

# A NOTE ON ANGER\*

It is a tiresome truth of women's experience that our anger is generally not well-received. Men (and sometimes women) ignore it, see it as our being "upset" or "hysterical," or see it as craziness. Attention is turned not to what we are angry about but to the project of calming us down and to the topic of our "mental stability." It is as common as dirty socks. Every woman knows it, has lived it. Men receive women's anger as incongruous and irrational and in many cases they are simply unable to improvise any way to cope with it: they strike out physically, slapping or beating the angry woman, or they retreat, covering their incompetence with something like "I can't deal with you when you're like this."<sup>1</sup>

I don't read men's misreading of women's anger and their inability to respond appropriately to it as wholly or always willful and malicious, as always simply a pretense put up just to frustrate the anger and avoid acting on the matter the anger is about. It has often not felt to me like simple perversity in the situations I have experienced, and this judgment is supported also by my experience on the other side of oppres-

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\* I am indebted to C.S. for valuable criticism of earlier drafts of this essay.

sion's barriers, as a white woman encountering the anger of women of color. The anger is in fact sane and sound, but its *seeming* crazy and bizarre to the receiver is also real. In many situations men really do experience women's anger as some sort of unnatural and baffling event that has no intelligible place in the causal order unless the man can see the woman as "out of order."

Though it is correct to deplore and denounce this odd combination of ignorance and incompetence as sexist (or racist), that is neither intellectually nor politically sufficient. We can, if we will, learn something from this phenomenon.

Anger seems to be a reaction to being thwarted, frustrated or harmed. It comes when your momentum is dispersed or deflected. You are going along living your life, tending your business, pursuing your project, and then you are stopped; a bureaucratic tangle, someone's unwillingness to lend reasonable assistance, the breakdown of a car. The energy that was moving you along your course cannot flow; it is blocked, it becomes turbulent. In some cases you feel frustrated, irritated, disoriented or depressed; in some cases you become angry.

The frustrating situations which generate anger, as opposed to those which merely make you displeased or depressed, are those in which you see yourself not simply as obstructed or hindered, but as wronged. You become angry when you see the obstruction or hindrance as unjust or unfair, or when you see it as due to someone's malice or inexcusable incompetence. Most of us, if we are kept from going to the concert or the ball game by the weather, are disappointed, maybe grouchy, perhaps depressed; but if we are kept from going because our partner lost the tickets, we are more likely to be angry. If a person does shake a fist at the sky in anger about the weather, she is either ridiculous or she is pretending or even believing that there is some sort of agent up there whose

responsibility in this matter makes the snowstorm a wrong rather than a misfortune. Anger implies not only that the inhibition or obstruction was distressing, but that it was an offense.

To be or be perceived as wronged, you have to be or be perceived as right. Anger is always righteous. To be angry you have to have some sense of the rightness or propriety of your position and your interest in whatever has been hindered, interfered with or harmed, and anger implies a claim to such rightness or propriety. When you are not "right" or "in the right," anger is inappropriate, or impossible.\* Suppose that in the midst of cooking something you realize you need mushrooms. You've seen an ad in the paper that says a particular store has a special on mushrooms. You dash off to that store but find that they don't have any mushrooms, at any price. You may be angry. But if it turns out that you misremembered the ad, and it was actually another store's ad, that will take the wind out of your sails. If you are not right in your expectation, you are not wronged in its disappointment.

There are many kinds and senses of presence, propriety, position and place, many kinds of "being in the right." I do not mean here to speak just of "rights" in some strict political or legal sense. I mean to speak of something which is the logical mate of respect.<sup>2</sup>

When a person is harmlessly about her business, pursuing her interests as she sees fit, employing means and using resources which are properly hers to employ, respect dictates

\* Some people are surely careless and irresponsible in their anger and don't pay much attention to whether they are right or not, not caring much about whether their anger is appropriate or not. But I suspect that such people think they are right to get their way whether or not they are the right person, in the right circumstance, with the right expectations, etc.

that you permit her actions, and the objects and conditions these require, to be under her control or to happen as felicitously as the fates will allow. If she is engaged in building bookshelves, respect dictates that you not saunter up and take the hammer without bothering to ask her if she's finished with it (unless, of course, you need it to defend both your lives by braining a dangerous intruder). Whether or not the hammer is, in a legal sense, her property, it is in her domain and associated with her by the web of connections her purposive behavior weaves. If you walk off with it (in the absence of some overriding factor like the intruder), your act implies that you do not acknowledge that it is "rightful" that the hammer be in her domain: for instance, that you think she does not have a right to use it because she stole it; or she ought not be making bookshelves on company time; or she's botched it up so badly she shouldn't bother continuing anyway; or you simply don't think she or her project is worth minimal recognition and consideration. If you think any of these things, then there is something about her and/or her project which you are not respecting.

The domain one acknowledges in respecting a person, a project or act is not simply physical, encompassing physical objects. Acknowledgement of right may dictate refraining from making conversation which would distract a person, or it might dictate encouraging her or not discouraging her. Her attention, her confidence, her sense of well-being, her freedom to speak her mind, her access to knowledge and skills, are all matters within her domain.

Anger implies a claim to domain—a claim that one is a being whose purposes and activities require and create a web of objects, spaces, attitudes and interests that is worthy of respect, and that the topic of this anger is a matter rightly within that web. You walk off with my hammer and I angrily demand that you bring it back. Implicitly, I claim that my project is worthy, that I am within my rights to be doing it, that the web of connections it weaves rightly encompasses that hammer. Or you wantonly criticize my work, without

invitation, and I angrily tell you to mind your own business. Implicitly, I claim the right to do this work, the propriety of relying only on my own judgment if I wish, and the sanctity of whatever confidence I have in my abilities and the success of the project. There is something I demand that you respect.\*

Being angry is usefully understood on analogy with acts the philosopher J.L. Austin called "speech acts."<sup>3</sup> When you say something like "I promise" or "I apologize," you do not just assert or report something about yourself, you also re-orient yourself and another person to each other. You become committed, another comes to count on you; you undo a debt, an imbalance of good and ill will is repaired. This alteration of relations requires and involves a certain cooperation from the second party. You can say, "I promise I'll write you," but also the other must take herself to be someone to whom you are obligated and must count on your doing what you said you'd do. If the second party's "uptake" is not forthcoming, the relation between the two does not take the intended shape, and the "promise" collapses. Your speech just hangs there—embarrassed, unconsummated.

Being angry at someone is somewhat like a speech act in that it has a certain conventional force whereby it sets people up in a certain sort of orientation to each other; and like a speech act, it cannot "come off" if it does not get uptake.

One woman told of this experience: She had gone to some trouble to adjust the carburetor on her car and shortly thereafter an attendant at a gas station started monkeying with it.

\* I use examples of one person angry at one other person about one thing because they are simple paradigms. Of course one can get angry at oneself, or at many others, and a group can be angry. The picture presented here can be extended to these sorts of cases, but it is not my purpose to do that in this sketch.

She was dismayed and sharply told him to stop.\* He became very agitated and yelled at her, calling her a crazy bitch.

Other responses might have been forthcoming from the attendant. He might have demanded to know why he shouldn't touch it; he might have defensively claimed he was only looking at it and wasn't going to touch it; he might have tried to persuade her that it was indeed the right thing to do, to try changing its adjustment. All of these responses take the anger on by directly responding to the claims implicit in it: accepting them or challenging them, accepting or defending himself against the implicit charge or accusation. He did not meet the anger and its claims. He moved to a different level. What he did was irrelevant. He changed the subject—from the matter of his actions and the carburetor to the matter of her character and sanity. He did not give her anger uptake.

Deprived of uptake, the woman's anger is left as just a burst of expression of individual feeling. As a social act, an act of communication, it just doesn't happen. It is, as Austin would have said, "non-played."

The sort of uncooperativeness displayed by the gas station attendant is a rejection of anger's claims. It rejects them not simply as arguably false or unjustified, but as claims so wildly and obviously off the mark as to confound response. It rejects them as claims only someone in an abnormal state—hysterical or mad—could make; as implying accusations so obviously fantastic that they could be motivated only by a fevered and indiscriminate malice. The claimant can only be a crazy bitch.

One's anger presupposes certain things about what sort of being one is and what sorts of relations are possible between

\* For those who do not know about carburetors: This organ of the gasoline engine mixes gasoline and air (oxygen) in just the right proportions to enable the gasoline to ignite and to burn efficiently. Getting it properly adjusted is a delicate and often frustrating job, and its maladjustment causes all sorts of trouble. When you've got it right, you don't touch it; and even when you suspect it is not right, it is the last thing you experiment with in your diagnostic efforts.

oneself and another. The patterns of claims someone can and cannot countenance, of the acts one can and cannot give uptake to, is a partial map of one's world view. It reveals something of one's understanding of the essential natures and relations of things.

You say the movie is at 7:30 and I disagree, saying it is at 7:00. I am puzzled by your getting it wrong, since I think you must have phoned the theater, just as I did. But we are still in the same world of belief and discourse. Another day, you say you are the messiah and I should worship you. This situation is rather different. I don't know how to argue with you about that (assuming I am satisfied that we mean the same things by these words). I have certain understandings of what a messiah would be if there were one, of what worship is, and of the circumstances under which worship might be appropriate. These are enmeshed far more deeply in my basic understanding of the world than is my confidence in the health of any one particular human being I may encounter. As I understand this world, human individuals run amok far more often than messiahs appear, if they ever do. If I am convinced that you are serious, I can only suppose there is, in some sense, something wrong with you.

To get angry is to claim implicitly that one is a certain sort of being, a being which can (and in this case does) stand in a certain relation and position *a propos* the being one is angry at. One claims that one is in certain ways and dimensions *respectable*. One makes claims upon respect. For any woman to presuppose any such thing of herself is at best potentially problematic and at worst incomprehensible in the world of male-supremacy where women are Women and men are Men. A man's concept of Woman and of Man, and his understanding of what sorts of relations and connections are possible between beings of these sorts, to a great extent determine the range of his capacity to comprehend these claims, and hence of his capacity to give uptake to women's anger.

In some cases women can get angry without much risk of being thought crazy, hushed up or beaten up. Usually, women can get angry at children, or in behalf of children. A woman may get away with being angry at some oaf who slammed a door and thus ruined her soufflé, or at another who disarranged the pages of a report she has typed and is collating. On the other hand, she is not likely to get away with being angry at the oaf who maladjusts her carburetor. The pattern is obvious. Kids, homemaking and secretarial service belong to women; cars belong to men. So long as a woman is operating squarely within a realm which is generally recognized as a woman's realm, labeled as such by stereotypes of women and of certain activities, her anger will quite likely be tolerated, at least not thought crazy. It seems to me that in general, if a woman's purposive behavior and the web of interests and authority it weaves can be seen as falling within the place and functions of Mother/Caretaker/Conserver/Helpmate, her claim to authority, interest, presence and place will make sense to relevant others. It is likely to accord well enough with their concept of Woman.\*

We are indebted to women of the nineteenth century for extending the range of tolerance of women's anger. The struggles and victories of abolitionists, suffragists, prohibitionists and other reformers made it relatively safe for women to get angry, publicly, in behalf of great moral causes. Generally speaking, women can get angry about such things as nuclear energy and arms, pollution, war, starving children or drunken driving. (This does not mean, still, that we are so likely to be taken very seriously. Our anger is likely to be perceived as "understandable, but ill-informed.")

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\* Often a woman's anger, even when she is within this range of social places, will not be taken particularly seriously, but that is because all that belongs in this range of social places is likely to be thought trivial. Not being taken seriously is not quite the same as being thought mad. Still, if the woman insists persistently enough on her anger being taken seriously, she may begin to seem mad, for she will seem to have her values all mixed up and distorted.

This extension, hard won as it was, represents only a relatively small shift in the concept of Woman. Historically and logically it was an extension of our "right" to mother. We can be relatively easily perceived as mothers to our nations or to our peoples (which in some cases are imaged in dominant mythology as childlike), or to the species. By virtue of this, we can be understood if we claim legitimate interest and some degree of authority in the matter of their protection and preservation.\* Also, as an extension of mothering into matters of public welfare, it still permits women's anger only *in behalf of others*, not in our own behalves.

A woman's anger on another's behalf is far more likely to get uptake, and even acceptance, than her anger in her own behalf. This is why it is easier for a woman to be passionately anti-abortion than passionately "pro-choice." One is within the bounds of concepts of Woman which are more widely shared and more warmly sanctioned when one's passion is in defense of others (especially if the others can plausibly be presented as "innocent" and as "children" or "babies"). For the same sorts of reasons, women's claims to some sort of propriety and authority in our interest in "peace" and "the survival of humanity" are generally more credible in this culture than women's claims to a like propriety and authority in our interests in our own skins, genitals or wombs. Hence it is safer to get angry about nuclear power than about one's own rape; the former is more likely to be intelligible, to get uptake.

To expand the scope of one's intelligible anger is to change one's place in the universe, to change another's concept of what one is, to become something different in that social and collective scheme which determines the limits of the intelligible. Nineteenth century women succeeded in expanding the

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\* I have considerable respect for mothering and believe that the attitudes and practices of good mothering can make a very valuable contribution to the conduct of things in the sphere of public politics and morality. Things will have changed more, and more for the better, when we can mother as appropriate without being seen as Mothers, and can, as women, do a great deal else as well.

concept of Woman, that is, really, the concept of Mother, to the point where a woman could express anger in a public matter and be found intelligible. Contemporary feminists have taken on the more radical project of expanding the concept of Woman to the point where a woman can assert herself and make demands upon respect, in public or private, simply in her own behalf. Not, that is, as any kind or degree of Mother, but simply as a being, herself, worthy of respect.

Not all anger is justified, and as long as we have concepts of ourselves, others and the relations amongst us, some anger will sometimes be unintelligible. And of course others' concepts of us are not always objectionable. Different men, and indeed different women, differ in detail in what concept they have of Woman, and what they would or could perceive as "a woman going about her business, pursuing her interests, by means and using resources which are properly hers to employ." Some men, for instance, think all affairs pertaining to birth control are entirely "female" concerns and virtue requires of men who engage sexually with women only that they let women take care of it. But also, some husbands think a wife's fecundity is entirely the husband's to control and manage. The first sort of man would be baffled by a woman's anger at his not taking any responsibility; the second sort would be baffled by his wife's anger at his getting her pregnant. In both cases, the discovery of what baffles is the discovery of some aspect of what the man thinks a woman is.

No two women live, in a daily and detailed way, in identical spaces created by identical ranges of concepts of Woman. Some of us, indeed, have consciously constructed situations for ourselves in which we will be shaped by chosen and wholesome concepts of Woman. For better or for worse though, in each of our lives, others' concepts of us are revealed by the limits of the intelligibility of our anger. Anger can be an in-

strument of cartography. By determining where, with whom, about what and in what circumstances one can get angry and get uptake, one can map others' concepts of who and what one is.

One woman took this thought home with her and tried it out. She walked about the apartment she shared, not unhappily, with her young husband, testing in imagination for the viability of her anger—in what situations it would “work,” would get uptake. She discovered the pattern was very simple and clear. It went with the floor plan. She could get angry quite freely in the kitchen and somewhat less freely and about a more limited range of things in the living room. She could not get angry in the bedroom.

Anger. Domain. Respect.

## NOTES

1. See “Getting Angry,” by Susi Kaplow, and “Men and Violence,” a transcript of a taped consciousness-raising session, in *Radical Feminism*, edited by Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine and Anita Rapone (Quadrangle, New York, 1973).
2. See “Rape and Respect,” by Carolyn Shafer and Marilyn Frye, in *Feminism and Philosophy*, edited by Mary Vetterling-Braggin, Frederick A. Elliston and Jane English (Littlefield, Adams & Co., Totowa, New Jersey, 1977).
3. J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford University Press, 1962).

# SOME REFLECTIONS ON SEPARATISM AND POWER\*

I have been trying to write something about separatism almost since my first dawning of feminist consciousness, but it has always been for me somehow a mercurial topic which, when I tried to grasp it, would softly shatter into many other topics like sexuality, man-hating, so-called reverse discrimination, apocalyptic utopianism, and so on. What I have to share with you today is my latest attempt to get to the heart of the matter.

In my life, and within feminism as I understand it, separatism is not a theory or a doctrine, nor a demand for certain specific behaviors on the part of feminists, though it is undeniably connected with lesbianism. Feminism seems to me to be kaleidoscopic—something whose shapes, structures and patterns alter with every turn of feminist creativity; and one

\* This paper was first presented at a meeting of the Society for Women in Philosophy, Eastern Division, in December of 1977. It was first printed in *Sinister Wisdom* 6, Summer, 1978. It is also available as a pamphlet from Tea Rose Press, P.O. Box 591, East Lansing, Michigan, 48823. Before it was published, I received many helpful comments from those who heard or read the paper. I have incorporated some, made notes of others. I got help from Carolyn Shafer in seeing the structure of it all, in particular, the connections among parasitism, access and definition.