Meeting 9: The Fittingness of Emotions

I. Srinivasan on Apt Anger and the Counterproductivity Critique

Srinivasan’s initial target is the counterproductivity critique of anger: Oppressed people should avoid being angry at the systemic injustices they face, because such anger has detrimental effects and ultimately worsens their situation.

One response to the counterproductivity critique questions its underlying empirical assumptions:

the productivity defense of anger: Oppressed people should be angry at their injustices, because such anger is useful, whether as a source of practical motivation, epistemic insight, or consequentialist virtue.

Srinivasan grants the counterproductivity critique its empirical assumptions but opposes it on other grounds. She insists that on occasions when anger is counterproductive, it can nonetheless be apt (or fitting).

She implicitly assumes that anger’s fittingness is determined by (the balance of) the reasons of the right kind.

And she implicitly assumes that right-kind reasons for/against being angry are “intrinsic reasons” whereas wrong-kind reasons for/against being angry are “instrumental reasons” (pp. 127–28).

Srinivasan embraces an alethic account of anger’s fittingness that is close to D’Arms & Jacobson’s, with some extra necessary conditions added in.

Srinivasan’s account of anger’s shape (p. 128): Agent A’s anger that $p$ presents that $p$ as a moral violation (or violation of some other type) of how things ought to be.

She denies that anger has additional contours to its shape because it necessarily involves (a) a desire to make the offending party suffer, (b) a belief that the offending party should suffer, or (c) a desire for revenge.

Srinivasan’s account of anger’s aptness (pp. 129–30): Agent A’s anger that $p$ is apt only if:

(i) that $p$ is a moral violation (or violation of some other type) of how things ought to be;

(ii) that $p$ is a (normative) reason to be angry that $p$ that A possesses (by knowing that $p$);

(iii) that $p$ is the (motivating) reason for which A is angry that $p$ (and in the right way); and

(iv) A’s anger that $p$ is proportional to the seriousness of the violation in clause i.

In fact, if we distinguish ex ante aptness (the analogue of propositional justification for belief) from ex post aptness (the analogue of doxastic justification), Srinivasan can be read as defending an account of anger’s ex ante aptness that exactly matches D’Arms & Jacobson’s (once we accept her account of anger’s shape):

It is (ex ante) apt for agent A to be angry-to-degree-$d$ that $p$ if and only if (i) that $p$ is a moral violation of how things ought to be, and (iv*) being angry-to-degree-$d$ that $p$ is proportional to the seriousness of the violation in clause i.

Why Srinivasan doesn’t include a proximity condition such as ‘(v) that $p$ is something to which A has an appropriate personal connection’: such a condition “can shade into troubling moral parochialism” (p. 130).

Let ‘conflict cases’ refer to cases in which an agent’s anger at some injustice would be both counterproductive and apt.

In these cases, prudence and/or morality speak against being angry.

But what speaks in favor of being angry? Srinivasan’s suggestion (p. 132): “getting angry is a means of affectively registering or appreciating the injustice of the world,” and such appreciation is intrinsically valuable, in the way that aesthetic appreciation is: someone whose actions and beliefs accord with all of her moral duties but fails to have such aesthetic or affective responses is missing out on something.
So in conflict cases, “victims of injustice must choose between making the world as it should be, and appreciating and marking it as it is” (p. 133).

This conflict is substantive: it is “a genuine normative conflict . . . involving competing and significant goods that often feel incomparable [i.e. on a par]” (ibid.). And the conflict is psychically painful.

The first lesson Srinivasan draws from the existence of conflict cases (p. 134):

Srinivasan’s first lesson: The counterproductivity critique is not successful unless its advocates can explain why prudential (and other instrumental) considerations must outweigh aptness considerations in conflict cases, thus making it the case that one ought, all things considered, not be angry.

But insofar as this seems to be Srinivasan’s main response to counterproductivity critics, I wonder whether they might think that they can meet this challenge. All they need to do is emphasize just how strong the moral and prudential costs of being angry would be.

Here Srinivasan’s analogy with aesthetic appreciation is potentially doing her more harm than good: even if aesthetic appreciation is intrinsically valuable, do we really want to say that if a given aesthetic experience were going to bring with it all the moral and prudential costs that supposedly come with a given bout of anger at injustice, then it would be better all things considered to have that aesthetic experience?

Srinivasan spends some time replying to another objection the counterproductivity critic might make:

• objection to the first lesson: “My claim isn’t that feeling anger is counterproductive; rather, it’s that expressing anger is counterproductive. So I can perfectly well grant that, in some or most conflict cases, feeling anger is both apt and all-things-considered what one should feel; my main claim is that, all things considered, one should not express anger in such situations.”

Srinivasan’s reply: This objection assumes pure disjunctivism about anger. “. . . anger is a mere feeling, and that feeling must be sharply distinguished from whatever behavior contingently accompanies it” (p. 137).

But the existence of “manifestation and recognition conditions [for anger] that are stable across human cultures” is “some reason to think that anger’s stereotypical expression is at least partly constitutive of anger” (p. 137). (So near-universal accompaniment indicates partial constitution? Why?)

Instead of pure disjunctivism, we can accept the following, and when we do, the objection lapses.

moderate functionalism about anger: Anger is at least partially constituted by its stereotypical expression, but which expressions those are can depend on an individual’s cultural training.

(Note that this thesis doesn’t actually give us a reply to the objection unless we assume that if (a) that \( p \) is a reason for me not to yell, and (b) my anger would be partially constituted by my yelling, then (c) that \( p \) is also a reason for me not to be angry.)

II. Srinivasan on Affective Injustice

Srinivasan draws a second lesson from the existence of conflict cases involving apt, counterproductive anger:

Srinivasan’s second lesson: Conflict cases give rise to affective injustice: “the injustice of having to negotiate between one’s apt emotional response to the injustice of one’s situation and one’s desire to better one’s situation” (p. 135).

Affective injustice is “a second-order injustice that is parasitic on first-order injustice, a sort of psychic tax that is often levied on victims of oppression” (ibid.).

We need to be careful, though, when we bandy about the word ‘injustice’. Not just any bad or unfortunate or difficult situation counts as ‘an injustice’. In virtue of what does this constitute injustice? (Is it enough that it’s a second-order harm where the first-order harm is itself an injustice?)
We also need to be careful about double-counting bad things. It would be a little odd to respond to your unfaithful lover by saying, “How dare you cheat on me! And, also, how dare you put me in a situation in which I must choose between either feeling apt, counterproductive anger at you or failing to register your transgression!” (So maybe we only get the extra second-order layer of harm when the first-order harm is both systematic and an injustice? But why?)

Srinivasan ends by asking the question, “What should we do when faced with the sorts of conflicts that give rise to affective injustice?”

She gives this question a Hegelian spin, making it become: “How can we change our contingent social and political arrangements to make there be no (or at least fewer) occasions in which victims of oppression must choose whether to feel apt, counterproductive anger?”

- **first option**: Try to make there be no (or fewer) occasions for apt anger, by removing the systematic injustices to which such anger is a response.

  Srinivasan sees this an overly naive option “in the actual context of our thoroughly non-ideal politics” (p. 140). (But why couldn’t it be pursued at the same time as the option she prefers?)

- **second option**: Try to make there be no (or fewer) occasions for counterproductive anger, by dissolving the false presumption that anger is the enemy of reason.

  This is Srinivasan’s preferred way of combating affective injustice. Her argument (p. 141): if apt anger involves the *appreciation* of certain facts, then it is a *cognitive good* like true belief or knowledge, and indeed a *non-fungible* good of that sort, so it is within the realm of the rational. (She seems to have slid here from considering whether anger is the enemy of *reason in general* to considering whether it is the enemy of *theoretical reason in particular.*

- **a third option that is, strictly speaking, also available**: Try to lessen the psychic costs of conflict cases by making people less aware they’re in them, or by training ourselves to respond without deliberation in a given way when in such situations, or by . . .

### III. Maguire against Reasons for Anger (and Other Emotions)

An assumption made by Srinivasan (and by most other authors we have read): not only can anger be fitting, but moreover there are reasons for and against being angry.

Maguire accepts the first of these claims but denies the second. More generally, he argues for:

Maguire’s thesis: There are no reasons for any affective attitudes, including all emotions and desires.

(Here he is invoking the affective vs. behavioral [or conative] vs. cognitive [or epistemic] distinction from empirical psychology.)

How Maguire often casts his proposal:

When a fact normatively supports an affective attitude, it does so by standing in the *fit-making relation* to that attitude, not by standing in the *reason relation* to that attitude.

Maguire focuses on three properties of reasons (by which he always means ‘normative pro tanto reason’):

1. Reasons are *non-strict* (or individually impotent): on their own they are not (and do not entail) directives about what to do, think, or feel. (But what, exactly, is a directive? An ‘ought’ fact? A deontic fact?)

2. Reasons are *contributory*: they play a distinctive “pro” or “con” role in a weighing explanation of an overall normative fact, such as [Agent A has sufficient reason to \(\phi\)] or [Agent A ought to \(\phi\)].

3. Reasons are *gradable*: some reasons are weightier (or stronger) than others. (Is this the same as reasons *themselves* being gradable? Or, better, the same as the reason relation *itself* being gradable?)
Maguire’s argument that fit-making facts are not contributory:

If fit-making facts were contributory, they would need to compete or combine with each other in weighing explanations of overall normative facts.

Maguire assumes the relevant overall normative fact is [Emotion E is (un)fitting].

Why fit-making facts don’t compete: any putative example of two fit-making facts competing with each other is really a case in which two compatible more-specific responses are both fitting, rather than one more-general response being either fitting or unfitting due to competing considerations.

ex. 1: When Maguire’s grandmother died, the fact that she had been suffering terribly from Alzheimer’s made relief at her passing fitting, whereas the fact that she “had great chat right up until the end” made sadness at her passing fitting.

ex. 2: If you didn’t get some promotion, but your friend Andrew did, the fact that you didn’t get the promotion makes being disappointed that you didn’t get the promotion fitting, and the fact that your friend got the promotion makes being pleased that your friend got the promotion fitting.

As Maguire puts it: “More fit-making facts just make a more complex set of reactions fitting” (p. 788).

But advocates of reasons for affective attitudes need not deny this (at least if we drop the ‘just’). The following is compatible with their position, given that being disappointed that you didn’t get the promotion and being pleased that your friend got the promotion aren’t alternatives to each other:

The fact that you didn’t get the promotion makes being disappointed that you didn’t get the promotion fitting.

The fact that your friend got the promotion makes being pleased that your friend got the promotion fitting.

The fact that your friend got the promotion and the fact that you didn’t get the promotion compete with each other with regard to whether being disappointed that your friend got the promotion and you didn’t is fitting.

(An analogy: whenever F₁ is a reason to believe P₀, and F₂ is a reason against believing P₀, there will almost always be other propositions P₁ and P₂ such that (i) F₁ is a reason to believe P₁, and F₂ is neither a reason for nor against believing P₁, and (ii) F₂ is a reason to believe P₂, and F₁ is neither a reason for nor against believing P₂. But this doesn’t, by itself, show that F₁ and F₂ don’t compete with regard to whether to believe P₀.)

Why fit-making facts don’t combine: any putative example of two fit-making facts combining with each other to support an emotion is either a case of the sort described above (for putative examples of competition) or a case in which the two facts together make a specific response fitting, not a case in which each fact on its own supports that specific response.

ex. 3: Suppose I am a knight about to face the terrible dragon. Each of its hands has 6 razor-sharp claws, its tail has 12 vicious spikes, its mouth has 144 jagged teeth, and it breathes fire. These considerations, all together, make it the case that fear-to-such-and-such-a-degree is fitting, but none on its own supports that emotion. (Or is it fear-to-such-and-such-a-degree on account of the dragon’s 12 claws, 12 spikes, 144 teeth, and ability to breathe fire that is fitting? What an oddly specific state to be the fitting response.)

Maguire’s argument that fit-making facts are strict (or individually potent):

In all of the examples above, each fit-making fact (or collection of facts that are together fit-making) fully grounds a distinct directive of the form [Emotion E is fitting] or [Emotion E* is unfitting].

“One . . . consideration . . . individually provides strict normative support for a distinct response. (These are local, rather than overall, strict facts.)” (p. 788). (A local normative fact is one that is not explained in part by a normative totality fact; see p. 784, n. 10.)
Maguire’s argument that fit-making facts are not gradable:

“Strictly speaking, it is a mistake to talk about some affective attitude’s being more fitting or less fitting. This is unobvious, . . . [because we usually overlook] the distinction between a gradable normative fact about an attitude and a normative fact about a gradable attitude” (p. 790).

So really Maguire’s claim here isn’t that fit-making facts themselves are not gradable (can individual facts, rather than properties or relations, even be gradable?), but rather that the relation of fit which they make the case isn’t gradable.

Compare: it isn’t really the case that a fact which stands in the reason relation to some attitude is itself gradable, but rather that the relation in which it so stands is gradable. (And this overlooks the issue of whether the relation/fact itself is gradable or whether a certain property of it—its weight or strength—is what is gradable.)

Putative cases of the fittingness relation being gradable Maguire thinks are really cases in which an on/off relation of fit holds with respect to a gradable attitude.

ex. 4: “. . . you learn that two individuals have died. One is a peaceful octogenarian, her most important projects behind her. The other is a talented, educated, motivated, and popular twenty-one-year old. . . . let’s just assume that the death of the youngster is more tragic than the death of the octogenarian” (p. 790).

Maguire holds that the first of these two claims is true, the other false:

a. [The death of the youngster is very tragic] makes it fitting to feel more sad about her death.

b. [The death of the youngster is very tragic] makes it more fitting to feel sad about her death.

Fittingness, like correctness, is not gradable and does not come in degrees, insists Maguire.

His analogy: suppose you ask two children for the product of 7 and 5, and one says 42, the other 33. Neither answer is “more correct.”

The first child likely used a better method (by multiplying 7 and 6, thus being only one multiple off), whereas the second child was numerically closer. We probably substitute in one of these standards depending on the context when we try to make sense of talk of one answer being “more correct” than another, but neither is, strictly speaking, a standard of more correctness.

Maguire offers a similar debunking explanation of our tendency to say one attitude is “more fitting” than another: we substitute in some contextually salient standard when we try to make sense of such talk, but this standard is not, strictly speaking, a standard of greater fittingness.

An objection to Maguire’s central thesis: sometimes we ask whether some overall affective attitude is fitting to a complex situation, and this question seems to be determined by all the relevant considerations on both sides.

(Note: it’s not clear to me that when we ask this we are asking whether a distinct type of attitude—“overall anger,” say—is fitting, or asking whether a normal attitude—anger, say—is overall fitting.)

Maguire’s reply (in essence; there are many more details):

Even if there are such things as overall affective attitudes, they do not have fittingness conditions: not every affective attitude can be fitting. (So are overall affective attitudes neither fitting nor unfitting, or are they always unfitting?)

Another sort of objection to Maguire’s central thesis: he allows that there are motivating reasons for affective attitudes (we feel emotions and have desires for reasons). But it is plausible that a given entity is the sort of thing for which there can be motivating reasons only if it is the sort of thing for which there can be normative reasons (no reasons for which we feel emotions without reasons to feel emotions).