

Robert Talisse [00:00:09] Hello and welcome to the Why We Argue podcast, The Future of Truth Edition. This season of the podcast is produced by The Future of Truth, a project based at the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute, which explores what truth is, where it's going, and why it matters for democracy. The project is made possible by generous funding from the University of Connecticut and the Henry Luce Foundation. The podcast features discussions with publicly minded thinkers about the cultural and political role of concepts like truth, fact, expertise and information today. My guest is Myisha Cherry. Myisha is assistant professor of philosophy at the University of California at Riverside. Myisha's research focuses on the intersection of moral psychology and social and political philosophy. More specifically, she's interested in the role of emotions and attitudes in public life. You can follow her on Twitter @myishacherry. That is M Y I S A C H E R R Y, all one word. Now, I invited Myisha on the program to talk about anger, rage, and forgiveness, as well as their current political expressions. Hi Myisha.

Myisha Cherry [00:01:30] How are you?

Robert Talisse [00:01:32] I'm doing good. It's so good to talk to you again.

Myisha Cherry [00:01:34] Likewise. Likewise. Always.

Robert Talisse [00:01:37] Well. So let's start with the big picture. You know, you have a forthcoming book with Oxford University Press and it has a provocative title, which is The Case for Rage: Why Anger is Essential to Anti-racist Struggle. Now, as you know, and I suspect some listeners will know, both in the Western tradition and not only the Western tradition of philosophy, but non Western traditions of philosophy and also in contemporary philosophy, notable thinkers have argued that anger and rage are almost never morally appropriate. So you reject this view. Can you tell us a little bit about your overall, we might go so far as to say pro-anger, or at least not anti-anger, position? Can you just fill out some of the broad sort of philosophical details of your view?

Myisha Cherry [00:02:36] Right, so I think it will help for us to before we focus on anger, to think about another emotion, right. And we're going to see how people treat what we call kind of positive emotions in ways that they don't treat what typically is called negative emotion. So one of the things I like to set up is I like to think about love. And usually when we say love, we think we know what it means. But we also know that there's different kinds of love. Right. So you can have kind of brotherly love, you can have erotic love, and you can have kind of a family love. Right. But there's also.... And we think those things are essentially good. Right. But there are certain things that you can love that one might say, well, if you love these things, it's probably not something that you should be doing. So if I love hardcore drugs, although it's love, it doesn't necessarily suggest or mean, therefore, that what I'm doing is a good thing. Right. Because the way that we will evaluate that love is based on what the target of that love is. What are we doing with that love? What is the kind of the aim of that love or the perspective of that love? Right. And so if that's the case when it comes to love, I think it also will be the same case when it comes to anger. So as much as the book title is called The Case for Anger, what I want to kind of get us to imagine is to kind of broaden our view of what anger is. And once we do that, then we can isolate the kind of anger that I'm in defense of. Right. So I think there are a variety of different types of anger and particularly I'm very focused in a context of of political injustice, particularly in the context of racial injustice. And I want to say that there are different kinds of angers in the way that we can distinguish those angers are kind of the ways in which I set up love is by its target, by his action tendency or that action that is most prone to to motivate us to engage in, the aim of that particular anger, and the

perspective that informs that particular anger. And once we have the answers to those questions, then we can begin to decide if that anger is useless or if that anger is useful. So I think there's...particularly in the book, I isolate kind of five examples of the different types of anger that can happen or arise in the context of racial justice. And I kind of tend to get kind of clever with the phrases. So one example is what we might call rogue rage, may sound like road rage, but it's called rogue rage. And typically, if you if you have rogue rage, that rogue rage is usually directed at any and everybody. The aim of it is kind of destructive destruction, etc., etc. And I can go on and on. Then there's another type. This called wipe rage, not white rage. And the difference between white rage is that, you know, the action tendency, what we aim to do is eliminate the other and usually the target of that anger is usually scapegoats. Right. And then we might say that there's something that I call kind of narcissistic rage. So you may be angry at racial injustice, but you're only angry at it when it is directly about you, when it's concerning you and it affects you. But when it concerns others, one is apathetic about it and it also has other features. But the type of anger that I motivate in the book is something that I call Lordean Rage, and it's named after the poet and scholar Audre Lorde for a very popular essay called "The Uses of Anger." And I want to say that kind of anger, Lordean Rage, its aim is for change, it's directed at racism and racists and racial injustice and racial institutions. The perspective that informs it is that we are not free until we all get free. And the action tendency is to do a kind of productive work that changed the world so that racial justice can be the norm. And so the case that I'm making for anger is the case for this Lordean rage. And I think that has a place, that has a role to play in anti-racist struggle.

Robert Talisse [00:06:25] Excellent. And so what would you, now just isolating on that form of Lordean Rage, what would you say about some of the, I take it, even to some of our listeners who aren't philosophers, familiar worries about anger as being a kind of loss of control and that there's something impulsive or there's something about anger and its profile as a psychological phenomenon, that it can't, for the person in the throes of the anger, can't sort of fixate on the right target to the right extent. It can't do all those Aristotelian things that the virtuous person can do. So is there an element of the view that tries to suggest that that concern, that anger is always going to be in some way blind and not focused on some particular target? Is there some response or do you just think that that kind of concern is overblown?

Myisha Cherry [00:07:35] Yeah, I think it's overblown. But, you know, I must admit that I'm using rage to be provocative, because I know just that word itself frightens people, right. But it points to... I think it points to a deeper worry that even if I was to say anger, it frightens people. But that's the thing I want to address. Right. So here's the thing. I think all emotions move us in a certain kind of way, can take over us in a certain kind of way. I mean, that's why it's called emotions, right? It has the power to move us. That's not just restricted to anger. Right. You know, we might say the same thing about compassion, the same thing about pity, and the same thing about love. We all, I mean, that kind of sentimentality, those kind of affective dimensions do have a power over us. But here's the thing. I do believe in agency. Right. And I think that the emotions exist because they operate in tandem with our own agency. And we are, I guess you can say, a tag team of sorts when it comes to emotions. I never think that emotions will cause us to do these things as if we're zombies and we can't help but do anything. Right. That's where agency comes into place. And so I think once you take, you know, emotions mixed with the individual, it's up to the individual to decide how they're going to work with, you know, how they're going to team up, how they're going to tag with. And it's not to say that there's no difficulties, but that's when the full agency and discipline, and temperance and all that stuff, and solidarity with others can help that anger indeed hit at the right target, to hit at the right

aim. And it's not to say that those things happen instantly or in particular moments, but I think it's always a process, even in most destructive forms of emotions. There's a process before you get there. Right. There's thoughts that you had, there's conversation that you have to yourself. There's planning that happens. And if that's the case, when it comes to those emotions that we think of as vices, I think the same thing when those emotions turns into virtues.

Robert Talisse [00:09:26] That's fabulous. So let me sort of shift gears slightly and just sort of present a pushback about anger and rage that might come from a slightly different direction. Now, I could imagine that those who espouse a kind of anti-anger view, especially with respect to the political value of anger—so those who are suspicious of the political value of anger—might push back in the following way. They might say the wake of the 2020 election, particularly the events that unfolded in the Capitol on January 6th, perhaps, show us where anger and rage will lead politically. So I'm guessing that you've seen some of the clips or at least as much as you could stomach of the Capitol rioters, all of whom seem to be very keen to video themselves committing this gigantic crime, you know, sort of screaming into their phones and yelling that they're taking back the country and they've had enough. And this is what the mainstream media has done to them. You've seen, I'm sure, the footage of the people smashing cameras and all this. So what would you say to an anti anger theorist, particularly with respect to the political value of anger, who would say, yeah, well, you know, there was a lot of anger on display in the Capitol, and that's what anger and politics is. It's unrestrained kind of destructive activity.

Myisha Cherry [00:11:10] Yeah, I mean, there's lots of thoughts here, so I have several responses. So one of the responses I would have if this is the poster child for anger, then it's kind of disrespectful to history, right? History of the United States, of lots of people that have been angry, whose anger did not yield those particular results. So why point to the extremity, the most destructive of all actions and says that represents anger, but don't point to other kinds of movements that did not look that way, but was able to be productive and that was able to transform our nation. So I would say, you're taking the easy way out by pointing to the most extreme example. Another thing I would say, I mean, goes back to the distinctions that I just made prior, I think—and I'm hoping that this is what the book would do—is that I hope if anything, what it points to is not anger simpliciter, but to allow people to see the distinct kind of anger that manifested. Right, that it was.... I haven't really thought about this this much since that incident, but one might say, well, that's not anger, that's wipe rage, or that's not just simply anger, but that's narcissistic rage or that's a rogue rage. And what can we do to make sure that whatever the target is, you know, that they think the target is, that they recognize that that's not necessarily a target. Like how can we transform that into a more productive one? I will also say that when I witness January 6th, and one might say that I'm just particularly biased because I do work on anger. What I saw was not necessarily the anger, but I saw the power of conspiracy. I saw the power of more particularly white resentment and white privilege and white supremacy. I saw the power of politicians to influence a massive amount of people. I mean, those are the things that I saw. And you mix all of that with emotion, that's what you get on January 6th. Right. So it's not, by definition anger as if this is in isolation. And I think this point is pointing to one of the arguments that I usually make in reference when people criticize people who are fighting more explicitly for racial justice, for example. Right. So they have a tendency to say, oh, you are angry. They don't necessarily look at the cause of that particular anger. And as I have, you had a tendency to argue that the cause is a little bit more interesting than the anger, because if we address that cause, we probably would not necessarily have the anger. And I want to use the same kind of argument for the storming of the Capitol. Right. Why are these people angry? What has led up to that anger? There's a lot there.

And I think that's more interesting. Right. And I'm not talking about the behavior. I want to make that a separate distinction from angry behavior, from anger itself. Right. And I say that because I think the behavior is also interesting. But I think that the cause of the anger that's been brewing for years and years and years, that has been kind of a status quo of sorts, and media through the president's tweets, that's more interesting for us to address. And I think if we remedy that, then we probably would not have seen the behavior that was on display.

Robert Talisse [00:14:05] That's fabulous. And, you know, you got me thinking, which is always a nice thing. So, you know, I'm wondering if part of what you just said about, you know, the looking at those events through not just the lens of the anger or whatever was being expressed by the people who are very happy to be in front of telephone, you know, with the phone cameras. But the the the rally, the riling up, the rhetoric that you're not going to have a country unless you fight like hell kind of statements. I'm wondering if the kind of account that you just gave of all of that isn't in some way bolstered, helped by the fact that one of the really remarkable things that struck me as I watched was that these are often the very same individuals who were in one frame, you know, seemingly seeing red, blind with rage, actually getting to the chamber of the Senate, and then then they sort of just instantly calm down and wander around not knowing what to do next. The kind of aimless sort of, I'm going to take selfies sitting in this room, because even though two minutes ago I was screaming and yelling about taking the country back and all the rest, but, you know, now that I'm here I guess I just chill out and sit down and have a seat. I mean, it seemed to me almost uncanny that the emotion kind of.... which might suggest, I guess, that the target... this isn't aimed at injustice or this was about making a spectacle, and once they had done that and succeeded in getting to where they were supposed to be, they didn't have any other direction.

Myisha Cherry [00:16:11] Right, right. I mean, this is this is a perfect description of what I call rogue rage, right? Oh, and one of the things that I say in the book is that those with rogue rage are not looking for new laws to be enacted or policies to be reformed or authorities to listen to their demands. Right. Their only aim is to hit back at the world for supposedly hitting at them. Right. Oftentimes this is physical violence, other times it is not. It just happen to be the case on January the 6th, it was a combination of several things. Right. And so once you've done that, that's kind of it and you're probably wondering what else can be done, which is, you know, you contrast that with Lordean rage. And just before I go there, I mean, this is very... this was articulated through lots of people's testimony, like, what are you doing? What are you seeking to do? "Oh, we're storming the Capitol," "Oh, we're starting a revolution." I mean, can you say a little bit more? Right. It was just the hitting back and that was the extent of their anger. You contrast that with what I'm calling Lordean rage, where that would be insufficient.

Robert Talisse [00:17:09] Right. Right.

Myisha Cherry [00:17:10] Right. That would be totally, totally insufficient. And I think that points to something important and distinctive. And we can see the problems that can happen when that is the only aim. And so that's what I'm trying to get us to see that the distinctions, that there's a difference there. And when you have that kind of rage, of course, that's the kind of activity that you're going to be involved in. Whereas if you have another kind of rage that I'm describing, there's other aims that you're seeking and that's going to have an effect on the behavior that you engage in.

Robert Talisse [00:17:39] Good. One last further question about this. Again, what one of the things that struck me, watching this unfold on my TV at home, was the impunity, the expression like, this is... "We're the people. This is my desk, I can sit wherever I like. These are somebody else's papers, oh I'll take photos of it. Oh, somebody would say it's OK to take photos. You know, Ted Cruz would say it's OK to take photos. So, you know, let's just take photos." And I thought that that was one of the respects in which the kind of white privilege that you had mentioned before was really, I mean, unmistakable. They were storming the Capitol. This is a revolution. And, you know, you we all saw the early images of the the young lady who had been pepper sprayed and was, you know, indignant that she had been pepper sprayed because she's storming the revolution. Don't you know what we're doing? Was that part of the... I mean, the way in which the attitude of rage was combined with a kind of impunity about the whole thing, that there will be no consequences for this because of, you know, this is just what we do.

Myisha Cherry [00:19:00] Yeah, there's been, I mean, there's been lots of people who who've pointed to the double standard. And I you know, I go a little bit, I guess you can say kind of meta, in the book about what this double standard is all about. And one of the things that I suggest in one of the chapters is I basically say, listen, it's not just the anger that's a double standard. Right. Anger is connected to valuing. That when you are angry at something it's indicated that you value the thing in which you're responding to. Right. So if someone was to hit my car, I'm going to express kind of anger. And the reason why my anger may increase is that I love the car that I have. I value it. And the fact that someone messed it up, we going to have problems. Right. In so much that if someone was to ball up a random piece of paper in my house, I wouldn't get so angry because I don't value just a random piece of paper. So anger is connected to valuing. It's not only the thing that you value. So if you think that you are the victim and you take yourself to have a certain kind of value, then you're going to have a certain level of anger, and those who are responding to your anger, if they also agree with your level of valuing, then they are more apt to suggest that your anger is fitting. Right. And they're more prone to just let you do what you do. Right. It's kind of a mutual kind of consensus there. And I think the root of that is, "I understand that you value your life and I too also value your life." And that affects my judgment of your anger and moreover, my judgment of your angry behavior. Right. So much so. I mean, we've seen this in and, you know, take it back to the Kavanaugh case, which, you know, you have Dr. Ford, who has to speak very low, in a low voice, although she's the victim, because women are perceived to not have much value. And so her anger would not be justified in that moment. Contrast that with Kavanaugh, right. He's coming with this history of like he's entitled to this. No one's going to get in his way. The Democrats is not going to get in his way. Something that he did years ago is not going to get in his way. And other Republicans are agreeing with this value. Right. So there's a consensus there about what's appropriate. And, you know, you contrast that with Black Lives Matter protests. Black lives don't matter in the United States. At least that's the overall consensus. And so one don't agree with your value, your valuing, your valuation, hence your anger. And so you can see kind of the response to that. So that the double standard, you know, you see the white privilege, but what I see there's a deeper root of supremacy that is rooted in valuing and our judgment about people's behavior, people's anger, and our judgment about their behavior is affected depending on if we agree with that valuation. And we clearly see not just a double standard, but I think it makes us aware that there are certain people whose lives and issues matter and there are other people who don't. And we've seen that play out January the 6th.

Robert Talisse [00:21:51] That's right. So let's move to... We've got a little bit of time left. Let's move to this other aspect of moral life or moral emotional life that you work on, which

is forgiveness. So we've heard a lot of talk about the need for healing and unity. Recently, it was the theme of the latter stages of Joe Biden's campaign and then was part of his sort of victory speech and then his inauguration speech. But I can't recall hearing from anyone, on any side or any position in the political spectrum in the United States, at least recently, I can recall from anybody the idea that healing calls for the recognition of wrongdoing. So there's a lot of talk about healing and getting over divides and unifying the country, but not a lot of talk about whether that or any of those aspirations, such as they are, might require some kind of coming to terms with wrongdoing or something in the past that is responsible [for] or that is the cause of the wound that needs healing. So some recent polling, I'm sure you're aware, shows that there's still an alarming percentage of Republicans who believe that the 2020 election was not fairly won by Joe Biden. So maybe just in your view, like what is the, if any, what's the role of sort of coming to terms with the truth. What role does that have to play in forgiveness? Is it possible to forgive in the absence of any recognition of the events for which forgiveness is necessary or needed?

Myisha Cherry [00:23:43] I'm thinking of two analogies and very different concepts. We have a psychological example, a psychological context, and then we have more of a medical context, dealing with the physical body. So in the psychological context, if you were to go to a psychologist, you say, well, I have this psychological problem, right? Let's just say that it doesn't require medication and it can be remedied by these kind of therapeutic methods. One of the things— I mean, I'm not a psychologist, I mean, the doctorate that I have is more of a Ph.D. in that regard. Well, one of the things I know is that it's no way that you can fix your problem, according to the psychologist, unless we figure out how did you arrive at this problem, because part of fixing it means that you have to address what led us there, right. Whether that's something that you haven't reconciled with the way in which your father treated you, the way that, you know, you can't reconcile with some kind of destructive behavior that you engaged in, or what led you to the destructive... I mean, that has to be taken care of in order to solve your psychological problem. And let's go to the medical context. One of things we know, I'm not an M.D., I'm a Ph.D. Well, one of things I do know, if you were to go to the hospital and you say you were... it's a bullet. You have a bullet wound, no one is going to patch up, just patch up the bullet wound. They had to take the bullet out. Right. They have to..And I'm going to make stuff here. They had to put some stuff in there to kind of cleanse it. Right? Right. And then they have to, like, sew up, you know, and then it's going to take some time for it to heal. Like, that's got the psychological and the medical context. That's how healing begins. Right. So what we learn from these two examples, the healing requires for us to figure out how did we get here and make sure that we stop the destruction that led us here so that we can go forward and in a medical context we learn that we can't go forward unless we get that thing that's destroying us out of us, then we have to cleanse it of all impurities. And then we have to engage in the actual activity of sewing up the wound and then it takes time for that to heal. And I think there are lessons in that. I mean, we like to say, oh, all we have to do is be unified. Let's get some healing, let's forgive. That's too instant. I think that that's just too instant. That's not the way that healing happens. In order for our nation to heal. And this is just a kind of a quick kind of suggestion here, a way for our nation to heal. First of all, we've got to be clear what it needs to be healed from. That's that's very important. But it has to reckon... and I think part of that has to do with reckoning with its history. How did we arrive where we are? Right. The rhetoric, the racism, how do we arrive where we are? And we need to address that. And what we've learned from a lot of commissions that have.... A lot of nations that have ushered themselves into a new democracy. For example, I'm thinking about South Africa. It wasn't called the South African Reconciliation Committee. It was called the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. You got to reckon with your past. You've got to be truthful about how do we get here? And then it requires for you to clean

that stuff up. Right. And cleaning this stuff up is not forgetting it and just act like you can just move on. To clean this stuff up means that we clean up, you know, poor areas. And what I mean by that, it's not just a clean... Where are the social programs? Right. Where's the equity? Where's the opportunities? We need to stop destructive policies that are disenfranchizing millions of people. We have to stop that kind of behavior. Once we begin to sew the wounds, we have to give people time to heal. Right. And, you know, it's not going to happen overnight. It's going to take some time. But I think we have to allow people, to give people the time to do just that. So as opposed to saying, "hey, you haven't forgiven, you're getting in the way of a reconciliation," give people time to heal. But I think none of that can happen. We have to do much more work. It's not an instant thing. Just to suggest that once I say I forgave, once I ask for your forgiveness, things will be all good and neat. It's going to be messy. One of the things I know about what a hospital room looks like, and that's particularly true in this context of COVID-19, right. To get well and to deal with sickness is messy, but unless we're able to really... willing to get messy, we cannot be unified and we cannot heal as a nation.

Robert Talisse [00:28:09] Myisha that was a really fabulous response and a very nice place to end. Except I want to ask one last very quick question. How optimistic are you?

Myisha Cherry [00:28:22] Optimistic? I'm not optimistic, per se. I would say that, you know, I live each and every day believing that with my own efforts and the efforts of people who are like-minded, that we can create something different and something new and a place that we can feel safe and flourish together and live this life. I'm hopeful that I'm not living in vain and anything that I'm working towards and those who are working in solidarity with me, we're working toward something. And I think that allows life to be worth living.

Robert Talisse [00:28:56] That is as good a point to end on, Myisha, as I could imagine. Thank you so much for talking to me today for Why We Argue.

Myisha Cherry [00:29:06] Thank you, Bob. I enjoyed the conversation.

Robert Talisse [00:29:08] You've been listening to The Why We Argue podcast, The Future of Truth Edition. Thanks, as always to our podcast team. Toby Napoletano at the University of California at Merced handles our sound. Elizabeth Della Zazzera at the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute is our communications coordinator. And Drew Johnson handles research for us at the University of Connecticut. We also want to thank, especially, Matt Guariglia for his creative inspiration. The podcast, I repeat, is produced by the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute's The Future of Truth Project, with generous funding from both the University of Connecticut and the Henry Luce Foundation. Thanks for listening to the podcast. Bye for now.