

Nussbaum, Martha C. *Anger and Forgiveness. Resentment, generosity, justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 315 p., \$ 24.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-19-933587-9

Nussbaum's *Anger and Forgiveness* is a critical examination of the moral and political value of the emotion of anger and of its substitute attitude of forgiveness. In her book, Nussbaum challenges the idea that anger is somehow constitutive for either one's self-respect or political justice. The idea that anger is a necessary requirement for asserting self-respect is widely accepted in the literature on forgiveness of the last 30 years. The initial presence of retributive emotions is assumed to be necessary for forgiveness to be a morally acceptable way of dealing with wrongdoing. Nussbaum tackles both the conception of anger as a primary moral condition and the assumption that forgiveness is the best way to overcome such justified anger.

After reframing the relationship between justice, anger and forgiveness in the first introductory chapter, she argues in the second chapter that the implicit ideas and beliefs that accompany anger are normatively problematic and involve errors. In explaining anger she distinguishes two lines of thought: the road of payback and the road of status. The road of payback involves the idea that the wrongdoer's suffering would somehow counterbalance the injury. But this road relies on irrational ideas of cosmic balance and thus engages in magical thinking. People cling to it since they are often unwilling to grieve or accept helplessness. They look for psychic satisfaction, which is often called "closure" (Nussbaum, 2016; 29). For Nussbaum this road is normatively problematic because it is irrational, involving false and incoherent beliefs (29). The second road, the road of status, isn't normatively problematic because of its false beliefs, but because it involves defective values. If one takes the injury to be about one's relative status, it does make sense to down-rank the offender in order to restore

one's own status-injury. This retaliatory reaction makes sense rationally and is no longer magical (26). The error involved in this road is to see everything that happens as about oneself and one's own rank. It is a narcissistic error. The obsession with one's relative status and rank impedes the pursuit of intrinsic goods and is ill suited to a society in which reciprocity and justice are important values (28-29). According to Nussbaum, the errors involved in the road of payback and the road of status can be avoided by taking a third road: The Transition. She argues that, noting the flaws of anger, a reasonable person shifts off the terrain of anger towards a more future-oriented approach in which social welfare is the central goal. Nussbaum notes that in order to move to The Transition, a borderline kind of anger could be involved and is thus called Transition-Anger. But Transition-Anger differs from retributive anger since it is not characterized by payback mechanisms and quickly focuses on future welfare strategies. Nussbaum admits that anger can have three possibly useful instrumental roles. It may serve as a signal, as motivation and as a deterrent. But she doesn't believe it to be necessary. She takes it to be rather useful as a wake-up call, and only legitimate if one is prepared to be rational and to move quickly to the Transition.

Nussbaum distinguishes this third road clearly from forgiveness that is often proclaimed (in recent times mostly by therapists) as the best way to deal with anger. But in analyzing its Judeo-Christian cultural history in the third chapter, Nussbaum comes to a different conclusion. According to her, forgiveness remains attached to the logic of anger and its retributive tendency and therefore also remains too much oriented to the past. This is especially the case with what she takes to be the classical account of forgiveness and calls transactional forgiveness. In both the Jewish and Christian tradition there exists a necessary transaction between repentance and confession on the one hand and forgiveness on the other. But in contrast to Christianity there is no explicit

abasement or humbling oneself in Judaism (64) and repentance pertains not to wishes or desires but to acts and omissions-to-act (63). In Jewish tradition there is also no room for generosity or spontaneity regarding forgiveness: it is a requirement of religious law and should not be freely given (65). In Christian transactional forgiveness there is a much greater accent on humility and lowness, as essential features of the human condition (71). The process of forgiveness is a practice of self-abasement, self-obliteration and shaming. As sins of the mind are considered to be the most fundamental, the confession tends to be endless. There is never a point at which one can be confident that one has truly confessed every hidden sin, as sins are extended to the inner domain of the uncontrollable and ungovernable (70). Nussbaum portrays it as a harsh inquisitorial process, demanding confession, weeping and a sense of one's lowness and essential worthlessness (73). She takes transactional forgiveness to be the temporary prize held out at the end of an intrusive process of self-denigration (72). She thus concludes that far from being an alternative to the two errors of anger, transactional forgiveness actually involves both. The payback error turns up in the idea that the confessor's pain somehow atones for pain inflicted. Equally, there is the error of narrow status-focus in which lowness and abasement compensate for a lowering or status-offense inflicted by the offender towards God (74). Nussbaum admits that there is a different model of forgiveness, the unconditional model, which is more prominent in the biblical texts than the transactional model. According to her it is mainly the organized church that has tended to alter the emphasis (75). But Nussbaum regards the unconditional type of forgiveness still as a waiving of angry emotions that involve a payback wish. The wish for payback is sometimes even channeled by the forgiveness process, as the person who purports to grant unconditional forgiveness may claim moral superiority (76). Moreover, Nussbaum holds that the unconditional type of forgiveness

remains backward-looking and not Transitional. It is merely focused on removing the impediment of the committed wrong to the future, but remains silent about constructing a positive future (76). Therefore Nussbaum draws attention to a different possibility that she assumes to be crucial in personal, social and political life. The alternative is also present in the Bible and departs slightly from unconditional forgiveness. It is an ethic of unconditional love and generosity. It departs from judgment, confession and contrition but also from the waiving of anger. Love is understood as a first and immediate response, not as a substitute of a payback wish (78). To illustrate this, Nussbaum refers to the parable of the Prodigal Son, which is, according to her, often mistakenly understood as an example of forgiveness (79). She argues that the father's reaction cannot be described as forgiveness, transactional or unconditional (80). The father makes no reference neither to forgiveness, nor to the son's repentance and not even to anger (81). There is only a type of intense, unconditional parental love, involving a strong bodily feeling, expressed in the words "I'm so happy that he is still alive" (81). It is a love that, rather than remaining rooted in the past, focuses on an uncertain future (81). It refers to a loss and to the joy of a rediscovery (79).

After having developed this theoretical framework in the first part of the book, Nussbaum turns over to a more detailed discussion of the role of anger and love in three domains of life, using vivid examples in literature, her own personal life and politics: the domain of intimate relationships, the relationships with acquaintances, colleges and strangers in the middle realm and thirdly, the political domain. Nussbaum divides the discussion on this last domain in a part on everyday justice and a part on revolutionary justice.

In this second half of the book in which she discusses the three domains of life, she also elaborates her view on the issues of self-respect and political justice and the

Stoic way to deal with anger. Concerning the Middle Realm, in which more casual interactions take place, she accepts the more general Stoic idea that no human relationship is worth getting upset about (97). She believes this attitude may help to reduce the childish anger that is mostly the result of status-anxiety and to turn more important matters over to the law. In the domain of intimate relationships things are different. She holds friendship, love and family relationships to be important goods that are worth caring about deeply. A Stoic attitude is not appropriate here. Those relationships all involve a great vulnerability requiring trust (94). Precisely because of this vulnerability harm is easily inflicted, which causes a profound helplessness. In those cases, anger gives the illusion of agency and control (95). As such, anger often becomes a substitute for grief and disappointment, which Nussbaum takes to be more appropriate reactions to harm (102). Most importantly, in discussing the intimate realm, Nussbaum tackles the idea that an angry reaction to harm is necessary to assert one's self-respect and to stand up for one's dignity. She explains that anger often precisely keeps one attached to the situation one is protesting against. In contrast to the more forward-looking stance of generosity and love, anger misses the power to turn the tables and to change habits and interactions. Instead of solving the problem, anger is often a way of cycling it round and round and becomes a kind of ritual in which both parties are locked in a posture of no-change (109). What about forgiveness? According to Nussbaum, forgiveness has the same effect of keeping someone attached to thinking about the committed wrongs instead of moving on with the constructive job (110). The supposed connection between anger and standing up for oneself has an even longer tradition in the political domain. It is believed that political justice requires angry emotions. Those emotions are taken to be necessary for our interactions as responsible agents and to express concern for the dignity and self-respect of the wronged. But in

referring to the *Oresteia*, Nussbaum argues that everyday political institutions should express forward-looking concern for social welfare and eschew the nonsensical backward-looking angry attitudes. In the beginning of her book, Nussbaum points at the double transformation that takes place in the *Oresteia*: the Furies are not only put into the cage of justice, they are also transformed into the Kindly Ones. Hence, she points out that everyday institutions must be fair and impartial, but also have kindly intent. They should not only embody a love of justice but also a spirit of generosity, going beyond strict legalism (172-173). According to her, the issue of trust is a constitutive element, not only of intimate relationships, but also of political communities. In the intimate sphere, it allows people to lay the important elements of one's flourishing to rest in another's hands, instead of simply relying on those others. Similarly, a society with decent institutions will only be stable if people do not simply rely on the existing institutions, but are also attached to its principles. This attachment brings vulnerability. Therefore, producing trust must be a continual concern of political societies, as it enables the willingness to put one's own good in the hands of others rather than engaging in self-protective and evasive action (173). It is with this view in mind that Nussbaum tackles a crucial issue in everyday justice: the social effectiveness of punishment and incarceration. For her, other more effective social welfare strategies should be given more weight. Moreover, she believes that proportional punishment as a means for balancing an illegitimately claimed liberty and thus as an instrument for restoring the social contract fails (184). It allows payback emotions to sneak in and thus precisely disturbs the human welfare the social contract is actually about (185-186). Her approach is therefore sympathetic to the restorative account of justice. On the other hand however, she objects the idea that victim's stories should have a more prominent role in Criminal Trials. According to her, this brings The Furies into the courtroom.

Victims need to be heard and the public acknowledgment of wrongs is crucial for establishing trust. But Victim Impact Statements and reintegrative community conferencing should have their place outside the courtroom (194-197). Moreover, instead of framing the restorative approach in terms of forgiveness, she puts a strong emphasis on the concept of mercy (205-210). After having discussed everyday justice in the political domain, Nussbaum ultimately turns over to the issue of revolutionary justice. She strongly contests the widespread idea that anger is necessary to fight injustice and to evoke change and revolution in a non-decent or corrupt political system. In analyzing the political non-angry revolution of three important figures, King, Gandhi and Mandela, Nussbaum argues that in all the three cases their attitude was far from passive or subversive. Instead, it involved an attitude of active concern and respect, which Nussbaum also calls love and generosity. This attitude took away the fear in which anger on both sides was rooted and that obstructed the road to change. It enabled “a form of protest that was calm, dignified, and strategic, rather than furtive, desperate and prone to retributive violence” (222). This process, as it took place in South-Africa with Mandela, is framed by Tutu as a process of forgiveness and translated in terms of Christian ideas of confession and contrition (237). However, Nussbaum points out how these terms were not part of Mandela’s view and were also never made use of in his rhetoric.

Nussbaum’s refutation of the prevailing idea in recent forgiveness literature that anger is required for self-respect and for fighting injustice is certainly one of the most compelling points of the book. But although Nussbaum gives a clear indication of how a reduction or avoidance of angry reactions could be initiated by reason (the reasonable person quickly recognizes the rational and moral flaws of a payback wish and concern

with status) and training (the self-reflective exercises of the Stoa and Mandela's daily meditation exercises), it is less clear how one should draw on unconditional love and generosity. Apparently, Nussbaum holds that an attitude of love and generosity can be cultivated by empathy and respect for the other. But how do we come to awake this love in the first place? She seems to assume it as an ever-present possibility, but how does she argue for that possibility? What enables the experience of love and generosity? Her example of the Prodigal Son is not really illuminating as it clearly involves unconditional *parental* love. Is it really possible to feel such unconditional love for the unknown political adversary that is held responsible for the way in which your life was ruined? And if so, how?

Moreover, the demarcation between unconditional forgiveness and unconditional love in Nussbaum's account seems to rely on only a very small difference concerning the orientation of their focus. She takes unconditional forgiveness to be more oriented at the past, whereas unconditional love focuses on constructing a productive future (76). But forgiveness' settlement with the past clearly happens for the sake of hope for the future. Nussbaum admits that an acknowledgment of past wrongs is a fundamental part of restoring trust in the future (178; 188). Consequently, it is unclear in what respect Nussbaum's proposal of a Transition, supported by unconditional love actually differs from unconditional forgiveness. She rightly argues at the end of her book that generosity does not reform the corrupt justice system, but rather infuses one's deliberations with a productive spirit (237). If we take unconditional forgiveness to discharge someone of the past and to pave the way for thinking about the future, in what sense does it differ then from the spirit of love and generosity? Nussbaum argues that unconditional forgiveness entails the risk of channeling the wish for payback since one may set oneself up as morally superior to another (76). She seems to assume that

forgiveness always implicitly tends to assert that payback was a legitimate aim (76), of which one then refrains. But it is unclear whether unconditional love can avoid the claim of moral superiority. At some point Nussbaum argues that the road of the Transition is morally superior (236). Although this is meant as a meta-ethical conclusion concerning the judgment of the involved moral values, it is not clear why someone who adopts an attitude of unconditional love and generosity would avoid the risk of experiencing personal moral superiority over the other.

Nussbaum also argues that the attitude of non-anger has a strategic superiority as well. It is the best way to win respect and friendship and eventually one may also win one's adversaries over and gain their cooperation (236). Perceived like this, the attitude of unconditional love and generosity seems to be a rather instrumental pose, aimed at social welfare, reconciliation and the achievement of one's political goals. Nussbaum also explicitly states that for Mandela the superiority of non-anger and a mere non-angry style of conduct could not be separated (236). His years in prison gave him the opportunity to introspect and discipline his entire personality in a Stoic way (236). The attitude of unconditional love and generosity Nussbaum praises thus seem primarily rooted in a strong internal discipline, oriented at individual or collective political goals and general social welfare. Consequently, one may question whether the attitude Nussbaum proclaims is as unconditional as she purports. Is the idea of an unconditional love, that is assumed to be of morally superior intrinsic value, even compatible with an instrumental strategy of non-anger aimed at an utilitarian goal of social welfare? Reasoning about social welfare always entails balancing the best strategies to reach that goal in the most efficient way. This kind of rational evaluation crucially differs from reasoning about what attitudes are preferable for persons to fulfill themselves as morally good persons. Of course, in Nussbaum's account, the social welfare-thought is strongly

attached to the idea that persons are only able to develop their capabilities as persons if they live in the best possible environment and have the best possible chances (173-174). Nevertheless, Nussbaum's account of politics is much more instrumental than for instance Hannah Arendt's account. In Arendt's account forgiveness enters the political domain as a means for persons to remain free as acting persons, whatever their future actions may be oriented at. The idea that freedom is dependent upon an inner transformation, as Gandhi believed (236), which enables to pursue one's goals crucially differs from Arendt's idea that freedom is an intrinsic good that can only be gained by our interactions with others. In Arendt's view, forgiving one another serves no determinate external goal of social welfare, but constantly guarantees the very possibility of free human action. In comparison to Nussbaum's account, Arendt's account has the advantage that it doesn't determine in advance what kind of human actions and moral values are liberated by the act of forgiveness. Forgiveness enables a continuous political freedom and spontaneity. Such a view is much more in line with the idea of plurality in a liberal political community than Nussbaum's utilitarian model, in which only the protection of a capability is an intrinsic political good (174). Consequently, the political reconciliation that is aimed at in Nussbaum's account also turns out to be more narrow and paternalistic than in Arendt's view.

Nussbaum's book is thus a wonderful examination of the rational flaws, moral and political problems of the emotion of anger, but as a profound elaboration of the alternative attitude of unconditional love and generosity some important questions remain unanswered. It remains unclear on what grounds Nussbaum argues for love and generosity as an unconditional attitude and in what sense it differs from the unconditional attitude involved in unconditional forgiveness. Moreover, it is questionable whether forgiveness is necessarily attached to the logic of anger, as

Nussbaum believes. From an Arendtian perspective, it seems possible to develop a concept of forgiveness that is not related to the emotion of anger, not even to the process of overcoming it, but merely to the gift of political freedom in political action.

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