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# Moral Anger as an Expression of Agape Love: Can Moral Anger Lower One's Status?

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## **ABSTRACT**

Myisha Cherry argues that moral anger is an expression of agape love and, consequently, a justified response to oppression. She upholds that by expressing moral anger one brings the aggressor to the point of equality within the social hierarchy. I will contend that lowering someone's position to the point of equality is very unlikely due to the complexity of the oppressor's psychological makeup. I will, however, show that this is not necessarily a problem since bringing someone slightly below or above the point of equality might still express agape love.

## **KEYWORDS**

Moral Anger, Agape Love, Myisha Cherry, Fighting Oppression, Social Hierarchy, Racial Injustice

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will contribute to Myisha Cherry's conversation on moral anger as agape love. In the first section, I shall explain what agape love and moral anger are, to then show how the former is an expression of the latter. In the second section, I will briefly explain one characteristic of moral anger, namely, its focus on one's status in the social hierarchy. I shall then argue that bringing someone to the position of equal status is very unlikely (if not impossible) because of the complexity of the oppressor's psychological makeup and reasons they decided to oppress others. However, I'll contend that this is not necessarily a problem since one might express moral anger as agape love while lowering one's status slightly above or below the point of equality. As long as the degree of our moral uncertainty is not too high we are allowed to express moral anger.

## 2. MORAL ANGER AS AN EXPRESSION OF AGAPE LOVE

First, agape love entails that we love someone for "their own sake" (Cherry 2019, 158). It is an emotion that is "universal and impartial" (Cherry 2019, 158). Put simply, agape love is directed toward all members of the moral community (that includes both the oppressed and the oppressors). To express such love, one needs to try to "understand the other from their shoes" (Cherry 2019, 159). After all, we express agape love to others because we try to understand their perspective and not because we hope for a reward; consequently, the scope of agape love cannot exclude even enemies. However, agape love is not expressed to others only but might also manifest itself in a form of self-care (Cherry 2019, 160). Cherry claims that one needs to first love oneself in order to "extend" (Cherry 2019, 160) that love to others. Lastly, she says that agape love is also active and directed at change, that is, it aims at the restoration of the moral community and achieving the common good.

Second, moral anger is "a judgment that one has been wronged" (Cherry, 160). For instance, a black person might experience moral anger as a result of racial discrimination. Such anger recognizes that the oppressor perceives themselves as superior to the person of color. Hence, the aim of moral anger is "leveling the wrongdoer's status with one's own" (Cherry 2019, 160). In other words, moral anger attempts to help the oppressor realize that their feeling of superiority is

mistaken and that they are equal to others. Cherry distinguishes moral anger from the kind of anger that is sudden and unreasonable. The anger she has in mind is rational and communicative; it sends a message that we disagree with the way we are treated. As a result, the purpose of moral anger is not revenge, but rather transformation. Throughout such anger, the oppressed aims to transform the oppressor, not to gain revenge and make someone suffer.

Having explained those concepts, we can now better understand how moral anger expresses agape love. First, anger expresses agape love because it “communicates respect” (Cherry 2019, 165). When the oppressed get angry at the oppressor, it is because they recognize the “humanity” of the persecutors (Cherry 2019, 165), that is, they recognize the significance of the oppressor’s actions. To act otherwise, would be to deny the moral agency of the oppressor. Second, moral anger expresses agape love since it has “the moral community’s best interest in mind” (Cherry 2019, 166). Both anger and love aim at change and not distraction; they attempt to improve the community and bring the offender to justice. Anger, in such a situation, also has a “preventative” (Cherry 2019, 165) function since it aims to communicate to other members of society that a certain action is wrong and should not be undertaken again. Lastly, anger expresses love since it is concerned with the wrongdoer’s own moral status (as I alluded to above). Those expressing moral anger understand that it is in the oppressor’s own interest that they realize their mistakes and fix their moral standing.

### **3. CAN MORAL ANGER AS AN EXPRESSION OF AGAPE LOVE LOWER ONE’S STATUS?**

One additional characteristic of moral anger, which will be crucial for my argument, can be found in Cherry’s analysis of Martha Nussbaum’s definition of anger. Nussbaum pointed out that when we get angry at someone, we naturally aim to push them down in the social hierarchy. By pushing someone lower, we act as someone more rational and morally superior; as a result, we increase our status in the social hierarchy. Anger, therefore, commits “the error of status focus” (Cherry 2019, 160) since it analyzes the situation in terms of one’s social position. Cherry, however, believes that such an understanding of anger does not really capture the nature of the phenomenon. She agrees that moral anger involves lowering someone’s position, but she does not perceive it as an issue. She claims

that such lowering is not problematic until the harmed one does not lower the aggressor below one's own status. Put differently, by expressing moral anger, one lowers the aggressor to the point of equality which is after all not objectionable. In such a process of lowering "the angry agent reminds the wrongdoer of their human failure and thus their humanity, but also their equality with others" (Cherry 2019, 161). For example, a racist person might be lowered in the social hierarchy so they are equal to people of color. Moral anger in such a situation aims to eradicate the racist person's false sense of superiority.

To analyze that response let me first, for the sake of clarity, distinguish between three reductive functions that anger might play in someone's position in the hierarchy. (Such a distinction is introduced by me, not Cherry.) Anger might either 1) reduce one's position in the hierarchy below the point of equality, 2) reduce one's position in the hierarchy to the position that is still above the point of equality (insufficient anger), or 3) reduce one's position to the point of equality.

Moral anger, as understood by Cherry, aims at (3) only. In this paper, I will argue that (3) is virtually impossible or at least very unlikely to achieve. However, I will argue that the fact that moral anger cannot achieve its aim is not as problematic as it seems since achieving (1) and (2) is also an expression of agape love.

First, I will argue that it is very unlikely that one manages to lower the status of the oppressor to the point of inequality because the individuals and harms they cause are so complex that no one knows how much lowering is needed. Hence, it is doubtful that the aim of moral anger can be achieved. To make my argument let us compare two cases:

- A. In the first case, a twelve years old white boy refuses to socialize with people of color
- B. In the second case, a white middle-aged man refuses to date women of color, since as a rule, he does not find them attractive.

Perhaps if we precisely analyze the two cases, we will be able to determine what kind of anger is justified in each case. Let me, therefore, add some detail. In the first case, the boy refuses to socialize with people of color; however, his beliefs are to a greater extent a result of indoctrination. Hence, the boy is, perhaps, not fully (or perhaps not all) responsible for his racism. In the second case, the man

takes a racist and sexist attitude toward women of color. However, his views on what is and what is not attractive are, at least to some degree, influenced by modern media and capitalism. Moreover, he seems to be racist only on a personal level. When it comes to the problems on a systemic level, he is more open. For example, he supports feminist movements and often votes for women of colour to increase diversity in the government and positions of power more generally.

Having established the details, one can attempt to express one's moral anger in a rational manner that aims at change and, consequently, brings both agents to the point of equality. We could, for instance, try to explain to the boy the wrongness of his actions; however, we would try not to raise our voice or at least, raise it, but only to a certain degree. Otherwise, our anger could turn out from being communicative to being hysterical or simply inappropriate. On the other hand, in the case of the middle-aged man who is more aware of the consequences of his actions, we would not have to be as careful in expressing our anger. We can speculate that using swear words would not prevent our anger from being communicative because of man's maturity and familiarity with some degree of profanity. However, yealing itself does not seem sufficient either. To express rational and communicative anger it would be useful to appeal to the feminist values the man already upholds to show how their application on the personal level should make him work on his behaviour. The purpose of such thought experiments is to show that the more we know about the person and the reasons they decided to harm another, the more rational and effective our moral anger will be.

The problem, however, is that in real life the aggressor does not provide the oppressed with the history of their upbringing nor any details about their current personal life. The harmed one often knows literally nothing about the oppressor except the fact that they harmed them. Moreover, even if the oppressed tries to improve the moral standing of the oppressor and get to know them, the oppressor will most likely refuse to cooperate. Consequently, the process of lowering one's status to equality will be even more difficult. Hence, if a random person harms me, then it is very likely that my anger will bring them either slightly below or above the point of equality, but not to the point of equality as such.

Sometimes the anger we express might lower one's position by let's say 85%, but it will not bring them to the state of equality with the oppressed. For example, the twelve-year-old (from the first case) might begin to play with non-white

children; however, he will still subconsciously prefer white kids. In such a situation, the child realizes that he is not better than others and he is lowered almost to the point of equality; however, the point itself is not yet reached. (Whether the existence of subconscious racism only brings us closer to the points of equality is debatable, but let us assume that it is close enough.) What's important is that the anger which brings the boy lower in the hierarchy still manages to express agape love. Even though the anger did not lower the boy to the place of inequality with others, it was still directed at change and improving his moral standing. Agape love was, therefore, expressed.

Similarly, moral anger expresses agape love when it lowers the twelve-year-old's status slightly below the point of equality. Being morally angry at the child in a reasonable and communicative way might make him feel like he needs to reevaluate his actions; it is possible that the way we communicate will make him feel as having a lower status than he actually should. However, if our moral anger is really communicative, then such feelings will be only temporary and the twelve-year-old will eventually enjoy a status equal to those of his peers. In a similar way, one might feel worse after taking an injection; it might hurt at first, but the long-term effects will be positive. Such an expression of anger once again manifests agape love since it cares about the moral standing of the child and understands that temporary inconvenience will eventually pass and the moral community will be improved as a whole. Thus, I have shown that getting to the point of equality at which moral anger aims might be more difficult than it seems; this, however, is not a problem since going slightly above or below such a state is still an expression of agape love.

## REFERENCES

Cherry, Myisha. 2019. "Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice." In *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, edited by Adrienne M Martin, 13–23. New York : Routledge.