

**Book Review***Preston King*

Martha C. Nussbaum

*Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, and Justice*

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**Anger in A Nutshell**

Everyone gets angry (at times). Anger is a sentiment, a measure of discontent. It is a sentiment the holder may repress or express, and if express, then in different degrees. (Let us not count the ways!) But anger at least is not rage. If we are attending to rage, let's please not call it 'anger'. Anger *in se* and *in nub* has nothing accordingly to do with forgiveness. Repressed, anger remains a sort of camp fire; it is no forest fire; and it can be dealt with simply, in a variety of ways, all as 'natural' as anger itself. For a start, being reflected upon, it can be put out. It can be cut across, as by a cool head, one that extinguishes the thing where it laps at what it shouldn't. As a mere nub or nudge, anger can have no impact. If anger is repressed, leaves no evidential trail, no signal of or for it, then it can neither please nor offend, not a second party or a third. Anger unknown, neutralizing both joy and hurt, is a river away from the idea of forgiveness. What is there to forgive?

Consider that the angry person may hide his anger. He may bite his tongue. He may have thought he saw something to give offence; gave it a little thought; then revised the first or nub opinion; and let it drop. This process may be entirely internal to the actor, or the actor may share his disquiet with a second party, or a third. The point is that the nub or nudge that is anger, though emotionally freighted, is rather like an hypothesis. The reasonable or rational person always inspects the id, to see whether she ought to persist, or to be rid, of the nudge sent upwards for inspection. And the nudge may never amount to more than that. It happens all the time.

So there is no necessary tie between anger and forgiveness, unless we burden anger with an inflated notion of what it comports. The key question is not whether anger points to the normative solace of forgiveness. The question is whether anger of itself signals vengefulness, usually (but not necessarily) meaning violence, whether by the state, corporate bodies, or individual persons. Let's move away then from inflated notions of anger that require a tie to forgiveness. More narrowly and to the purpose, does anger *in nuce* necessarily lead to harm or injustice?

Here the answer is that anger no more necessarily leads to vengefulness or retribution than passion or sexual excitement necessarily leads to rape. Anger may of course in some loose sense lead to retribution, including violence, in the same way that the plot of a good novel or film may engagingly ramble, without its constituent elements forming anything like a causal link. Stanley Kubrick's film, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), based on A. Schnitzler's novella (1926), is a brilliant example of a merely 'accidental logic'.

Anger *in se* is best seen as a sentiment of discontent, not yet reflected upon, and rendered rational. Anger in this incipient and lidded sense is one of the more important forms of potential impetuosity. Any lidded or antecedent form of impetuosity may be regarded as innocent and thus 'natural'. But impetuosity, where it boils over, into its fully achieved state, may prove damaging. So it is, even with curiosity, that fabled killer of cats. There is the possibly fictive case, once told to me in Sudan, of the well-meaning man who impetuously sought to save the child in the well, but then slipped, fell on top, and killed her. His impulse, or instinct, to save the child, was right, but the impetuous expression of the impulse proved lethal.

Repression is a very real way of attending to anger. To say that is not necessarily to recommend it, though the default position it signals is usually a safe 'ought' to act on. Now put repression to one side: it is not the only way to deal with anger. Expression, in some fashion, is another. Not that the 'expression' of anger is always real. It is often theatrical. It may be used to good effect to intimidate, etc. But where theatrical, it is really any longer 'anger'? Presumably not. Burton and Taylor, in the film *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), supply a pretty impressive edition of pretend anger. Did one know no better, one might take it to be real. But we do know better. So by extension, any theatrical 'anger', on stage, but often in the marketplace, too, is to be accounted pretense. That doesn't mean it has no impact, possibly serious. It only means it isn't best read off as *anger*.

Anger is often said to be natural. Let us say that it is: But if it is natural, then it is, and is best conceived, as nothing more *in se* than a minimalist prompt or nub or 'nudge.' If anger is natural, this must imply that there is not a great deal we can do about it, no more than we can avoid breathing, touching, evacuating and the like. At the same time, since anger is not necessarily a precursor to retribution (including violence), there may be no good reason to bother unduly about it. If everybody gets angry, there seems to be no great need either to rub cheeks with it or spit on it.

The question can't be whether a person is angry in some primal and contained sense but whether they are unthinking and allow any given acts to be enacted impulsively, and without due restraint. If the anger of people is natural, then so are they 'naturally' reasonable and rational. In that case, our only concern should be to ensure that this rationality is not displaced by unthinking loss of restraint, especially where such loss may occasion unwarranted harm to the self or to others. The injunction to 'bridle your anger' is better reconfigured to read 'bridle your deeds,' whether as language or action.

Anger is a natural impulse cut across by other impulses equally natural. One does not have to be angry to do foolish things. One can be mentally loose-limbed, 'thoughtless,' foolish, with massively damaging effects, without the least experience of anger. This is instantiated in the enormously popular Mario Puzo novel, *The Godfather* (1969), translated by F. F. Coppola into an amazing, eponymous film (1972 & 1972). Here the fictional Michael Corleone has a brother, Fredo, whose behavior is remarkably damaging but fuelled by good-willed idiocy. By contrast, Michael's response to Fredo is murderous, but in an entirely reflective and calculating way – without any outward show of 'anger', rage, or furious impetuosity. The murder ordered is a pure act of policy, not an expression of 'anger' or even rage.

It is important then to cease associating anger automatically with vengefulness, wrongful violence, and the like. It matters to steer clear – as many do not – of such characterizations as 'your black wave of anger', 'anger's obsessive force,' anger as 'beastly,' 'bloodthirsty,' 'hardly human,' 'vindictive,' 'retributive,' etc. Anger is best conceived in more minimalist terms. 'Natural,' yes. But only as a prompt or nudge, which is then adjudicated by other dispositions. If it is clearly

distinct from other dispositions, such as retribution, violence, force, and the like – which it is – what can be the point of merging it conceptually with all or any of these?

Anger only succeeds as ‘natural’ if we limit the scope of what it admits. First, anger really has nothing to do, as such, with ‘self-respect.’ One can be angry and lose one’s self-respect. One can lose one’s self-respect without being angry. One can retain one’s self-respect without being angry. One can see a fostering of ‘anger’ as the only means of achieving or restoring self-respect. One does not need to be angry to disapprove seriously of another’s wrongdoing. One can take a friend’s wrongdoing seriously without being angry at her. Anger need have nothing to do with combatting injustice. It is essential to justice that enforcers either have no ‘anger’, if this implies dangerously blind impetuosity, or that they suppress it. The point is not so much that the usefulness of anger is limited. It is, rather, that where one limits anger, it is the limiting force that is useful, a force which we often call prudence, self-restraint, reasonableness, rationality, tolerance, friendship, etc.

If to be angry is ‘natural’, and one may hold *in nuce* that it is, there can be no point in viewing it either as a valuable part of the mold of life or as a central threat to human society. It can only be thought to be (a) good where the operative assumption is that we can tear it up at its roots. Anger can only be thought (b) evil where we view it as a necessary partner to the ills of wrongful retribution and violence. If we are angry but not violent, then the anger will be neither praised nor blamed. If we are violent without being angry, then the anger is inconsequential because irrelevant. The problem with ‘anger’ is that, normally, we enlarge unduly its meaning. What matters is not to turn it into a conglomerate, positioning it as a grossly inflated moral target.

The proper object of our disapproval is not anger (properly truncated) but an outward and (usually) wrongful impetuosity. Anger is merely a sort of prompting, perhaps to act or to speak (with the latter as a subcategory of the former). Anger may prove a very helpful prompt or nudge. It cannot be evil as such. Its presence may enable a turn in the direction of sensible policy or not. The question is whether simply to repress the nudge of anger or to direct or redirect it in some appropriate manner. The naturalness of anger (in this properly truncated form) is only matched by the naturalness of the intermediary functions broadly known as ‘reasonableness’ and ‘rationality’. Rationality does not necessarily kill the core prompt. Rationality intrudes to signal the path, the path, if any, the prompt should take. Rationality may signal fight or flight; vengeance or accommodation; war or peace; immediate or deferred action/speech. It is more policy, less impulse.

On this argument, anger in se has nothing to do with retribution. Retribution is not directly dictated by anger. Retribution is formally a species of justice - which is not to say it is concretely or simpliciter just. Retribution (e.g., ‘an eye for an eye’ etcetera) is an egalitarian or redistributive argument. It may not be a salutary argument but, as in Hammurabi, it is an argument all the same. You do not object to retributivism by declaiming against it as ‘anger,’ but by demonstrating retributivism to be an inadequate expression of justice. We bypass altogether the question whether anger is good or evil. That should not stop us from calling it ‘natural’, since its naturalness is what prohibits us from imposing upon it a moral character. In its core or truncated sense, anger is at best a prompt or nudge. Other sentiments with which it is associated – ‘reasonableness’, ‘rationality’ – are just as natural. Of course both can be nurtured and both can be spurned.

When we say we nurture anger all that we mean is that we seek to transition to some immediate word or deed to which we have given little proper consideration. For example, the character Sonny, again in the Mario Puzo novel, *The Godfather*, rushes off to avenge an affront to his sister. He is rewarded with a short, sharp death for his impetuosity. There is no gap between this man's anger, *in nuce*, and his fully ripened and impetuous rage. One can see the value of teaching all such persons restraint. One can also accept the likelihood of some minds always operating on the other side of that perimeter. By contrast with Sonny (or Santino), Carlo, the bother-in-law, who intentionally pummels Sonny's sister in order to provoke Sonny's ire, is not acting out of 'anger'. He is not being impetuous. He is acting from policy. His action is violent, not angry. He is a perfectly rational, if perverse, actor.

Many cultures value what they call 'anger', where they identify it with 'honesty', 'plain dealing', 'directness', 'manliness', and the like. We should not underestimate the power of that culturally inculcated inclination. But there is nothing in the least 'natural' about rage and other forms of unbridled impetuosity. These are forms of behavior that are taught and culturally endorsed. Where societies are sharply divided, as along lines of caste, race, class, or tribe, and where one element controls and exploits the other(s), it is necessary that the dominant element in some degree detests the dominated. The teaching may be formal or informal, but teaching it is, and it is necessary.

The detestation serves to justify domination. It is learned behavior, and ultimately vital to control. Soldiers, at war, are either taught or informally learn to detest the enemy. How else otherwise can they so readily engage in wholesale killing, rape, and pillage of persons who may not only be strangers, but neighbors? Anger *in nuce* is natural. Violence on any significant and sustained level is not. Just as there is brainwashing in war, so may there be acculturation to violence in 'peace'.

The actor may be taught to "say it loud and say it clear". Equally, she may be taught to bite her tongue. She may be taught never to use violence when 'angry'. Such is the sense of the injunction, "don't get angry, get even", or "vengeance is best served cold," or indeed "keep your friends close, but your enemies closer". Anger *in nuce* is natural; it is not taught. But rage, impetuosity, unbridled 'honesty', 'manly' violence, revenge – all these are taught. Violence is not to be viewed as 'natural'. It is culturally transmitted, as in every war college.

The point here is not to declaim against violence. It is only to underscore the point that anger is natural but violence is learned behavior. And just as violence is learned, so is peace, as in the call to beat "swords into ploughshares". Anger *in nuce* (in the truncated or core sense) is not inconsistent with tolerance or friendship. Tolerance recognizes the nudge of dislike and even the rationality of disapproval, yet bridles or deflects it. Friendship is perfectly competent to recognize even severe wrong, to respond to it with disapproval, without displacing a core affection with the foolish, irate hostility. Amity is one of those core impulses, that can be shaped by reasonableness and rationality, and thus far help to keep a lid on impetuous rage, and the world at peace.

One can enlarge the notion of anger as much or in any way one likes. But that only makes it a clumsier construct. Of course it is the case that inexperienced or ill-educated people who feel a prompt or a nudge may be excited somehow to act on it sans further thought. But there are obvious concerns that may interrupt such movement. First, there is the question whether animosity directed towards another actor is (a) soundly based, and if so (b) whether any response at all is called for and apt, and if so (c) what that response should be, and (d) whether any response should be executed, now or later, and (e) whether immediately when one is emotionally distraught, or at the (later) moment when one is settled and calm.

If 'anger' can be dismembered in this way, such that it provokes at least five questions, then it makes no sense to inflate its character, naturally, so as to merge it, e.g., with retaliation (possibly including violence). Anger is 'naturally' less than retribution and less than violence if reflection identifies the initial nudge as unsound. If by contrast the initial angry nudge is adjudged sound, it still does not necessarily follow that any response, such as retribution of any sort, is apt.

Tolerance might dictate inaction, which is also cheek-turning. The soundness of the nudge does not *in se* or directly point to retaliation (including violence) as a proper response. Retribution in any event is a many-splendored thing, and opens itself up to considerable reflection regarding appropriate options. The *prompt* (of anger) is merely responsive to the *thought*: it is not surely a sensation. That some hurt or injury has been imposed upon another or others in no way *necessarily* foretells what (if any) response there should be.

In thinking about tolerance and friendship, it is important to see that, if (in nub) anger is 'natural,' then so too are these. Being tolerant does not mean you must or can put up with any or everything. Being friendly does not mean that you must abide *in silencio* whatever friends do. Anger in nub, as prompt or nudge, need not be praised or damned. It is only necessary to accept that we should never see retribution or violence as integral to it. People can learn to be angry (in the sense of excessive) and to nurse 'anger' (in the sense of excess) just as they can learn to be gentle and nurse gentleness. Judgment is independent of anger unleashed (as a force of impetuosity), and guides us in dealing with the intriguing nub of an animal in a cage.

Professor Nussbaum has written a very good book. She writes well. Her command of a wide ranging literature is engaging. She does not skimp. She is didactic and discursive. She is not hesitant in this display. In the process, the author says a great deal along the lines of "on-the-one-side-and-on-the-other." She is as familiar with the crooked timber of literature as with that of humanity. Since she says such a lot, and says it nicely, one can never fail to disagree by more than half. But the approach can be confusing. The firm connection she insists upon between anger and retribution instantiates this.

What the author giveth by way of discursiveness is a touch diminished by inattention to precision. A very great difficulty she encounters lies in attacking the very concept—the meaning—of anger, importing into it the idea of retribution and thus (if indirectly) violence or force, though she denies any importation. The merger of anger with retribution remains an inflationary approach that directly leads to the conclusion that anger is an evil. But that opens the door to others who see anger as a good. Far better to detach the nub of anger as a prompt from impetuous thoughts or deeds, like retribution, with which it is too easily confounded. If retribution and anger are separable notions—as they are—then best to keep them so.