Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*

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The primary thesis of Martha Nussbaum's new book is relatively straightforward: contrary to what she takes to be something like a consensus in contemporary moral reflection, anger, in most of its forms, is not rational, productive or morally necessary. The fact that anger seems natural, is a ubiquitous feature of human life, and may well have been an advantageous adaptation in our evolutionary history, simply means that dealing with anger, or unlearning our attachment to it, will be very difficult. Or, as Nussbaum puts it pithily towards the end of the book: 'It's hard not to be stupid' (p. 249). In a sense, then, the book is a plea for the necessity and importance of painful (and prolonged) rational self-cultivation. The model for this is Nelson Mandela's 25 years on Robben Island, engaged in self-reflection in the manner of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, challenging his own concern with

status and the desire for revenge, and learning to think of what must be done to ensure future justice, rather than what harm or humiliation must be inflicted to make up for past injustices (pp. 226-232).

On Nussbaum's account, the main problem with anger is the desire for payback, which she takes to be conceptually bound to anger (p. 22). Following the approach to emotions that she established in *Upheavals of Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), helpfully summarised in Appendix A here, anger can be understood—in a broad sense—as a form of recognition or judgement that something valuable has been harmed or threatened, unjustly. In this sense anger, like other emotions, should be seen not as an irrational force that threatens to overwhelm the rationality of the subject, but as a *form* of evaluative judgement (however mistaken the judgement may in fact be – see pp. 20-21). In the new book Nussbaum follows Aristotle—with some reservations—in seeing anger as something more than this recognition of loss or damage: anger has an aim, and the aim is retribution (pp. 17-18). In this sense, anger mirrors gratitude, which is equally forward-looking and reciprocal (pp. 46-7). But, for Nussbaum, the very idea of payback—harm inflicted on the object of anger that somehow 'answers' the pain one has experienced—is both deeply irrational (inflicting harm does not, in fact, right any wrongs or erase any harm done) and morally problematic (insofar as

it betrays a commitment to status that should itself be rejected). Anger, then, is rational in the sense that it is essentially a form of evaluative judgement, and yet irrational in the sense that its defining aim—retribution—is incoherent. So, on the one hand, even when it seems to be morally motivated, anger tends to be irrationally futile, because justice is *not* advanced through the retributive imposition of harm (as Nussbaum argues in detail in chapter six, in some ways the most illuminating chapter). On the other hand, the angry person *can* actually achieve their goal if this is simply the humiliation of the object; but in such cases, it is morally problematic (p. 26). As a result, the only rational and moral response to anger is to renounce altogether the wish for harm that seems to characterise it in most of its everyday forms. Instead, anger must be brought, with difficulty, to the point that Nussbaum calls 'the Transition', when one gives up preoccupation with payback, so as to turn one's energies to the future (pp. 28-35). At this point, something like anger remains, but it is a creative and determined energy, stripped of status-anxiety and the 'magic' of retributive thinking. This 'Transition-anger' is best expressed in the phrase: 'This is outrageous. Something must be done…' (pp. 35-37).

Crucially, for Nussbaum, 'forgiveness' is not the best word for this transition; in fact, she is deeply suspicious that the 'magical' retributive beliefs that she

spends much of the book challenging may be hard-wired into most forms of forgiving, such that the forgiving gesture itself relies upon the prior validity of the propriety of 'payback' (pp. 60-75). Worse still, even when forgiveness is affirmed in unconditional terms, there is the danger that it can be a subtle form of humiliation, or reassertion of status (p. 77). Nussbaum distinguishes three primary forms in which something like 'forgiveness' has been found in the Judeo-Christian heritage: transactional forgiveness; unconditional forgiveness; and the 'counter-strand' which she terms 'unconditional generosity'. This last strand, for Nussbaum, reflects the best of the tradition, but need not be understood in terms of 'forgiveness' at all, even though very often the texts through which it is expressed have been understood in these terms, e.g. the parable of the Prodigal Son, Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Nussbaum's comments on the parable express most clearly her reservations about associating such radical generosity the term 'forgiveness': 'Even to call it unconditional forgiveness, we have to imagine the father thinking about his resentment, and choosing freely to give it up'. But 'there is no such thought process in the story, and no reference, even, to anger'. That could have characterised 'a different father, more calculating and controlling. This father is taken over by love.' (p. 81).

The key issue, for Nussbaum, is the way in which teachings on forgiveness normalise and legitimise the retributory thoughts and feelings that one is held to let go when one 'forgives'. This is most obvious in 'transactional forgiveness', exemplified by the *Dias Irae*, where forgiveness is the culmination of a process of abasement, confession, contrition and penance, one that 'requires acknowledging that one is fundamentally low and of little worth and putting oneself, imaginatively into the midst of a spectacle of the most savage retribution' (p. 72). Such forgiveness involves both errors that Nussbaum identifies: the magical thinking that some kind of cosmic balance can be restored through pain, and the error of status-focus, which is magnified because the *only* injury that God could be vulnerable to is a status injury (p. 74). This is not the whole story, of course, because the Christian tradition in particular contains powerful instances of unconditional forgiveness, from Christ's prayer on the cross, to Paul's exhortations in Romans 12 (pp. 76-7). However, the latter also points up the dangers of this kind of language: 'unconditional' forgiveness appears both to presume the validity of the retribution that it foregoes, and to achieve a new kind of superiority in the form of 'graciousness' in the process (the influence of Nietzsche can be felt throughout chapter two). Beyond this, Nussbaum worries that unconditional forgiveness remains backward-looking, preoccupied with what could never be changed, rather than with what could be (pp. 77-8, 124-6). Although she allows

that there are no watertight distinctions between what she terms ‘unconditional forgiveness’ and ‘unconditional generosity’, the overall sense is that the problems she highlights are hard-wired into the language of forgiveness.

One of the most valuable points that Nussbaum makes throughout the book in different ways concerns vulnerability. Nussbaum’s challenge is, on the one hand, to put forward a vision of moral life in which rationality is absolutely central (such that the retributive element in anger is rejected primarily on rational grounds – ‘intuitions’ about the morality of the retributive idea are rejected out of hand as grounds for argument[pp. 185-6]), whilst, on the other, to distance herself from the rejection of human vulnerability that one finds in the Stoic condemnation of anger (Seneca is one of the most important argumentative partners in the book). Nussbaum has written persuasively on this point before, most notably in *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 2001). In some respects *Anger and Forgiveness* can be seen as an attempt to tread this fine line: to present human flourishing as necessarily relational, and so open to real damage by others, whilst affirming the need and possibility of radical transformation of the reactive emotions to which such vulnerability gives rise.

The middle chapters articulate this position through explorations of how anger is felt, and can be handled, in three spheres: intimate relationships; the 'middle realm' of everyday life (strangers with whom we share public spaces, work colleagues, customer service assistants, etc.); the political domain. Here Nussbaum persuasively shows that, even when anger is perfectly well-grounded (because it is a response to genuine betrayal, obnoxious behaviour or grievous criminal harm), this does not merit the conclusion that there is anything psychologically or morally valuable about anger's retributive aim. In the discussion of intimate relationships, this point is made in response to an emphasis in therapeutic self-help literature on the need to deal with anger through forgiveness. Here Nussbaum is quite persuasive, and her account likens a healthy process of responding to anger at intimate betrayal to the gradual shifting of attention that takes place in mourning: 'In short, if a person is dominated by angry and punitive thoughts, something needs to be done about that, and a struggle within the self needs to be fought. Is the quest for "forgiveness" a useful form of that struggle? It's like struggling with loss of faith by thinking about God all the time.' (p. 126). In other words, an emphasis on the need for 'forgiveness' may make a shift in attention—which is what is needed—more difficult. The *way* in which such a shift might be possible will be very different in different circumstances, so for Nussbaum the key question is what resources are available to help 'the

transition' to take place. One of the book's most the notable features is the sheer range of ways in which this question is explored: from very personal reflections on the way that frustration at other's failures or the irrationality of bureaucratic systems can be overcome, to detailed arguments about the rationale of legal punishment and the question of how revolutionary political changes become possible.

On balance, the discussion of forgiveness is less central to the argument of the book than that of anger. Nussbaum makes what I take to be a sound point about the vagueness that often surrounds the concept: 'one phenomenon we shall repeatedly observe is the tendency to use the word for whatever attitudes one thinks good in the management of anger. This tendency confuses, and also makes criticism difficult: "forgiving" is just an all-purpose term of commendation in the general neighbourhood of dealing with wrongdoing' (p. 59). Here she is not alone, and book-length philosophical accounts by Trudy Govier, Jeffrie Murphy, Charles Griswold, Margaret Holmgren and others have attempted to articulate much more precisely what 'forgiving' does and does not involve and how it relates to negative or retributive emotions (for example, in Griswold's case, by specifying under what conditions it is morally justifiable to maintain resentful feelings or morally acceptable to relinquish them). The aim in these accounts has tended to be either to

reconfigure a narrowed-down forgiveness in the face of the charge of moral weakness and to present a partial defence of resentment (Murphy and Griswold), or to defend the moral value of unconditional forgiveness by linking it to the affirmation of human dignity (Govier and Holmgren). Nussbaum's account is different, in that she tries to show that, when anger is understood properly and the possibility of 'the Transition' is glimpsed, 'forgiveness' will tend to seem beside the point. This is a well-argued and interesting position, and adds something new to the discussion within moral philosophy.

Overall, the book is deeply thought-provoking and persuasive, especially in its critique of too-hasty attempts to claim anger for the side of justice. In the case of forgiveness, however, it does not address an issue that, it seems to me, any consideration of the theological background of the concept should: the problem of justice and irreversibility. Anthony Bash has argued, in this journal, that divine forgiveness, in the Christian tradition, is thought possible only because God is believed to be able, miraculously and mysteriously, to address sin *itself* (not just the sinner). This means that divine forgiveness, healing and justice can extend to those instances that are, by definition beyond human reach: the lives that have been seriously and irreparably damaged, or destroyed; the perpetrators; and the shattered bonds between the two. Other theologians, in response to the discussion of

forgiveness in philosophical circles, have concluded something similar (L. Gregory Jones, John Milbank and Miroslav Volf, for example), and from a very different perspective, Vladimir Jankélévitch's provocative book *Le Pardon* suggests that under the name 'forgiveness' we feel the attempt to do the impossible: for this reason forgiveness appears to us as mystery and paradox, or 'madness'. These ideas, of course, may be thought to be straightforwardly irrational, and as such, not worthy of consideration, but the fact is that the Christian tradition has concluded otherwise, and Nussbaum's treatment of the various forms of forgiveness in the tradition does not seem to touch on this basic issue. This is a shame, for it is a problem directly connected to Nussbaum's underlying concern for vulnerability: how *can* we affirm the value of that which is most vulnerable, without being entirely determined by the reactive feelings to which such vulnerability gives rise?