

**Martha C. Nussbaum.** *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice.* Oxford University Press 2016. 336 pp. \$24.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199335879).

Martha Nussbaum's *Anger and Forgiveness* is an extended argument against anger. She wants her readers to clearly see 'the irrationality and stupidity of anger' (249), although she thinks there is a certain kind of anger—*Transition-Anger*—that is positive and constructive. She argues for unconditional forgiveness over conditional (transactional) forgiveness, but considers unconditional love a better response to wrongdoing than either form of forgiveness.

In chapter two, Nussbaum analyzes the concept of anger in the philosophical tradition and shows that the idea of payback—making the wrongdoer suffer—is essential to the concept, at least as it has been traditionally understood. For her, payback is not morally permissible, so anger is not permissible either. She claims that an angry person has three options with regards to her anger. First, she can go down the 'road of status,' focused on her own diminished status vis-à-vis the wrongdoer and seek to 'right the balance,' lowering the offender through retaliation. Nussbaum disapprovingly labels this option a 'narcissistic error' because it emphasizes one's ego and the desire of power over others. Second, she can go down the 'road of payback,' thinking that making the wrongdoer suffer is the way to make things better. Nussbaum thinks this option is irrational, labeling it 'magical thinking' because it is either based on a dubious notion of cosmic retribution or on assumptions that are clearly mistaken, such as the idea that inflicting suffering makes the world a better place. Third, she can follow the path of *Transition-Anger*, which is the term Nussbaum invents to describe her preferred option. *Transition-Anger* is an emotional response to a wrongdoing that, instead of dwelling on social status or payback, seeks to change things for the better. It is forward-looking. It says, 'This is outrageous, and we must commit ourselves to doing things differently' (37). Nussbaum says that *Transition-Anger* is exemplified in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I have a dream' speech in that he taps into widespread dissatisfaction and directs it toward a constructive solution in which payback is rejected and peace and justice are embraced.

In chapter three, Nussbaum explores three different types of responses to wrongdoing found in Judaism and Christianity: transactional forgiveness, unconditional forgiveness, and unconditional love and generosity. Transactional forgiveness is the term she gives to conditional forgiveness, the kind that requires the wrongdoer to satisfy specific requirements in order to be forgiven. This can be found in Judaism's doctrine of *teshuvah*, or repentance, where an observant Jew should confess sin and commit to avoiding wrongdoing in the future. Some strands of Christianity also teach the conditions of confession and repentance. Christian transactional forgiveness is couched in the context of an angry God and a day of wrath. The way to secure one's eternal destiny is to fulfil the necessary and sufficient conditions for divine forgiveness. Nussbaum thinks that transactional forgiveness commits the same two errors that anger does, going down the roads of payback and status. However, she thinks that the picture that emerges from the Gospels through the life of Jesus of Nazareth is that of unconditional forgiveness. She blames institutional Christianity for the fact that unconditional forgiveness is not a more prominent Christian teaching. She says, 'It is no surprise that a human institution seeking authority over human beings should prefer to attach conditions to the powerful offer of remission. Still, it is important to state that Jesus, at least in some passages, does not do so' (76). She comments, however, that even unconditional forgiveness has problems because it is still entangled with anger. She prefers the third type: unconditional love and generosity. She shows how this manifests in the Gospels in the story of the Prodigal Son, where a disobedient son is enthusiastically and unconditionally embraced by his father upon returning home. She comments: 'Love is the first response, not a substitute for a prior payback wish' (78).

In chapter four, Nussbaum explores anger and forgiveness in intimate relationships. These relationships involve people we love and trust and so, she says, should be characterized by love and generosity. Parental anger can easily fall into the payback or status errors, but a loving parent ought to avoid these and be motivated out of love for the child such as the father's love in the story of the Prodigal Son. She also considers anger in marriage. Many think that anger is the appropriate, self-respecting response to marital infidelity, but she disagrees, saying, 'It eats up the personality and makes the person quite unpleasant to be with. It impedes useful introspection. It becomes its own project, displacing or forestalling other useful projects. And importantly, it almost always makes the relationship with the other person worse' (125).

In chapter five, Nussbaum examines anger in the so-called 'Middle Realm,' the realm of everyday dealings with co-workers and strangers. The offenses in this realm include anything from minor annoyances like personal insults to major problems like sexual harassment. She suggests that Transition-Anger is the appropriate form of anger here, too, because garden-variety anger is destructive both to others and to oneself. She explores Seneca's thoughts about anger and summarizes his views in the following way: 'Even when [anger] concerns apparently weightier matters, it is extremely likely to be distorted with excessive concern with status and rank... Far from being helpful in promoting useful conduct, anger is a very unstable and unreliable motivator. Far from being pleasant, anger is extremely unpleasant and a cause of further unpleasantness. Far from being a good deterrent, anger makes people look childish, and childishness does not deter' (143). She applies Seneca's thoughts to several cases, which appear to be drawn from her own life. She shows that in these cases, anger is a waste of energy.

In chapter six, Nussbaum explores anger in the criminal justice system. Our current system of punishment is heavily based on retributivism, which is backward-looking and fueled by anger. She argues that Transition-Anger ought to be characteristic of our approach to punishment, as well. She says, 'If law is both rational and focused on the right things—on well-being rather than status—it will, having made that statement, then focus above all on the future, choosing strategies that promote both incapacitation and specific and general deterrence' (179). She says we ought to spend more energy trying to prevent crime before it occurs than punishing it after it occurs. She argues for a type of consequentialist theory of punishment that is constrained by considerations of human dignity.

In chapter seven, Nussbaum considers Transition-Anger in regards to revolutionary movements, arguing that it is the best sort of anger when society is in desperate need of change. She uses three examples—King, Gandhi, and Mandela—showing in each case that revolutionary change is possible without the usual kind of anger. She says that King, Gandhi, and Mandela 'show us the strategic superiority of non-anger: for it wins world respect and friendship, and it also eventually can win over the adversaries, enlisting their cooperation in nation-building' (236).

Many readers will be uncomfortable with Nussbaum's stand against transactional forgiveness. Some will think she takes too soft a position on crime and responsibility. Others will think, based on their religious beliefs, that transactional forgiveness is part of the fabric of the universe and cannot be ignored. Nussbaum's book might help those in the former group to see how conditional forgiveness can actually delay justice and hinder the process of healing. For example, it could have derailed the movement to reform the apartheid system in South Africa, which she discusses in chapter seven. Nussbaum's book might also encourage those in the latter group to reflect more deeply on their religious traditions and consider other interpretations of sacred texts. Nussbaum's brief discussion of the shooting at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina should speak to Christians in this category because the families of the victims forgave the shooter even though he

showed no signs of repentance (197). The following Sunday, the preacher at Mother Emanuel explained their actions in his [sermon](#). He said, 'I am reminded by some news media persons that wonder why the nine families all spoke of forgiveness and didn't have malice in their hearts. Well, on this Father's Day, you ought to know the nine families' daddy. If you knew the nine families' daddy, you would know how the children are behaving'. The families of the victims were following the teaching of Ephesians 5:1, which says to be imitators of God. This means to love one's enemies (Matthew 5:43-48) and forgive as God forgives (Ephesians 4:32). Nussbaum says that the meaning of the story of the Prodigal Son is that God loves us unconditionally. The father in the story is not angry, and there is no mention of forgiveness. There is only joy that his son has returned.

**Gregory L. Bock**, University of Texas, Tyler