

Anger

Philosophical puzzlement

Some people claim that anger is a uniquely human emotion; but a dog's angry reaction to perceived territorial invasion puts this into question. Anger is characterised by certain feelings and bodily expressions. It can determine certain actions negatively – hitting someone (active); deciding not to go to someone's birthday party (passive) – or positively, such as fighting a perceived wrongdoing (active). Anger usually has an object – we are angry *because of* something, although it is not always easy to know the reason or cause. Also, the original cause of our anger is often different from the object of it. We could kick our dog for annoying us, because – at a deeper level – we are angry with our teenage son for staying out all night.

The fact that we think, and use a language, influences the fact that we can get angry. For example, we get angry when we are not treated with respect. It is unlikely that animals experience that too, as the ethical notion of wanting to be treated with respect depends on our use of concepts such as *respect*, *dignity* and *self*.

Is anger more than a feeling?

It is difficult to describe what the emotion *anger* exactly *is*. It seems to be more than a raw feeling. It is clear that anger – manifested in our experience of certain bodily changes (*eg* a face going red, an increased heartbeat) – is the result of certain beliefs and thoughts. It is as though *anger* is the physiological spur to act when our beliefs are affronted or challenged. The excited state we find ourselves in motivates us to certain actions.

Empirical study of anger is complicated by the fact that people from different cultures respond differently. What may outrage people from one culture (*eg* sexual freedom of women) may not cause anger in another.

A mixture of feelings and thoughts?

Since anger is usually a response to something, it makes sense to enquire into what exactly this something is. In cases where our anger is based on misunderstanding other people, dialogue can help resolve the issue. When we listen to others empathically, communication can often be improved for the better. However, we sometimes get angry because concepts we use can be interpreted differently by others. For example, we could be disappointed with a friend, because he wasn't honest. Our anger is based on our expectations that *friend* implies honesty. If we have no such expectations of our friends – that is, if our concept of *friend* does not imply *honesty* – there would be no frustration or disappointment to get angry about.

More intriguing questions?

How do you know people are angry? Why do many people believe being angry is not good? Do some people get angrier than others? Are some people born to be less angry than others? Is anger always unpleasant? Can animals be angry, and if so, how would you know?

Is anger always unpleasant?

For Aristotle (384-322 BC), anger is a highly complex emotion, since it is based on certain beliefs. The underlying beliefs make the emotion pleasant or not. We get angry, because we believe that we have been wronged or insulted and the one who caused this had a choice to do otherwise. Anger can be painful and unpleasant. Yet, for Aristotle, anger is followed by a wish for retaliation – the desire to punish the person who did the wrong – and the thought of this happening is pleasant.

However, there are many cultures which acknowledge the destructive power of anger, and whose discomfort with it would preclude any possibility of finding retaliation ‘pleasant’. Perhaps, in the Judeo tradition, an ‘eye-for-an-eye’ retaliation will rebalance things to the state they were before, but this would not be the case for the ‘turn-the-other-cheek’ Christian. Also, Buddhists and Taoists would see retaliation as an example of a negative emotion generating yet more negative emotion (*eg* cruelty) rather than trying to balance it with a positive emotion (*eg* kindness).

Anger and harmony

Certain Eastern philosophies maintain that an emotion need not be damaging just because it is negative – but because it is in excess. For example, Taoist ‘yin-yang’ philosophy of harmony maintains that an excess of positive emotions is just as damaging as of negative ones. Balance is the key to flourishing – excess of love, kindness, openness, gentleness and courage, will undermine flourishing just as surely as an excess of cruelty, hastiness, anger, worry, fear and sadness. Balancing these emotions, Taoists believe, will lead towards the higher state of ‘compassion’ – a concept they share with most schools of Buddhism.

How to deal with anger?

Anger – caused by an affront to our beliefs – often disappears when we find out that our belief was mistaken; or that the challenge to it didn’t happen intentionally. Also, if we judge the wrongdoing to be more trivial than originally thought, the anger tends to dissipate. Many philosophers from the East and West agree that we get angry only when we attach importance to whatever it is we get angry about. There is a conceptual link between anger and the acknowledgement of perceived importance.

What is important enough to get angry about?

We are vulnerable to getting angry when we are attached to things not under our control and especially to things over which we feel we have *lost* control. We get angry when a loved one dies, or when a loved one doesn’t treat us in the way we would like to be treated. We *expect* all sorts of things. When our expectations are not met we get angry.

Should we be less optimistic?

It is when our dangerously optimistic ideas don't materialise that we get angry, according to Roman poet and Stoic Seneca (4BC-65AD). Such a point of view does seem to have practical relevance. Most people expect to die old, their children to outlive them, their friends not to betray them, their colleagues to remain loyal, their neighbour's dog not to bite them, their partners to love them forever. It is when we feel we are *entitled* to loyalty, healthy children, a long life, a faithful partner, and a friendly dog next door that we are likely to become outraged when our expectations are not fulfilled. We can deal with our anger if we trace the original expectations on which our anger is based, and assess how realistic they are.

Can it be good to get angry?

For Aristotle, the virtuous person tempers anger with reason – too many people get angry for insufficient reasons. However, there can be good reasons for getting angry. Failing to get angry in some cases, says Aristotle, testifies neither to insight, nor pain. Not defending what one cares about lacks the integrity of one's own choice, and one will be trampled like a slave. Anger motivates action that can be positive and creative as well as negative and destructive.

Do we need anger as motivation?

The Stoics (eg Seneca) disagree with Aristotle. They argue that virtue and duty are more reliable motivations of actions than passions such as anger. The actions of a good person should be passionless, reliable and consistent. But in order to judge an action as a good action, don't we need to look at its motives? It could be argued (against the Stoics) that anger can reveal care and commitment, and these qualities can make an action a good action.

Summary

Sources. Botton, A. *The Consolations of Philosophy*, 2000, Hamish Hamilton.
Nussbaum, M. *Therapy of Desire*, 1994, Princeton Univ Press.

To sum up, examination of various philosophies – Eastern and Western – suggests that anger is an emotional catalyst for action, which is triggered by an affront to beliefs, value judgements and expectations. A challenge to *unrealistic* expectations triggers inappropriate anger; a challenge to *realistic* beliefs and expectations causes appropriate anger. Therefore, action driven by anger can be positive as well as negative. And, therefore, anger in itself is not wrong.

Why do we get angry?

Name:

Class:

Activity

The class divides into three groups according to where you are most often angry. Do you get most angry: in school (Group School), at home (Group Home), or outside (Group Outside)? In your small group, each of you gives an example of when you got really angry. Choose three examples to explore further, and think carefully about what made you angry in each example.

- What did you do when you got angry?
- Is that the same as what you **could** or **should** have done in these examples?

	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
What I did			
What I could have done?			
What I should have done?			

Discuss: Compare what your group has written down with the other two groups.

Reasons and causes of anger

Name:

Class:

What do you think? Discuss in small groups the following points of view:

- It is alright to be angry when you have good reasons.
- It is never right to be angry, but sometimes it is caused by something and I cannot help getting angry.

After discussion: List different causes for getting angry and different reasons and explain what you think the difference is between causes and reasons:

Our ideas