensive killing (e.g., an act of self-defense). This would make all the difference in the world to anger’s reasons, and none at all to my opponent of capital punishment. (He would remain sad about the victim’s death, and perhaps add on an additional sadness for the murderer’s death.) Anger’s complaint about punishment is not that it fails to make things better, but that it fails to make them right.

If punishment fails to right wrongs, does it follows that we cannot have reason to punish? If rational anger is a rational response to injustice, and punishment is not a rational response to rational anger, does it follow that punishment cannot be a rational response to injustice? It does—if punishment must be a response to the same injustice to which anger is a response. So the question about the bearing of my argument about anger on our theory of punishment boils down to the question: do we punish people to make things right, crimewise? It is sometimes thought that this is what a retributive justification of punishment amounts to: the criminal pays back (re-tribuo, re-distributes) a debt, we

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17 Here and henceforth I am asking questions about why we have the institution of punishment, rather than questions about why we punish, given that we have the institution. (Rawls, Two Concepts of Rules)
balance out a wrong, we make it as if the wrong never happened\(^{18}\), we cancel (Hegel\(^{19}\)) the original crime. This kind of retribution could be called ‘corrective retribution’—if it were possible, it would bring it about that, as a result of punishment, we no longer have reason to be angry about something we once had reason to be angry about. If I’m right about the eternality of anger, corrective retribution is impossible.

There is, however, a thinner conception of retribution, one we might call ‘deontic retribution,’ sometimes referred to as ‘the desert theory.’ On this theory, punishing is right because it is what criminals deserve, full stop—not because it achieves any further goal. (Just as, we might say, murder is wrong, full stop, and not because it detracts from any further goal). The proponent of deontic justice interprets the etymology of re-tribuo differently: instead of the criminal paying his debt to society, the crime is (re) distributed, revisited, onto the criminal\(^{20}\). The rationale is simply that it is fair or right or just for this to happen. The “re” of deontic retributivism is not the “re” of backwards motion but the “re” of repetition—the crime is iterated a second time, with the difference that the second time around, it is no longer a crime but a justified harm, since it is right for it to happen. There is just a norm that says murderers ought to be punished, which stands alongside the norm that says, one ought not murder. Deontic retribution is not about redeeming an old injustice, but preventing a new one: leaving the murderer unpunished would compound the original injustice.

The thought behind corrective (as opposed to deontic) retributivism is that there must be something to be got out of punishment, some goodness or balance or world-harmony or expiation of blood-guilt. Corrective retributivism is an attempt to give a consequentialist spin to a basically deontic idea: there must be some upshot, some good effect, some point or purpose to the punishment over and above the hollow formulation that it was such as ought to be done. The deontic theorist, on the other hand, is no more inclined to ‘balance out’ or ‘undo’ crimes that he punishes than good deeds that he rewards. He thinks that the point in both cases is just that there is a norm dictating fitting responses to good or bad acts. Some consider it an embarrassment to this theory that if it deserves the name ‘retributivism,’ then the person who believes that rewards ought to be fitting to deeds can be called a ‘retributivist’ as well. But I think the deontic retributivist will be happy to bite that bullet, and insist that one can and ought to be a retributivist about reward as well as punishment.

We can represent the difference between these two varieties of retribution in terms of the way in which the norm dictating the wrongness of the crime is related to the norm dictating the rightness of the punishment. On the corrective view, the second norm is contained within, or derivable from, the first norm: punishment is nothing other than wrong-righting. The reason why it is right to right a wrong is the same reason as the

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\(^{18}\) Arthur Ripstein, As if it never happened

\(^{19}\) The eternal anger thesis does not directly push against Hegel’s ‘cancellation’ view. To address Hegel’s arguments for his view on punishment as cancellation, I would have to consider his idiosyncratic conception of crime—as something which has no existence outside the will of the criminal, and exists in the will of the criminal even after what we would call the crime is over.

\(^{20}\) I make the etymological point in response to Cottingham, who thinks there is no way for the desert theorist to explain the etymology of ‘retribution.’
reason why it was wrong for that wrong to occur in the first place. On the deontic view, the second norm is not contained within the first norm—the fact that it is right to punish someone is not derivable from the wrongness of his crime. The “rightness” of the punishment is a new rightness, not merely the flip side of the “wrongness” the crime. But in order to see how deeply the two retributivists are divided, it is helpful to locate the two forms of retributivism in relation to nonretributive theories.

What unifies deontic and corrective retributivists is their stance towards the claim that wrongdoers ought to be punished: they believe it *a priori*. Non-retributivists justify punishment either as a source of *rehabilitation* for the criminal, *deterrence* of crime by dis-incentivizing it for would-be criminals, or *segregation* of the criminal to prevent him from further harming others. What these three nonretributive views have in common is the fact that they affirm “wrongdoers should be punished” only on the basis of empirical research as to whether, e.g., jailed criminals really are ‘segregated’ in the right sorts of ways (perhaps they still harm other prisoners? or pass messages to the outside world?), whether they are really improved by imprisonment (recidivism rates?), and whether other would-be criminals really get the message. Like all empirical knowledge, such knowledge of “wrongdoers should be punished” is synthetic—rehabilitationists, deterrentists and segregationists alike deny that the idea of punishment is somehow implied by or contained in the idea of wrongdoing. This is the respect in which their view is akin to that of the deontic retributivist, and different from that of the corrective retributivist.

If a wrong can be righted, it ought to be—this is just what it means for it to be wrong. So, for the corrective retributivist, who believes that punishment is the righting of a wrong, “wrongdoers ought to be punished” is an analytic truth. On the corrective view the norm governing punishment is contained in the norm prohibiting crime. On the deontic view, it is not: the deontic retributivist shares with the various nonretributive theorists the view that “wrongdoers ought to be punished” is a *synthetic* claim—the difference is that he believes that synthetic claim *a priori*.

My argument about anger makes room for the possibility that retributive punishment might be just or rational, but it does not allow for the possibility that “wrongdoers ought to be punished” is an analytic truth.

**G. Justice**

If this is right, then the justice at which the criminal justice system is directed is, on every theory of punishment, the justice of making sure some new norm is enforced, rather than

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21 There is another theory of punishment that has become popular since Feinberg’s paper in Monist 1965, the theory that punishment exists to express our disapproval of the crime—though there has been skepticism about whether it is a legitimate alternative. I think that this theory must *justify* punishment either by claiming that such an expression gets the message out there that X-ing is wrong, in which case it is an *a posteriori* theory, a form of deterrence, or in terms of its being fitting or right response to a crime to express disapproval of it, in which case it is an *a priori* theory, a form of deontic retributivism. But the argument that the expressive theory borrows its justificatory force from other theories would have to be made elsewhere, at greater length.
the justice of rectifying the violation of the old norm. In this respect the criminal justice is like all institutional justice—it is forward looking. I want to end by bringing out the significance of the difference between anger’s concern with old justice, and institutional concern with new justice.

The legal concept of a ‘statute of limitations’ on the prosecutability of a crime is the concept of a temporal restriction on the reason-giving force of a certain kind of wrongdoing. When its ‘prescriptive period’ expires, the wrong undergoes a transformation not unlike that of Cinderella’s carriage at midnight: it takes on the ordinariness of an event that gives rise to no (legal) reasons. The wrong becomes something to which it is (legally) inappropriate to respond as a wrong. There is a contingent connection between the concept of a statute of limitations and the concept of a justice system: some justice systems contain statutes of limitations for some crimes. But there is also a necessary connection: every justice system that ever was or will be instituted by human beings is a statute of limitations. When the culprit has been caught, tried and sentenced, the criminal and civil suits completed, the victim remunerated, the time served, then the crime, the wrong, is—as far as the justice system is concerned—over and done with. It gives rise to no further (legal) reasons.

The statute-of-limitations quality of the criminal justice system is generalizable to all of institutional justice: if we think that it is unjust for women not to be able to vote, if we care about this norm, then we might institute voting for women. And the moment we do, it is as though we are saying that, institutionally speaking, the time to complain about women’s suffrage is over. The institution of voting for women is the institution of the statue of limitations on the ‘crime’ of female disenfranchisement. It would not matter if we decided that giving women the vote is not enough—that we need to do more. Perhaps we institute some form of ‘reparation system’ to the previously disenfranchised women—maybe they get an extra vote or two, for the next 20 years? If reparations are just, it is because the new norm, the norm to institute reparations, is just—all we’ve done is widen time-frame of the statute of limitations by 20 years. From the point of view of anger’s justice, reparations are nothing but another distraction from the fact that people who ought to have been allowed to vote, were not. Like criminal justice, the women’s suffrage movement leaves something in its wake. The justice system, and social institutions generally, are concerned only with the new justice, the justice we can do.

But the just solution to the problem of murder, to the fact that A killed B when he ought not to have done so, would be to bring it about that A did not kill B. The just solution to the problem of disenfranchisement would be to bring it about that women were not disenfranchised. That is what we seek when we are angry for justice: old justice. For the reasons already presented, we cannot have what we want—but that doesn’t mean we can’t or shouldn’t keep on wanting it. Anger’s justice has no statute of limitations.

We could eliminate the dividing line between the two kinds of justice by denying the existence of either one. Consider the zealous, utopian-minded social reformer. He keeps his eyes on the prize, on the future, on progress. He will not allow anger to distract him from his goal of making the world a better place; if there is an injustice, he rights it and
‘moves on’. Anger strikes him as impractical, uncivilized, primitive, indulgent. In the perfect world he is creating, there will be no need for it. Or will there? Will the citizens of the perfect world submit to having their memories erased, so that they can forget about the injustices from whence they sprang? Are utopias born from deception, as Plato thought? Or is it that the zealot is ahead of his time, himself the model for the anger-free man of the future? Perhaps in his utopia, the souls of men will have been reshaped along with their society?

If we spent any time with this zealot, we might eventually seek refuge in the company of his opposite: the cantankerous, cynical pessimist. He thinks that there is and will be nothing to human history but a sequence of injustices; for him, everything is always going to hell in a handbasket. There is nothing to be done about this except seeing it for the evil that it is; there’s nothing to do but get angry, and stay that way.

These two characters will never have reason to see eye to eye. The zealot is stirred to a action by the thought that X ought not to be the case and X might be the case (or, X ought to be the case yet it might not). He is moved by gaps between what ought to be and what might be. Logically speaking, there is no road from this concern, to that of anger. Nor is there a road in the other direction: the cynic is rationally outraged by atrocities, and rationally unmoved to prevent them. He is struck by gaps between what ought to be and what is, by actual injustices. As regards possible injustices, the cynic might be a fatalist, thinking that nothing he does will possibly be efficacious in preventing injustice; or he might be an egoist, thinking that his only practical concern is his own happiness; or he might be an indifferentist, affectively untouched by potential wrongs. He might say, there is nothing actually wrong about potential wrongs. So what is there to get all worked up about?

We see a version of cynicism in the inflated seriousness with which people often take their own political views or party affiliations. Elections aside, what nonpoliticians think about the actions of the government makes no difference at all—our political opinions are as toothless as aesthetic or philosophical opinions. But people become infuriated by the actions and words of those with political power. I think that perhaps one reason they are able to get so angry is that they see getting angry as ‘doing something’ about justice, even as ‘doing their part’ about justice. They walk around filled with a rage that, I think, they can confuse with service to their country; they congratulate themselves on their anger, on their righteousness. We are in a position to see the mistake they make: to get angry is to get not even a tiny bit of justice done. To get angry is only to notice some justice that can’t get done. The justice system, the politicians, the government—they are in the business of bringing justice into being—something which anger can never do. But if you entertain cynical doubts about whether the justice system, the politicians, the government really do bring justice into being—then it is tempting to allow yourself the thought that anger is a kind of work. It is only if you are a skeptic about the very possibility of new justice, that you can see getting angry as all there is to doing your part.

The justice system and other institutions for social justice are concerned with a part of justice, the justice we can do. Anger is concerned with the other part, the part we can’t
do. I think it is not irrational to care about only one of the two parts of justice. So what is wrong with being a cynic, or a zealot? Setting that question aside for the moment, we can say that those of us who are not cynics or zealots care about the whole of justice; and that means we need to be able to get angry, and to take action. What I hope to have shown is that those two reactions to justice, appearances perhaps to the contrary, have nothing do with one another. Human justice is a thing divided.

H. Vengeance

Or so it appears. But there is something we have been neglecting about anger. I have claimed that anger is directed at an unchangeable fact which is and ought not to be the case. But anger is also typically directed at whatever is responsible for the gap between ought and is. That is, if you are angry that I stole something from you, you are typically also angry at someone, namely me. That we can be both angry that and angry at is something special about anger. Consider a fact that I can be both angry and sad about, such as the fact that my dog was run over by a car.22 If Joe was driving the car, then I may get angry at Joe—that is, my anger at the fact that my dog was, but ought not to have been, run over by a car can get directed onto Joe. But this does not happen with sadness—I do not get sad at Joe. I do not get sad at those resposible for the thing I am sad about. What explains this difference between anger and sadness?

Sadness and anger are both impractical attitudes, in that they close the question as to whether the thing that ought to be the case is the case. (The difference, as we have seen, lies in the way in which they close the question: sadness closes contingently, anger necessarily). But anger does tend to move us—angry people are typically people in motion. Sad people tend towards stationariness. I think this is connected to the fact that when we are sad, we are not sad at anyone or anything. We could put the question about the difference between anger and sadness in two ways: we could ask, why don’t we get sad at those responsible for what we’re sad about; or we could ask, why do we get angry at those responsible for what we’re angry about. The right question, if the eternal anger thesis is true, is the second one. It makes sense that we are unmoved to do anything about our sadness, since there is nothing for us to do about it. The problem is that there is also nothing to be done about anger, since nothing we do can change the fact that what ought not to have been the case was the case. So why does anger impel us, move us, stir us up? Why do we direct our anger onto those responsible and sometimes those not responsible? Why do we punch the wall?

Because not only do we direct our anger, we feel as though we must: anger’s yearning to be directed is palpable. When we cannot find someone to blame; when we don’t know who is responsible for a wrong; when we are unsure whether anyone really is to blame (maybe it was an accident)—we find this state of affairs unendurable. We need to know, so that we can blame. We need somewhere to put our anger. And once we can blame, we need to do something about it. We are looking for more than an occasion to

22 I’ve argued that I can’t ever be sad and angry about the same fact: I’m angry that, at time t, a car hit such-and-such-a dog, whereas I’m sad that my dog was run over yesterday—but I’m abstracting from this difference in order to point out yet another difference between sadness and anger.
express our anger (though sometimes we must settle for this)—we are looking to interact with, to act upon, the object of our anger. We seek revenge. We may, eventually, forgive, but notice that even forgiveness is closer to a physical action than a mental one: Forgiving someone feels like doing something—it doesn’t feel like forgetting, or thinking, or learning, or realizing or remembering, or even changing one’s mind. Forgiveness makes sense to the angry because it is doing something to the object of our anger. (I forgive you) When we forgive, we redirect—or, better, un-direct—our anger off of the one responsible. There is nothing irrational or impossible about this, because there was nothing rational or necessary about directing it onto them in the first place (as the case of sadness ‘at’ shows)\(^2\). But then why don’t we have leftover (undirected) anger at that which still gives us a reason to be angry? Why does forgiving a person dissipate the anger that what ought not to have been, was? Is it just that we do not have the ‘energy’ to be angry unless we can be angry at someone? Again, why is it not so with sadness?

There is a part of this question that is relatively easy to answer, which is that anger needs direction in order to motivate. The ‘view from nowhere’ picture of anger must be incomplete because anger could not move us, set us into motion, unless it somehow incorporated reference to what’s changeable. The directing of anger onto an object at the same time serves to locate the subject of anger in a world in which she can act. What should I do, given that p is and ought not be the case? Which part of the world should I punch? The directing of anger onto a particular (changeable) object in my vicinity makes anger a possible motive by giving me something to punch, something to change. And notice: we forgive someone because we think they have changed. To apologize is to say that I have changed, or rather, that I have been changed by your anger. You can be done with it. Your anger has done what it came here to do. But to say ‘anger must be directed onto what’s changeable in order to motivate’ is not yet to explain why anger should motivate in the first place. We can see that the directedness of anger is needed to explain how it moves us to interact with the world. But we have yet to explain why anger moves us. Why couldn’t anger leave us still and passive and withdrawn? Why couldn’t that be

\(^2\) The literature on forgiveness is bedeviled by this point: because they think that the rationality of anger rationalizes directed anger, they mistake the eternality of anger for the eternality of directed anger, and then there is really a paradox about how we can ever forgive anyone for anything ‘uncompromisingly,’ that is, without undermining the initial claim of wrongdoing. See P. Hieronymi, “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness” for a good statement of the problem and a failed solution to it. Hieronymi’s criticism of Novitz, that he conflates anger with sadness, is right on target; but she proceeds herself to conflate it with fear: “resentment protests a past action that persists as a present threat.” But it is just not true that being angry = feeling threatened, though of course we sometimes feel both angry and threatened. She says that events which anger us make the claim “that you can be treated in this way and that such treatment is acceptable...that claim is what you resent...in resenting it, you challenge it.” Setting aside the question of whether it makes sense to think that events (the event that incited your anger) can make a claim, and that it makes sense to talk of resentment “fighting the meaning” of such a claim—there is the basic problem that what she has described as one claim is really two claims: “that you can be treated in this way and that such treatment is acceptable.” If I wrong you, it is obviously the case that you “can” be treated in this way (nothing can ‘fight’ the meaning of that claim, since it is simply true); and it needn’t be the case that I think such treatment is acceptable. I may sincerely assert, while treating you in that way, that such treatment is not acceptable. (She claims that the event’s claim is the claim of the author.) And whether or not I think it, the claim (that you can be treated in that way) is false, so it doesn’t need fighting.
the way it feels to get angry?24 This is the deep question about anger, and I am going to end with a somewhat unsatisfying sketch of an answer to it.

The sad man, like the angry man, believes that what ought not to be the case is the case. His sadness is a response to a gap between a fact about ‘ought’ and a fact about ‘is’. But in the case of sadness the two facts in question are changeable. We have, until now, focussed on the changeability of the is-fact (e.g., we’ve compared the fact that I do not, now, have my cat, to the fact that A (tenselessly) has no cat at time t). But let’s not forget that we must also translate the ought-fact into changeable-ese: ‘p ought to be’ for the sad

24 There is yet another question which is bound to interest: why blame this one? Given that we must direct our anger onto a particular, why this particular? Why the agent who did what he ought not to have done—why not the one he did it to? Or a bystander? Or the rock he did it with? On what grounds do we hold one bit of the world morally responsible instead of another bit? Perhaps this is the place to raise the issue of the relation of this paper to Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment.” I am in agreement with Strawson on the moral significance of the reactive attitudes. Like him, I think that anger is a big part of the answer to the question ‘where is our moral life located?’ But in a deeper way my paper is directly at odds with his. Strawson hoped, by turning to the moral sentiments, to uncover an arena in which morality is insulated from metaphysics. The hope is that the war between ‘an uncaused cause’ and ‘determinism’ can be waged outside the gates of our ordinary moral attitudes, reactions and judgments. Strawson’s insight is that reactive attitudes have their own internal logic, a logic which has the conceptual resources, all on its own, to give a meaning to sentences such as ‘he’s responsible’ or ‘he did it of his own free will’ —without requiring that that freedom be given sense ‘from the outside’ by, say, the discovery that there are quantum indeterminacies or that God insulates our wills from the causal order. To operate in the space of a reactive attitude is to operate in the space in which concepts like ‘responsible’ and ‘free’ have application—we can do this, he says, without wondering “about the rational justification for our ordinary interpresonal attitudes” and practices. That is, without wondering whether we should (rationally, given the truth of determinism) praise and blame, we can simply note that we do, and that we (humanly) must. There is a ‘should’ and an ‘ought’ which is internal to our interpresonal attitudes and practices (we should blame wrongdoers, be grateful to benefactors, etc.) and this is the only should or ought with which we need concern ourselves, ethically speaking.

I think he may be right about much of this—but wrong to think he has plumbed the depths of that very internal ‘should’ or ‘ought.’ What Strawson has failed to notice is that our reactive attitudes are metaphysically committal on the inside; that uncaused causes might be the kind of thing we need to admit into our conceptual space if we are to understand what (ordinary) people are doing when they praise and blame. One thing I have been trying to do in this paper is to show just how much metaphysics we need to do in order to understand the inner workings of a reactive attitude. Anger has its own conceptual space, but that space requires us to be able to make sense of changeable and unchangeable facts; of looking at the world from no point of view; of there being such a thing as what ought to be the case. And ultimately, I suspect, if we want to make sense not only of getting angry but of angrily placing blame (which is outside the scope of this paper), we will have to attribute to the angry man thoughts about the freedom of the human will from determination by any natural causes. And we will do this whether the angry man in question is a common peasant who has never heard the word ‘determinism,’ or a battle worn hard determinist who will flatly deny the freedom we attribute to him. (He will be wrong. There is more to what we think than what we think we think.) I do not want to deny “the fact of our natural human commitment to ordinary inter-personal attitudes” or that “this commitment is part of the general framework of human life”; I want to add that this commitment may turn out to be a commitment to the falsity of determinism.

In short: from the fact that anger has its own logic it does not follow that the logic of anger must be simpler, more naive, less philosophically problematic than the logic of ‘rational justification.’ The metaphysics to which the internal logic of anger commits us may be downright baroque.
man, means, ‘I like or love or care about or value or want p.’ This, recall\(^{25}\), is the trump 
card up the sadness rectifier’s sleeve: if the is-fact proves hard to handle, the sadness 
rectifier can change the ought-fact, since both are changeable. The sad man’s problem is 
the way he wants the world to be does not match the way the world is. His sadness could 
be solved in two ways.

Anger, unlike sadness, has a direction: contained within anger is the thought that the two 
things between which one sees a gap are different in kind. The ought-fact is fixed and 
immutable as the starry sky above; the is-fact is what could have been other than how it 
was. The is-fact is the kind of thing that someone should\(^{26}\) have done something about, 
the one that should have been otherwise, namely, so as to match the ought-fact. Now, we 
have to be careful here: I do not mean that the is-fact is a changeable fact—it isn’t. But it 
is an (unchangeable) contingent truth. Do we then need to say, in order to get a contrast 
between the two, that the ‘ought’ fact is a necessary truth, perhaps true in all possible 
worlds like the truths of mathematics? No—this would set too high a modal standard for 
ethics. An ought can be contingent on something as local as a promise. And what’s 
more, the very same fact, in the very same world, can serve as an ought-fact and an is-
fact: her action violates a law of etiquette; but the law of etiquette may itself violate the 
moral law. The law of etiquette is then the “ought” to the defective “is” of her action; 
and at the same time the law of etiquette is the defective “is” to the “ought” of the moral 
law. The point is that necessity/contingency is here to be understood relatively. We can 
say: there is always a modality gradient between the ought-fact and the is-fact—the 
‘ought’ fact is higher up, closer to necessity, than the ‘is’ fact\(^{27}\).

\(^{25}\) See above, p. 10

\(^{26}\) It may seem as though my account here invokes the ‘direction of fit’ between the ought-fact and the is-
fact. In a sense it does, but there is a reason why I avoid the term. I take myself to be analyzing (this 
instance of) the concept of ‘direction of fit’ into the idea of a modal gradient. I don’t think that all uses of 
direction of fit’ will be amenable to this analysis. I am not sure that there is any underlying thing that all 
uses of ‘direction of fit’ have in common—it may be a fundamentally metaphorical idea. This is why I 
avoid the phrase: I am wary of giving off the impression that the unanalyzed concept of ‘direction of fit’ 
is being allowed to do any philosophical work. If I favor a reduction of direction of fit to a modal relation 
between two propositions, am I saying that our topic belongs in, or requires a foray into, the philosophy 
of language? No, I’m saying just the opposite: the philosophy of (modal) language requires a foray into 
anger. See next footnote.

\(^{27}\) The idea of an attitude which is sensitive to a modal gradient is structurally paralell to the idea of 
indexically sensitive attitudes (i.e. the “thank goodness that’s over” problem). I invoke the former for the 
reason that philosophers invoke the latter: to raise a worry about whether possible worlds semantics can 
really handle all of our propositional attitudes. The worry is that possible worlds semantics is too 
egalitarian in its treatment of worlds. Some attitudes, e.g. relief (thank goodness that’s over!) require the 
idea of my location within a possible world—the idea that this is the actual world, and thus that this one is 
special and not merely another possible world. The idea of a modal gradient is the idea that possible 
worlds could stand in real relations to one another. By ‘real’ relations I mean, relations which are not 
reducible to (i.e., do not supervene on) properties of the possible worlds understood independently from 
one another. Consider two different theorists of the relation ‘taller than’:

Theorist 1 “A is taller than B if A is greater in height than B”

Theorist 2 “We cannot even understand the idea of ‘height’ except in terms of comparison. There is no 
neutral backdrop against which we can measure the height of something—A has height X if it is taller than 
something with a height less than X!” Theorist 1 has a reductive theory of ‘taller than,’ theorist 2 has a 
nonreductive theory of ‘taller than’. Anger requires us to see how possible worlds stand to each other in 
the way that theorist 2 sees the heights of A and B standing to each other. There is just a basic mistake
This is what we have been missing in our discussion of anger: anger, unlike sadness, contains the perception of a modality gradient. What is it to perceive a modality gradient? How is it different from what we perceive when we are sad, which is a simple gap between two facts which are, modally speaking, on par? The difference is that a modality gradient involves a gap in another dimension—to turn it into sadness would be to flatten out one of its dimensions. Here the best I can do is give an analogy to convey what the metaphor of ‘dimension’ is doing here. Imagine a human being lacking the capacity for visual depth perception—what he sees is a field of colors, arrayed in two dimensions. He might come to perceive the depths and distances of things by touch and sound (echolocation). His perceiving of the depth of a thing, how far it extends away from him, would just be his touching of it or shouting out to it. If asked, “what are you doing” when he shouts out or feels along a wall, he would answer, “I am perceiving how deep it is.” What I am trying to bring out is the way in which perceiving can sometimes involve movement on the part of the perceiver, that sometimes perceiving is ‘doing something with one’s body.’ I think that anger is perceiving injustice, but the perception in question is more like touch than like sight. When we direct our anger at something what we do is feel out the moral law; we sense its gradient. Asking someone to get angry without blaming anyone is like asking the man I described to perceive how far away something is from him with his hands tied behind his back and his mouth and ears taped shut. Extending ourselves into the world is part of getting angry, in that it is part of feeling the fact that it is the “is” that ought to conform to the “ought” and not vice versa. Revenge is not something that we do in response to anger, or in order to get rid of our anger. (As we’ve seen, there is nothing that fits that bill.) To seek revenge just is to be angry, that is, to notice that things are not the way they ought to be.

going on whenever we try to understand our affective response to right and wrong as a response to what’s true at some world or worlds—so long as those worlds are not to be understood as standing in an irreducible relations to one another. The relations in which possible worlds are standardly taken to stand to one another, e.g. proximity and accessibility are precisely ones that can be understood reductively. I hope to devote some time to this issue in a separate paper, to try to bring out that just as the logic of indexicals might be best understood as a topic not in the philosophy of language but rather in the philosophy of action (I take this to be one way of putting the conclusion of Perry’s ‘The Essential Indexical’), deontic logic might be best understood as a topic not within the philosophy of language but rather in the philosophy of emotion.

28 I should say, as long as the ‘someone’ is a human being. There are different rules for God—he has moral ‘depth perception’ and so he does not need to feel out the moral law in order to perceive it. Perhaps this is why Cain does not really get punished for what he does. The “mark of Cain” (Genesis 4:15) is a mark God puts on his head to protect him from anyone trying to avenge themselves on him. Nor is Cain even forced to ‘wander the earth’ (4:12-13)—Cain, inventor of murder, is allowed to become the founder of the first city (4:16-18). God lets him ‘get away with murder’—and he is only the beginning. God lets all murderers get away with murder. God says to Cain, “Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the soil.” (4:10-11) But Cain, like all humans, cannot hear this cry. We do not have that kind of a sense of justice. Notice that God uses as analogy for his sense of justice the most passive of our senses, the one most unlike touch. We don’t need to ‘open our ears’ in order to hear, since we don’t have ‘earlids’—there is nothing to do in response to the command to “Listen!” Hearing is just the world, sometimes the distant world, being present to us. Perhaps this moment is God’s realization that morality will never be like that for his creatures.
So I was wrong when I said that justice is divided. There is a very tight unity between the sensing of injustice and the doing something about it—between anger and its movements. But this unity is invisible except to someone in an angry frame of mind. A theory of human justice is nothing other than a theory of anger.

Where does that leave the eternal anger thesis? Did it only seem to us that we have a reason to be angry forever—were we perhaps not thinking angrily enough? It is true that when we adopt the point of view of reason justice appears to be what it is not: broken, divided. This shows that there is something defective or at least incomplete about the point of view of reason, the very point of view from which anger’s reasons appeared eternal and inaddressible. Rationality exhausts neither anger nor justice—but it does exhaust anger’s reasons. I have been urging us to see that what’s morally important about anger transcends the fact that it is a response to reasons. But none of that changes the fact that it is a response to reasons, and that those reasons are eternal.

Consider once again the cynic and the zealot. Prescinding from reason and rationality and the reasonable, it is clear what’s wrong with these characters. Neither one knows how to get good and angry. The cynic might appear to be angry, he might say he’s ‘mad at the world in general’—but that isn’t really anger, it’s grumpiness. Grumpiness is faux anger, a glorified bad mood. Real anger cannot be experienced by those unwilling or unable to lash out. Likewise, what’s wrong, what’s inhumane, what’s dangerous and frightening, about the utopian zealot is the eirenic forward march of his mind. He lacks or suppresses his anger. He’s so busy bringing about the perfect world that he seems to have lost sight of right and wrong altogether. His zealotry is a failure to notice that, so

29 Notice that I do not say, as I did at the end of section G, “between anger and action.” I am giving up the idea that justice is divided, but I am not giving up the idea that there is a disconnect between anger and action. This would have to be the subject of its own paper, but let me just state that I want to make room for the possibility that the movements that constitute anger—the punching, the killing, the jailing, the forgiving—are not actions any more than the depth-blind man’s feeling out what we see is an ‘action.’ We sometimes interact with the world without acting. What is at stake in saying that these interactions are not actions is that the ‘agent’ has no answer to the ‘why’ question; he can offer no ‘reason’ for what he is doing. As I’ve argued, anger does not give us a reason to take revenge. (Of course someone could at this point try saying that perception, e.g. glancing around a room, is itself an ‘action’ requiring the undergirding of a ‘belief-desire’ pair—I wanted to see what the room looked like and I believed that by moving my eyes around I would be able to see what the room looked like. All I can do here is say that it is a mistake to think about perception that way.)

But let us also be wary of unfurling over our heads the banner of ‘expression.’ To understand emotional movement as expressive is to get things exactly backwards. Of course we can understand what someone is feeling by looking at what they are doing, but if we thought that was why they were doing what they were doing, we would probably revoke the ascription of emotion. Emotional movement is a matter of information’s working its way inward to the agent, rather than outward to the world or an observer. This is exactly why emotions constitute a being moved. The punching, the shouting, the forgiving—all this is a ‘being moved’, a ‘coming to see.’ The possibility I am trying to open up is that in addition to action and expression, there is another form of human self-movement, namely, emotion.

30 With the exception of those who ‘lash in.’ When there’s no one outside to direct anger on to, we can turn it inwards. That is, I can feel my anger out using my own substance instead of the substance of another. This is what is called ‘being consumed by anger.’ It is a form of self-destruction.
long as the human race is to continue to care for justice, we have to continue to value anger. He fails to see that we have a reason to be angry forever.

END