

SKETCH FOR A PHENOMENOLOGY OF ANGER

Robert A. Reeves
University of New Mexico

Anger is a familiar emotion. We've all been angry. We're angry *about* things and we're angry *with* people. Often it disturbs us that we take out our anger *about* things on people we aren't angry *with*. I will attempt here to classify the kinds of anger, uncover the roots of anger and seek out the possible remedies for anger that are available to us. My procedure will be phenomenological (in a neutral, untechnical sense): I will not deliberately go beyond those facets of anger which present themselves to us in a daily way, relying on facts accessible to anyone who's taken notice of the problem. Obviously it is a problem, and not just philosophically. "Righteous indignation" aside, anger is behind such things as wars, the situation of battered women, the prevalence of divorce, the disruption of friendship and trust between individuals; where it can't be said to be the sole cause of these things it is at least an outstanding necessary condition. Any analysis that can illuminate this important source of human discord will be a means, however awkward, to diminish its power.

When do we say that someone is angry? There is the obvious case where someone "blows up," "loses his temper," "gets angry." The raised voice, the red face, the erratic movements, the intransigent demands of someone fitting these descriptions are universally recognizable. This is an episodic condition. We think of it as an event in the person's life, a happening, lasting for a definite time, usually not long. On the other hand, we speak of (or used to speak of) "angry young men"--using anger in the sense of "smoldering" anger, a long-term disposition. We say someone "has a lot of anger" and often attach some adjective like "bottled-up" or "repressed." The "angry" person in this sense is *not* prone to episodic fits of anger: his anger is evident precisely in that it is never expressed, or expressed in ways that aren't at first blush interpreted, whether by the angry person or observers, as anger. We say of one that he "has a bad temper," i.e. is liable to sudden outbursts of rage. We say of another that he "has an angry temperament," i.e. *continually* exhibits indirectly-expressed anger in his behavior, a tendency to glumness or sarcasm for example. A special case, but not for that reason uncommon, seems to overlap these two main categories: that of sudden-overflowing anger, anger

long unvoiced or repressed which reveals itself in excessive, often uncharacteristic violence. If this is indeed an overlapping case, it will be best treated after the others. In general, then, we can say there are two main conditions, one dispositional and the other not, to which the term "anger" is ordinarily applied.

With due deference to Wittgenstein, I don't want to get involved in the issue whether a phenomenology of anger ought to look for shared characteristics in every condition labelled "angry," or to settle for a "family resemblance" between them. We've distinguished two categories easily identifiable by everyone. The question I want to ask is only, "What shows itself in both these categories?" If it is the same phenomenon that shows itself, or if it turns out that ordinary language is unjustified in applying the same word to both conditions, the essential problem remains: how are we to understand and deal with anger? If it so happens that anger is divisible into two separate phenomena, perhaps even two distinct emotions, the question of how to understand and deal with anger simply becomes more complex.

Let me refer to episodic anger as "anger (I)" and dispositional (hidden) anger as "anger (II)." Anger (I) and anger (II) have several fairly intuitive differences and similarities. As to the differences, a striking but relatively unimportant one is the difference in their physical manifestations. The behavior associated with anger (II) may not, as we've remarked already, resemble "angry" behavior at all--habitual snideness or cynicism is not in itself interpreted as angry but at most as evidence of anger. Where the behavior is directly identifiable (and this happens only where it's most intense), it is seen as evidence of a "deeper-seated" anger than the blustering behavior of anger (I). Thus Descartes says the man whose face pales is more dangerous than the one whose face blushes, because he "holds himself in and makes up his mind to a greater vengeance." Here Descartes is not only hinting at the distinction between anger (I) and anger (II) but indicating a more important difference between them than their physical concomitants.

That difference lies in the fact that anger (II) can endure in the face of reflection, while anger (I) cannot. As is well known, a person who is angry in the sense of anger (I), when made to examine or explain his anger, will cease being angry; but one prey to unexpressed or indirectly-expressed anger can meditate on its causes and consequences without ceasing to feel it--indeed without admitting that that's what he feels. It would seem then that anger (I) is more tightly bound up with the will, the desire to *be* angry, than anger (II). Anger (II), not being an episodic state, is immune to any criticism levelled upon such a state. It can ask itself not only "Why am I angry?" but "Am I angry?" and still persist unchanged.

This may be part of the reason why it's much easier to pretend

you're angry when you're not than to pretend you're not angry when you are. Anger (I) is easy to feign and almost impossible to disguise. The question "How would I behave if I weren't angry?" *could* be asked from the standpoint of anger (II), but proceeding to behave in those ways would at most only result in not exhibiting the symptoms of anger (I). And what would it *mean* to pretend you weren't angry in the sense of anger (II)? Since there aren't any universal symptoms of this kind of anger, it would only mean pretending to *yourself* that you weren't angry. This, however, is one of the traits of anger (II) anyway, so the criterion of knowledge that you're pretending, which I take to be a necessary condition of pretending, would be absent.

These differences granted, there are also strong similarities between the two types of anger. We associate anger with certain attitudes which we take to be present even if the angry person doesn't show his anger. To say that someone is angry, whether this is an observation or a deduction, is to say we believe him to be under the sway of attitudes more or less deliberately assumed. The angry person is first of all *hostile* toward some specific person or thing; we say he is angry "with" or "at" this object of hostility even if it isn't clear to us (or him) what he's angry "about." Second, the angry person is *unreasonable*, not only in the factual sense that he is resistant to argument but in the definitional sense of thinking immediately and undiscursively. Third, he is to some extent *intolerant* of attempts to remove his anger. We speak of "righteous indignation" as a case where a person is justifiably angry; in phenomenological terms this "justification" reduces to a smaller degree of intolerance: the "righteously" angry person is more easily persuaded to end his anger. But it is hard to imagine a case of "righteous" anger (II): since even the existence of this type of anger is only tentatively deduced, a decision that one had the *right* to be angry (II) would be all the more tentative.

Those three attitudes, then, seem to be typical of both anger (I) and anger (II) though in differing degrees. However, we must avoid interpreting the attitudes in a way which permits us to ignore the differences between the two types. If hostility, for instance, means that the recipient of one's anger is an object of perceived wrongdoing, and intolerance means a feeling of perceived threat to oneself, it will be impossible to say that the angry (II) person always has these attitudes--for he often doesn't know or admit he's angry, so perceives no wrongdoing or threat. Certain cases of anger (I): I'm thinking of those I referred to as "sudden-explosive" anger, can also occur without perception of wrongdoing or threat: a completely harmless and irrelevant remark can trigger them.

It is also important that we not overemphasize the factor of the person's will or desire to be angry. The angry person may be intolerant of giving up his anger, but as we pointed out, the angry

(II) person is much less capable of giving up his anger of his own volition. To say that the three attitudes are "deliberately" assumed does *not* mean that the person is conscious of choosing them or even capable of choosing them--just that he is to some extent unwilling to abandon them.

Now, if we can locate a single attitude which could cause one to adopt the attitudes associated with anger, we will have arrived at the likely source of anger in the human personality. Various candidates have been offered for this source, from chemical imbalance (which would deny any intentional aspect to anger) to fear for one's security (which would leave out all the cases where we're angry "for others"). We want to find an attitude which can be described equally well in physical and mental categories, on the unconscious as well as on the conscious level.

I suggest that *frustration* is such an attitude. One need not feel frustrated to be frustrated--as when one is frustrated in entering a building because the door is locked; and one may be frustrated without becoming angry. In purely formal terms, frustration is the state of being redirected: one sets out in a certain direction and is turned back before reaching one's goal. Being frustrated will matter to a person, I think, just insofar as he identifies himself (his interests, needs, values and self-image) with the direction taken. When being frustrated matters, anger results. To be thwarted in taking a direction one feels is essential to one's identity in the broadest sense, one feels *misdirected*, thrown back upon oneself: it is as if one's personal boundaries have been trespassed and one is no longer sure where "himself" stops and the "outside" begins. One acts to reassert the former boundaries. The farthest one can be "thrown back" is of course to one's body, the most definite limit between himself and the outside he knows. This is why anger is most easily vented on people closest to one in a literal sense, most familiar with one's body, though they may not actually be menacing. It is also why sociopaths, people with a complete lack of the sense of any boundaries to what they can do, can commit violent acts without anger, in a calm or even cheerful frame of mind.

"Anger for others" might seem to be a counterexample to this analysis too, but when one is angry, for instance, over an injury done to one's wife, one's personal space has in fact been disrupted because someone who shares that space has been threatened. Again, if I am angry with Hitler for his treatment of the Jews, it is because I personally resent living in a world where such things take place, so my chosen direction has again been interfered with. (I'm very unsure, in any case, how angry I can actually *be* with Hitler.)

Anger (I) and anger (II), if I am correct, are thus at least genetically connected: they can both be explained on the basis of frustration that matters. They are additionally connected by the

object of hostility: the people one is most likely to be angry "at" are the same for both types--those in familiar proximity. So it appears clear we aren't dealing with two separate emotions. Their distinctness comes from the fact that they are angry *about* different kinds of frustration. Anger (I) is angry about an immediately-experienced frustration from going in a currently-important direction (the television burns out in the middle of the Superbowl). Anger (II) is angry about the factors which have frustrated long-term or "deeper-seated" tendencies (if my father hadn't drunk our money away I might've gone to college). As one is often unaware of what the factors were that frustrated one's long-term goals, one is often unaware of being angry (II). (But I *love* my father!)

Sudden-explosive anger seems to be an instance of anger (I) in which the intensity of anger (II) becomes an immediate frustrating factor; but here, more than in the other sorts, the factors of physical compulsion and the breakdown of physical controls (e.g. through alcohol) come into play. This kind of anger is beginning to be treated more as an illness and less as something involving responsibility. I won't attempt to draw the lines in a paper of this length.

Can we say anything about the possible remedies for anger? Obviously, if the awareness of personal limits is removed one will never be frustrated, but this also produces unhealthy personality types who can't be relied upon to act in anyone's interest (since the distinction between themselves and "anyone" is meaningless to them). A more fruitful plan is perhaps to *strengthen* the awareness of one's limits. We admit to ourselves that we are finite creatures, we cannot have everything we want, we make mistakes about what we do want, our choice of direction in life is always provisional, and not only upon whether we succeed or fail, and we are still ourselves in the face of frustration--up till the time when we are frustrated (and we will be) of our goal of going on living. To the degree that we realize our power to redirect and redefine ourselves by the adoption of attitudes and habits and the exploitation of our talents, to that degree do we become independent of previous images of ourselves and our needs. The readiness and willingness to change can eliminate anger before it begins.