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Should I get angry – or just take offence? A response to McTernan

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a response to Emily McTernan's book, *Taking Offence*. I focus on how to evaluate taking offence comparatively against alternative attitudes such as anger or blame. Drawing on some of my work on blame, emotion and expressive action, I sketch a way in which we might reach a more convincing answer than that provided by McTernan.

KEYWORDS Offence; anger; emotion; reasons; expressive action

Emily McTernan has done us a great service in providing a rich and topical philosophical account of taking offence (McTernan, 2023).[1] McTernan's nuanced and qualified defence of taking offence is an important contribution to debates about 'cancel culture' and the nature and significance of micro-aggressions. It is part of a wave of philosophical interest in the detail of particular 'reactive attitudes,' following Strawson (1962). Related recent contributions would include Srinivasan (2018), Bell (2019) and Radzik (2020) and some of my own work (e.g. Bennett 2024).

These authors have investigated different attitudes. How should we evaluate these attitudes comparatively? If I am wronged, or my standing threatened, should I get angry, or offended, or should I blame? Part of our emotional intelligence is finding the right reaction to the situation we find ourselves in, and I take it that we are often very good at this – though of course not always. What does getting it right involve? A local version of this question would ask: which is the reaction that is appropriate for a particular situation? Answering this local question would require us to say why, say, offence was more appropriate to a particular situation than anger. A more global version of the question would be: why do we need offence as well as anger in our emotional vocabulary? Answering this question would require us to explain what taking offence adds to our

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emotional range, given that that range already includes reactions such as anger and blame.

I think that these are fair questions to ask of a philosophical account of the attitude of taking offence. At least part of what such accounts aim to do is to excavate and bring to critical attention the workings of our emotional intelligence, explaining not just what the reaction of taking offence involves but also what its value is compared to related reactions. However, in this paper, I will claim that McTernan does not consider these questions in detail. Where she does broach them, I will argue, her answers are not fully convincing. Drawing on some of my own work on blame, emotion, and expressive action, I sketch a way in which we might reach a more convincing answer, focusing on how there could be intrinsic reasons for emotional attitudes.

What is offence? According to McTernan:

> [O]ffence negotiates social standing in everyday contexts. A central idea is that to take offence is to resist another's affront to one's standing and, in so doing, to stand up for one's social standing and, often, that of one's group. In taking offence, someone marks another's act as one ignoring, diminishing, or attacking her standing. Where her offence is visible, she also communicates her rejection of the affront to others. Further, to take offence can be a way to negotiate the background social norms that enable us to express and shape social standing. (p. 2)

If we are looking for an answer to the questions posed above, however, we can see a problem emerging, because it seems quite possible to substitute 'anger' for 'offence' in this quote, and still end up with something that sounds plausible. If this is correct then this account will not help us to understand what, if anything, might make offence more appropriate than anger. This is not necessarily to say that anger *is* an appropriate reaction; it is just that we want a philosophical account to explain which responses are appropriate and why.

McTernan does provide a contrast between offence and anger. For instance, anger is described as 'an emotion of approach: of engaging with and especially attacking or getting back at another whom we perceive variously as violating a moral norm, injuring us, or committing an injustice' (p. 21), whereas offence is said to be an emotion of withdrawal or estrangement. Expressed more formally, when A takes offence:

> (i) A believes, judges, or perceives that φ is an affront to her social standing as she perceives it;
>
> (ii) and so, A feels estranged from B as a result of B's doing φ, even if only for a moment;
>
> (iii) and, as a result, A has a tendency towards acts that express withdrawal from B. (p. 32)

However, noting that anger attacks while offence withdraws does not yet tell us which is more appropriate. Furthermore, while McTernan argues that there

are limitations on the applicability of offence that do not appear to apply to anger – offence is 'domestic' or appropriate for small-scale violations (p. 25); offence focuses on attacks on oneself rather than against others (p. 27); and offence requires a pre-existing relationship from which to be estranged (p. 30) – this does not show that anger is not an equally appropriate way to mark, communicate, resist and negotiate issues of social standing in many situations.

To illustrate, consider McTernan's strategy for dealing with the problem of the 'social justice warrior' and 'piling on' (p. 39):

> If . . . I take offence at an affront to the social standing of some group to which I am not a member nor otherwise closely associated with, or a slight made about an individual to whom I bear no relation to and to whom I share no facet of identity, then I am mistaken in the object of my offence. (pp. 27–8)

This line does not really address the worry, as the 'warrior' could, it seems, appropriately be motivated by anger, which has no such first-personal limits. Indeed, McTernan seems to acknowledge as much:

> That is not to say that outsiders ought never react but, rather, that it would be preferable to respond in another way, say through emotions such as indignation and hence, likely, with behaviours other than withdrawal. Indignation, for instance, as a species of anger, would likely provoke reactions of (negative) engagement instead. (p. 29)

Consider also McTernan's response to the concern that taking offence is too weak a reaction to injustice. She argues:

> offence [is] a particularly apt way to respond to one subset of the affronts to equal standing which contribute to injustice: those affronts that are rendered significant by unjust broader contexts. Without that context, the act would have a differing meaning or communicate a different message: one which either did not threaten social standing or that did so to a far lesser degree, akin, say, to being merely rude to someone. For this subset of affronts, the core of my defence is that taking offence offers us a way both to directly defend our social standing and to respond to the particular act's threat to that standing. Thus, offence merits a place as one of the emotions appropriately involved in responding to injustice. (pp. 88–9)

However, she again seems to acknowledge that she cannot rule out the appropriateness of anger:

> I do not thereby claim that anger is inappropriate in such cases. My argument is not that there is no place for anger over acts like microaggressions but, rather, that there is also a place for offence: anger or offence could be morally justified, and people might experience one, both, or neither. (p. 89)

My view is that we should seize the nettle. McTernan should explain how it can be that sometimes taking offence is uniquely appropriate. More broadly,

a good test of whether one has captured the particular texture of an emotion is whether one can explain how its conditions of appropriateness differ from those of other emotions.

McTernan might query the aspiration to show that there are situations to which offence is uniquely appropriate. This is what she seems to do in the following passage:

> As to why not take anger to be the sole morally justified or appropriate response to acts that constitute injustices or that contribute to patterns of injustice, the simplest response is to observe that our emotional lives are not so simple, nor so one-dimensional. Often, we feel a range of emotions when confronted by injustice: say, anger but also grief or despair. Sometimes, one might be both angry and offended. (p. 91)

However, while I entirely agree about the complexity of our emotional lives, this response cannot be adequate unless – implausibly – we deny our ability to pose and answer the local and global questions we raised earlier. Different emotional attitudes capture different ways of experiencing the situation; they involve seeing different patterns and marking different sets of features as salient. They also involve taking different types of practical attitude towards a given situation, and such attitudes are often mutually exclusive. It thus seems both practically and philosophically relevant to evaluate these 'structures of experience' against one another.

McTernan offers three further grounds for thinking that offence might be more appropriate than anger in some situations. She claims that offence can be appropriate at minor violations to which anger would be disproportionate (p. 91). She also claims that anger is more appropriate as a reaction to *patterns* of micro-aggressions, whereas offence is 'taken at the particular act' (p. 92). Furthermore, as previously noted, she claims that anger 'pushes us towards engagement,' whereas offence 'communicates through its estrangement and withdrawal,' and she uses this point to claim that anger is thus highly demanding in a way that offence need not be (p. 92).

However, these grounds are not fully convincing. It is not clear that the lower proportionality limit of anger is higher than that of offence. Although outbursts of great anger might be disproportionate, one can appropriately be *mildly irritated* by minor violations, and irritation seems more closely related to anger than withdrawal. It is also not clear that offence never issues in engagement as opposed to withdrawal. Take the case of an aggressive man in a pub who becomes confrontational because he thinks he has been inappropriately stared at by someone on the other side of the room. This man is offended by being stared at, I assume, but his reaction of confrontation is 'engaging' rather than withdrawing.

What about McTernan's claim that offence can be more appropriate than anger because it is less demanding? This move does make some progress, but

it gives us the *wrong kind of reasons* for the questions we have been looking at. I can see why McTernan makes this move. McTernan clearly does feel the force of the questions I have posed, and provides some ways to deal with them. However, most of her strategies for addressing these questions appeal to the way in which the *nature* of offence differs from the *nature* of anger. For instance, we have seen that McTernan argues that anger involves attack rather than estrangement, that it is focused on particulars rather than patterns, and so on. While these strategies go some of the way to addressing the question, it can be hard to see why simply looking at the ways in which these reactions differ *conceptually* is sufficient to answer our *normative* questions about the comparative appropriateness of one reaction against another. Given the limits of conceptual analysis, I can see why McTernan points to demandingness as a consideration that clearly has some normative weight. However, the problem is that this consideration about demandingness is only an *instrumental* reason for preferring offence in such cases over anger. While instrumental considerations can be important considerations when we are evaluating emotional reactions, I do not think that they cannot be its central basis. Let me illustrate this key point before I then go on to explain what a better approach might look like.

In her (2018) account of the aptness of anger, Amia Srinivasan distinguishes instrumental from intrinsic reasons for emotion. The distinction here is between, on the one hand, ways in which anger might lead to good (or bad) results, such as gaining leverage over opponents or provoking opponents to greater violence; and, on the other hand, ways in which anger might be inherently fitting and hence appropriate independently of any further benefits. In other words, we can ask 'why does this situation *merit* this emotional response?' (intrinsic reasons); or we can ask 'how does the fact that I (or people in general) react in this way further important goals?' (instrumental reasons). In the passage just discussed, McTernan provides us with instrumental reasons concerning demandingness. However, it looks as though intrinsic reasons have a certain primacy for the agent. This is because we do not normally experience emotions *in order to* further our goals. It may be that we can *indirectly* regulate our emotions – suppressing or encouraging them – in line with further costs and benefits to which they might lead. But emotions are *directly* responsive to the presence or absence of considerations that inherently merit such responses, in the way that truth (or evidence of truth) inherently merits belief – what we have called intrinsic reasons. McTernan does not entirely neglect intrinsic reasons for emotion (e.g. p. 37), but she does not leverage those reasons to explain the distinctive nature and value of offence as compared to related emotions.

If this is correct, then in order fully to answer the question whether I should get angry or just take offence, we have to look at the question whether the situation *merits* attack/engagement or withdrawal. However, McTernan does

not explore the question of which situations merit which responses; or what it would mean for a situation to merit a response; or how a situation could merit one response rather than another. A first step in addressing these questions is to figure out how there could be intrinsic reasons for emotions. My suspicion is that to answer this kind of question we have to look in more depth at the *meaning* of withdrawal and the *meaning* of attack. What does the response of withdrawal *say* about the situation; how does the action of withdrawal *speak to* those features of the situation that should be judged to be the most salient; and does the symbolism of withdrawal (as opposed to attack) capture what is most salient in the situation?

On my view (Bennett, 2022), there can be intrinsic reasons for emotions such as anger and offence because those emotions are partly defined by *expressive actions*. Expressive actions say things about the situations to which they are directed because their role is to *mark* extraordinary situations in a way that is *expressively adequate*. To get a handle on this idea of expressive adequacy, we can take the case of Christians kneeling in church. You don't have to be religious to understand this action, which I interpret as fittingly expressive of reverence or awe because of the way it symbolises the incomparable 'height' or 'stature' of the Divine in comparison to the worshipper. An act is expressively adequate when its key features – such as kneeling – correspond to or symbolize the salient features of the situation (kneeling corresponds to comparative lowness). If the idea of marking the significance of extraordinary situations in an expressively adequate way has some plausibility, the next task would be to show that (some) emotions are partly defined by their relation to such expressively adequate actions. We could do this by showing that there are intrinsic reasons for the attitude of reverence/awe when acts expressive of reverence/awe (such as kneeling) are called for as expressively adequate ways of marking the situation. Emotions like awe (and guilt, shame, offence, and, perhaps, anger) are partly defined by expressive actions because such emotions have the same psychological role as that of expressive action: namely, to mark extraordinary situations and to lift them out of the stream of ongoing, mundane events.

We can conclude by briefly considering what is expressed by withdrawal or estrangement, and how such a response might be claimed to be intrinsically appropriate to the situation of wrongdoing. Anger presents the agent as to-be-attacked because of the act. However, it might be possible to argue that withdrawal is more appropriate in some circumstances (e.g. Bennett, 2024). Withdrawal expresses a view of the wrongdoer as one with whom one shares community, yet where the offender has violated some of the basic terms of that community. Being a fellow member of the moral community merits a certain kind of recognition or respect; but such membership involves a presumed commitment to abiding by and promoting certain moral standards. Where

those commitments have been violated, a partial and temporary withdrawal of the signs of recognition can be interpreted as an intrinsically fitting way to mark the situation because it captures or symbolises this most salient feature. In this way, I suggest, we can uncover the meaning of withdrawal in a way that would inform an assessment of whether anger/attack or withdrawal would be the more appropriate response to a given situation.

In this paper, I have posed a challenge for McTernan's account of taking offence, by asking whether it gives us any reasons to react with offence rather than anger. McTernan argues that offence is an emotion of estrangement, while anger is an emotion of attack. However, her account does not have the resources to explain how there could be intrinsic reasons to respond with one rather than another. Drawing on some of my work on blame, expression and emotion, I have sketched how this gap in our understanding might be filled.

Note

1. Unless otherwise noted, page references are to this book.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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