

**REVIEW: ANDREJ DÉMUTH:
ANGER AS A/MORAL EMOTION**

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While anger is a common emotion present in every person's life, it is generally deemed by many as something unnatural, unhealthy, and undesirable. Very few people would look someone externally demonstrating anger and conclude that their behavior is reasonable. In his book *Anger as a/moral emotion*, Andrej Démuth argues that anger is misunderstood and thus needs further research. "Despite the "omnipresence" of anger, it is striking how little of the philosophical tradition focuses on the study of anger"¹, Démuth states, and therefore delves into the study of anger to explore its dual nature, to examine whether it serves as a moral response to injustice or an amoral, self-serving reaction.

From Aristotle to neuroscience: the many faces of anger

"If anger bothers us and destroys our lives, we have no choice but to try to understand it, because only then can we control it"². To grasp this prevailing emotion, an interdisciplinary approach is taken, drawing from philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and cultural studies. This decision is informed by the recognition that interpretations vary across disciplines, as each field is grounded in unique premises and analyzed through differing perspectives. Pursuing an interdisciplinary path serves several purposes, primarily the potential achievement of a more holistic understanding that eliminates the oversimplification of the topic's complexity. The author's approach also challenges the prevalent binary conceptualization of anger, based on which it can only be understood in two

extremes, simply 'good' or 'bad', but nothing in between. Rather, the book positions anger within its broader context to underscore its moral and psychological relevance. It is also noteworthy that Démuth highlights cultural variations, pointing out that the perception of anger is not objective and universal but shaped by cultural values.

The opening chapter presents definitions of anger from different disciplines and various sources, such as the American Psychological Association, Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Bible, and more. Démuth also quotes, among others, works of Flanagan³ and van Manen⁴ to interpret other scholars' understanding and contribution to the study of anger. Dedicated subchapters address the study of this topic and provide several philosophical perspectives, mentioning Aristotle's advocacy for *virtuous anger*⁵, Buddhist and Stoic views, along with examples from modern psychology. The author's study would not be complete without an overview of the history of research into anger, from ancient Greek philosophy (with major contributions from Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics), through anger's moral categorization within medieval Christian theology as one of the seven deadly sins, its representation within Shakespearean drama (e.g., *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*), modern psychology (e.g., Paul Ekman), and neuroscientific interpretations. To lay the groundwork for further exploration, several methodological approaches are presented with four key perspectives: first-person - focusing on the subjectivity of anger and individual experience, second-person – anger seen in social contexts, third-person – anger examined through a scientific and objective lens, and interdisciplinary perspectives – combined approaches to create a holistic view.

¹ Andrej Démuth, *Anger as a/moral emotion* (Berlin: Peter Lang GmbH, 2024), 19.

² Démuth, *Anger*, 25.

³ Prominent American philosopher known for his work in the philosophy of mind, ethics, and moral psychology.

⁴ Canadian scholar specializing in phenomenological research methods and pedagogy. He is known for his work concerning the phenomenological study of lived experience, which can also be applied to anger.

⁵ Anger to the right degree - aimed at the right person, at the right time, for the right reasons. For a deeper analysis read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

A few thoughts highlighted

Considering that Démuth's work presents a selection of commentaries and interpretations on different views of anger, this review adopts a selective approach rather than providing a chapter-by-chapter analysis. A full recapitulation is intentionally avoided, allowing the reader to discover the work in its entirety.

While each chapter contributes to a larger conversation about anger's nature and role, a few stand out as particularly essential to the book's central themes. A portion of the book critically examines the role of anger within social relationships and its placement within a moral framework. This analysis is particularly significant, as it directly engages with the central question the text seeks to address, whether anger is inherently moral or amoral.

Anger, like madness, cannot be controlled; it forgets decency, disregards human relationships, obsessively and fervently engages in what it started, is impervious to reason and advice, is provoked by trivial stimuli, is incapable of discerning what is right and true, resembles a collapsing house that falls apart over what it has collapsed upon⁶.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Roman Stoic philosopher, describes anger as an irrational, unhealthy, and purely destructive emotion⁷. Démuth discusses the Stoic perspective; while he acknowledges the Stoic pursuit of mental peace, he raises thought-provoking questions: Is anger always a failure of self-control, or can it be morally virtuous? Does anger inevitably lead to further harm, or can it also be a justifiable response to injustice? This chapter stands out because it does not offer a simple answer; instead of condemning or defending anger, it explores its complexity based on different contexts.

Another section studies anger from literary and artistic perspectives, exploring how it is represented across

different cultural traditions. Starting with visual art and various examples of anger as a destructive force, as a weakness, or as an expression of self-centeredness, through its literary representation in Shakespeare's works, contrasting anger as a sign of femininity as opposed to its cold masculine version, this chapter is with no doubt an unexpected addition to the book. While the rest of the volume focuses on anger from a more practical standpoint, drawing from real-life examples and experiences, here, the author takes a surprisingly insightful detour that adds significant depth to the book and allows the reader to experience anger through narratives and artistic expressions. It is often said that artists see the world differently than the rest of the world, and bearing that in mind, the displayed artistic illustrations of anger inevitably compel readers to view it from points of view they might not have considered before. The author encapsulates the importance of art and its far-reaching impact, stating, "It can motivate us to take action against injustice, to protect the oppressed, and to save the world from self-destruction"⁸.

A particularly sharp critique of anger emerges in a section that examines its egocentric and impulsive nature. Whereas in other parts of the book the author tends to highlight the morality of anger, as if trying to defend it from the common judgment it gets, this view is balanced out with a more negative perspective in one of the latest chapters. Is anger inherently self-centered? Does it always resolve conflicts or does it sometimes, on the contrary, escalate them even more? In addition, a rather remarkable point is made by examining the societal role of anger; Démuth draws attention to its prevalence in today's era and studies anger's dominance in social and political discourse.

The ability to be angry, along with the unpleasantness, intensity and urgency of this feeling, compelled me to think. To think about what both-

⁶ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *O hněvu*, in *O duševním klidu*, ed. L.A. Seneca (Prague: Odeon, 1999), 13, 24, quoted in Andrej Démuth, *Anger as a/moral emotion*, 77 (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2024).

⁷ For a deeper analysis read Seneca's *De Ira* (On Anger).

⁸ Andrej Démuth, „Anger and Art (Cabanel's Fallen Angel and Shakespeare's Tamora)”, chap. 7 in *Anger as a/moral emotion* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2024), 125.

ers me, why I feel what I feel, how to avoid it in the future, how to better manage myself and my emotions. I'm not claiming that I have learned it all or that I understand the world and myself to any great extent. But I was able to experience something and learn about myself after all⁹.

In the foreword, the author reveals his subjective experience with this intensive emotion, and one of the last sections of the book, titled *Anger and Forgiveness*, encourages the readers to reflect on their own experiences as well. Inspired by Martha C. Nussbaum¹⁰, this chapter offers an intellectually stimulating discussion by its engagement with the debate between anger and forgiveness. This raises a fundamental question: Is anger a necessary instrument of moral engagement, or should it be replaced by forgiveness and reasoned reflection? The question to think about is whether letting go is always the better path to take. The acknowledgement that forgiveness has both appeal and limitations is what makes this chapter especially noteworthy. Anger is a deep emotion that often resists easy solutions.

Strengths and limitations

One of the book's greatest strengths lies in its broad, interdisciplinary framework. Démuth successfully integrates perspectives from philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, sociology, literature, and cultural studies to create a holistic analysis. Rather than isolating anger within a single academic tradition, he connects ancient wisdom with modern research, making the study both historically rich and scientifically grounded. Unlike some scholars who refuse to look at anger as a destructive force and consider it a necessary tool for achieving justice, or the ones whose opinions are on the opposite side of this spectrum, the author does not take an extreme position on this matter. Readers who are expecting to find a straight-

forward answer to the question the title of the book suggests, whether anger is a moral or amoral phenomenon, will end up either surprised or even fascinated by the time they finish reading. The complexity of anger requires judgment that is not black-and-white but one that navigates between perspectives. This allows the readers to contemplate, and to think critically about the function and consequences of anger in different contexts.

An initial concern, that the author puts an overemphasis on Western philosophical traditions, slowly vanishes throughout the book, as he starts touching upon Buddhist and Eastern perspectives more frequently. Since anger is a culturally shaped emotion, a much broader study would be needed to fully explore all the other alternatives.

One factor that could be considered as a limitation is the book's practical application for anger management. However, with Démuth's statement that "the presented book is not a detailed manual on how to handle anger, how to regulate it or possibly completely avoid it"¹¹, this aspect cannot be criticized, as it was never meant to be the purpose of his research. Nevertheless, a case study discussing real-life scenarios or a chapter on practical anger regulation would potentially help translate theory into practice.

"Why should I read it?"

The discussion of anger is highly relevant in today's world, particularly in the context of political polarization, with frequent protests and digital activism.

We are living in an era where the expression of anger is almost fashionable. We see mass movements protesting against sexual harassment, racial discrimination, social or economic oppression, rights related to sexual orientation, political views, environmental burden, national or religious oppression, and more¹².

⁹ Démuth, *Anger*, 11.

¹⁰ American philosopher and scholar who critically examines the concept of anger, questioning its value and rationality in her work *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*.

¹¹ Démuth, *Anger*, 11.

¹² Andrej Démuth, „Anger as an Egocentric and Amoral Emotion (with a Note from Jessie Prinz),“ chap. 9 in *Anger as a/moral emotion* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2024), 150.

The book's relevance to contemporary issues is barely questionable. Rather than treating anger as an abstract concept, the book examines how anger operates in modern society, making it particularly useful for readers interested in ethics, politics, and social behavior. As the book is highly intellectual, engaging with complex philosophical arguments and scientific discussions, it is predominantly aimed at academics, students, and people with prior knowledge in philosophy and psychology. With that said, even readers without specialized knowledge will find valuable and thought-provoking ideas and implications within this book if they are interested in political anger, social justice, and artistic representation.

Anger as a/moral emotion is a timely exploration of one of the most misunderstood emotions. It challenges

the reader to reconsider their views on anger, thus creating a captivating and relevant work. The book offers significant insight into how anger shapes the lives of individuals, as well as modern society. Ultimately, this volume is not just about anger but about the human condition – the way one sees anger as a moral compass, a social weapon, a destructive impulse, and so on. This is a text that will likely resonate with readers long after they have finished it, perhaps even compelling them to revisit it from time to time.

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