Losing Hope: Injustice and Moral Bitterness

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In this article, I defend a conception of bitterness as a moral emotion and offer an evaluative framework for assessing when instances of bitterness are morally justified. I argue that bitterness is a form of unresolved anger involving a loss of hope that an injustice or other moral wrong will be sufficiently acknowledged and addressed. Orienting the discussion around instances of bitterness in response to social and political injustices, I argue that bitterness is sometimes morally justified even if it is ultimately undesirable to bear. I then suggest that focusing only on the harms and risks of bitterness can distract from its positive role as a moral reminder about a past or persistent injustice, indicating that there is still moral and often political work left to do. Finally, I address the concern that bearing bitterness may lead to despair and inaction. I respond by arguing that moral agents can and do persist in their moral and political struggles with bitterness, and without hope that their efforts will be successful.

I. Feminist Philosophy and Bitterness

> The accusation of bitterness implicitly acknowledges that a great many people have never been granted the social goods likely to lead to the luxury of cultivating sympathetic emotional lives. Bitterness does not always involve gender as a salient determinant of who is most likely to be accused. The angry disadvantaged of a society—visible minorities, aboriginals, the working class, the disabled, the ill, the divorced, and the old—are all targets of this critique.
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> —Sue Campbell, 1994

Feminist philosophers have increasingly recognized that it is individuals at the margins of society who are most likely to be accused of bitterness. To call someone "bitter" is an accusation because it is assumed that the person is not merely angry but

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still angry, and that the point of anger has expired. The accusation implies that the person ought to move on and let go. This understanding of bitterness as an inherently inappropriate and destructive emotion stands in contrast to other forms of anger that have earned much attention and, often, moral praise in the philosophical literature. Resentment, for example, is praised when it demonstrates self-respect and an appreciation for morality.

Discussions of bitterness are far less common, and have taken place most frequently among feminist philosophers who have noticed the tendency to categorize socially and politically disadvantaged individuals as bitter and not just angry. In her widely cited 1991 article entitled "What's Wrong with Bitterness?," Lynne McFall defends the notion that bitterness is sometimes rationally appropriate and morally justified (McFall 1991). On her view, moral bitterness is a refusal to forgive and forget moral wrongs that have disappointed one's important hopes. This article paved the way for Sue Campbell's discussion of bitterness in her influential 1994 article "Being Dismissed: The Politics of Emotional Expression," which explores the ways in which the accusation of bitterness is used politically as a form of silencing and emotional dismissal (Campbell 1994). Following Campbell, philosophers such as Susan Babbitt, Diana Tietjens Meyers, Sylvia Burrow, Margaret Urban Walker, and Kathryn Norlock have built upon McFall's article to continue discussions of the significance of bitterness to feminist moral and political thought (Babbitt 1997; Meyers 2004; Burrow 2005; Walker 2006; Norlock 2009).

But although there is much to be learned from McFall's discussion of bitterness, significant problems with her view have gone largely unnoticed. The purpose of this article is to expose these problems, and to offer an alternative account of bitterness that more accurately traces the character of the emotion, as well as its moral and political value. I begin, in section II, by considering James Baldwin's testimony about his father's and his own bitterness to motivate moral inquiry into the emotion (Baldwin 1955). I then consider McFall's account of bitterness as an attempt to capture experiences like Baldwin's. Drawing upon Campbell, I show that McFall's framework for evaluating instances of bitterness unintentionally renders the bitterness of members of oppressed groups rationally inappropriate and morally unjustified. But whereas Campbell takes this consequence to suggest that we should block accusations of bitterness for political reasons, I suggest that the consequence reflects a broader problem with McFall's understanding of the emotion. The emotion is not, as McFall suggests, primarily about the disappointment of important hopes, but violations of moral expectations: those expectations we have of one another to abide by moral norms. But hope is still important to understanding bitterness. I argue that bitterness is a form of unresolved anger involving a loss of hope that an injustice or other moral wrong will be sufficiently acknowledged and addressed.

In section III, I show that delving deeper into the experience of bitterness reveals that the emotion is sometimes morally justified even if it is psychologically and emotionally painful to bear. In section IV, I point out that focusing only on the harms of bitterness can distract from its positive moral and political value: namely, its role as a "moral reminder" about a past or persistent injustice, indicating that there is still

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moral and often political work left to do. I also consider the effects of bitterness on individuals' agency. I show that, though bitterness involves a loss of hope, it does not necessarily lead to despair and inaction.

II. What is Moral Bitterness?

Bitterness is an emotion that can manifest in a wide range of contexts. One can be bitter about such things as being diagnosed with a terminal illness or the loss of a loved one due to an accident. Like resentment, bitterness is not always an emotion that manifests in response to perceived moral failures on the part of others. But I want to understand bitterness as a *moral* emotion, that is, an emotional response to perceived moral failures in the form of actions, omissions, practices, and policies that are within the power of human moral agents. I am particularly interested in instances of bitterness that respond to social and political injustices targeting members of whole social groups.

James Baldwin's testimony about his father's and his own experience of bitterness from his *Notes of a Native Son* illuminates exactly the kind of bitterness that I want to understand. In recounting his father's life and death, Baldwin writes:

> He had lived and died in an intolerable bitterness of spirit and it frightened me, as we drove him to the graveyard through those unquiet, ruined streets, to see how powerful and overflowing this bitterness could be and to realize that this bitterness was now mine.
>
> When he died I had been away from home for a little over a year. In that year I had had time to become aware of the meaning of all my father's bitter warnings . . . I had discovered the weight of white people in the world. I saw that this had been for my ancestors and now would be for me an awful thing to live with and that the bitterness which had helped to kill my father could also kill me. (Baldwin 1955, 90)

Baldwin's bitterness evolved from his lived experience under racial oppression. He writes of his time living and working in New Jersey where he came to understand the bitter claims his father communicated to him about white people. Through the culmination of daily experiences of injustice—being denied service at restaurants, bars, bowling alleys, being refused places to live, getting fired, and so on—racism began to take its toll; Baldwin became embittered.

Baldwin was well aware of the harms of bitterness to his father's and his own psychological and emotional well-being, relationships, and behavior, and much of his essay is dedicated to exploring them. So although *Notes of a Native Son* is infused with bitterness, it is at the same time a struggle to overcome the emotion toward fighting injustice "free of hatred and despair" (Baldwin 1955, 604). Baldwin is, on my view, probably right that living without bitterness is a better state of affairs than bearing it. But it does not follow from the recognition that bitterness is undesirable that the emotion lacks moral value, even for the agent who bears it. Part of what

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makes Baldwin's essay so insightful are the ways in which bitterness taints the narrative, conveying the darkness of what it is like to live under racial oppression. Bitterness is, in this narrative, part of Baldwin's moral perception: it helps to focus his attention on the bleak realities of persistent racism that blacks in America face.

McFall takes up the challenge of developing an account of bitterness as a moral emotion to make sense of experiences like Baldwin's. She describes bitterness as a refusal to forgive and forget moral wrongs that have disappointed one's important hopes. To be bitter, on her view, is "to recite one's angry litany of loss, long past the time others may care to listen" (McFall 1991, 146). Bitterness can be either active, manifesting in vocal and vengeful forms, or passive, experienced more as deep sorrow. It can also be partial and object-directed, as when it is about losing one's job due to discrimination, or characteristic of a person, as when bitterness results from a pattern of discrimination and ends up encompassing how one perceives important aspects of one's life.

McFall argues that bitterness can be rationally appropriate and morally justified[1] when it responds to avoidable harms and losses brought about by human agency. Although I wish to keep the question of what bitterness is separate from the question of what (if anything) makes bitterness rationally appropriate or morally justified, McFall's account of how instances of bitterness can be evaluated reveals much about her understanding of the nature of the emotion, and where she goes astray. On her view, since bitterness is about the disappointment of hopes, the question of what makes bitterness rationally appropriate and morally justified is one about whether the hope disappointed was legitimate.

McFall argues that hopes that are extremely unlikely to be realized (either statistically or specific to the case in question) cannot be legitimate, where "extreme unlikelihood" of a hope's being realized is relative to individuals. To use McFall's example: whereas the hope to escape may be legitimate for an escape artist in certain challenging situations, my hope to escape may be illegitimate if it is highly unlikely that I will succeed. Her argument is that we cannot rationally hope for things that are highly unlikely to obtain.[2]

McFall adds a further condition: legitimate hopes are ones that have "been raised by one person in another through an explicit statement of intention" (McFall 1991, 149). Though she does not say much about this second condition, McFall provides an example of sexual betrayal that clarifies how the two conditions work together in practice. She argues that, in the case of sexual betrayal, the harm done is the disappointment of the hope for sexual fidelity. So in considering whether an instance of bitterness in response to sexual betrayal is justified, we ask whether the hope of fidelity is a legitimate hope in that instance. McFall argues:

> On the assumption that sexual fidelity is possible … and assuming one's lover is not exceptionally gifted in respect of waywardness, and one's vows or other communications contained an explicit statement of intention to be "true," the lover who was betrayed had her legitimate, important hope of fidelity disappointed, and so partial, passive bitterness is justified. (150)[3]

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It is a striking consequence of McFall's view that it renders the bitterness of members of oppressed groups rationally inappropriate and morally unjustified. But if the relevant question in assessing bitterness is whether the hope it is based in is legitimate, then much of the bitterness of individuals who belong to privileged groups will be more justified than the bitterness of members of oppressed groups, since these differential positions come to bear on the opportunities and entitlements that we have. Campbell, calling attention to this concern, asks: "What can a woman of Color in america legitimately hope for?" (Campbell 1994, 52). She quotes Audre Lorde, who points out that the anger of women of color responds to being silenced, unchosen, hated, and having their perceived "lack of humanness" taken for granted (Lorde 1984). Since these women know that their important hopes are not likely to be realized, their bitterness would be rationally inappropriate and morally unjustified on McFall's account. Her view unintentionally rules out the possibility of morally justified bitterness for exactly those individuals whom we tend to think have good reasons for having the emotion, if anyone does.[4]

It is important to note that, even if McFall's view is incorrect, her error in understanding has not interfered with feminist philosophers' use of her essay as inspiration for uncovering important insights about the emotion. As Campbell made clear, the label "bitterness" has been used politically to silence and dismiss disadvantaged members of society, functioning to shift the focus away from unjust circumstances toward individuals' supposed pathological emotional states. But I worry that, although this insight points to a political danger of using the term *bitterness*, it does not help to understand why bitterness comes about, the experience of moral bitterness, and its effects on the characters of individuals who bear it. Bitterness is, after all, not just a political charge but also a felt emotion;[5] and it is an emotion that has been noted by some members of oppressed groups, like Baldwin, as one consequence of their experiences living under oppressive conditions. Bitterness, in these cases, manifests as what Alison M. Jaggar calls an "outlaw emotion" (Jaggar 1989, 166), contributing to the experiences and perceptions of members of oppressed groups who find themselves resisting, emotionally, the unjust conditions in which they exist. Since bitterness is often met with dismissal from the larger society that views the emotion as inappropriate to bear, correcting our understanding of bitterness is important for resisting dominant social understandings, making room for new insights about how bitterness might contribute to moral perception and agency.

Fortunately, the problem that the bitterness of members of oppressed groups will be categorized as unjustified is a consequence for McFall's understanding of bitterness, not a problem inherent to the emotion. Specifically, her view does not accurately represent the relevance of hope to bitterness. In the sexual betrayal case, McFall thinks that the harm done is the disappointment of one's hope for sexual fidelity. But when I enter into an exclusive romantic relationship, I don't merely hope for sexual fidelity; I *expect* it. Similarly, I don't merely hope for justice and equality; I have a moral expectation[6] that others will act in accordance with justice and equality. That these are moral expectations, not merely hopes, can be seen in how we respond when others act contrary to sexual fidelity, justice, and equality. If my partner in an

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exclusive romantic relationship cheats, I may become resentful; my resentment expresses my perception that I have been *wronged*, not just that my partner has disappointed my hope that he or she would be sexually faithful.

This alternative description better explains how bitterness is connected to anger.[7] Campbell points out that an expression of bitterness was at one time "intended anger," where the recounting of injury and the failure of others to listen combine to form the emotion. Margaret Urban Walker argues that, "without at least the acknowledgement by others of serious wrong and the need for repair, or without a clear demonstration of concern for suffering and loss of victims, victims and the families of victims fall prey to bitterness and despair" (Walker 2006, 108). Anger is thus often *prior* to (but also part of) bitterness; we become angry about a perceived wrong, and when it is not met with an adequate reparative response, bitterness ensues.

Walker also points out that, in bitterness, "one insists on what is right but with a sense of futility and alienation" (108). "Futility" in this sentence is important. Bitterness in the psychological literature has been described as a mixture of anger and hopelessness. For example, Hansjörg Znoj explains that "bitterness or embitterment can be seen as the product of a personal story of perceived injustice. The emotional quality is characterized by resignation (hopelessness) and anger" (Znoj 2011, 10). Beate Schrank and Astrid Grant Hay similarly point out that the psychological impact of the perceived injustice involves dimensions of hopelessness about goals, relationships, one's sense of control, and expectations about the future (Schrank and Hay 2011). This is unsurprising. If bitterness responds to a perceived moral wrong in which those whom we think have wronged others and us fail to make amends, we may lose hope that they will ever acknowledge and address the wrong and meet our moral expectations in the future.[8]

The connection between moral expectation and hope is complex. *Legitimate* moral expectations are fixed by moral reasons in the sense that, even when it is extremely unlikely that they will be met, moral expectations continue to make demands on moral agents. For example, individuals who experience persistent injustice may lose hope that the injustice will ever end, but the legitimacy of their moral expectation for justice and the further moral expectation that the *in*justice will be addressed are unaffected by the likelihood of those expectations being met.[9] In bitterness, we begin to lose hope that others will act in accordance with the moral expectations we continue to endorse.

The present analysis suggests that philosophers' current understanding of bitterness falls short in significant ways. Bitterness is not primarily about the disappointment of important hopes, but violations of moral expectations. It is a residual emotion we experience when a perceived wrong has not been put to rest through reconciliation or repair. Bitterness involves anger, but it is, to varying degrees, *hopeless* anger. In bitterness, we remain committed to the moral expectations others have violated, and at the same time, begin to lose hope that they will attend to the harms about which we're angry and abide by our moral expectations in the future.

Consequently, to call individuals bitter *as* moral condemnation when the emotion is responding to perceptions of injustice is to illegitimately silence individuals who

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may be expressing legitimate moral expectations. This is consistent with Campbell's insight that calling someone bitter shifts attention away from interpreters' failures to listen and act toward the individual's emotional states such that the charge of bitterness itself becomes a reason or excuse for not listening. She argues that we are "better off in blocking the criticism than internalizing this description of our attitude and trying to defend our bitterness" for this reason (Campbell 1994, 52). But I want to emphasize the political importance of having the conceptual resources to say that instances of bitterness such as Baldwin's can be morally justified emotional responses. Even if Campbell were right that the accusation of bitterness should ideally be resisted, it can be practically very difficult to do so. For individuals like Baldwin who know that they are bitter, it may even be impossible. When one comes to recognize that one bears the emotion, being able to identify that it is justified and to resist the charge of "craziness" that accompanies the charge of bitterness may be the most empowering possibility available in nonideal circumstances.

There is also an increasing political danger of failing to acknowledge the presence of bitterness in social and political contexts. One only needs to pay a visit to men's rights activism websites, browse the #WhiteLivesMatter twitter hashtag, or read the comments sections of news articles to see that members of privileged groups who feel threatened by social change bear their own bitterness. So although members of oppressed groups have most frequently been targets of bitterness as an accusation, they are not the only ones who experience and express the emotion. If feminists want to be able to categorize the bitterness of men's rights activists and believers in reverse racism as morally unjustified, it is important to have an evaluative framework for doing so. Otherwise, such activists and believers can claim the same political reasons to block charges of bitterness that members of oppressed groups can claim.

In what follows, I offer an evaluative framework for sorting through justified and unjustified instances of bitterness to help guard against these risks.[10]

III. Bitterness as a Morally Justifiable Response

I'll begin with Campbell's concerns about evaluating bitterness for rationality. She states:

> My concern … is that calculating rationality may put responsibility on the individual for her attitudes or actions without offering ways of assessing that individual's situation against the political options of others. If, as I believe to be the case, assessments of rationality are connected most deeply to questions of intelligible agency, what is not within my power to affect may not provide a rational ground for my actions or responses. (Campbell 1994, 51)

This passage suggests two concerns: that evaluating bitterness for rational appropriateness involves focusing on the rationality of the person accused of bitterness while failing to attend to the importance of the person's political situation in comparison to

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others, and that talk of rationality may not make sense in this context because bitterness seems unconnected to what the person is capable of doing and affecting.

Burrow, quoting this passage, responds to Campbell's second concern. She argues that we can assess the emotions by noticing that "rationality" in this context is a function of the appropriateness of a response to some situation (Burrow 2005). Burrow thus disagrees with Campbell that questions about rationality are restricted to questions about intelligible agency, and points out that it is the very nature of some emotions that they respond to events over which individuals do not have control. But there is a further question as to what kind of rational assessment is most important in evaluating emotions. In evaluating emotions when they are connected to moral judgments, the most important question is whether there are good moral reasons for the emotional response. Our evaluations are thus best framed in terms of whether the emotion is morally justified given the context in question.

But Burrow notes her hesitation about doing any kind of evaluative work when it comes to bitterness. She states:

> If we are in the company of persons we consider capable of giving uptake to our emotions, it would be legitimate to expect them to do so. We might wish to add a moral force to this expectation as well, and claim that others *should* give uptake to legitimate instances of bitterness. But I hesitate to take this approach, because we cannot always expect others to care about our losses of hope or . . . any other feature of our lives. (Burrow 2005, 30)

Burrow's hesitation reflects her agreement with McFall that bitterness is about the disappointment of important hopes: if we can't expect others to care about our "losses of hope," then there may not be grounds for demanding the uptake that bitterness seeks. But I have argued that bitterness responds primarily to violations of moral expectations, not disappointed hopes. If this is right, then when an injustice has not been adequately addressed, the justification for the emotion's demand for uptake is already there: moral failure calls for apologies, reconciliation, and repair, where the appropriate response depends on the context in question. There are, in other words, moral grounds for demanding the uptake that bitterness seeks.

In response to Campbell's first concern, I suggest that evaluating bitterness can also help to call attention to the person's political situation rather than dismiss or distract from it. When bitterness responds to a perceived injustice that remains insufficiently addressed, then bitterness *calls attention to the perceived injustice*. It expresses that the injustice, if there is one, has not received a sufficient reparative response. So considering the question of whether some instance of bitterness is morally justified consists almost exclusively in asking whether there is some injustice that requires attention and action. It is a way of engaging with the moral reasons behind the person's emotional experience, reasons that, in social and political contexts, express how she construes her social and political circumstances against those of others.

It does seem, then, that bitterness can be evaluated as morally justified or unjustified and that doing this evaluative work can call attention to rather than ignore or

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dismiss the existence of unjust social and political conditions. But we have seen that McFall's account of how we should evaluate instances of bitterness problematically depends upon assessing the legitimacy of individuals' hopes. So we need an alternative.

I suggest that bitterness can be evaluated similarly to anger. On my view, anger is morally justified when there really is an injustice or other moral wrong to which it is responding (not just a perceived one), and resentment is the appropriate kind of anger when the wrong was done to oneself, a close loved one, or a social group to which one belongs (Stockdale 2013). Since bitterness is a form of anger, the same is true: there must actually be an injustice or other moral wrong for the emotion to be morally justified. For example, white men might experience resentment when they hear the concept of "white male privilege" because they perceive it as an unjust attack on their identities, and they may become embittered when others fail to affirm that the use of the term constitutes an injustice done to them, and when progress toward gender and racial equality continues. But since the bitterness is responding to a discourse that is advancing justified moral and political aims—that is, the elimination of *injustice*—it is not morally justified.

Importantly, by evaluating the bitterness of members of privileged groups, such as white men's bitterness in response to the discourse of white male privilege, another way in which bitterness is used politically becomes apparent. Sometimes, members of privileged groups express bitterness to articulate moral progress as unacknowledged injustices done to them, which in turn, helps to keep members of oppressed groups in their place. Bitter expressions such as "that policy is sexist against men" and "blaming white people for that is racist" are ways in which the moral language used by members of privileged groups works to maintain their privilege at the expense of others. Their bitterness is, in at least one sense, practically rational: it serves to protect individuals' privileged positions. But the relevant question is a moral one: that is, whether the bitterness is responding to a legitimate injustice that has not received a sufficient reparative response. It is clear that white men's bitterness in response to discourse about sexism and racism is morally unjustified despite its being instrumental to their aims.

But what makes bitterness, not just another form of anger such as resentment, morally justified? For bitterness to be justified, there must be good reasons for the agent to have lost hope that the injustice about which she is angry will receive a sufficient response.[11] When wrongdoers apologize and display remorse, and when the moral community responds with acknowledgment and sufficient efforts toward repair, the moral expectation that harms will be acknowledged and addressed has been met; there is, as a result, good reason to regain hope that the same injustice will not be repeated or tolerated. In these cases, there may be no moral work left to do but for the victim, if she chooses, to forgive. What constitutes a sufficient response (and who needs to give it) is necessarily contextual, and depends upon the nature of the injustice, who is responsible, the harm caused to individuals and groups, the social and cultural context in which the injustice occurred, among other things. But what seems necessary is that the injustice is acknowledged *as* injustice, and that steps are taken toward repair.[12]

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But bitterness, even morally justified bitterness, can be infectious and affect the ways in which individuals perceive objects, people, and events such that they come to see the negative in everything. In a political context, women's bitterness about gender oppression may cause them to lose hope in all men, even those men whom they have good reasons to believe are feminist allies. I think that bitterness in this sort of case is justified but misdirected; emotions are sometimes themselves morally justified even when they are directed toward the wrong things.

The possibility of evaluating instances of bitterness does, however, become complicated with the passing of time: as we live on, our emotional lives are affected by new experiences that may enhance, distort, or diminish how we think and feel about injustices done to us. For example, the passing of time in conjunction with new morally good experiences such as improved social and political conditions might make possible the rebuilding of hope even when forgiveness for the original injustice might not be possible. If the same wrong is not done to me again, and if I see improvements in my moral community in how it responds to cases like mine, I might have good reasons to be hopeful that the injustice will not be repeated.

Martin Luther King, Jr., in describing his encounters with some white people at Morehouse College who were committed to racial justice, describes the diminishing of his resentment that accompanied meeting white people whom he learned he could count on to stand by his moral and political aims. King explains: "The wholesome relations we had at the Intercollegiate Council convinced me that we had many white persons as allies, particularly among the younger generation. I had been ready to resent the whole white race, but as I got to see more white people, my resentment was softened, and a spirit of cooperation took its place" (King 2001, 14). The same diminishing can happen with bitterness. Even when injustice persists and sufficient efforts toward repair have not been made, positive encounters with others who endorse and abide by our moral expectations can instill our hope that moral and political change will come. However, the passing of time in conjunction with new, morally bad experiences such as worse social and political conditions may exacerbate bitterness. If similar injustices are repeated or systemic injustice continues, I may lose even more hope that perpetrators, those complicit in injustice, and my moral community will ever affirm my claims to moral entitlement. My exacerbated bitterness may be morally justified as I acquire more reasons to be bitter even if its severity was not justified before.

These possibilities show that it is possible to do some evaluative work in understanding bitterness as it changes, distorts, diminishes, or is exacerbated over time, but they also show just how messy the emotions can be and become. The *natural* diminishing of bitterness further complicates moral evaluations. Sometimes, bitterness does not diminish as an understandable response to new experiences, but because time has distanced us so far from the event that it no longer bears as much meaning in our lives. The idea that "time heals all wounds" sometimes resonates with our experiences; how we perceive, interpret, and attach meaning to events may change as we live on. I see the changing nature of our emotional experiences and expressions as an inevitable challenge for evaluating bitterness, but it is a challenge that is shared with all of the emotions insofar as they depend upon our continued interactions with the world.

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IV. Loss of Hope and Agency

There is a further and pressing challenge for a defense of moral bitterness. Even if people are morally justified in their bitterness, we often urge them to overcome the emotion because we think that adopting other strategies will be more effective in their moral and political struggles. The loss of hope that perpetrators of moral harms and persistent injustice will ever acknowledge and address one's moral claims may involve, at the same time, a loss of hope that one's own agency will make a difference to those struggles. This apparent deficiency is particularly worrisome for cases of social and political injustice that are alive and well today. If, for example, individuals who belong to groups that are subjected to racism have become embittered, they may no longer believe that their own agency in fighting racism will be effective. There may seem to be no point in continuing to demand that perpetrators of and those complicit in injustice acknowledge their attitudes and actions as wrong and change their ways when they have shown, time and time again, that they will not do so.

I do not think that bearing bitterness is always detrimental to positive action, but it is important to reflect on what it would mean if bitterness were necessarily damaging in this way. It is tempting to say that if bitterness is damaging to moral and political agency, then bitterness is counterproductive to one's moral and political aims and is thus not morally or politically valuable. But focusing only on the harms of bitterness can distract from its role as a moral reminder that marks a past event or present situation as a context in which injustice occurred, or is continuing. As McFall suggests, bitterness "bears witness" to important moral truths (McFall 1991, 155). Individuals not directly or personally connected to injustices more easily forget that they have occurred. Or, because of their privileged social locations, they are unable to see injustice *as* injustice, and dismiss it. In bitterness, individuals remind the moral community of injustices that stand in its past and present as unfinished moral business, injustices that continue to require attention and action. The emotion refuses to allow injustice to be forgotten and communicates that repairing or constructing good moral and political relations will not take place until harms are adequately addressed.

Here, I think, is where Campbell's insights as to how the charge of bitterness is used politically to silence and dismiss connect with her more recent work on memory. She anticipates this connection in her "Being Dismissed" in claiming that "the accusation of bitterness not only refuses to grant authority to judgments of wrongdoing but also refuses to grant authority to what counts for others as significant memory" (Campbell 1994, 53). In a chapter entitled "Remembering for the Future" from her 2014 book *Our Faithfulness to the Past*, Campbell explains that one of the aims of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission is for nonindigenous Canadians to come to remember the past in ways that stop suppressing and ignoring the history and legacy of the Indian Residential Schools (Campbell 2014, 136). She points out that nonindigenous Canadians have "collectively refused" to hear the memory of indigenous Canadians. One way to refuse to listen is to call indigenous Canadians bitter as moral condemnation, demanding that they move on from the past. As Campbell noted, years before, in "Being Dismissed": "The accusation of bitterness

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may further undermine the struggle for group memory by failing again to provide the uptake that leaves the recounting of incidents established as public record" (Campbell 1994, 53). In the Canadian context, Campbell suggests that renewing their relationships with indigenous Canadians requires that nonindigenous Canadians keep the history and legacy of the Residential Schools alive in their memories. Through memory activities such as honoring, witnessing, and offering apologies, nonindigenous Canadians can begin to reconstruct their connections to the past and reshape their present relationships for the future.

Remembering is crucial to responding to the morally justified bitterness of members of historically disadvantaged groups. The emotion does not call upon privileged members of society to undo the past, but to listen to the accounts of those affected by historical and ongoing injustices and to act in ways that will not repeat the injustices in the future. If, for example, nonindigenous Canadians respond to the resentment and bitterness of indigenous Canadians not with silencing and dismissal, but with listening and openness to re-remembering their collective history from a perspective that acknowledges the fact of injustice, and if wrongdoers commit to abiding by shared moral expectations from now on, reconciliation might become possible. Understanding bitterness as a moral reminder makes sense of the fact that it is the responsibility of *others* to listen and to act: perpetrators, the moral community, and institutions that continue to support colonial practices and policies. This is important moral work even if bitterness is ill equipped in motivating indigenous Canadians to engage in active protest against colonialism.

I also think that bitterness can be consistent with positive action. Lisa Tessman offers insights into this possibility through her work on pessimism, which she understands similarly to how I understand bitterness as involving a loss of hope. Tessman argues that individuals living under oppressive conditions who have become pessimistic about their circumstances can still find ways to go on politically even in the absence of hope (Tessman 2009). The reason is that some pessimists sustain other moral virtues that enable them to actively resist oppression even when they know that their moral and political aims will likely not be achieved. Pessimists' self-respect, integrity, and their "sense of a 'claim' on the sort of flourishing that is unattainable under conditions of oppression" guard against the concern that they will give up on their morally praiseworthy ends (Tessman 2009, 14–15). Tessman draws upon Derrick Bell's testimony of his interaction with Biona MacDonald, a black civil rights activist, to illustrate what struggling against oppression in the absence of hope looks like. Bell explains:

> I realized that Mrs. MacDonald didn't say she risked everything because she hoped or expected to win out over the whites who, as she well knew, held all the economic and political power, and the guns as well. Rather, she recognized that—powerless as she was—she had and intended to use courage and determination as a weapon to, in her words, "harass white folks." (Bell 1992, xi–xii)

This example suggests that pessimism is consistent with other moral values and traits that motivate individuals to act against injustice even in the absence of hope that

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the injustice will end. Tessman and Bell nicely attend to the complexity of moral characters and how questions about motivation cannot be answered without considering the various beliefs, traits, values, and emotions of individuals that motivate or deter them from action only when taken together. Similarly, by focusing solely on the risk that bitterness can lead to despair and inaction, it is easy to miss seeing the ways in which bitterness can be deeply connected to our moral convictions and other moral values and traits. If I *believe* that I, someone else, or certain social groups have been wronged, if I have the *courage* to stand up for what I think is right, and if I am *determined* to do so even in the face of dismissal, resistance, and penalties, I may be motivated to continue in my struggles against oppression even when I have lost hope that my efforts will be successful.

Tessman even thinks that pessimism can be compatible with hope. She recognizes that hope and faith were essential to the Civil Rights Movement, such as in the speeches and writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., and suggests that there may be reasons to encourage hope even when it would be unwarranted for members of oppressed groups to hope that their moral and political goals will be achieved. Tessman thus supports a kind of pessimism that is compatible with hope because, as she says, "one might still sustain hope that one's prediction of failure will turn out to be wrong" (Tessman 2009, 10). I think that, in many contexts, a more specific role for hope is consistent with bitterness. The emotion is not global in the way that a bitter disposition would be, a disposition that would taint individuals' perceptions of all people and events in the world. It is consistent with finding and cultivating new hopes, such as the hope that oneself alongside other members of oppressed groups and those standing in solidarity will support one another in struggles against injustice. And this hope, one that brings people together who share common experiences or values, can inspire new ways of thinking and acting together that increase the likelihood that their claims to moral entitlement might someday be affirmed. Joining with others who share one's moral and political goals, and uniting with them in collective action, can restore and strengthen hope for the future when hope might otherwise be lost. So perhaps, as Norlock argues, since bitterness in its more active form seeks out a better world, it "may hold out more hope for the future" (Norlock 2009, 89).

V. Reflections on Moral Responsibility

I have argued that moral bitterness is a kind of unresolved anger that ruminates about a past wrong or persistent injustice without much hope for acknowledgment and repair. Correcting our understanding of bitterness as a moral emotion invites an important shift in our evaluative language: it is not individuals' responsibility to defend the rationality of their disappointed hopes to show that their bitterness is morally justified. Though it may ultimately be better for moral agents who bear bitterness to challenge and overcome it for themselves, focusing only on the harmfulness of the emotion and on the personal responsibility of the individuals who bear it

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can distract from the individual and collective responsibilities of others to acknowledge and address injustices. As Meyers speculates:

> If social groups were organized to seize upon claims kindled by hypersensitivity, paranoia, anger, and bitterness and to give them a good airing and a fair hearing, insightful moral perception might be greatly increased, and emancipation might be hastened. (Meyers 2004, 153)

The question of moral responsibility in this context is best framed in terms of potential interpreters' responsibility to seek out understanding of the moral reasons for bitterness, the perceived injustices to which it is attending, and to figure out, based on their own social and political locations in relation to the bitter person, how they should respond.

Notes

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1. She does not clearly separate these two ways of evaluating bitterness (that is, for "rationality" and for "moral justifiability").

2. There is now an emerging literature on the rationality of hope. Philosophers such as Luc Bovens, Philip Pettit, and Adrienne M. Martin have argued for nuanced accounts of the rationality of hope involving appeals to both epistemic and practical reason (Bovens 1999; Pettit 2004; Martin 2014). Though there is much more to be said about how to best evaluate hope, I agree with McFall that hopes that are highly unlikely to be realized are not well-placed. Her understanding is thus sufficient for our purpose here.

3. This example suggests that, for McFall, what we know about the likelihood of a hope to be realized matters for its legitimacy. If the information available to me suggests that it is likely that my partner will remain sexually faithful, then even if it is in fact *un*likely that my partner will remain sexually faithful (for example, because she has convincingly lied), my hope is legitimate, and thus bitterness based in it is justified.

4. It is also not a consequence that all philosophers who cite McFall may notice. For example, Kathryn Norlock suggests that in the case of two South African women's bitterness in response to a white police officer's murder of their husbands, we should *extend* McFall's argument to characterize their bitterness as appropriate since, otherwise, we

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would be letting the officer "off the moral hook" (Norlock 2009, 89). But McFall's account cannot be extended to track our moral evaluation of this case because the women's hopes were not likely to be realized; and it is the likelihood of realization that makes a hope legitimate and thus the bitterness based in it rational and morally justified on McFall's view.

5. Meyers similarly points out that, though charges of what she calls "rancorous emotional attitudes" including hypersensitivity, paranoia, anger, and bitterness are often fabricated for political purposes, sometimes ascriptions of these emotional attitudes are warranted. She states: "Despite an element of hyperbole embedded in these ascriptions, they are not always distortions arising from patriarchal conventions of interpretation" (Meyers 2004, 147).

6. I follow Margaret Urban Walker, Adrienne M. Martin, and others in understanding normative expectations as expectations for which we hold others responsible whom we consider capable of responding to reasons (Walker 2006, 68; Martin 2014, 123). I use the language of "moral expectations" to focus on normative expectations that involve distinctly moral reasons.

7. As Martin notes, "expectation brings with it a sense of quasi-entitlement that hope lacks, with the result that disappointed expectations produce greater anger than disappointed hopes" (Martin 2014, 31).

8. I tend to think of the classic angry response as something like, "I can't *believe* she would do that. As if she thinks she can treat me that way!," whereas the bitter response is something like "Of course she behaved that way. What else did you think might happen? She has shown her true colors."

9. Babbitt calls attention to the fact that the bitterness of members of oppressed groups is often responding to an absence of something to which they are morally entitled. She argues that the hopes of members of oppressed groups should be considered "rational" in the sense that they aim at ends that are morally good (for example, self-respect, dignity, and autonomy) even though they were not likely to be realized (Babbitt 1997, 124). I make a similar argument in section III.

10. There are complexities that I do not explore, such as the question of who gets to evaluate others' emotions. This question reminds us that individuals do not have epistemic access to all of the relevant experiences, perspectives, and interests that contribute to others' emotional responses, especially when others' experiences, perspectives, and so on are fundamentally different from their own. This is, I think, an important question; but it is one that can be asked only in considering concrete cases in which we know who those moral agents are.

11. On the framework I offer, the bitterness of members of oppressed groups, such as Baldwin's bitterness, will be categorized as morally justified inasmuch as their bitterness is responding to real injustices that often go unacknowledged or addressed. This evaluative claim does not entail that individuals should embrace and sustain bitterness despite its harmful effects. Emotions are sometimes justified responses to our circumstances even if they are undesirable to bear, and even if we can or should work to overcome them for our well-being and for our relationships.

12. Beyond the responsibility of others to listen to bitterness, and to acknowledge and address the injustices to which it is responding, particular moral agents might be well-

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positioned to address the person's emotional experience itself. For example, depending on one's specific relationship to the embittered person, responding in genuinely empathetic ways may be helpful to the individual who is struggling emotionally. Acknowledging, listening, and offering a safe space for emotional expression are ways of resisting the temptation to dismiss another's emotions—and this is particularly important to remember in the case of bitterness, where one is so often asked to "leave the room before a conversation starts" (Campbell 1994, 49).

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