

## Fighting Fire with Fire: Mobilizing Anger for Climate Justice

Laura Silva & Alexandre Gajevic Sayegh

### 1. Introduction

Philosophers are beginning to pay attention to climate emotions -- emotions experienced in the context of the climate crisis. Psychologists have been studying these emotions for longer than philosophers and have highlighted that they are among the most important predictors of climate change-related judgments and behaviors (see Brosch, 2021 for a review of this literature). A central debate in climate psychology and communication is whether it is most beneficial to induce positive or negative emotions regarding climate change (Brosch 2021). For example, while despair may be justified given the current state of affairs, it may lead to inaction because agents become unmotivated to act as they consider the battle to already be lost. On the other hand, while some hope may be justified, it can make agents complacent and overly optimistic that change will arise without much effort. One emotion that has received surprisingly little attention in this psychological literature is anger (Stanley et al. 2021; Sabherwal et al. 2021). In philosophy as well, eco-anger has been neglected -- the dominant climate emotions studied are hope and anxiety (Moellendorf, 2022; Mosquera & Jylhä, 2022). This is perhaps particularly surprising in the context of philosophical research as the climate crisis is often characterized as an issue of justice, and anger is seen as the paradigmatic response to injustice. Our two main aims in this paper are, (i) to establish that eco-anger is a justified response to climate injustice and (ii) to argue that eco-anger is beneficial to the fight for climate justice. To make this argument we first make clear what is meant by ‘climate emotions’, and by the rationality of these emotions, before arguing that anger is non-instrumentally justified, i.e., fitting (because the climate crisis involves injustices and anger is an apt response to injustice), and instrumentally rational (because it can lead to beneficial individual and collective actions). In so doing we identify targets at which eco-anger should be directed and highlight climate obstructionists as the most pressing target. We end with recommendations for how to mobilize anger for climate justice.

### 2. Climate Emotions

#### 2.1 Objects and targets

We often talk of climate emotions without specifying exactly what these emotions are about. This is important, however, for both work in philosophy and psychology, as it can help fine-tune experimental design. When we use the prefix ‘eco’ to refer to emotions (e.g., eco-anger, eco-anxiety, etc.) we are referring to climate emotions, i.e., emotions that have the climate crisis, or aspects/components of it, as their objects. A few distinctions regarding the objects of emotions will be helpful here. The first is the distinction between particular and formal objects. The particular objects of fear, for example,

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include anything that one can be afraid of, while the formal object of fear is *danger* or the *fearful* -- the evaluative property that all instances of fear share. The second distinction concerns two types of particular object that emotions can have -- the targets of emotions, (the entities emotions are felt towards) and propositional objects (the states of affair that emotions are directed towards) (Scarantino & de Sousa, 2018). Some climate emotions have both targets and propositional objects while others have only propositional objects. For example, one can feel afraid of rising global temperatures or hopeful that sea levels will not rise beyond a manageable level, we can also feel guilty or proud of our role in contributing to these states of affair or their mitigation. In the latter cases (of guilt and pride), but not in the former, while the propositional object of one’s emotion is the climate crisis, the target of one’s emotion is oneself. In the former case (of fear), there is no specific target, only a propositional object. We can also feel anger or joy about a fellow citizen or a certain country’s contribution to the crisis or its mitigation. The target in these cases are other individuals or collectives, while the propositional object remains the climate crisis. Relatedly, we can feel angry at a company, our government or the prime minister for their lack of action on the climate crisis. In this case, the propositional object of the emotion is the climate crisis (or an aspect thereof) while the target is a political actor.

Climate emotions admit of a wide scope of propositional objects -- any state of affairs that falls within the scope of the climate crisis:

**Climate propositional objects:** climate change, global warming, rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and so forth.

For any of these propositional objects there are at least three types of targets climate emotions can have:

**Reflexive targets:** ourselves or our community (personal or collective role in the climate crisis).

**Other targets:** Individuals and collectives (the role of entities we do not identify with, in a strict sense, in the climate crisis).

**Political targets:** our representatives, our governments (role of political actors in the climate crisis).

Although these are not mutually exclusive categories, we believe this schema can help make sense of most cases of eco-emotions, as different emotions are more likely to latch on to one of these specific types of target. As we saw, self-condemning and self-praising emotions such as guilt, shame, embarrassment on the one hand and pride on the other have, by their nature, reflexive targets. What Landmann (2021) and Pihkala (2022) have called ‘other-condemning emotions’ (anger, disgust, contempt), ‘other-praising’ emotions (admiration, awe, gratitude, love), and ‘other-suffering’ emotions (compassion, empathy) are directed at others including political targets. Those emotions directed at the climate crisis itself, that lack a further target, can be grouped into threat-related emotions (fear, anxiety, hopelessness), positive future-oriented emotions (hope, optimism) and further subcategories

(Pihkala, 2022). Our interest is anger which typically takes others, including political agents, as its target.<sup>1</sup> By anger we are referring to the anger family of emotions – including mild anger, indignation, rage, fury and so forth -- which we take to share the formal object of offence or injustice. By taking others as its target, anger will be more concerned with the actions and omissions of others, be they individuals or collectives, in the context of the climate crisis. Anger holds its targets accountable for offences and injustices, making anger of utmost relevance in contexts of moral wrongdoing. That is, in so far as anger gets things right about the world.

## 2.2 The normativity of emotions

The standard account of the rationality of emotions proposes three ways in which emotions can be said to be appropriate or inappropriate, based on: fittingness, morality or on instrumental value (D’Arms & Jacobson, 2000; Scarantino & de Sousa, 2018). Fittingness concerns whether the particular objects of the emotion really instantiate the evaluative property ascribed to it by an emotion type, that is, whether the formal object of that emotion type is fitting to the situation at hand (e.g., for fear of rising sea levels to be fitting, rising sea levels must pose a real threat or danger). Moral appropriateness, on the other hand, concerns whether the emotion in question is good or bad, virtuous or vicious. The verdict of such an assessment will depend on one’s background moral commitments, but according to the standard framework the important point is that moral appropriateness should typically be kept separate from questions of fittingness (amusement might be fitting in response to a genuinely funny joke, but it remains morally inappropriate if the joke is told in an ill-advised context, such as at a funeral). Lastly, instrumental rationality pertains to whether an emotion is beneficial or not to furthering one’s aims. Although what types of aims we have in mind should be specified (agents can have personal, communal and political aims and these can conflict), the main point for now is that evaluations of instrumental value are distinct from evaluations of fittingness as an emotion can be fitting while not instrumentally valuable (e.g., your fitting anger might be counterproductive to voice in certain contexts as it may provoke retaliation from a perpetrator) and vice versa (e.g., unfitting hope might motivate you to keep at a difficult project). Evaluations of instrumental value are also typically distinct from moral evaluations as one’s aims need not be moral, and these evaluations are concerned only with whether the emotion is useful or beneficial to the agent, moral considerations aside.

Two specifications, beyond this standard account of the normativity of emotions, are relevant for our argument, however. First, it is important to note that as we focus on anger in this paper, the moral appropriateness of the emotion may come baked into its fittingness as anger’s formal object is offence or injustice, which is a moral value. That is, if anger is fitting whenever an injustice is at hand and justice is a moral value, fitting anger may imply moral anger<sup>2</sup> while unfitting anger would involve anger

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<sup>1</sup> A notable exception is self-anger (see Silva, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> In the aptness sense -- that is, in so far as we believe anger can be morally appropriate when it is aptly felt towards injustices, irrespective of its downstream consequences (Srinivasan 2018), then fitting anger will be morally apt anger (or at least overlap with it considerably).

that is either immoral (e.g., anger at climate activists) or amoral (e.g., anger at a dog).<sup>3</sup> In the case of anger then, the standard distinction between fittingness and moral appropriateness may not hold. Second, the standard account underspecifies how to evaluate the propositional objects and targets of emotions (Szanto & Tietjen, forthcoming). The nature and scope of the objects and targets of anger should be particularly scrutinized in political contexts such as the climate crisis. In cases of scapegoating for example, while it might be fitting to feel angry about the loss of jobs in fossil fuel intensive industries (a potentially fitting propositional object of frustration and anger), blaming climate advocates for the situation is unfitting (erroneous target).

Similarly, while anger is fitting in response to the climate crisis, given that, as we will see, it involves numerous injustices, it may be unfitting to target each and every pick-up truck owner that one comes into contact with as responsible for this injustice. This would involve a fitting propositional object but an unfitting target (the target is arguably too wide scope). On the other hand, while some pick-up truck owners may be fitting targets of eco-anger, failure to recognize the structural and political components that influence consumer choices would involve too narrow a propositional object of eco-anger (i.e., a limited understanding of crucial components of the climate crisis).

In what follows then we take fittingness and moral appropriateness to come together for eco-anger and believe scrutiny of the propositional objects and targets of eco-anger is crucial to the arguments regarding whether and when eco-anger will be fitting and instrumentally beneficial.

### 2.3 Obstacles to climate action

The obstacles to climate action are many. Lack of knowledge is a classic obstacle -- climate literacy is low and studies have shown that it is inversely correlated with the presence of oil and gas industries in one’s county (Lachapelle & Kiss, 2019; Thomas, DeCillia, Santos, & Thorlakson, 2022). Another obstacle is the perceived distance in time and place of the consequences of climate change. Surveys show that, even when a majority of people are informed, only a minority think they will be personally affected by climate change (Champagne St-Arnaud, Crépeau, & Daignault, 2023).

A further obstacle to climate action is climate obstructionism, where companies, politicians and opinion makers deploy a series of strategies to impede or delay climate action, including funding climate skeptic think tanks and political candidates, procuring public subsidies for oil and gas projects, opposing the deployment of green technologies and much more (Oreskes & Conway, 2010; Ekberg, Forchtner, Hultman, & Jylhä, 2023).

Emotions may play important roles in tackling all of these obstacles. Regarding lack of knowledge, it is important to note that emotions can be triggered without agents grasping or processing large amounts of information. Emotions are often seen as responses that have evolved to respond quickly to low-thresholds of evaluatively significant information (Deonna & Teroni, 2012; Scarantino & de

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<sup>3</sup>For the purposes of this paper we take amoral anger, such as anger at animals, babies and televisions to be unfitting (as these targets are not blameworthy).

Sousa, 2018). Although this can often make emotions bypass our better judgement, it also means that emotions are well-placed to motivate action in situations where scarce information is available, or cases where agents find it hard to reach a firm conclusion based on the conflicting information at their disposal. Regarding temporal and geographical distance, emotions are likely to be a crucial way of bridging these distances by making agents respond viscerally to issues that reason may suggest are not their concern. So long as our means of communication are emotion-provoking (art has great potential here, we believe), we may be able to trigger apt emotions in viewers that would otherwise remain unmoved by hypothetical descriptions and barrages of statistics. Regarding climate obstructionism, anger in particular may prove beneficial as it targets others for willful wrongdoing and seeks to hold them accountable. Detailed examples will be provided below, as they allow us to showcase the central arguments of the paper, using the conceptual framework presented above.

As for general collaboration problems, emotions are powerful motivators for action, both individual and collective. They are also arguably inherently expressive states, that is they come with characteristic behavioural and expressive patterns such that others can easily tell what emotional state one is in (Scarantino & de Sousa, 2018). This makes emotions states that have a tendency to spread amongst groups, individuals often mirror the emotions of others and groups can feed each other’s apt emotions, amplifying them and spreading them to others. This makes emotions key players in the motivation of collective action and in the very formation of collectives themselves (Frijda, 2005; Goodwin et al., 2001). Again, the normativity of eco-anger will be relevant to whether it is beneficial or not as inapt climate emotions can galvanize collectives that oppose climate action as well.

If emotions hold such potential, why haven’t they already helped move climate action forward? It is important to stress that it is actually surprising that the climate crisis has not and does not engage the emotions of the public more systematically. One reason for this has recently been theorized under the concept of ‘structural apathy’ (Slaby, 2023). The idea is that the global north, in being used to its levels of consumerism, comfort and affluent lifestyle, is structurally cut off from responding affectively in an appropriate manner to the suffering and devastation on which this lifestyle depends (Slaby, 2023). Emotions are systematically geared away from the severity of the ecological crisis in these societies and towards the perpetuation of affluent lifestyles (e.g., the media seeks to trigger outrage at climate activists’ destruction of property rather than focussing on their political cause). This makes mobilizing the emotions difficult, but also highlights just how important it is that we do so, as well-oriented emotions hold perhaps the greatest potential to break through this structural apathy<sup>4</sup>.

Having canvassed the potential of climate emotions to help overcome various obstacles to climate action in this section, we now move to the specific role of anger which is our focus.

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that communities in the global north that do not benefit equally from its affluent lifestyle may be particularly well placed to experience apt eco-anger (indigenous and poor communities for example) and, if heeded, have important roles in overcoming structural apathy.

### 3. Why anger?

#### 3.1 The climate crisis is an issue of justice

The climate crisis raises issues of justice for several reasons, regarding both the causes and the responses to climate change (Meyer & Roser, 2010; IPCC, 2013; Caney, 2014; Shue, 2014; Zellentin, 2015; Gajevic Sayegh, 2018; Gajevic Sayegh, 2020a). First, there is a dismal mismatch between those responsible for causing the climate crisis (affluent and newly industrialized countries) and those that will disproportionately suffer its consequences (less affluent countries). This issue of justice concerns the identification of wrongs and responsibilities as it pertains to the *causes of climate change*. Second, all countries and individuals will suffer the impacts of the climate crisis (in terms of resources, infrastructure, water, land and living environments, etc.), but they are not all to the same extent equipped to deal with it. This raises a question of justice regarding the capacity of agents to face the *impacts of climate change*. Third, we need to distribute the responsibility to respond to the climate crisis equitably among countries, provinces, states, companies, and individuals. This is an issue of justice that concerns the distribution of *responsibilities for the response* (e.g., duties for mitigation, adaptation, compensation or duties related to the just energy transition). Fourth, we need to distribute the responsibility to ensure that agents will fulfill their duties. This concerns the distribution of (*second-order*) *duties related to compliance*, verification, implementation and not-obstructing at global and national levels) (Caney, 2016; Gajevic Sayegh, 2020b). Finally, we need to distribute the responsibility to respond to the climate crisis equitably between present and future generations. This is an issue of justice related to the *intergenerational distribution of responsibilities* (global and national) (Vanderheiden, 2008).

The fact that some countries and individuals are more to blame for climate change, both historically and presently, may justifiably trigger feelings of anger. This may be particularly pronounced in those who will have to live with the impacts of climate change despite lacking the means to adapt to climate change as compared to those primarily responsible for the problem. Similarly, only a small number of the world’s largest companies (57 firms by some accounts), including with the largest oil, gas, cement and aluminum companies (Exxon Mobil, Shell, BP, Texaco, Aramco, Gazprom) are responsible for 80% of the global GHG emissions between 2016 and 2024 (Carbon-Majors, 2024). These same companies have been involved in large scale campaigns of climate scepticism, denialism and obstructionism of all sorts. Obstructionism involves a failure to fulfill first order duties regarding *responsibilities for the response* to climate change, it prevents other agents from fulfilling these first order duties and it involves a failure to fulfill *second order duties* to not-obstruct climate action.

In sum, we see clear patterns in the agents and groups that are responsible for implementing, supporting and benefiting from a carbon intensive system of economic production and consumption, and those that have contributed very little to it, benefit significantly less from it and do not have the same means to adapt to it. These multiple axes of injustice suggest that the climate crisis may be a form of structural injustice. Further, climate injustice is arguably inherently intertwined with existing forms of structural injustice, including gender (poor women and women of the global south are

disproportionately affected by a changing climate given their role in food production and water procuring), racial (black neighborhoods suffer disproportionately from heatwaves and pollution from refineries), economic (poorer communities both globally and within nation states are more vulnerable to a changing climate) and colonial injustices (the global north holds disproportionate historic blame and indigenous communities are being further dispossessed of their lands as it becomes uninhabitable), such that the climate crisis stands to significantly exacerbate them all. The structures that sustain climate injustice likely uphold and entrench structural apathy regarding the climate crisis, blocking productive emotional engagement with the crisis.

Despite the structural and multifaceted levels of injustice involved in the climate crisis, responsible agents -- targets for eco-anger -- can be identified. From the discussion above, we see that ‘other targets’ and ‘political targets’ are particularly salient when questions of justice are foregrounded, such as elected officials, polluting firms, fellow citizens and countries themselves. If anger is a fitting response to injustice and the climate crisis involves multiple levels of injustice, then eco-anger will be fitting in response to appropriate targets.

### 3.2 Anger as the rational response to climate injustice: Fitting Eco-anger

As anger is a fitting response to injustice, understanding the multiple axes of climate injustice allows us to evaluate if and when eco-anger is fitting (objective (i) of this paper). That is, eco-anger will be fitting when felt towards objects and targets that reflect the various facets of climate injustice outlined above. For example, the anger of younger generations directed at governments, citizens and companies that have failed them is fitting as it is sensitive to intergenerational climate injustice. On the other hand, the anger of citizens against indigenous groups that have approved pipeline projects on their land might not be justified as these groups have been put in a position where free consent is difficult to give (Beaumont, 2018; Hoberg, 2021).

Although there are many fitting targets for eco-anger, we believe that the most pressing targets of eco-anger are those targets that willfully block climate action -- i.e., agents guilty of climate obstructionism. In the vast majority of cases, the science speaks clearly on how we should proceed to tackle the climate crisis, yet political actions are stalled by agents and industries with vested interests in maintaining the status quo. In one of the first large scale studies on climate obstructionism, ‘Merchants of Doubt’ (Oreskes & Conway, 2010), the authors uncover that only a handful of politically conservative scientists with strong ties to the fossil fuel industry and conservative think tanks were instrumental in casting doubt on the scientific consensus around climate change and thereby blocking climate action. The fact that the fossil fuel industry is responsible for (a) causing a problem that creates massive injustice, (b) delaying action that could bring about a solution to the problem, and (c) has massively benefited from the problem and the delaying of action against it, should make people angry.

Unfortunately, empirical work suggests that the perpetrators of climate obstructionism are not currently a primary target of the populace’s eco-anger. In one of the few empirical studies to specifically probe eco-anger, only 48% of Norwegians surveyed were angry about the climate crisis

and, of these, only 22% were angry at politicians and a mere 5% were angry at the role of industry in the climate crisis (Gregersen, Andersen, & Tvinnereim, 2023). Most participants (57%) were angry at the actions or omissions of fellow citizens regarding climate action. Although the latter are likely fitting targets for eco-anger it is disconcerting that less than half of those surveyed were angry at all and particularly problematic that only a small fraction of respondents were angry at those most responsible for climate inaction (i.e., politicians and industry). This study suggests first, that eco-anger may be an untapped emotional resource for climate action and, second, that existing eco-anger fails to target key perpetrators of climate inaction.

Our first objective was to argue that eco-anger is a fitting response to climate injustice. To establish this, we have delved into the nature of climate injustice to identify targets that would make eco-anger fitting. In so doing it has, in our eyes, become clear that eco-anger may not currently be directed at the most blameworthy targets for climate inaction. This is something we should work to correct, especially if anger proves beneficial to addressing these injustices, a question to which we now turn.

### 3.3 Anger as the rational response to climate injustice: Instrumentally beneficial eco-anger

Given that anger is the fitting response to injustice, and that the climate crisis is an issue of justice, it is very surprising that anger has been relatively neglected in the burgeoning philosophical and empirical literature on climate emotions (Pihkala, 2022; Gregersen et al., 2023). One reason for anger’s neglect may be that anger is typically vilified, it is seen as irrational, destructive, immoral and counterproductive, such that the emotion is rarely seen as a viable solution or recommended response.

We are often advised to move quickly out of anger, told it isn’t worth it and that our anger will likely only make things worse. These have been called the inefficacy and the counterproductivity critiques of anger respectively (Silva, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Lepoutre, 2018; Srinivasan, 2018). The former holds that anger is an ineffective way of furthering the agent’s aims. In anger the agent aims for justice. The inefficacy critique holds that not getting angry, or feeling other emotions such as hope, would be better for the pursuit of justice (Nussbaum, 2015; cf Silva 2021a). The latter critique claims something stronger: anger is not only ineffective, but counterproductive to seeking justice and may cause a worsening of the situation and further entrench injustice, often due to retaliation (Nussbaum, 2015; cf Silva 2021a). It has recently been argued that these critiques of anger fail to live up to theoretical and empirical scrutiny in cases of historical and systemic injustice (Silva, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Cherry, 2021; Lepoutre, 2018; Srinivasan, 2018). Whether this holds true for the climate case is an empirical question that has not been sufficiently explored. Here we argue that we should expect anger to also hold great potential in this context (objective (ii) of the paper).

The inefficacy and counterproductivity critiques of anger typically hinge on viewing the emotion as inherently retributive. The thought is that if anger has punitive aims, it will be destructive, as attempting to enact payback or retribution will lead to further harms (vandalism, destruction of private property, aggression against individuals and groups, etc.) which may in turn hinder or undermine the aims of the angry party (the targets of anger will be unwilling to work towards a solution, or worse,

they may retaliate against the angry party) (Nussbaum, 2015; cf Silva 2021a, 2021c). This presumed tight link between anger and destructive actions has been widely questioned in the recent literature in philosophy (Cherry, 2021; Lepoutre, 2018; Silva, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Srinivasan, 2018) and psychology (Averill, 1983; Shuman et al., 2018; Spring et al., 2018; Tagar et al., 2011; Tausch et al., 2011; Van Kleef & Côté, 2007; van Zomeren et al., 2004) where arguments and evidence suggest anger is far more complex and often aims for rectification and recognition rather than retribution.

This literature suggests that there are broadly two avenues that anger-motivated actions take: ‘constructive’ actions (typically actions that do not harm people or property) and ‘destructive’ actions (typically actions that harm people or property). Although these action types can overlap and their labels likely betray a certain political alignment, we use them here in an intuitive sense to distinguish between primarily communicative peaceful actions (‘constructive’ actions) and actions that aim to damage or punish their targets (‘destructive’ actions).<sup>5</sup>

Anger has been found to motivate constructive collective actions in both experimental settings and real-world cases of entrenched historical conflict, including peaceful protest, collective mobilizations and communicative actions (de Vos et al., 2013; Halperin, 2008; Tausch et al., 2011; van Zomeren et al., 2012). Similarly, the targets of anger, as opposed to responding defensively and reactively to being the anger’s targets, have been found to often respond with support, empathy and compassion to angry agents (de Vos et al., 2013, 2016; Van Kleef & Côté, 2007). Anger has been observed to recruit more support in its targets than positive emotions or non-emotional communications of the same content, suggesting that anger is particularly well suited to recruit allies (Tagar et al., 2011). This evidence has been taken to suggest that anger’s tie to violence and retribution is more contextual than constitutive. Indeed, phenomenological evidence supports the existence of different aims in anger as well, where the emotion is sometimes aimed at retribution and other times at recognition or rectification (Silva 2021a). Existing empirical work helps shed light on when anger is likely to be constructive or destructive. The changeability of the targets of anger was found to be a significant moderator of anger behaviour, that is, the more open to change and rectification an angry agent perceives their target to be, the more constructive and communicative their anger-fueled actions will be (Tausch et al., 2011; Yeager et al., 2011). On the other hand, when the agent perceives the targets of their anger to be unwilling to change or address the injustice, in what have been called ‘nothing to lose scenarios’, angry agents are more likely to act aggressively and punitively (Scheepers et al., 2006; Silva, 2021a, 2021c). It is important to note however that even in such scenarios, while anger may cause ‘destructive’ actions, these actions may nonetheless be instrumentally beneficial -- if we really have nothing to lose then extreme and aggressive actions seem not only arguably morally justified but also potentially the only actions likely to bring about any change.

The evidence levied in support of these defenses of anger focus on cases of historical injustice including gender, ethnic and economic injustice. It is an open question whether a similar story could be told for the case of climate injustice. As mentioned above, there is a lack of empirical work on the eco-anger such that an analogous argument cannot be made by appeal to existing empirical work. The

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<sup>5</sup> For more on these distinctions see Silva 2021a; Silva 2021b. Silva 2021c

empirical literature on climate emotions explicitly acknowledges the lacuna in research on eco-anger (Gregersen et al., 2023; Stanley et al., 2021). Nonetheless, we will see that the empirical work that does exist stands in line with our argument. First, empirical work finds that anger is a strong motivator for pro-environmental behaviour (Gregersen et al., 2023; Kals & Russell, 2001; Panno et al., 2021). The types of behaviour typically investigated however are individual actions (such as willingness to eat organic or vegetarian, to recycle or to take public transport) and individual support for environmentally protective policies (e.g., support for stricter emissions regulations). There is a lack of work on the role of eco-anger in motivating actions specifically targeting the perpetrators of climate injustices<sup>6</sup> and, as seen above, one of the few studies probing the targets of eco-anger suggests that the public does not feel angry at the most pressing agents and entities (industry and politicians) (Gregersen et al., 2023).

The existing defenses of anger, surveyed above, suggest that the emotion has two avenues of instrumental benefit: one constructive, motivating largely communicative individual and collective action such as protesting and organizing, and one destructive, motivating aggressive actions such as property damage, obstruction and violence. Both avenues of anger-motivated action seem potentially beneficial in the case of the climate crisis. Uncontroversially, it is beneficial if eco-anger motivates peaceful organizing, collectivizing around the cause, recruitment of allies, communications regarding the injustice, protests, petitions, etc. Existing empirical work confirms that anger is a powerful motivator of individual climate action (Gregersen et al., 2023; Stanley et al., 2021) and anger is uncontroversially taken to be an extremely powerful motivator for collective action against perceived wrongs (van Zomeren et al., 2004).

Recall that previous work found that, against the predictions of those who vilify anger, angry communications recruited the support of its targets to a greater extent than hopeful, or otherwise positive or neutral communications did (Tagar et al., 2011; Silva 2021a). Further work has found that anger recruits the support of its targets by triggering empathy for the harmed party (de Vos et al., 2013). However, this effect was only observed when targets considered the anger in question to be fitting (de Vos et al., 2016). This evidence has also been taken to suggest that perceiving anger as fitting may be particularly effective at recruiting allies to one’s cause (Spring et al., 2018; Silva 2021a). It would be relevant for empirical work to investigate whether this is also the case in the climate context. Existing work suggests this might be the case, as perceiving a majority of one’s community to be angry about climate change was found to increase viewers’ support for climate mitigation and enhance viewers’ belief in anthropogenic climate change (Sabherwal et al., 2021). Widespread emotional consensus such as this is plausibly perceived as fitting, which highlights the relevance of the normativity of emotions for climate action, but future empirical work should investigate this claim specifically and in contexts where emotional consensus is lacking.

For anger to play its demonstrated role in recruiting support then, be it in allies or in its targets, people must plausibly first see anger (and perhaps emotions in general) as capable of being rational/fitting and second, they must see specific cases of fitting eco-anger as indeed fitting. To mobilize anger’s

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<sup>6</sup> As those affected by the climate-protective policies studied are either everyone or left ambiguous.

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potential in recruiting support then we might have to devote efforts to shifting mainstream beliefs about emotions and anger, so that they are seen as rational and called for. As fittingness and moral appropriateness come together in the case of anger, we may need also to shift popular thinking on the nature of anger, so that it is not seen as an inherently vengeful emotion that is often seen as incompatible with morality. Second, we must make efforts to identify and communicate specific objects and targets of fitting eco-anger, such that anger’s targets, and potential allies, can more easily identify genuine instances of fitting eco-anger.

It is an open empirical question how the public would react to climate action once climate injustices are made explicit. Two existing studies suggest that this a promising direction to investigate as foregrounding issues of climate injustice was found to strongly motivate pro-environmental behaviour (Syme et al., 2006) and anger was found to be a strong predictor of action in cases where justice was foregrounded (Reese & Jacob, 2015). The first study did not probe the role of anger (or any emotions) however, focussing on decision making, and both studies conceptualize climate injustices in a more coarse-grained manner than we have above. Furthermore, the actions investigated were again either individual types of environmental behaviour or support for broad sweeping environmental laws, rather than actions specifically targeting the agents and entities that block climate action.

Empirical work has largely ignored eco-anger directed at climate obstructionists. How would anger-fueled actions targeting fossil fuel companies be perceived if it were common knowledge that these companies are trying to snatch public funds to pay for their carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies, like in the case of the Pathways Alliance consortium in Canada? Considering (a) that this company was created with the purpose of convincing the public that oil and gas companies are acting for climate by investing in CCS, (b) that CCS technologies are not an effective tool for reducing GHG emissions, (c) that they are lobbying and campaigning for public funds to pay for at least half of the \$16 billion project, and (d) that oil and gas companies are the most blameworthy for the climate crisis and for obstructing climate action. Would such knowledge trigger eco-anger at this company and fuel concrete actions to oppose it? Would running campaigns that target companies and politicians guilty of climate obstructionism lead to concrete eco-anger fueled actions by the public -- like massive protests, strikes, suing the firms’ executives and threatening the re-election of public officials that support them? What specific types of action would be motivated remains open to investigation, but we believe they are likely to be instrumentally beneficial for climate justice.

Note that we are not merely suggesting that the facts of climate change and climate injustice must be stated and openly communicated by experts (which we know too often fails to convince those within the grip of skepticism). What we are suggesting is that 1) these facts be communicated in a manner that mirrors the granularity required for eco-anger to latch onto the relevant objects and targets, i.e., clear and specific climate objects, with clear and specific targets for blame, and 2) in a manner that makes issues of injustice, rather than descriptive facts, the focus, and in a manner that mirrors the fineness of grain of injustices highlighted in the climate justice literature, and finally, 3) these injustices be communicated in a manner that highlights climate obstructionists as the most pressing targets of eco-anger. Doing so will allow us to mobilize eco-anger in those already disposed to feel it and hopefully to recruit further allies who will see the eco-anger of others as fitting. Doing so will also

make it harder for the targets of anger to deny that they are fitting targets of blame and open the door for action to be sought on a sufficiently concrete level that allows tangible action on a complex multifaceted global crisis.

When it comes to so called destructive anger-fueled actions, we believe it is likely that eco-anger similarly holds great potential to aid concrete climate action. If we leave moral considerations aside for a moment, it is clear that violent actions are often very effective at bringing about change. This is the case for regime changes, revolutions and arguably, also, in the case of the climate crisis. In “How to Blow Up a Pipeline”, Malm (2021) offers a critique of the climate movement’s commitment to “absolute non-violence” and raises the question of whether the fight against climate change can succeed if it is committed to pacifism. He shows that sabotaging fossil fuel infrastructure has been instrumental to the success of social fights in Nigeria, South Africa and elsewhere, and thus should be considered a viable tactic by the climate movement. However, Malm does not discuss what the backlash of this strategy is likely to be, nor does he consider the risk of potential escalation of violence (Klein, 2021).

A key determining factor for whether destructive actions will be effective is how such actions are perceived by the public. More studies are required to investigate how and when popular backlash rather than support is foreseeable. For example, while some might absolutely rule out violence against anyone, it is plausible that targeting only the ultra-rich could garner significant support. This could involve targeting luxury emissions such as private jets for example (Shue, 2014; Malm, 2021). Doing so might garner considerable popular support as it connects in a very clear way with the issue of justice -- the richest citizens, especially the ultra-rich, are disproportionately responsible for the climate crisis. As for more large-scale destructive actions such as blowing-up pipelines and other oil and gas infrastructure, the immediate negative backlash may be considerable as these actions would affect a large portion of the population. But empirical studies are required to investigate what the popular reaction to such tactics would be. Similarly, empirical studies should investigate the public reaction to direct-action groups such as Tyre Extinguishers who slash SUV tires. Media coverage suggests that there is widespread condemnation of such destructive actions as focus is more often on the damage activists cause rather than the desperateness of their plight, but we lack empirical evidence that there would be widespread condemnation of such actions if the communication strategies were different. That is, we lack empirical investigations into whether the triggering of fitting eco-anger, by foregrounding issues of climate injustice, has the potential to alter public support for more destructive actions. There is some evidence that destructive actions can recruit support for climate action even if the destructive actions themselves are condemned. Ostarek et al. (2024) found that hearing about the disruptive tactics of the climate activist group ‘Just Stop Oil’ was correlated with increased support for more moderate climate groups (Ostarek et al., 2024). This suggests that even if destructive actions are not widely accepted, they may still be effective at recruiting allies to the climate cause, perhaps because they foreground the desperateness and unjust nature of the crisis.

Previous work has suggested that anger becomes destructive or hostile in nothing to lose scenarios (Scheepers et al., 2006; Silva 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). It is an open question whether, once the climate crisis is communicated as a nothing to lose scenario, support for more violent actions will increase.

We think it likely that it would. If popular support for destructive actions increases, then public and political backlash against them decreases and there is an avenue for large and rapid action. Destructive actions then are, on our view, within the purview of potentially effective and morally permissible climate actions.

We believe that the formulation of both theoretical arguments and political communication strategies that (a) provide anger fitting objects and targets, (b) connect clearly with a climate justice and c) highlight concrete actions in response (be they ‘constructive’ or ‘destructive’), will allow fitting eco-anger to be mobilized for effective climate action.

In sum, the inefficacy and counterproductivity critiques of anger fail in other cases of injustice, giving us reason to think they may fail in the case of climate justice. Anger is instrumentally rational in many instances, be it by motivating far more constructive actions than is often assumed of the emotion, or by motivating destructive actions that further the cause, given that non-violent options have failed to bring about tangible effects. We have no reason to think the same is not true for the climate case. Existing empirical work stands in line with this and where empirical evidence is lacking, we have highlighted specific lines of investigation that may confirm this hypothesis. The results of future empirical work will likely also be well placed to inform communication strategies such that we can better mobilize anger for climate action.

#### 4. Conclusion

Anger is widely held to be one of, if not the most motivational emotions and it is the fitting response to injustice. We have argued that eco-anger is fitting whenever it adequately targets agents and collectives that are blameworthy for climate injustices (objective i). We have argued that eco-anger is not only fitting but potentially instrumentally beneficial against these injustices (objective ii). If we do away with anger then, or advise against it, in the context of the climate crisis, we do ourselves and our planet a disservice. By focusing on instances of systemic climate injustice, eco-anger may be particularly well suited to motivate climate action against corporate and political targets rather than motivating mere changes in individual behaviour (such as consumption or transportation choices), which have often been the focus of empirical research on climate-related activism.

To unlock anger’s potential and mobilize it for effective climate action, a number of steps must be taken.

- Philosophers and psychologists should devote more attention to eco-anger in the burgeoning literature on climate emotions and this work should be explicitly linked to research on climate justice.
- Philosophers should work on public engagement regarding the nature and normativity of emotions such that folk conceptions of eco-anger shift to involving a phenomenon capable of being fitting, morally appropriate and instrumentally beneficial. This has arguably been successfully done for anger at racial injustice but not climate injustice (Cherry 2021).

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- Empirical work should further investigate what the public takes to be the fitting targets of eco-anger, as well as what emotions are felt when the public is exposed to what we take to be the most pressing fitting targets of eco-anger -- climate obstructionists.
- Empirical work should investigate how best to trigger eco-anger and what contextual features moderate the actions it motivates.
- The multiple axes of climate injustice should be determined and communicated to the general public in a manner that makes explicit: culprits, victims and concrete actions available to tackle the fine-grained injustices.
- Climate communication strategies should seek to mobilize eco-anger by foregrounding issues of justice and incorporating the results of the previous points.

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