

# The Role of Anger in Justice

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Philosophers have presented a range of perspectives on the role of anger in the pursuit of justice, highlighting both its constructive and destructive dimensions. Plato's account in *The Republic* treats anger as a neutral emotion that requires rational guidance to serve justice. In contrast, Audre Lorde regards anger as transformative, capable of exposing systemic injustices when distinguished from hatred. Conversely, Martha Nussbaum argues that anger is inherently retributive and counterproductive to the pursuit of justice, advocating for a more cooperative and forward-looking transition-anger that requires the mediation of reason. Contemporary psychological research shows that anger often biases decision-making and can escalate conflict. This paper argues that anger itself does not inherently support just outcomes. Any constructive role anger may have depends on rational oversight to mitigate its destructive tendencies and redirect it toward ethically productive ends.

Plato claims, in *The Republic*, that the value of emotion comes from its alignment and harmony with the other parts of the soul. The tripartite soul, introduced in *The Republic*, consists of three parts: rationality, spirit, and appetite. When all three parts are in harmony, a sense of justice is achieved. The spirited part is responsible for the existence of emotions and self-appraisal. It evaluates whether actions align with one's values and reacts accordingly. The spirited part is governed by desire and has no sense of morality or justice. In an article published by Pressbooks.pub, writer Ali Adams puts it best by saying that "the part of the soul that is governed by desire is ambitious and will push for doing whatever is wanted, no matter the consequences or obstacles." Because the spirited part is part of the soul, but itself is not capable of evaluating justice, Plato writes "therefore,

isn't it appropriate for the rational part to rule, since it is really wise and exercises foresight on behalf of the whole soul, and for the spirited part to obey it and be its ally?" Plato sees the harmony of the tripartite soul as being achieved when the spirited and appetitive parts are auxiliaries to the rational part, but also argues for each part's autonomy. The spirited part is meant to assist the judgements made by the rational part and enforce these decisions with emotional responses, including anger. Anger, to Plato, is inherently neutral; it does not lend itself to being rationally or irrationally aligned. Then anger is a context-dependant tool that motivates rational decisions, and should be used or expressed only when appropriate to do so. Therefore, according to Plato, anger itself does not aid or inhibit a sense of justice, and it only aids justice when it is aligned with reason.

Audre Lorde, in her article titled "The Uses of Anger," describes anger not as a neutral tool like Plato does, but instead as a transformative force aimed at confronting injustice. Lorde writes about how anger is used to confront the specific injustice of racism. She believes it to be a catalyst for justice. She argues that "anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies." Lorde first argues that anger is a response to a lived experience of injustice and that it exposes the roles that are played in maintaining or resisting injustice. Anger pushes individuals to critically analyze the systems that perpetuate the injustice. It is worth noting that Plato refers to justice as an abstract ideal with practical applications, and Lorde sees justice as an active process that requires emotional and social confrontation and engagement. Plato believes

justice to be a universal Form, and unchanging across all societies. Lorde sees justice as dynamic and changing across societies, and society has achieved justice when there is complete equity and no marginalized groups or systemic oppression. Lorde believes justice to be about resolving inequality and relies on continuous progressive effort. So in Lorde's view of justice, anger is not only useful in combating injustice, anger is an essential force for justice. So then, Lorde argues that anger is constructive and moral, contributing positively to justice.

However anger does have a destructive element to it, and any argument stating anger is just must account for the duality. Lorde rectifies this by clarifying anger and hatred as two separate emotions, where anger is the constructive part, and hatred is the destructive part. Anger is the desire to confront and correct injustice, and hatred is the rejection or disliking of another's values. Hatred cannot lead to justice as hatred lacks the focus that anger does. Comparing this to Plato's anger, we see that Plato considers anger to have both of these parts. Anger can either align with rationality or disrupt the harmony of the soul. To compare the two accounts, we must recognize the difference in definitions between Plato and Lorde. Lorde's definitions of anger and hatred are not universal but are context-dependent within her framework. Since anger as a universal emotion contains both of these constructive and destructive parts, we must define anger as a mixture of Lorde's anger and hatred. So then, Lorde believes the value of anger as a catalyst for justice depends entirely on the context in which it is used and how it is expressed. While there is potential for anger to be just, there are times in which it is not. This positions anger, in Lorde's framework, as inherently neutral. This is still distinct from Plato, as Plato believes

justice is the result of the harmony of all three parts of the soul, whereas Lorde believes anger is crucial for exposing inequality, and without anger, the energy required to address inequality may be lacking. There is no claim from Lorde that anger is the only path to justice, but she argues for its importance. In summary, despite initial differences, Plato and Lorde have very similar beliefs about the inherent value of anger as a means to justice. Anger is recognized as a basic emotion, and one fundamental to human functioning. Anger has its roots within the biology of humans themselves. Often anger is described as a complex multi-faceted emotion. However, anger is usually depicted as an emotion that is only moral when under control by reason. Audre Lorde argued for an instinctive anger that was seen as just, but it is difficult to separate anger's constructive part from its destructive part without conscious effort. Though, the other facet of Lordean anger is that anger is essential for detecting injustice. Lorde argues that anger is essential for exposing systemic injustice and that anger is a morally apt response to injustice. She argues that anger itself is moral to feel in response to injustice. Plato himself seems to say that feeling anger in response to injustice is disruptive, as anger tends to cloud judgement and therefore stand in the way of reason. Plato argues that a calm, evaluated response to injustice is moral. This is to correct the injustice without emotional impulses impeding complete rationality. According to Plato, it is possible to detect and correct injustice without the role of anger. Martha Nussbaum, in *Anger and Forgiveness*, writes that anger inherently involves a desire for retribution, which she argues is immoral. She advocates for a new emotional response to injustice, which she calls transition-anger. Transition-anger is similar to retributive anger, but lacks the desire for retribution, and instead aims to produce justice and

cooperation between parties. This approach prioritizes problem-solving and reconciliation. Nussbaum argues that true justice is achieved through constructive responses that address harm and foster social cooperation, rather than through retributive anger. While Lorde argues that anger stands to expose injustice, Nussbaum argues that anger itself is unjust as it is initially retributive. Nussbaum emphasizes the destructive, retributive potential of anger, while Lorde focuses on the catalyzing potential of anger. Importantly, Nussbaum's transition anger relies on the role of cognition, and the active mediation of the emotion, whereas Lordean anger is more natural and instinctive. Transition-anger requires deliberate emotional redirection of natural, retributive anger to the constructive and more justice-aware transition-anger. Transition-anger aims to transform into productive motivating emotions, with a goal of problem-solving and reconciliation, and encourages the suppression of retributive impulses. Lordean anger instead values the exposure of injustice, the confrontation of it, and the authentic direct expression of the empowering motivation of anger. While Nussbaum seeks to redirect retributive anger into a forward-looking tool for resolution, which she calls transition-anger, Lordean anger has raw and immediate power to confront systemic injustices, and Lorde emphasizes its indispensable role in challenging oppression.

Summarizing the few philosophical perspectives explored in this paper, we can argue that anger itself is unhelpful to the pursuit of justice. The neutral position is Plato, who sees anger as largely neutral, and thinks justice is only achieved when it is controlled by reason. Lorde sees anger as beneficial, and a catalyst for justice. She believes anger to be crucial in the confrontation of injustice, and indispensable in the pursuit of justice, and detaches

the destructive elements of anger and puts them into a separate emotion: hatred. However we find that Lordean anger and Lordean hatred become what we understand to be anger, and so this anger needs to be expressed appropriately, and inappropriate usage can lead to hatred, which she describes as “the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction.” Nussbaum believes anger to be naturally retributive, and by definition, counterproductive to the pursuit of justice. All three of these perspectives, when we organize them so they can be compared, have the same conclusion. The conclusion is that anger has two components: the constructive, and the destructive. The destructive part is tempting, retributive, and instinctual. It impedes justice, supporting anti-justice. The constructive part is when anger acts as a motivator for good and a catalyst for moral confrontation of injustice. However, Plato and Nussbaum both argue that anger needs to be managed by reason to isolate and better enable the constructive part. Lordean anger and Lordean hatred can be separated as well, but only by means of cognition. If anger can only be guaranteed just under control by reason, it seems anger itself does not aid the pursuit of justice.

I would now like to incorporate contemporary psychology into the discussion, to see if it aligns with the philosophical perspective. *Emotion and Decision Making*, an article published as part of 2015’s Annual Review of Psychology, summarizes psychological research on the connection between emotions and decision-making. The article pays significant attention to anger and its effect on decision-making. A 1989 study compiled for this article, *Relations among emotion, appraisal, and emotional action readiness* by Frijda NH, Kuipers P, and ter Schure E., showed that “anger was associated with the desire to

change the situation and move against another person or obstacle by fighting, harming, or conquering it.” This corresponds with the constructive part of anger, where this motivation can be used to confront injustice as Lorde suggests. However, the destructive part has a significant effect on decision-making as well. Another study, *Effects of fear and anger on perceived risks of terrorism: A national field experiment* by JS Lerner, RM Gonzalez, DA Small, and B Fischhoff, found that individuals who were experiencing anger enacted harsher punishments on criminals than those not experiencing anger. Anger can bias how negative situations are evaluated, as people feeling angry are more likely to blame an individual for an outcome rather than considering the circumstances or other factors, like fate. Anger is even linked to changes in the affected’s physiology that might prepare them to fight, potentially escalating a situation to unnecessary violence. In the US, 13 states require an individual to wait for a time period after buying a gun, to receive the gun and complete the purchase. This is done because anger and other intense, negative emotions affect decision-making, and time is shown to be one of the best methods of suppressing emotion. This prevents people from buying and using a gun while angry, or suicidal, and doing something they wouldn’t have done in a clearer emotional state. Studies show that there is inconclusive evidence supporting the theory that waiting periods lower firearm homicides, but also show that there is moderate evidence supporting the theory that waiting periods lower total homicides. It seems clear that anger affects decision-making directly, and tends to lead to further unnecessary escalation within the circumstances. Anger creates a bias towards blame and violence in negative circumstances, and affects decision-making accordingly. Audre Lorde argues this motivation helps confront injustice,



but it stands that anger does not aid justice. Since anger affects decision-making, Martha Nussbaum and Plato have both argued that reason needs to triumph over anger and dismiss biases to lead to just decision-making. Then, if anger can only be moral and support justice under the control of reason, what is the motivation that leads to Lordean anger? Without the assumption of individual responsibility and blame, anger may no longer feel justified. Contemporary psychological studies have shown that anger has a negative effect on decision-making, creating a bias for escalating situations and making irrational decisions. There is not much left of Lordean anger when it is stripped of its instinctive, bias-driven motivators. Therefore, I conclude that anger itself does not aid the pursuit of justice. Instead, any constructive role anger might play is contingent on reason's ability to suppress or redirect its destructive tendencies. Contemporary psychological studies further demonstrate that anger biases judgement and escalates conflict, positioning anger as more of an impediment than a tool for the pursuit of justice.

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