The Puzzle of Victim-Anger

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I raise a puzzle that I call ‘the puzzle of victim-anger’ that is parallel to Bernard William’s puzzle of agent-regret. Suppose a truck driver is driving down the street when a child happens to walk in front of them. Through no fault of their own, the driver hits and kills the child. It is well understood that the driver will, and probably should, have some sort of guilt-like response, called agent-regret. However, it would also be unsurprising to find out that the child’s parents were angry at the driver for killing their child, and this observation has been largely overlooked in the literature on agent-regret. This anger is totally intelligible—we might even feel deeply alienated by a parent who didn’t feel it in the wake of their child’s avoidable death. Nevertheless, it’s hard to see how this anger could be rationally defensible: aren’t the parents just lashing out at an innocent party? In this paper, I show how the traditional philosophical account of anger fails to yield a satisfactory solution to this puzzle. As a result, I reject the traditional account and offer my own positive account of anger in its place. According to my positive account, anger functions to shift the conversational dynamic in order to call attention to the target’s obligations to repair the harm they caused.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

In this paper I raise a puzzle that I call 'the puzzle of victim-anger' that is parallel to Bernard William's puzzle of agent-regret. William's puzzle starts like this: suppose a truck driver is driving down the street when a child happens to walk in front of them. Through no fault of their own, the driver hits and kills the child. It is well understood that the driver will, and probably should, have some sort of guilt-like response, called agent-regret, even though the accident wasn't their fault. However, it would also be unsurprising to find out that the child's parents were angry at the driver for killing their child, and this observation has been largely overlooked in the literature on agent-regret. This anger is totally intelligible—we might even feel deeply alienated by a parent who didn't feel it in the wake of their child's avoidable death. Nevertheless, it's hard to see how this anger could be rationally defensible: aren't the parents just lashing out at an innocent party? In this paper, I show how the traditional philosophical account of anger fails to yield a satisfactory solution to this puzzle. As a result, I reject the traditional account and offer my own positive account of anger in its place. According to my positive account, anger functions to shift the conversational dynamic in order to call attention to the target's obligations to repair the harm they caused.

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1 Introduction

Suppose a truck driver is driving down the street when a child happens to walk in front of them. Through no fault of their own, the driver hits and kills the child. This case raises what's known as the puzzle of agent-regret — it seems like the driver will (and probably should) feel a particular sort of regret over their action simply because they were the person that killed the child.[1] It's unclear, however, *why* they should feel this guilt-like emotion, which is typically accompanied by a desire to make amends, if they didn't actually do anything wrong. Subsequent papers written to solve this puzzle have filled a sizable graveyard of hypothetical pedestrians.[2]

In this paper, I will argue that there is a parallel puzzle surrounding the angry reactions we might expect from *victims* of bad moral luck (i.e. the people unintentionally harmed by the unlucky agent). This puzzle has, until now, gone overlooked. To see its force, consider how anger is often understood in philosophy. On the traditional philosophical account of anger, which traces back at least as far as Aristotle, anger is a punitive response to wrongdoing. As such it is only rationally appropriate to direct anger at someone who is culpable.[3] At first pass, this seems right. When someone says "I am angry with you" a natural response is, "What did I do wrong?"

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[1] Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 50, (1976):123.
[2] See, for instance David Sussman, "Is Agent-Regret Rational?," *Ethics* Vol. 128, No. 4 (2018); Jordan Mackenzie, "Agent-regret and the Social Practice of Moral Luck," *Res Philosophica* Vol. 94, No. 1 (2017); Rachana Kamtekar & Shaun Nichols, "Agent-Regret and Accidental Agency," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* Vol 43, No.1 (2019); Michael Zhao, "Guilt without Perceived Wrongdoing," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* Vol. 48, No. 3 (2020); David Enoch, "Being Responsible, Taking Responsibility, and Penumbral Agency," in *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes From the Ethics of Bernard Williams*, ed. Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang (Oxford: OUP, 2015); Brian Rosebury, "Moral Responsibility and 'Moral Luck'," *The Philosophical Review* Vol.104, No.4 (1995); and Carla Bagnoli, "Value in the Guise of Regret," *Philosophical Explorations* Vol. 3, No. 2 (2000).
[3] Aristotle's version of the traditional account can be found in *Rhetoric* 1378a. This general account is also endorsed with slight variations by Martha Nussbuam, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford, 2016; Aquinas; Richard S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Zac Cogley, "Basic Desert of Reactive Emotions," *Philosophical Explorations* Vol. 16, No. 2 (2013); Samuel Reis-Dennis, "Anger: Scary Good," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 97, no. 3 (2017); Antti Kauppinen, "Valuing Anger," in *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, ed. Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Robert Roberts, *Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) among many others.

However, this account of anger doesn't play well with the anger we often feel and expect others to feel in the wake of bad moral luck. Simply put, "*because they ran over my child"* feels like an adequate justification for anger in a way that *"because they read about my child's death in a newspaper"* or even *"because they ran over someone I don't know"* does not. In other words, "victim-anger," or anger that we feel when someone non-culpably damages us or something that we care about, appears rationally appropriate in at least some circumstances. On the traditional account of anger, however, this could never be the case, as the people at whom victim-anger is directed have done nothing wrong. The driver is just as innocent as anyone else. I will call this the *puzzle of victim-anger.*

This puzzle places us in a dilemma. We have to either reject the traditional account of anger, which has long standing support and *prima facie* plausibility, or deny the aptness of victim-anger, which also has strong intuitive pull as an appropriate response in cases involving significant, albeit non-culpable, harm. To diffuse this dilemma, I argue that we ought to reject the traditional account's view of anger as a response to wrongdoing. Instead, we should view anger more broadly as a response to what I'll call *responsibility-generating connections to harm*. These connections include culpability, but also include, at times, weaker connections like mere causal responsibility.

My paper will proceed as follows: In Section 2, I outline the traditional account of anger and will show why it fails to make sense of victim-anger. In Section 3, I argue against a few plausible solutions that attempt to rescue the traditional account. In Section 4, I survey what I take to be two central virtues of the traditional account and explain what light they can shed on the puzzle of victim-anger. I argue that appreciating these virtues helps us to break down the puzzle into two smaller puzzles: the 'object puzzle', which suggests that victim-anger misrepresents its object, and the 'aim puzzle', which suggests that victim-anger is unjustifiably punitive. This leaves

me with the following challenge: to develop an account of victim-anger's rational appropriateness that adequately addresses both the object puzzle and the aim puzzle.

I resolve this challenge in Sections 5 and 6. In Section 5, I argue that the truck driver, while not culpable, bears a *responsibility-generating connection* to the child's death. Roughly speaking, an agent bears a responsibility-generating connection to harm when they have an obligation to repair the harm as a result of their connection to it. This helps solve the object puzzle because victim-anger can properly represent its object without giving up on anger's connection to responsibility. In Section 6, I fit this story about responsibility-generating connections into a broader story about anger's rational appropriateness. I argue that, instead of seeing anger as a response to culpability, we should see it as a communicative response to these kinds of responsibility-generating connections. On my account, anger isn't (necessarily) punitive. It is (necessarily) assertive. Anger essentially aims at establishing conversational control. In short, when it works, anger says, "Shut up and listen!" In the truck driver case, this shift in the conversational dynamic enables the victim to bring attention to the obligation the agent has to them. This account preserves the central virtues of the traditional account, while making room for the rational appropriateness of victim-anger.

Taking this puzzle seriously has two significant consequences. First, the puzzle raised by William's truck driver turns out to be a two-sided problem that has only been seriously explored from one side. Any proposed solution to the puzzle of agent-regret that gives us no way to make sense of victim-anger isn't adequate. The driver's agent-regret and the parent's victim-anger are both responses to the same situation just from different positions within it, so the puzzle of agent-regret and the puzzle of victim-anger aren't self-contained. A solution to the puzzle of agent-regret

requires us to interpret the normative facts of the situation which is common to both problems and thus constrains the sorts of solutions we can give to the puzzle of victim-anger and vice versa.

Second, it expands the scope of the literature on anger which, at least in philosophy, has tended to narrowly focus on anger contexts of wrongdoing and injustice. Recognizing that anger outside of these contexts can be both appropriate and worthy of philosophical attention has the potential to push us towards a fuller appreciation of anger's moral significance.

2 The Traditional Account

As I have defined it, victim-anger is anger that we feel when someone non-culpably damages us or something that we care about. In this section, I will briefly explain what the traditional account of anger is and why it cannot account for common intuitions about victim-anger.

On the traditional account, anger has three main components:

1. A perceived injury to the angry person's circle of concern
2. A target who wrongfully caused the injury (at least in the angry person's perception)
3. A desire to strike back

The first two components have to do with anger's evaluative judgement, and the third has to do with its aim.

Let's unpack each component a bit further. First, anger involves a perceived injury to what Martha Nussbaum calls one's *circle of concern*. Similar to grief or sadness, anger involves the perception that something one cares about has been damaged.[4] I might get angry after hearing about an injustice done to a group of people I didn't know existed beforehand, but I will only be angry insofar as I now care about the people that were harmed.

[4] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford, 2016): 17.

Second, anger has a target that wrongfully caused the injury.[5] We are angry at someone who we perceive as having acted wrongfully. 'Wrong' here doesn't necessarily mean *morally wrong*, but it does require the thought that there was something wrong about the way the agent acted independent of the action's effects (e.g. that the agent violated social rules, or personal expectations, etc.). And so, Martha Nussbaum observes that "Even though we experience frustration when someone inadvertently damages us, we only become angry when we believe (rightly or wrongly) that the damage was inflicted by a person or persons, in a manner that was illegitimate or wrongful."[6] Zac Cogley notes that "the core appraisal of anger, resentment, and indignation is of someone's conduct as wrongful."[7] Robert Roberts describes anger as involving an appraisal that "S has culpably offended in the important matter of X (action or omission) and is bad (is to some extent an enemy of what is good)."[8] And Antti Kauppinen writes "the thought that defines mature anger is that the target is responsible for violating a normative expectation, where a normative expectation is a standard to which we hold others (or ourselves)."[9] Even Aristotle, who thinks that we get angry over unjustified slights rather than wrongful injuries more generally, has a notion of wrongful or illegitimate action at the center of his account of anger.[10]

Beyond philosophy, this rough descriptive account of anger's evaluative content has seen support from prominent psychologists.[11] Appraisal theorists define anger as an unpleasant emotion

[5] 'Caused' here is a bit misleading since it seems to suggest that the injury must be separate from the wrongful action. The action itself may actually itself be the injury if, for example, it signals a lack of respect, or violates a principle I care about.
[6] Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*: 18.
[7] Zac Cogley, "Basic Desert of Reactive Emotions," *Philosophical Explorations* Vol. 16, No. 2 (2013): 167.
[8] Robert Roberts, *Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 204.
[9] Antti Kauppinen, "Valuing Anger," in *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, ed. Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018): 32.
[10] Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. G. A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): 124.
[11] For example, see Richard S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); [11] Phillip Shaver, Judith Schwartz, Donald Kirson, and Gary O'Connor, "Emotion Knowledge: Further Exploration of a Prototype Approach," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 52, No. 6 (1987); and Frijda, Kuipers & ter Schure "Relations Among Emotion, Appraisal, and Emotional Action Readiness" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (1989).

that occurs in response to the appraisal of a blocked goal.[12] In the psychological literature, a *goal* is something that is personally significant[13] or perhaps, more broadly, an outcome that is desired. This, however, clearly isn't enough to differentiate anger from other unpleasant emotions like sadness that also involve the appraisal of a blocked goal. As a result, appraisal theorists also commonly add the appraisal of "other-blame" to their definition. On these definitions then, anger must involve both an appraisal that my goal was blocked, and the appraisal that some other entity blocked it wrongfully.[14]

The third component of the traditional account has to do with anger's aim. Angry people want payback to right the wrong. They want the target of their anger to suffer, and they must envision this suffering as both deserved and as a way of somehow paying back the offense.[15] The desire for payback may be subtle, and it doesn't need to involve any desire to personally bring about the suffering.[16] However, this desire for payback is often explicitly linked to punishment or sanctioning.[17]

Crucially, on the traditional account, anger's evaluative judgement and its aim at payback fit together into a coherent package. The angry person thinks that someone wronged them and so it makes sense (to many people at least) that they would want payback. Their desire for payback, in turn, is only sensible if they think that someone has wronged them. Thus, on the traditional account, anger both *appraises* and *responds to* wrongdoing. This connection between anger's

[12] Eddie Harmon-Jones and Cindy Harmon-Jones, "Anger," in *Handbook of Emotions*, 4th ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2016): 774–91.
[13] Richard S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
[14] Phillip Shaver, Judith Schwartz, Donald Kirson, and Gary O'Connor, "Emotion Knowledge: Further Exploration of a Prototype Approach," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52, no. 6 (June 1987): 1061–86.
[15] Laura Silva, "Anger and Its Desires," *European Journal of Philosophy*, forthcoming: 3. Note that Silva does not herself endorse this view.
[16] Nussbaum *Anger and Forgiveness*: 22.
[17] Antony G. Aumann and Zac Cogley, "Forgiveness and the Multiple Functions of Anger," *Journal of Philosophy of Emotion* 1, no. 1 (2019): 44–71.

appraisal and goal direction has also been noted in the psychological literature. Shaver et. al., for example, commented in one study that anger "seems designed to rectify injustice."[18]

Consequently, much of the debate surrounding anger has focused on whether or not anger's hostile desires and motivations can be seen as appropriate responses to wrongdoing and injustice. With the traditional account as a starting point, the only way anger could ever be appropriate is if it could be an appropriate response to wrongdoing. The reason why this is the case is fairly clear. First, since anger's appraisal is that someone has wrongfully injured us, if the person we are angry at didn't act wrongfully, then our anger misrepresents their culpability. Second, angry individuals want payback, and even the most gung-ho retributivists think that retribution must be deserved. Appropriate anger thus requires wrongdoing because anger, like punishment, must be deserved.

Now we are in a position to see why the traditional account fails to make sense of victim-anger. To return to the truck driver case, note that the driver is not morally responsible for any wrongdoing. There was no intent or negligence; in short, they did nothing wrong. That the child walked in front of their truck was just a matter of bad moral luck. As a result, if the traditional account is correct, then the parent's anger — which necessarily aims at righting a wrong that isn't there — must be inappropriate.

This conclusion seems mistaken. We can bring out the issue with the traditional account's verdict by contrasting victim-anger with anger felt by mere bystanders. Suppose there was also some hypothetical bystander who was angry at the truck driver. On the traditional account, both the bystander and the loved ones are harboring inappropriate anger, as neither party's anger has a culpable target. While that description clearly fits the bystander, the loved one's anger doesn't

[18] Shaver et al., "Emotion Knowledge: Further Exploration of a Prototype Approach," 1061–86.

seem similarly objectionable. This leaves us with a puzzle: we need to either abandon the traditional account or accept that the intuitive aptness of victim-anger was illusory.

3 Can We Save the Traditional Account?

Maybe I've been too hasty. Maybe there is some way to salvage the traditional account without giving up on our intuitions about victim-anger. In this section I'll consider and ultimately reject a few plausible ways of solving the puzzle that would allow us to save the traditional account.

Let's first consider a solution that I will call the *epistemic route*. In the example motivating this paper, I specified that the driver was not culpable. But non-culpability in real life cases is usually not as clear-cut. In the real world, we likely wouldn't be able to tell conclusively whether or not a driver was culpable for an accidental death. Perhaps we can say that, while victim-anger is inappropriate in some sense (e.g. it isn't fitting, or morally appropriate[19]), it is nevertheless still reasonable for the victim to view and act towards the driver as if they were responsible, in the absence of clear evidence to the contrary.

Philosophers like Brian Rosebury have used the epistemic route to navigate their way out of the puzzle of agent-regret. And it might well work in that case. We might, in other words, grant that the *driver* has reason to view themselves as guilty until proven innocent. Nevertheless, there is an important asymmetry between agent-regret and victim-anger. While there is something admirable about taking responsibility for an injury in the absence of sufficient evidence of your

[19]An emotion is fitting when its particular object instantiates the emotion's formal object. For instance, if fear's formal object is danger or 'the dangerous' then my fear is fitting when what I am afraid of is in fact dangerous. Fittingness can come apart from moral concerns, for example when an offensive joke is funny. Amusement is fitting since the joke is amusing, but since the joke is offensive there are moral reasons against being amused by it. Thus, an emotion may be fitting even though it is not morally appropriate. This is following the standard account of fittingness found in Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy: On the 'Appropriateness' of Emotions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61, no. 1 (2000): 65–90.

innocence,[20] there doesn't seem to be a similar value in blaming others without good evidence of their guilt.

The driver ought to hedge on the side of guilt because of what is morally at stake — if they let themselves off the hook even though they are guilty then they've made a morally serious error. If, however, they aren't guilty, they haven't done anything morally wrong by blaming themselves. But this is not at all what is happening in the case of victim-anger. If anything, the victim ought to hedge in the *opposite* direction. If the driver isn't guilty, then blaming them is just undeservedly rubbing salt in the wound of someone who is, in some sense, also a victim of bad moral luck. If the driver is guilty, and they don't blame them, however, the parents haven't done anything seriously wrong.

So, we can't take the epistemic route out of the puzzle of victim-anger. The next strategy that we might use to save the traditional account is what I will call the *exempting condition route*. According to this strategy, the puzzle only appears to exist because I have mischaracterized our intuitions surrounding victim-anger. Maybe we *don't* actually think that victim-anger is an appropriate response in any sense. Instead, what our intuitions are really picking up on is the fact that we shouldn't blame the parent for being angry. Of course, strictly speaking, the parent *shouldn't* be angry, but given the extreme emotional stress they are under, it would be cruel to demand that they react rationally. If that were the case, there isn't a conflict between our intuitions and the traditional account. The traditional account only says that the victim's anger is rationally inappropriate. It doesn't say that we should invariably blame people for experiencing it.

Unfortunately, the exempting condition route won't solve the puzzle either. To see why, note that other forms of irrational anger commonly caused by grief don't raise the same sort of

[20] Brian Rosebury, "Moral Responsibility and Moral Luck," *The Philosophical Review* 104, no. 4 (1995): 515.

puzzle as victim-anger even though we excuse grieving people for experiencing them. A study of widows in mourning found that widows whose spouses committed suicide commonly became angry with doctors, police, medical examiners, and other officials involved with breaking the news.[21] Their anger is clearly inappropriate though because the officials are doing what they are supposed to. If anything, the widows would have reason to be angry if the officials failed to break the news to them. Nevertheless, these are clear cases where grief excuses inappropriate anger. The widows might not have any good moral reason to be angry at the coroner for determining that the death was a suicide, but we still wouldn't blame them for their grief-driven anger.

Is this what's going on in the truck driver case? I don't think it is. Simply put, anger at the truck driver doesn't seem unreasonable in the same way. There are some grounds for the parent's anger that we can at least partially understand. The driver killed their child. We can't say something similar about the coroner who handled the body. As a result, I'm not convinced that the exempting condition route could make good sense of our intuitions. And so, the puzzle remains.

In summary, the puzzle of victim-anger is a conflict between the traditional account of anger and our commonplace judgments about victim-anger. Accepting the traditional account requires us to accept that victim-anger is never rationally appropriate. Accepting our commonplace judgments means accepting that victim-anger may sometimes be rationally appropriate, which in turn requires us to reject the traditional account. To solve this puzzle, I will reject the traditional account, and suggest an alternative way to view anger. Before doing so, however, I will sharpen the puzzle of victim-anger.

[21] Arlene Sheskin and Samuel E. Wallace, "Differing Bereavements: Suicide, Natural, and Accidental Death," *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* 7, no. 3 (October 1, 1976): 232.

4 Sharpening the Puzzle

In this section, I'm going to identify two virtues of the traditional account in order to 1) show just how difficult it is to abandon this account in favor of an alternative, and 2) understand what exactly is so puzzling about victim-anger. I will suggest that looking at the virtues of the traditional account helps us see that the puzzle of victim-anger breaks down into two sperate puzzles. First, a mere causal connection to harm isn't sufficient to render someone an appropriate object of anger, yet the truck driver's causal connection to the child's death seems sufficient to justify the parent's anger. I will call this the "object puzzle." Second, victim-anger would be irrational as a goal-directed response if it aimed at payback, but it is difficult to explain the scary and confrontational nature of anger without the payback aim. I will call this the "aim puzzle."

4.1 The Object Puzzle

To start to appreciate the first virtue of the traditional account, as well as the specific puzzle that it raises for victim-anger, let's start by considering a classic example given by psychologist Richard Lazarus.[22] Suppose you are trying to check out at a store, but the clerk is ignoring you. You know they can see you, but they're on the phone. You are tired, your arms are full of groceries, and they're just ignoring you, so you get angry. Later, however, you find out that the clerk was talking with a doctor about their child who was just in a serious accident. Your anger would stop dead in its tracks, and you'd probably be mortified that you were ever angry in the first place.

The traditional account seems to get the right results here. Even though our goal was frustrated by the clerk (we want to check out and leave the store but can't because the clerk is on the phone), our anger disappears as soon as it becomes clear that the clerk hasn't wronged us.

[22] Richard S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994): 223.

The traditional account's ability to clearly and accurately capture cases like the clerk case is a central virtue of the account, and it is a virtue that we can easily lose if we try and weaken the traditional account's culpability condition. Consider, for instance, the weakened version of the traditional account that Maria Miceli and Cristiano Castelfranchi have offered. On their account, a) the perception of goal frustration and b) a target who is perceived as an efficient cause of the goal frustration is necessary and sufficient for anger.[23] It's unclear, however, how this weakened account can make sense of the above case. Even if it could give a story about why we stop being angry, if anger's characteristic appraisal is that its target caused goal frustration, then we would have to admit that anger was nonetheless still *appropriate* even after we find out about the clerk's injured child. After all, your goal is still being frustrated. But this seems like the wrong result: intuitively, there is a rational tension between being angry at the store clerk for ignoring you and knowing that they have good reason to ignore you.

Note, however, that there doesn't appear to be a similar rational tension between the parent's anger at the truck driver and understanding the truck driver's lack of culpability. And so, if we are going to reject the traditional account of anger, we must find an alternative theory that can simultaneously make sense of our divergent judgments in the clerk case and the truck driver case. This leaves us with a puzzle about anger's objects. Specifically, we must explain how a mere causal connection to harm can be sufficient to render the truck driver an appropriate object of anger. However, as evidenced by the clerk case, we must do so without committing ourselves to the implausible claim that causal connections to harm are always sufficient to justify anger.

4.2 The Aim Puzzle

[23] Maria Miceli and Cristiano Castelfranchi, "Anger and Its Cousins," *Emotion Review* 11, no. 1 (2019): 13–26.

To understand the second virtue of the traditional account, and the specific puzzle it raises for victim-anger, let's start by thinking about angry glares. Unless you are a moral saint, you can probably remember a time when you made someone angry and rather than yelling at you or getting physically aggressive, they just shot you an angry look. In the right context, an angry glare can be terrifying,[24] but angry glares don't seem to do anything other than communicate "I am angry at you." If angry glares just *express* anger, it doesn't seem like they can be scary unless there is something scary about anger. Again, the traditional account seems to give us material to explain this. If anger essentially aims at payback, by expressing "I am angry at you" angry glares essentially say, "You wronged me, and I want you to suffer." On this account, angry glares are scary because anger threatens punitive action.[25]

We can see what is so valuable about the traditional account's ability to explain the 'scariness' of anger when we compare that account to some common competitors. Some philosophers have suggested that anger is aimed at communication rather than retribution.[26] David Shoemaker, for example, argues that anger's aim is to communicate the anger. On his view, retribution isn't essential to anger, but often serves the fundamental aim of communication in a dramatic fashion.[27] Thus, Shoemaker argues, anger can be appropriate even if its target doesn't deserve retribution.[28]

An angry glare is clearly communicative, but if anger simply aims to get information across to its target, why would angry glares be scary? One suggestion would be that the information anger

[24] Arne Ohman & Ulf Dimberg, "Facial Expressions as Conditioned Stimuli for electrodermal responses: A case of "preparedness"?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36 (1978): 1251-1258.
[25] Samuel Reis-Dennis, "Anger: Scary Good," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 97, no. 3 (2017): 458.
[26] See for example, David Shoemaker, "You Oughta Know," in *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, ed. Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018) & Laura Silva, "Anger and Its Desires," *European Journal of Philosophy*, forthcoming.
[27] David Shoemaker, "You Oughta Know," 74.
[28] Ibid 78.

attempts to communicate is inherently scary or painful. If anger aims to get its target to acknowledge the pain that they caused, then the angry glare may be scary simply because it carries with it the threat of painful acknowledgement. The problem here is that we can communicate things like "you hurt me" in ways that lack the frightening jolt characteristic of angry expressions. Withdrawing from social interaction, looking sullen, and even seeking affection can clearly and effectively communicate hurt in the right context. Thus, it seems like even if angry expressions communicate something like "you hurt me" there must be something else that makes angry expression scary.

More generally, the concern here is that when we try to "purify" anger by replacing its aim with something other than payback we run the risk losing out on the traditional account's ability to do justice to anger's distinctive scary confrontational nature. On the other hand, if we keep anger's connection to payback, victim-anger is irrational, since it necessarily aims at punishing an innocent party. As a result, we're caught in another puzzle.

4.3 The Puzzle(s) of Victim-Anger

The puzzle of victim-anger thus breaks up into two puzzles. 1) How victim-anger could properly represent its object given that its appraisal can't be a mere causal connection, and 2) How victim-anger can be rational as a goal directed response given anger's association with scary and aggressive behavior. Sections 5 & 6 will address these two problems in order.

5 Luck & Reparative Obligations

As demonstrated in Section 2, the traditional account can't make sense of victim-anger because it views anger solely as a response to wrongdoing. Given the discussion in Section 4, however, it's

easy to see why so many thinkers have made wrongdoing anger's central focus. Anger draws some connection between the target and an injury, and that connection has to be more normatively meaty than a mere causal connection. It's an easy jump from that to wrongdoing. In this section I introduce what I call *responsibility-generating connections to harm*. The truck driver, while not culpable, bears a responsibility-generating connection to the child's death. Not every causal connection, however, constitutes a responsibility-generating connection. On my view of anger, which I will develop further in the next section, anger's appraisal is that the target bears a responsibility-generating connection to harm. Thus, my account of anger satisfies the object puzzle (anger properly represents its object in the truck driver scenario, but its appraisal is not merely that some entity is causally related to harm).

To get started, note that there are a variety of ways that we can be responsible. Most paradigmatically, we are responsible for harm when we intentionally or negligently cause it. If someone intentionally kills another person, we say they are morally responsible (or culpable) for the person's death. This sort of responsibility is unique because it generates a desert for payback.[29] When we are culpable for harm, we are responsible in a way that makes something like punishment an appropriate or acceptable response.

This is not, however, the only way we can be responsible. We can also be responsible through our causal agency, or through our role as a parent, or teacher, etc. The truck driver, for instance, while not culpable for the child's death, is still causally responsible for it. Our intentional and negligent actions, (some of) our causal agency, and certain important roles we occupy are all types of what I am calling responsibility-generating connections.

[29] Galen Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 75, no. 1/2 (1994): 5–24.

When we bear a responsibility-generating connection to harm we are responsible for the harm, but not necessarily in a way that makes us deserving of payback or punishment. Instead, we are at least minimally responsible in a way that generates a reparative obligation. This category of responsibility, most notably, includes culpable wrongdoing. If I forget to water your plants after I promised you that I would, I have an obligation to buy you some new plants. My own wrongful action makes me responsible for your plant's death, and as a result of this responsibility I have a reparative obligation. However, we can sometimes bear a responsibility-generating connection to an injury without having done wrong. A CEO of a massive company can have an obligation to repair environmental damage that their company caused even if they had absolutely no way of knowing about the damage, and even if the damage occurred before they worked at the company. Since they did nothing wrong themselves, they aren't culpable. However, they still have what I'm calling a responsibility-generating connection to the damage through the role they have at the company.

Similarly, I want to suggest that, when the driver hits the child, they incur a reparative obligation that they would not have otherwise had. As such, they have a responsibility-generating connection to the victim by virtue of their causal role in the child's death. Indeed, we are often obligated to repair damages even though we aren't morally responsible for them. When I accidentally spill my meatball sub all over my friend's carpet, I'm the one who should go to the store to buy carpet cleaner. We expect people to fix damage that they accidentally caused, and the truck driver case is not an exception to that expectation. We expect the truck driver to apologize, give an explanation, or to try and make it up to the child's parents ones in some way. There would be something morally off about a truck driver who failed to make an effort to help the family where they could.

However, not all causal connections are responsibility-generating. To go back to Lazarus' store clerk on the phone example, while it is true that the clerk is causally responsible for some inconvenience, they clearly aren't obligated to make any reparative effort. So, while they may have a causal connection to some (minor) harm, they don't have what I am calling a responsibility-generating connection to harm. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a full set of necessary and sufficient conditions for responsibility-generating connections, but a few candidate explanations come to mind. First, the difference between the clerk and the truck driver may be explained by the difference in justification. The clerk could justifiably ignore you, but the truck driver couldn't justifiably hit the child. Alternatively, we might think that, in the absence of culpability, responsibility-generating connections only make sense when the harm caused is significant.

Whatever the explanation, my argument right now simply rests on the thought that causal responsibility is not always sufficient to establish a responsibility-generating connection to harm. For now, I'm simply interested in showing how my solution to the puzzle of victim-anger allows for a variety of moral intuitions to fit nicely together.

I'm going to take it as a given that, whatever the explanation for these obligations turns out to be, these obligations exist. At very least, they're ubiquitous within our moral practices. And so, just because they hit someone, the truck driver has some obligation to make a reparative gesture. As a result, the truck driver has what I'm calling a responsibility-generating connection to the child's death. If this is the case, then there is a plausible way for anger to properly represent its object in the truck driver scenario that doesn't make a mere causal connection to harm sufficient for fitting anger in all cases. In other words, we will be able to salvage our intuition that the parent's anger towards the truck driver is appropriate, while preserving the thought that your anger towards

the store clerk is not. This account of anger's appraisal has the virtue that it is able to account for intuitions about anger's fittingness in diverse settings.

6 Anger & Conversational Control

In Section 4, I raised two puzzles: 1) How victim-anger could properly represent its object given that its appraisal can't be a mere causal connection, and 2) How victim-anger can be rational as a goal directed response given anger's association with scary and aggressive behavior. In the last section I showed that viewing anger as a response to responsibility-generating connections satisfies the first puzzle. Victim-anger would be fitting in the truck driver scenario, yet anger's appraisal would involve something a bit more normatively meaty than mere causal connection because the truck driver has caused harm in a way that creates a responsibility-generating connection. This preserves the first, object-directed, virtue of the traditional account, while still being able to preserve victim-anger's rational appropriateness.

Supposing this is correct, however, this would still leave us with the question: Why anger? Even if anger properly represented the driver's responsibility, why would a responsibility-generating connection justify the scary and confrontational nature of angry behavior? If the traditional account is correct and angry people want payback, then victim-anger is highly problematic. The truck driver may have a reparative obligation to the parents, but that doesn't make punishment appropriate. I think that this view of anger as necessarily punitive is misguided. On my view, anger may be scary, but this isn't because anger is essentially punitive. Instead, anger is essentially *assertive.* More specifically, anger asserts that we deserve *conversational control*.

On my account victim-anger is a rational response in truck driver type scenarios since it involves an appraisal that the target has a reparative obligation to the victim, and since it aims at putting the victim in control of a confrontation which enables them to make the target recognize and make good on that reparative obligation. Thus, anger's aim is not only a valuable response in its own right but is also a rational response to the concern that its appraisal reflects.

6.1 Anger in General

To understand what I mean by conversational control, consider this example from clinical psychologist Harriet Lerner. A married couple, Sandra and Larry, went to Dr. Lerner for therapy. Even though they were both committed to their marriage, they were constantly angry at each other. Larry was a workaholic who failed to sympathize with his wife and children. Sandra didn't appreciate the effort Larry put into his job and criticized him when he had real problems at work. Their anger became problematic because, rather than addressing problems in their relationship, they ended up stuck in an endless cycle of arguments trying to decide "who started it."[30] Nussbaum says this about the case: "Anger resulted from seeking a superior position through blame … Even to the extent that anger is well-grounded, it is a deflection of attention from the real problem."[31]

I largely agree with Nussbaum here. There is something going wrong with Larry and Sandra's anger. However, I think that we can't explain what is going wrong if we view their anger as primarily aimed at payback (as Nussbaum herself does). If we see their anger as essentially punitive, we have to view their attempts to gain the higher ground as either aimed at punishment or as a form of punishment itself. But this is mistaken for two reasons.

[30] Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*: 117.
[31] Ibid.

First, even if in this particular case Larry and Sandra are aiming at payback, it seems wrong to say we can infer this from the fact that they are angry. As Amia Srinivasan has pointed out, it seems possible for an angry person to just want the target to recognize the pain they caused them.[32] In fact, studies have shown that the intensity of anger correlates positively with straightforwardly constructive responses and goals like demonstrations, or petition signing, while anger correlates positively with punitive and or destructive behavior only in certain circumstances.[33] Studies have also shown that sincerely expressed remorse, not payback, is the best predictor of forgiveness, which suggests that anger's aim is often tied more to communication than payback.[34] We are most likely to stop being angry when we feel that the person we are angry with understands why we are angry with them. It seems at least possible that gaining a superior position could be tied more to an effort to communicate than to punish.

Second, viewing Larry and Sandra's anger as primarily punitive doesn't allow us to understand what is really inappropriate about their anger. They have both wronged the other, and so some punitive response is justified as much as it ever is. On the traditional view, it seems like we can at best say that their anger is problematic because it isn't an effective way of dealing with the problem. But that can't be exactly right. Suppose that one day, when Larry and Sandra are arguing, Sandra convinces Larry that he was to blame, and thereby gains the higher ground. Further, suppose that Larry ends up becoming more mindful of Sandra's efforts as a result, and their marital relationship improves. In that case, Sandra's anger *was* useful--it really *did* improve the situation. Still, there seems to be something wrong with her anger.

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[32] Amia Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (June 2018): 129.
[33] Nicole Tausch et al., "Explaining Radical Group Behavior: Developing Emotion and Efficacy Routes to Normative and Nonnormative Collective Action," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101, no. 1 (July 2011): 129–48. See also Eran Halperin, "Group-Based Hatred in Intractable Conflict in Israel," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 5 (October 1, 2008): 713–36.
[34] James R. Davis and Gregg J. Gold, "An Examination of Emotional Empathy, Attributions of Stability, and the Link between Perceived Remorse and Forgiveness," *Personality and Individual Differences* 50, no. 3 (2011): 392–97.

Reflect for a moment on what gaining the higher ground really means here. Imagine you've been arguing with someone for the past decade and all of a sudden you realize that you've been wrong this whole time. First, you probably would (and you probably should) feel guilty, and second, you'd probably start to apologize. There's a crucial shift in the conversational dynamic that occurs when we move from a debate context to an apology/forgiveness context. Once we start apologizing, we give up our share of conversational control. We're no longer in a position to direct the topic of conversation or enter counter-reasons for consideration. We are instead in a position to *listen.* Trying to direct the conversation or argue with the person to whom you are apologizing starts to undercut your apology. The problem in the present case is that neither Larry nor Sandra *ought* to take control of the conversation. They have both been wronged, and they have both wronged. They both have things they need to communicate, and they both have things they need to listen to. Their anger isn't inappropriate just because it is bad at solving their marital issues, it is inappropriate because its aim is fundamentally misguided.

This insight leads me to my account of anger, which can be stated as follows: *anger's essential aim is conversational control*. Yelling, hitting, angrily storming out of a room etc. can all communicate a variety of things at once depending on the context: "I'm angry at you," "You've wronged me," "You owe me," and so on, but they also simultaneously *demand* attention, recognition, and compliance. Anger wants people to shut up and listen to what we have to say. The scary, aggressive, confrontational nature of angry behavior isn't made sense of by the specific information anger intends to communicate, but by how anger attempts to re-structure the space in which we communicate. Of course, we may also want to hurt the other person, punish them etc. when we're angry, but the essential goal of anger is conversational control.

And anger is quite good at achieving this goal. Angry expressions help angry people take conversational control in at least two ways. First, they are scary.[35] This by itself may cause people to shut up and listen. Second, angry expressions often elicit guilt. In one study, 76% of targets of anger reported realizing their own faults as a result of an angry expression.[36] For this reason, other scholars have argued that producing guilt in the target is a function of anger.[37]

In an ideal angry interaction 1) the angry person expresses their anger 2) the target recognizes their connection to harm and feels guilty 3) the target apologies, tries to make amends, etc. (thereby giving away conversational control) 4) the angry individual forgives the target. Ideally, anger takes conversational control by forcing the target to recognize their connection to harm thereby producing guilt (or in cases involving bad moral luck, agent-regret).

Now, the defender of the traditional account will respond here that this insight about communicative control is nothing new. As I've pointed out in Section 4, many other scholars have noticed anger's communicative role. Anger expresses something like, "You've wronged me!" typically through scary, aggressive behavior. Of course, this is often the case. When my friend comes home to find their plants dead thanks to my neglect, their demand for an apology is a demand that I recognize how I failed in my promise to keep their plants alive. In that sense, their anger does express an accusation. My claim here, however, is not that anger *only* expresses a demand for conversational control. My claim is that anger *essentially* expresses this demand. Any other demands that it may or may not express will be contingent on the particular case. As such, there will be cases, where anger need not express anything about wrongdoing. I don't see a clear

[35] Reis-Dennis, "Anger: Scary Good," 451–64.
[36] Averill, "Studies on Anger and Aggression," 1151.
[37] Aumann & Cogley, "Forgiveness and the Multiple Functions of Anger," 50.

reason why angrily yelling, "You ran over my child!" has to communicate something other than the existence of a responsibility-generating connection.

The traditional account is right to claim that anger is a scary emotion. It is wrong, however, to insist that the scariness of anger is necessarily connected to punishment. Instead, we can view anger as a way of reasserting control we have lost. This preserves the second virtue of the traditional account outlined int Section 4.

6.2 Victim-Anger

The conversational control model can help us understand paradigmatic cases of anger that the traditional account seems especially well-suited to capture. What can it tell us about victim-anger? To start, consider why the parents of the dead child might need conversational control. The conversational control that anger aims at is important for these parents not because it allows them to point out how the truck driver messed up, but because it allows them to focus attention on what they need, and on what they are owed. Specifically, they are owed reparations, insofar as the truck driver has a responsibility-generating connection to harm.

The guilt that angry confrontations commonly elicit can force the truck driver to recognize and make good on their obligation to the parents. People who feel guilty are more likely to engage in reparative behavior in an attempt to compensate the victims[38] and are more likely to recognize the harm that they have caused others.[39] Guilt also tends to foster cooperation as those who would normally act out of self-interest tend to cooperate more when they feel guilty.[40] Thus, by making

[38] Majid Ghorbani,Yuan Liao, Sinan Çayköylü & Masud Chand, "Guilt, Shame, and Reparative Behavior: The Effect of Psychological Proximity," *Journal of Business Ethics* 114, no.2 (2013): 311-323.
[39]June Price Tangney, Jeff Stuewig & Debra J. Mashek, "Moral Emotions and Moral Behavior," *Annual Review of Psychology* 58, no. 1 (2007): 348-50.
[40] Ilona E. de Hooge, Marcel Zeelenberg, & Seger M. Breugelmans, "Moral sentiments and cooperation: Differential influences of shame and guilt," *Cognition and Emotion* 21, no. 5 (2007): 1025–1042.

the agent feel guilty, the expression of anger helps bring attention to and force the agent to understand their obligation to the victim.

Second, by creating a confrontation that they can control, the victim is able to dictate a) how they want the agent to discharge their reparative obligation and b) how they want to engage with the agent more generally moving forward. The reparative obligation that the driver has depends, at least partially, on what the parents want. There's not one reparative behavior that is 'one size fits all'. According to someone who accidentally took another's life:

> The family may not want to hear from you, and their preference should be respected. On the other hand, I have heard from several people who lost a loved one in a car crash or another accident and cannot understand why the CADI [Causing Accidental Death or Injury] did not reach out to them. They interpret the lack of communication as a lack of caring, which only adds to their hurt and anger.[41]

So first, the shift in the conversational dynamic allows the child's parent to draw attention to the obligation that the driver has to them making sure that it doesn't go unfulfilled. Second, it allows them to work out conditions for engagement moving forward. Those are both goals that are perfectly reasonable for the parent to have. Sure, it would be problematic if they saw eliciting guilt as a way of getting back at the driver, but I'm not sure this has to be the case. It seems possible for an angry person to just want people to shut up and listen to them. In that sense, anger isn't a desire for retribution. Instead, its goal is to establish an interaction that is more like a lecture than a discussion between two equal conversational partners.

Of course, an opponent will object that, while anger's hostility might be useful, it still is unjustified since it clearly causes the driver pain. I think there is definite merit to this concern. Of course, not every action aimed at gaining conversational control is justified. Standing outside the truck driver's house and screaming "Murderer!" is problematic. Still, insisting that moral desert is

[41] (mgray), "Should I Contact the Victim's Family?," *Accidental Impacts* (blog), January 29, 2020, https://accidentalimpacts.org/author/mgray/

required in order to yell, "Shut up and listen to me!" seems to over-moralize the rules that regulate everyday social interaction.

Admittedly, there are some situations like the truck driver case, where anger *will* be inappropriate in some sense. Accidentally killing someone is known to cause life-wrecking amounts of guilt or agent-regret. In most such cases, there really won't be any need to establish conversational control, and so yelling at the truck driver will be tantamount to kicking them while they're down. It is important to note, though, that what makes anger inappropriate here is not the lack of wrongdoing, but the lack of a need to establish conversational control.

As the psychologist James Averill observed, "Like a medicine that leaves a bad taste in the mouth, anger may help to restore balance to a relationship or achieve other ends unobtainable by more benign means."[42] Anger isn't pretty. It really is a scary emotion, but this doesn't make it punitive. Rather, anger is intimately connected to the ways that we engage and communicate with each other. It is because anger works to shift conversational control that it seems off-putting to argue for level-headed, non-angry discussion in place of angry confrontation. The point of anger is to create interactions that are not debates between equal conversational partners. Instead, anger tells its targets to "Shut the hell up for a moment, and just listen to what I have to say."

7 Gender & Anger

The puzzle of victim-anger is, at its core, parallel in structure to the puzzle of agent regret. It is a conflict between the traditional account of anger, a highly plausible theoretical account with significant historical precedent, and our commonplace intuitions surrounding victim-anger. We have to give up one or the other. I have argued that we should reject the traditional account and

[42] Averill, *Anger and Aggression* 208.

instead view anger as a response to responsibility-generating connections to harm. Anger contains an appraisal that the target has a responsibility-generating connection, and it motivates us to make sure that the reparative obligation the target has doesn't go unfulfilled. As a result, it can be appropriate even when no one culpably injured you.

I'm going to conclude by considering an egalitarian concern about anger. Specifically, one potential concern is that while male anger often gets men taken more seriously, female anger often undermines their ability to voice their concerns. Angry women are perceived as of lower status, less competent, and receive lower wages than angry men, and sad/unemotional women.[43] To put it more bluntly, an angry woman is more likely to be written off as a "shrill bitch" and this often leads people to dismiss or overlook what they are actually angry about. Thus, instead of putting women in control of the conversation, women's anger often inhibits their capacity to voice and direct attention to their concerns. You might think that, as a result, anger's connection to conversational control is its chief problem. It gives an outsized ability to people in positions of power to shut down conversation, and focus attention on their own concerns.

There are two issues here. One relates to the more general concern about non-functional anger. Women's angry expressions often don't actually give them conversational control. The other relates to the egalitarian concern that anger gives conversational control to some groups more than others.

Concerning the first issue, it might be true that anger isn't always useful. Still, this doesn't mean that anger can't be appropriate in some other sense in those situations. Specifically, anger can still be a fitting response. After all, someone does have a responsibility-generating connection to an injury to their circle of concern, and they ought to have conversational control even though

[43] Victoria L. Brescoll and Eric Luis Uhlmann, "Can an Angry Woman Get Ahead?: Status Conferral, Gender, and Expression of Emotion in the Workplace," *Psychological Science* 19, no. 3 (March 2008): 268–75.

they lack it. As a result, anger, even though ineffective, is still a proper way of affectively appreciating the situation. Or, as Amia Srinivasan puts it, "Just as appreciating the beautiful or the sublime has a value distinct from the value of knowing that something is beautiful or sublime, there might well be a value to appreciating the injustice of the world through one's apt anger—a value that is distinct from that of simply knowing that the world is unjust."[44]

Concerning the second issue, I think that, rather than being an issue for my account, my account actually gives a good explanation for why this disparity is a problem. It's a problem that women are pressured to restrain from expressing their anger. It's a problem that when women do express their anger it is taken less seriously. And it's a problem precisely because it restricts their ability to use this valuable way of taking control of the conversation.

[44] Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," 132.