

# Protest, Worship, and the Deformation of Prayer

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The idea that lament and protest might have a valuable place in Christian liturgy and practice has lately become a topic of increasing theological and philosophical interest. To take just a few examples: Kathleen O'Connor (2002), Kevin Timpe (2020), and Todd Billings (2015) have, in different ways, pointed to the role lament can play in both public worship and private prayer in expressing and encouraging hope in God in the face of suffering. O'Connor also argues, following Walter Brueggemann (1986), that lament teaches us to resist inappropriate uses of power; and she furthermore maintains that it teaches us to face, rather than deny, suffering in our own lives and in the world around us. Along similar lines, Christina Fetherolf (2016) and Michelle Panchuk (2019) have argued that lament and protest can both empower and help to heal survivors of various kinds of abuse and other traumatic experiences.

The inclusion in holy scripture of numerous Psalms of lament, together with books like *Job* and *Lamentations* that are chock full of lament and protest, provides powerful evidence that God is willing to tolerate lament and protest from human beings, at least in what we might call their *pious* forms, where the lament and protest are directed to God in faith that God is good and in hope that God will be motivated to respond. Moreover, the fact that so many benefits seemingly accrue to us as a result of engaging in such prayer helps to explain why God might tolerate it.

In *The Hiddenness of God*, however, I went a step further than many writing on lament and protest have been willing to go, arguing largely on the strength of my reading of *Job* and *Lamentations* that God not only tolerates pious lament and protest, but both authorizes and validates even some instances of *impious* protest—protest whose primary and most salient motivation is outright anger, despair, or similar affective states in response to the apparent injustice, wrongness, or unlovingness of God's behavior, and which is neither expressive of nor significantly motivated by faith or hope in God's love or goodness. In fact, I even went so far as to suggest that God might sometimes prefer impious protest over more pious modes of religious engagement.

I stand by these conclusions; but, at least on the surface, they are in tension with important and widespread assumptions about worship and prayer that I do not want to give up. In particular, it is hard to see how God can authorize and validate impious protest against God if, as seems correct, it is always true that everyone ought to worship God. Furthermore, it appears that impious protest is an instance of what Lauren Winner calls the “characteristic deformation of prayer”. (2018: 83) In this paper, after briefly explaining and defending the idea that God validates impious protest (section 1), I will explain these tensions more fully (section 2) and then explain how to resolve them (sections 3 and 4).

## 1. Divine Validation of Protest

The books of *Job* and *Lamentations* are both known for their powerful and piercing complaints against God. *Job* gives us the cries of a man who is presented by the book's own prologue as innocent, righteous, and afflicted by God “for no reason” (*Job* 2:3). *Lamentations* offers a prophet's complaint against God for inflicting suffering upon Israel beyond anything she could sensibly be thought to deserve. Both books undeniably contain expressions of hope and

trust in God—indeed, heroic expressions of hope in light of the broader perspectives of the main speakers in each book. But I see no reason to think that all of the complaints against God in each book *proceed from* a hopeful, faithful frame of mind. Kathleen O'Connor argues persuasively, against a “long tradition of interpreting...”, that one finds in Lamentations at best a wavering, uncertain, and substantially confused expression of hope—one that quickly fades as the book moves into its final, despairing chapters. And the speeches of Job draw a very clear picture of a character whose mind wavers, in the face of persistent divine silence, between hope and trust in God and angry despair. For example, although Job admonishes his wife with the faithful remark, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?” when she urges him to “Curse God and die,” (Job 2: 9 – 10), later speeches read more like angry protest. Witness, for example, Job 7: 11 – 20:

- <sup>11</sup>“Therefore I will not restrain my mouth;  
I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;  
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.  
<sup>12</sup>Am I the Sea, or the Dragon,  
that you set a guard over me?  
<sup>13</sup>When I say, ‘My bed will comfort me,  
my couch will ease my complaint,’  
<sup>14</sup>then you scare me with dreams  
and terrify me with visions,  
<sup>15</sup>so that I would choose strangling  
and death rather than this body.  
<sup>16</sup>I loathe my life; I would not live forever.  
Let me alone, for my days are a breath.  
<sup>17</sup>What are human beings, that you make so much of them,  
that you set your mind on them,  
<sup>18</sup>visit them every morning,  
test them every moment?  
<sup>19</sup>Will you not look away from me for a while,  
let me alone until I swallow my spittle?  
<sup>20</sup>If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?  
Why have you made me your target?  
Why have I become a burden to you?

Some of the speeches, furthermore, include outright accusation. Thus, Job 30: 16 – 23:

- <sup>16</sup>“And now my soul is poured out within me;  
days of affliction have taken hold of me.  
<sup>17</sup>The night racks my bones,  
and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest.  
<sup>18</sup>With violence he seizes my garment;  
he grasps me by the collar of my tunic.  
<sup>19</sup>He has cast me into the mire,  
and I have become like dust and ashes.  
<sup>20</sup>I cry to you and you do not answer me;

- I stand, and you merely look at me.  
21 You have turned cruel to me;  
with the might of your hand you persecute me.  
22 You lift me up on the wind, you make me ride on it,  
and you toss me about in the roar of the storm.  
23 I know that you will bring me to death,  
and to the house appointed for all living.

It is hard to imagine these words being uttered with an attitude remotely resembling steadfast hope or faithful trust in divine goodness

These speeches I have just quoted, then, are examples what I am calling “impious protest”. On the supposition that all scripture is divinely inspired and valuable for spiritual teaching, their inclusion in scripture is deeply puzzling except on the supposition that God somehow authorizes such protest. How could a congregation take Job 30:16 – 23 as the Sunday sermon text, read it aloud from the pulpit, and then say—as we do in my church—“The word of the Lord...thanks be to God” *apart* from the supposition that God in some sense values and accepts those very words of Job? Passages like these do not read like passages wherein biblical characters are portrayed as behaving in manifestly sinful ways; nor do they even read like historical sketches, offered without comment, of morally ambiguous behavior. Again, Job is presented as *blameless*; and a reading on which he is blameless *only* until he starts to complain against God is strained at best. Lamentations, similarly, is given as the words of a prophet; and, given that the whole point of the book seems to be to bring the prophet’s (sometimes impious) complaints to God, a reading on which the book as a whole is both divinely inspired *and* subject to God’s disapproval seems bizarre. Accordingly, it seems plausible to treat both books as evidence that even impious protest against God is sometimes acceptable to God.

As I read the book of Job, however, God does more than merely *accept* Job’s protest; God validates it. This is not to say that God *endorses* or *agrees with* Job’s protest. Rather, the idea is simply that God accepts it and recognizes it as a reasonable response to Job’s circumstances on the part of someone who loves goodness and justice but whose understanding of goodness, justice, and the relations between particular goods and evils is occluded by familiar human limitations. I read this validation partly in God’s explicit remark at the end of the book to the effect that Job alone among the speakers in the book has spoken rightly of God, but also in God’s treatment of Job when God finally appears in response to Job’s summons.

The divine speeches begin with God appearing as a whirlwind before Job, who has previously described himself as a pile of “dust and ashes” and accused God of making him “ride on the storm” and tossing him about. (Job 30:19, 22) God invites Job to “brace [himself] like a man” and receive God’s questions, which questions seem calculated to impress upon Job an overwhelming portrait of divine power and majesty. Many commentators have read these speeches as a divine smackdown—an extended “How dare you question the almighty?”, designed to silence Job and to rebuke him for the preceding thirty two chapters of complaint and protest. But the speeches climax with God asking who can stand before the mighty Leviathan and be safe, the implied answer being “only God”; and, of course, the obvious and irresistible continuation of that thought is, “*a fortiori*, who can stand before *God* and be safe?” Yet Job, the pile of dust and ashes, *does* stand, safely intact, before the divine whirlwind. Job spends thirty two chapters demanding an audience with God and accusing God of treating him with cruelty and undeserved violence; and, as I have already noted, at least some of Job’s protests are of the impious sort—

motivated by and expressive of emotions more like anger and despair than hope and faith. Yet when God finally appears, God lifts Job up, invites him to stand before God like a man, demonstrates that even in the face of God's overwhelming power Job can stand and remain safe, and then concludes by restoring Job's material blessings to the extent that they can be restored and saying that Job has spoken rightly of God. To my mind, it is hard not to read this as God validating Job's protest in the sense just described.

One might wonder how it is that Job can be said to have spoken rightly of God if (as I have also indicated) Job's protest reflects confusion, conceptions of God, love, justice, and so on that are distorted by human limitations. But I think reflection on fairly mundane misunderstandings makes it quite easy to see how this might be said of Job. Imagine that X and Y both acquire misleading but persuasive evidence that X's romantic partner has taken a new lover. X is angry, insisting that they do not deserve such treatment, that the relationship is too valuable to be thrown away so casually, that the love between X and their partner was deep and genuine and a betrayal like this is absolutely unacceptable, and so on. Y, on the other hand, draws the understandable conclusion that things must have been pretty poor between X and Y, that either X did deserve the treatment in question or the relationship was simply not what they thought it was, that in any case the love between X and their partner must have been relatively shallow, and the like. It is easy to imagine that when X's romantic partner finally steps into the conversation to clear things up, they might well say that X alone spoke rightly of them, even though X was in the grip of serious misunderstanding.

I believe that, on the assumption that scripture is divinely inspired and the formation of the canon was providentially orchestrated, the inclusion of *Job* in scripture provides powerful evidence that God not only accepts but validates human protest, both pious and impious. But it is hardly the only such evidence. The inclusion of *Lamentations* in the canon provides similar evidence; as do the various Old Testament stories wherein people argue with God, wrestle with God, and, time after time, receive loving accommodation from God rather than rebuke.<sup>1</sup> And yet, theologically speaking, the view that protest is validated by God faces at least two important challenges. These I take up in the next section.

## 2. The Duty to Worship and the Deformation of Prayer

The first challenge is that impious protest looks to be inconsistent with our absolute duty to worship God, and so it is hard to see how it can possibly be *authorized* or *validated* by God. That we do have a duty to worship God is both plausible and widely endorsed. Aquinas, for example, maintains that human beings owe God worship (ST 2 – 2, Q81). Nicholas Wolterstorff, identifies an explicit affirmation of the duty to worship in the “Rite One” version of the Episcopal Church’s “Great Thanksgiving”, which speaks of thanksgiving to God as our “bounden duty”; and he finds implicit affirmations of the duty to worship in passages of scripture (like Psalm 96) that enjoin us, in the imperative mood, to worship God and to do things like “ascribe to the Lord glory and strength” that are at least partly constitutive of worship. Commenting on Psalm 96 in particular, Wolterstorff says,

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to deny, of course, the stories wherein people *are* rebuked (to put it mildly) for various kinds of rebellion. But my point here is not that God accepts *all* forms of protest, but only that God accepts some, and that some of what God accepts counts as impious.

it is too weak to say that it is a good and joyful thing for the church to assemble to enact the liturgy [in worship of God]. Assembling to enact the liturgy is something the church ought to do; it is its bounden duty. Should it fail to do so, it would be guilty of wrongdoing. (2015: 42)

A bit later, he goes on to add that failure to worship *wrongs God*

It's not just a good thing for the church to enact its liturgy for the worship of God; it's obligatory that it do so. But if it is obligatory that the church do so, then it wrongs someone if it fails to do that. Who could that be other than God? (2015: 44)

These claims, furthermore, are made against the backdrop of his book's first chapter, the conclusions of which he partially sums up as follows:

Worship... is a particular mode of Godward acknowledgment of God's unsurpassable excellence; specifically, a person is worshipping God if her attitudinal stance, when engaging in Godward acknowledgment of God's unsurpassable excellence, is that of adoration. ... Christian adoration of God is awed, reverential, and grateful adoration of God. ... [T]he understanding of God implicit in our worship of God, and often explicit, is that of God as unsurpassable in glory, holiness, and love. (2015: 38)

Accordingly, it looks as if, on Wolterstorff's view, the proper aim of Christian liturgy is worship, and the church's duty to enact the liturgy for the worship of God comprises a duty to maintain and express a certain kind of *positive* attitudinal stance toward God. This is not to suggest that the church, or any individual person, has a duty to maintain conscious positive attitudes toward God at every moment, so that sleeping or focusing intently on some task would put one in violation of the duty. Rather, I take it that the idea is that the *church* has a duty to provide regular opportunities for the cultivation and expression of worshipful attitudes, and individuals have a duty to integrate the maintenance and expression of such attitudes into one's life in increasingly deep and meaningful ways; and all parties have a duty to refrain from the cultivation or expression of attitudes toward God that are incompatible with the sorts of positive attitudes that Wolterstorff describes. Conceived of in this way (or in relevantly similar, even if somewhat more limited ways), fulfilling the duty to worship God is straightforwardly inconsistent with what I am calling impious protest.

Wolterstorff acknowledges that some may be inclined to resist (albeit for misguided reasons) the idea that worship of God has the status of *duty* or *obligation*; and, indeed, one way to resist it might be to reject the entire deontological framework that such a claim presupposes.<sup>2</sup> But I think that making this move simply relocates the problem rather than solving it. For even those who resist (either for technical philosophical reasons, or for the sorts of reasons Wolterstorff envisions) the idea that we have a duty to worship God will nonetheless surely agree that God is someone who, by nature, deserves worship and whom we therefore ought (rationally, and perhaps

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<sup>2</sup> The sorts of reasons Wolterstorff envisions are not technical philosophical reasons, but rather reasons arising out of natural associations with commonsense understandings of the terms "duty" and "obligation"—e.g., that doing something because it is obligatory implies doing it grudgingly rather than joyfully or spontaneously.

also morally) to worship. It is natural to capture this “ought” by reference to a kind of rational or moral duty; but we need not do so. We might say instead that the concept of God is the concept of a being for whom worship is always fitting and failure to worship is always unfitting, or a being whom it is always virtuous to worship and unvirtuous not to worship. However we capture the idea that God absolutely ought to be worshipped, the divine authorization and validation of impious protest seems to make sense only if it is *not* the case that God absolutely ought to be worshipped. So the problem, in short, takes the form of a trilemma: our concept of God needs to be adjusted, or our concept of worship needs to be adjusted, or we need to reject the idea that God authorizes and validates impious protest.

The second problem—that impious protest is a “characteristic deformation” of the practice of prayer—is rather more complicated to explain. In *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, Lauren Winner argues that all Christian practices (like all human practices, perhaps) are susceptible to characteristic deformations—kinds of damage that are *proper*, rather than merely incidental, to the practices. She explains this idea primarily by way of examples. One way for a novel to be damaged is for it to be overly sentimental. Another way for a novel to be damaged is for some of its sentences to manifest the poor writing style of an officious copyeditor. The first form of damage is, according to Winner, proper to the art of novel writing; the second is not.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, one way for a family meal to go awry is for a fight about politics to break out. Another way for a family meal to go awry is for it to be interrupted by an intruder. The first is a form of damage proper to the practice of family meals; the second is not. And so on.

Can we say in a more general and precise way what it is for a form of damage to be *proper* to a practice? Winner herself does not try to do this; nor, importantly, does she specify what exactly she means by “practice”. Is drinking coffee a practice? Drinking coffee with friends? Being part of a coffee klatch?<sup>4</sup> It is hard to know where to draw the lines. That said, however, I think that reflection on her illustrative examples points to the following rough account of what it is for a form of damage to be proper to a practice.

Let us say that a practice is any type of activity (i) about which it makes sense to say that the activity has done intrinsically well or badly by those who are intentionally participating in it, (ii) that is not inherently bad when it goes well, and (iii) in relation to which we can identify behavioral dispositions—let us call them “virtues associated with the practice”—whose manifestation by practitioners of the practice tend to contribute to its going well. The first two conditions are needed in order for the notion of damage to make sense. It is hard to see what sense it would make to say that (e.g.) someone’s aimless stroll through the forest was *damaged* if (as I believe) the very activity of aimlessly wandering cannot be evaluated as having been done intrinsically well or poorly by the person participating in it. (Having a heart attack while aimlessly wandering, or finding a pot of gold, are, to be sure, ways for the wandering to go poorly or well, respectively; but those happenings are not *intrinsic* to the stroll, and it makes little sense—except

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<sup>3</sup> The examples here are somewhat modified versions of examples Winner herself gives to illustrate the concept.

<sup>4</sup> Winner’s conception of a practice seems to be in the neighborhood of MacIntyre’s (1984: 187ff). But she does not cite MacIntyre as a salient influence; and, toward the end of her book, she cites a variety of theologians who, as she puts it, have been “drawn to the category” of practice, without specifying which, if any, exerted significant influence on her own conception. (See 2018: 168; and see note 4 for further discussion and citations). In any case, as critics have pointed out, MacIntyre is also rather vague about what exactly it takes for a kind of activity to count as a practice.

as a joke—to evaluate someone as having done a good or bad job at strolling aimlessly.) Similarly, it is hard to see what one would be saying if one applied the notion of *damage* to (e.g.) an instance of armed robbery or murder. Something has gone undeniably *well* if a murder is foiled; and this, of course, is because the *practice* of murder is inherently bad.<sup>5</sup>

With practices thus characterized, it seems to me that Winner’s notion of *damage proper to a practice* can be adequately captured as follows: A form of damage is proper to a practice just if it tends to arise only out of practitioners’ failure to manifest some virtue or collection of virtues associated with the practice and furthermore tends to contribute to the practice not going well. Sentimentality in a novel tends to arise out of the novelist’s failure to manifest virtues associated with novel-writing; bad style *introduced by a copyeditor* does not so arise. A family dinner erupting in a political squabble tends to arise out of one or more family members failing to manifest virtues associated with the practice of family dinners; an intruder’s disrupting the family dinner typically does not. There are no intrinsic virtues associated with the activity of wandering aimlessly, and this is at least part of why Winner’s notion of “damage” cannot be applied to it. And so on.

With this characterization in hand, it is now easy to see how *impious protest against God* can look like a form of damage proper to the practice of prayer. As it is typically conceived, when prayer goes well, it is worshipful, it draws one closer to God, and it includes at least one of the following four components (perhaps, but not necessarily, expressed verbally): adoration, thanksgiving, confession, supplication. It is not immediately obvious exactly what virtues contribute to prayer going well; but a natural thought is that among them would be both a disposition to submit to God and a disposition to interpret God and God’s actions in a positive light—i.e., in a way consistent with continued adoration of and thanksgiving toward God. But, of course, impious *protest* against God is a manifestation of neither disposition; and, on the typical conception of what it is for prayer to go well, it is natural to think that a prayer that includes impious protest is one that, precisely because of the failure of virtue that such a prayer would manifest, has not gone entirely well (even if it has gone well in at least some respects, such as its honesty, or its being directed toward God rather than an idol, etc.).

What, then, can we say about these two problems? Consider again the trilemma that constitutes the first problem: our concept of God needs to be adjusted, our concept of worship needs to be adjusted, or we need to reject the idea that God authorizes and validates impious protest. I have no interest in developing a revisionary concept of God; and I have already made clear my commitment to the idea that God authorizes and validates impious protest. Accordingly, I think the problem lies ultimately in our concept of worship. In contrast to what Wolterstorff argues, I think that worship of God is best understood primarily in terms of concepts like *fidelity* and *devotion* rather than in terms of concepts that entail positive attitudes. In the next section, I will unpack this idea in some detail; and what I have to say on that score will, in turn, point the way toward addressing the problem of protest as a kind of defective prayer.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. MacIntyre 1984: 187ff, and the corresponding characterization of virtue on p. 191. I am, of course, not strictly following his characterization here; but I am trying to capture a conception in the neighborhood of what both he and Winner (again, perhaps independently) seem to intend.

### 3. Anger, Worship and Prayer

I want to begin by raising the question whether anger might ever be an apt—i.e., fitting and morally permissible—response to God, or God’s actions. Obviously lament and protest against God do not always involve anger; but impious protest in particular does often involve that emotion, and I think that it is anger’s common involvement in impious protest that makes it hardest to see how God could authorize or validate it. So I think that if it can be shown that, and *why*, anger toward God can be apt, validated by God, and consistent with worship of God, then the first of the two concerns in focus in this paper is effectively defused.

So, again: Can anger ever be an apt response to God? Initially one might think not. Many philosophers doubt that anger is *ever* an apt response; and even if we concede that anger is sometimes at least fitting, it is commonly thought to have generally harmful effects. Moreover, many philosophers, both historical and contemporary, think that there is an intimate, perhaps even partly constitutive, connection between anger and the desire to harm or to exact revenge.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, anger is often thought to impair one’s capacity to reason and, in both public and private discourse, to polarize its targets against one’s own position. (Srinivasan 2018: 124-5; Bell 2009: 171 - 173.)

Against these claims, some philosophers have argued that anger is not *inevitably* counterproductive, and often has positive effects. For example, summarizing her own brief survey of feminist defenses of the value of anger prior to 2009, MacAlester Bell writes,

[F]eminist philosophers have argued that anger is a mode of protest that can help maintain agents’ self-respect, that anger has ... important epistemological roles to play in correct moral perception, that it allows us to bear witness to injustice, and that it can directly motivate social change. As should be clear, these defenses of anger stress its instrumental value. Anger is defended as a valuable tool to develop in response to oppression because it can help bring about certain ends—either full recognition of one’s oppression, self-respect, or social change. (2009: 169)

But even if anger is sometimes fitting, non-harmful, and even productive, this does not guarantee that anger toward God can ever be apt.

To the extent that human anger plays a role in correct moral perception and can motivate us toward positive social behavior, a case can be made that God might have good reason to tolerate it, even when it is directed toward God. But, all by itself, such a case falls short of establishing the aptness of anger toward God; nor does it provide reason to think that God might validate such anger. For even if we grant that anger toward God is sometimes permissible, it may still not be a fitting response to God. Amia Srinivasan (2018), for example, takes anger to be an evaluative affective response to moral wrongness, injustice, or perhaps other norm-violations (e.g., she grants that one might respond aptly with anger to violations of epistemic norms).<sup>7</sup> She thinks that anger is often apt, but only in the presence of *actual* norm-violations, rather than merely perceived—even justifiably perceived—violations. If she is right, and if God is morally perfect, then anger

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<sup>6</sup> See the discussion in Nussbaum 2016, pp. 17 – 27. Nussbaum herself thinks that desire for retribution is partly constitutive of anger.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Nussbaum 2016, ch. 2.



toward God would never be fitting, even if it might sometimes be understandable, and so it could never be validated by God.

So what can be said in defense of the fittingness of anger toward God, and in support of the claim that God might validate such anger? My answer comes in three steps. The first is to follow Srinivasan in rejecting the idea that anger constitutively involves the desire to harm or to exact revenge. As she notes, even if ancient cultures had trouble separating anger from the desire to harm or exact revenge, anger in contemporary Western culture often occurs unaccompanied by such desires. Granted, X's anger toward Y might well include a desire on X's part to make Y suffer at least through the appreciation of how her actions have caused X to suffer; but this is different from a desire to harm or to exact revenge.<sup>8</sup>

The next step is to highlight some of what is *intrinsically* good about certain kinds of anger—in particular anger that arises in response to injustice and other kinds of wrongdoing. MacAlester Bell, for example, argues that “appropriate anger” is a “mode of hating or being against evil”. Thus, she writes:

If humiliation and pain are evil, then on the view I've sketched, the virtuous person will be disposed to hate humiliation and pain. ... If malice and cruelty are themselves evil, the virtuous person will respond to these vices with some form of hatred. If we understand anger as a kind of hatred or con-attitude, then anger would be a *prima facie* apt response to these vices. On this picture, what makes the character trait of appropriate anger a virtue is not its instrumental value in bringing about a state of eventual flourishing. Rather, the idea is that loving the good and hating the evil is itself non-instrumentally valuable. (2009: 177)

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<sup>8</sup> 2018: 129 – 30. Martha Nussbaum (2016: 21 – 27) emphatically rejects this position, insisting that anger always, with but one exception, involves a desire for some kind of retribution. The exception is what she calls Transition Anger, an allegedly “rare” emotion whose “*entire content*” [emphasis in original] is ‘How outrageous! Something must be done about this!’ (35 - 36) But Nussbaum's argument that anger always involves a desire for retribution is premised on intuition-based assessment of just one example; and even if her intuitions about that case are entirely correct, it does not seem to me that the example is adequately representative of the wide diversity of ways in which anger arises and manifests itself. More importantly, the view that anger constitutively involves some kind of desire for retribution implies that people who believe themselves to be angry *without* any desire for harm or other forms of payback to come to the target of their anger are simply mistaken—either they have failed (and maybe persistently tend to fail) to properly grasp their own conscious mental states, or else the desire for payback is a sort of unconscious desire of theirs. Although I do not deny that people have unconscious desires and even conscious desires that they somehow mistake for other mental states, it is not credible—especially just on the strength of intuition-based assessment of example cases—to insist that this is *always* what must be going on whenever someone thinks that they are angry in the absence of any desire for payback. Of course, it is possible to handle this worry in the way in which she handles a similar worry that one might raise about anger against oneself—namely, say that every such case is either one that involves a desire for payback or is an instance of Transition Anger. (128 – 129) But I do not see how one can keep making this move without turning the category of Transition Anger into a mere catchall category for a variety of (not obviously rare) cases of anger that don't fit her characterization.

She goes on to argue that, as a response to wrongdoing, anger is not merely understandable, tolerable, or permissible; rather, it is an *excellent* response. Thus:

appropriate anger is an excellent response in the domain of slights in that it is an especially fitting and appropriately expressive response in this domain. While other negative emotions such as disappointment or sadness, might also have a role to play in our emotional attachment to our moral standards and principles, in the domain of slights and disrespect, anger does the best job of: (1) fitting the failure; and (2) expressing the victim's integrity, respect for the object of her anger, and commitment to the moral standards in question. (177)

Amia Srinivasan similarly defends the intrinsic value of anger as a response to certain circumstances; and she is particularly interested in showing that even *counterproductive* anger might nonetheless be apt. On her view, the value of anger lies in the fact that it "is a means of affectively registering or appreciating the injustice of the world." (2018: 132) Comparing our capacity for anger with our capacity for aesthetic appreciation, she goes on:

Just as appreciating the beautiful or the sublime has a value distinct from the value of knowing that something is beautiful or sublime, there might well be a value to appreciating the injustice of the world through one's apt anger—a value that is distinct from that of simply knowing that the world is unjust. Imagine a person who does everything, as it were, by the ethical book—forming all the correct moral beliefs and acting in accordance with all her moral duties—but who is left entirely cold by injustice, feeling nothing in response to those moral wrongs of which she is perfectly aware. I don't want to say that such a person has done anything wrong. But I do think it is natural to say that there is something missing in her; indeed, that it would be better, *ceteris paribus*, if she were capable of feeling anger towards the injustice she knows to exist. (2018: 132)

These remarks comprise the bulk of Srinivasan's positive defense of the aptness of anger, and I think that, conjoined with Bell's remarks on behalf of the value of anger as a mode of standing for what is good and hating what is evil, the defense is compelling. Obviously not every expression of anger will manifest these intrinsic goods. But some do and, intuitively, the goods that Bell and Srinivasan point to are genuinely significant.<sup>9</sup> There is something deeply *important* about having an affective response, as opposed to a dispassionate response, to injustice. Although it seems doubtful that anger is ever a morally mandatory response to injustice,<sup>10</sup> it does seem to be a permissible and fitting response on many occasions.

Again, though, we must ask whether anger is apt only in response to actual wrongdoing or whether it might also be apt in response to merely apparent wrongdoing. Here is where I part ways from Srinivasan, and the support I offer for this departure constitutes the third step in my defense of the claim that anger toward God might sometimes be both fitting and validated by God. Srinivasan's defense of the claim that anger is apt only in response to actual norm-violations consists in the following three sentences:

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<sup>9</sup> For further defense, cf. Kauppinen 2018 and Shoemaker 2018.

<sup>10</sup> See Bell 2009: 177 – 178 for discussion.

What if I mistakenly but justifiably believed that your not coming to the party was a moral violation? I'm inclined to say that my anger would be excused but inapt. If I learned that you in fact had made no promise to come to the party, I would hardly insist that my previous anger about your non-attendance was fitting. (2018: 129, n. 23)

But I think that the example she offers does not clearly support her point. The reason is that present judgments about the fittingness of one's past anger are easily influenced by one's present grasp of the past circumstances. *Knowing* now that one's past anger was based on a mistake, there is considerable pressure to judge it as having been unfitting. (I think that present evaluations of the reasonableness of past beliefs that were based on misleading evidence are susceptible to the same distorting influence.) Change the example to remove this distorting pressure, however, and it is harder to side with Srinivasan. Suppose it now seems to you, on the basis of evidence you cannot explain by other means, that your business partner has embezzled a large sum of money from your business. You are, naturally, angry. Is your anger apt? I think it is; but the more important point here is that, whatever the correct answer might be, it seems not to depend on whether, in addition to your having otherwise inexplicable evidence that she has betrayed you, you *believe correctly* that you have been betrayed.

Notice, too, that in constructing this example I have not said that you actually *believe* you have been betrayed, or that you have *justifying evidence* that you have been betrayed. Seemings are different from beliefs. The premises that enter into familiar logical paradoxes all might *seem* true even if you know that one is false. Something *seems* true just when you experience a kind of cognitive inclination or pressure toward believing it; and I think anger can be an apt response to seemings even when the evidence that prompts them is insufficient to justify belief. Change the example again: If it powerfully seems to you that your child is in mortal danger, grave concern is apt even if, upon reflection, you would realize that the evidence prompting the seeming doesn't justify the belief that she is in mortal danger. In fact, lack of concern would be strange, at best. Why then wouldn't it also be apt to be angry if it also seems to you that your child is in mortal danger as a result of the negligent activity of one of her caretakers?

In light of the foregoing, I think it is clear that anger toward a morally perfect God might sometimes be fitting. Much of what God permits in the world, and some of what God is said to have done in the world, powerfully seems to fallible human beings to be inconsistent with perfect love and goodness; and, in light of the foregoing, it seems fitting for those who believe in God and love goodness and justice and their fellow human beings to respond with anger. Job, and the prophet of Lamentations, are two biblical figures who seem to have been fittingly angry with God—even if, as both I and the tradition would affirm, God did not in fact act wrongly on the occasions that provoked their anger. If this is right, then anger toward God is sometimes apt. Insofar as such anger is indeed a mode of *loving what is good and hating what is evil*, and insofar as it aligns a person with God's values even if not God's own perception of the circumstances, it seems furthermore that such anger will be validated by God—again, not endorsed as a *correct* response to the circumstance, but rather one recognized as a *reasonable* response on the part of someone who loves what is good and is taking a stand for it insofar as one has a grasp on it.

The question now is whether expressing apt anger toward God is compatible with *worship*. I take it that, even if it is psychologically possible to maintain an attitude of awed admiration for someone while in the grip of (apt) anger against them, and even if it is semantically possible to express anger against someone while at the very same time expressing one's awed admiration for them, these things are (at best) extremely difficult and uncommon. So it seems clear that if God

does authorize and validate impious protest motivated by and expressive of apt anger toward God, and if worship partly consists in maintaining or expressing an attitude of awed admiration toward God (in the ways I described earlier), then there is in fact no absolute duty to worship God.

But why characterize worship in terms of awed admiration? True, awed admiration often, maybe even typically, at least accompanies paradigmatic acts and attitudes of worship. But so too do a cluster of other acts, attitudes, and dispositions, and several of these strike me as candidates equal to or better than awed admiration for capturing the essence of worship. It is, for example, natural to identify worship with a kind of *love*, or *devotion*; it is also natural to identify worship with a kind of *honoring*. The latter is at least in the same conceptual family as “awed admiration”; but, importantly, it seems entirely possible to *honor* someone in thought, word, and deed while at the same time being angry with them and expressing that anger.<sup>11</sup> It would be surprising, for example, if the command to honor one’s parents entailed that one could neither be aptly angry toward one’s parents nor communicate one’s anger to them. And, of course, it is obviously possible to be angry with and express anger toward those whom we love or bear other forms of intense and stable devotion.

It is not my task here to provide a definitive analysis of worship; but what I am recommending as a way of defusing the first of the two problems that I have identified is to construe our absolute duty to worship God not as requiring us to cultivate, maintain, and express positive *attitudinal stance* toward God, but rather as a duty to cultivate, maintain, and express a complex, positive *dispositional stance*. What I have in mind is something more like love, devotion, allegiance, honoring, or some combination of these, rather than mere attitudes like awed admiration. Construing worship this way makes room for the possibility of negative evaluative-affective responses to God without violating the duty to worship. A further advantage of the construal I propose is that, unlike admiration and other affective-evaluative responses (like anger), stances or dispositions like love, devotion, and the like are plausibly within our voluntary control. Accordingly, these latter, unlike the former, are more appropriately thought to be among our obligations or duties. This is not to say, of course, that our affective-evaluative responses are not at all subject to moral evaluation. After all, the question of anger’s aptness is in part a question of its permissibility. But when we speak of the permissibility of an affective-evaluative response, what we are primarily focused on is the permissibility of acting so as to cultivate, maintain, or express that response. Whether we *have* the response at any particular time, however, will not be directly up to us; and so we can hardly be faulted for having it. What we would be faulted for, if anything, is, as in the realm of problematic beliefs, failing to take steps to correct it.

If all of this is correct, then there is no very compelling reason after all to think that impious protest is inconsistent with our duty to worship God. Accordingly, there is nothing problematic about the supposition that God authorizes it. Neither is there anything problematic about the supposition that God validates it. The apparently impious protest against God that we find in *Job* seems to be at least partly motivated by and expressive of respect for God’s law and love of justice and the good; and the protest we find in *Lamentations* seems to be at least partly motivated by and expressive of a concern for justice and compassion toward others. To be sure, if God is morally perfect, these protests reflect confusion on the part of the protestor; but insofar as they arise out of the good attitudes just noted, these protests, though impious, still locate the protestors among

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, one might think it is not only possible to honor someone in the midst of anger, but anger is sometimes an expression of one’s respect for the person or valuing of the relationship. Cf. Kauppinen 2018.

God's staunch allies. They are confusedly expressive of allegiance to God and devotion to things that God loves; they may, in their own way, even constitute confused expressions of love for and devotion *to God*. It is easy, I think, to imagine God validating and, indeed, valuing such protest. It is even easy to imagine God preferring such protest over other modes of engagement, given the protestor's inaccurate grasp of circumstances.

#### 4. Damaged Prayer?

I have defused the first challenge to the idea that God authorizes and validates impious protest by arguing that such protest is not inconsistent with our duty to worship God and may in fact both arise out of and express deep allegiance to God and devotion to things that God loves. With this response in hand, we can now defuse the second challenge—the concern that impious protest appears to be a damaged form of prayer.

Recall that the second challenge boiled down to this: As it is typically conceived, when prayer goes well, it is worshipful, it draws one closer to God, and it includes at least one of adoration, thanksgiving, confession, supplication. Plausibly, too, well-formed prayer is accompanied by a disposition to submit to God and to interpret God's actions in a positive light. But impious protest seems to be prayer that manifests none of these characteristics; hence, it is broken prayer.

The first thing to note by way of response is that, if the arguments of the previous section are sound, impious protest is consistent with a worshipful stance toward God (even if it is not itself expressive of worship). Moreover, on the traditional assumption that God is good, loving, compassionate, merciful, a lover of justice particularly for the oppressed, and that God is all of these things to a far greater degree than any human being might be, it seems that much of what was highlighted as beneficial about the manifestation and expression of apt anger would ultimately draw a person closer to God, even when one's anger is directed and expressed toward God. Indeed, for some people the path toward recovering their conception of God as an ally in their struggle against injustice, and as a protector of their own best interests and the best interests of others might well involve a great deal of prayer wherein they bear affective witness to injustice before God, angrily reminding God of what human beings need, what mercy, compassion, and justice require, and what love (as it is humanly conceived, anyway) necessarily involves. With regard to just those first two components, then, impious protest may well be highly functional prayer, at least for a person in certain kinds of circumstances.

Once we see this, however, then we must ask whether the remaining components of paradigmatically well-functioning prayer are in fact *necessary* for prayer to go well, or just *typical* of well-functioning prayer in ordinary circumstances. I would submit the latter. Just as love, devotion, honor, allegiance, and, accordingly, worship in ordinary circumstances are paradigmatically positive and full of praise and admiration, so too prayer would be; and so likewise prayer would naturally be accompanied by a disposition to interpret God positively and to submit to God's desires. But impious protest on the part of a still worshipful believer arises out of extreme and unusual circumstances; and I think it is ultimately better to say that impious protest is one form of prayer that is still functioning well in such circumstances rather than to say that it is prayer that has been broken in part by the circumstances in which it occurs.

The fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom, and we are called to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. But, at the same time, perfect love casts out fear. Like so many ideas in scripture, these ideas need to be held and understood in tension with one another. Neither trumps

the other. It is, in part, the first cluster of ideas here that makes impious protest seem so far out of bounds. But I think one way, perhaps the only way, in which the love of a *fearsome* person who surpasses their beloved along every conceivable positive dimension can cast out fear is by that person showing themselves to be receptive and meekly responsive to the worst that the beloved has to offer. This is how it goes on the cross; and I think this is part of what's going on in the divine authorization and validation of protest.<sup>12</sup>

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