

# ANGRY FOR CHANGE: THE ETHICS OF POLITICIZING OUTRAGE

Despite its reputation as a less-than-desirable or even destructive emotion, numerous studies have found anger to be a driving force in the United States that has led the way for positive change. In 2011, University of Michigan political scientists found that anger played a “vital role” in engaging Americans politically, particularly by increasing motivation to participate in the electoral process. The study’s lead author, Nicholas Valentino, and his team of researchers found that from 1980 to 2004, angry citizens were more likely to partake in visible political acts such as wearing a campaign button, volunteering, attending a rally, etc., compared to those driven primarily by feelings like enthusiasm or anxiety (Valentino, 2011). Though this study was fairly recent, it may even be safe to say that anger has been deeply embedded in American culture since the country’s founding. From historical moments like the Boston Tea Party where colonists rebelled against unfair taxing, to traditional myths like the American Dream which encourages citizens to ‘fight’ for their ideal life, perhaps the U.S. “political system was [always] cleverly designed to maximize the beneficial effects of anger” (Duhigg, 2019). Yet, as contemporary politicians, pundits, activists, and everyday citizens continue to harness outrage as a force for social change, ethical considerations arise as to whether this practice should be sustained or laid to rest.



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For over two thousand years, some of the world’s greatest minds have debated the utility and morality of action through anger. In her work regarding “Anger, Virtue, and Oppression,” Macalster Bell discusses how most literature on feminist moral psychology and philosophy defends anger in four ways: (1) Calling out wrongdoing and oppression, (2) disvaluing the disvaluable, (3) motivating overall social change, and (4) providing new knowledge about the world (Bell, 2009). This final point, also known as the “direct epistemic value of anger,” refers to the idea that “those who experience anger have knowledge that the non-angry lack.” Based on how an individual’s anger is perceived by the world, one can gain a socially-induced understanding of their expected role in society (Bell, 2009). For example, during the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans were able to further validate their lack of equality when their calls for desegregation were met with extreme hostility and violence. Though their anger was largely expressed peacefully, the *perception* of that anger by white Americans resulted in excessive responses to crush disobedience and keep Black Americans in their place of inferior status, thereby further motivating their push for equality.

Numerous studies have found anger useful not only because it provides new knowledge, but also because it reflects greater levels of competency, powerfulness, and strong leadership capabilities (Duhigg, 2019). Besides simply calling attention to injustice, those experiencing oppression may find new power when they embrace their outrage. Especially when seeking to establish and gain greater respect, articulating anger



may be necessary for those addressing widespread injustices. African American writer and civil rights activist Audre Lorde illustrates this exact point in her piece “The Uses of Anger.” Here, she describes how her internal anger transformed into outward action as “a liberating and strengthening act” when her expressions of passionate rage forced others to listen and take her concerns about racism and sexism in America seriously (Lorde, 1981). Thus, Lorde’s anger actually provided an avenue to be heard as both an individual in pain and a leader with ideas on bettering the world around her.

Furthermore, political philosopher Amia Srinivasan contends that public anger can also invoke greater empathy that may develop into “more nuanced moral concepts” (Lepoutre, 2018). For example, during the California Labor Movement, farm worker and activist Cesar Chavez sought positive change for Latino grape pickers through the cultivation of a “righteous rage” – A form of anger that Srinivasan argues has the ability to produce a boost in morale for those experiencing oppression *and* those complacent as oppressors. By identifying as victims of the economic and social systems which unfairly harm immigrants, Chavez’s fellow farm workers not only transformed their fear into anger, motivating them toward rebellion over submission, but also encouraged previously silent Americans to stand in solidarity, as they now understood farmworkers’ anger as justified. Thus, anger proves to be a noble force in creating an unshakable sense of cohesion that can bring diverse populations together and pursue higher moral codes as a collective humanity.

On the other hand, while the use of outrage has proved powerful in American civic life, many philosophers known as “anger-pessimists” argue the emotion is more dangerous than it is useful, at both the individual level and throughout society as a whole. The Roman philosopher Seneca criticized anger as a “departure from sanity,” in which the uncontrollable nature of such a strong emotion would be unable to effectively focus on a particular target and thus become a threat to justice, even when the rage is righteous (Bell, 2018). Though he died around two-thousand years ago, Seneca’s theory regarding anger has certainly manifested in various moments of U.S. history. For example, some might argue that while President Harry Truman may have understandably been hurt and angry at Japan for attacking Pearl Harbor during World War II, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on his command was misguided – rather than seeking equal retribution on a Japanese military base to directly engage combatants, critics emphasize that Truman targeted civilian cities and killed millions of innocent people. Perhaps only anger could justify this specific way of showing the imperial forces America’s awesome new weapon. For these skeptics, the events of 1945 embody Seneca’s exact fears of threatening justice through rage-fueled actions.

Perhaps in a less extreme way, concerns of anger negatively affecting the U.S. have even continued into present day media ethics. As emotionally-driven news content has become increasingly popular and profitable, expressions of outrage in the mass media have likewise grown exponentially. In noticing this rising trend, two professors at Tufts University found “talk designed to provoke emotional responses in the audience (anger, fear or moral indignation, for instance) through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, inaccurate information and ad hominem attacks” in 100% of cable news programs watched by the nonpartisan research team (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). What worried the authors most, however, was that this finding “suggests that outrage poses a threat to some of our most vital democratic practices,” including a reduced tolerance for others or opposing viewpoints at the individual level, institutions pressured to avoid any form of compromise, the drowning out of more moderate or peaceful voices, and



ultimately, U.S. legislators who are heavily swayed to please the most outraged citizens “highly engaged in the political system” (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014).

If anger creates more problems than it solves, what should replace it? Martha Nussbaum, perhaps anger’s most prominent opponent, believes that rage in America should be replaced by attitudes of peace and civic love. According to Nussbaum, while anger may draw attention to a cause, the divisiveness and hostility that often accompanies intense rage overwhelmingly distracts and detracts from all pursuits of reconciliation necessary in seeking justice (Nussbaum, 2019). Acknowledging the power of peaceful change makers of the past, such as Nelson Mandela, Nussbaum argues that rage can exist in non-retributive forms that seek no vengeance. For example, she says Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the ideal leader to follow in that he kept “the good part of anger, the protest part” but had “to get people to abandon the destructive payback part in favor of an attitude of love, brotherhood, constructive work and a determination to work with others” (Nussbaum, 2019). Recognizing the potential of anger to drive both helpful and hurtful political change, thinkers like Nussbaum argue it is not the presence nor absence of rage in itself, but the *fittingness* of one’s anger that should be examined in determining the emotion’s ethical worth. To Aristotle, justified anger is that which is directed towards “the right thing toward the right people in the right way at the right time” (Bell, 2018). Nevertheless, this precise criteria that would define such appropriateness is also a matter of debate.

In the end, whether one speaks for or against the use of emotive messages in activating and promoting political change, wide-spread feelings of anger and distrust nonetheless continue to grow in significance in modern day America. Despite its effectiveness in motivating political action, uncertainty remains about how much heat or light emotions like anger bring into our democratic discourses.

## Discussion Questions:

1. What ethical issues does the debate of anger and democracy involve?
2. If anger can create meaningful change, does this mean the emotion is ethically justified or should be further encouraged? Why or why not?
3. How can a political figure or activist produce and encourage *ethical rage*?
4. What are the ethical responsibilities of politicians, pundits, activists, and the media in using outrage as a force for political motivation?
5. Would America’s democracy be better—or more just—with less anger? Explain how you would relate anger to our ideals of democratic community.

## Further Information

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