

Fitting Anxiety and Prudent Anxiety

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Abstract Most agree that, in some special scenarios, prudence can speak against feeling a fitting emotion. Some go further, arguing that the tension between fittingness and prudence afflicts some emotions in a fairly general way. (Perhaps, for instance, it's best for human well-being that we generally grieve much less than is fitting.) This paper goes even further: it argues that, when it comes to anxiety, the tension between fittingness and prudence is nearly inescapable. On any plausible theory, an enormous array of possible outcomes are both bad and epistemically uncertain in the right way to ground fitting anxiety. What's more, the fittingness of an emotion is a demanding, not a permissive, normative status. So the norms of fitting emotion demand a great deal of anxiety. For almost any realistic agent, it would be deeply imprudent to feel anxiety in a way that meets the demands set by norms of fitting emotion.

This is a paper about the normative status of anxiety. When is anxiety appropriate, and when inappropriate? When, if ever, is anxiety mandatory or forbidden?

There are a variety of ways to interpret these questions, because there are variety of norms on emotion. We might want to know whether feeling anxiety is morally virtuous, whether it is prudent, whether it promotes some salient goal, or whether it is all-things-considered best. Or, on the other hand, we might want to know whether anxiety is *fitting*.

The fittingness of an emotion is a distinctive normative status—one that is notoriously difficult to define or analyze.¹ To say that an emotion is fitting is to say that it *matches its object* in a certain way. To get a sense for the sort of match in question, contrast two episodes of envy. Imagine, first, that I feel envy when I hear that my rival has been promoted. Then, imagine that I feel residual envy even after I learn that my initial evidence was misleading, and that my rival has not in fact been promoted. The former episode of envy is appropriate in a way that the latter is not—and this difference in appropriateness does not seem grounded in a difference in the

¹ For introductions to fitting emotion, see D'Arms and Jacobson (2000) and Howard (2018). The difficulty of analyzing fittingness may partly account for the recent popularity of a "fittingness-first" approach to normativity; for defenses, see Chappell (2012), McHugh and Way (2016), and Howard (2019).

usefulness or *virtuousness* of the two episodes of envy. Appraisals of fittingness are meant to capture this dimension of emotional appropriateness.²

In this paper, I'll focus on the relationship between norms of fitting emotion and norms of prudent emotion. Norms of prudence direct us toward emotions that promote well-being and away from emotions that promote ill-being. It's a familiar truth that, in certain cases involving idiosyncratic incentives, prudence speaks against feeling a fitting emotion. If an eccentric billionaire promises to give you one thousand dollars only if you feel no amusement toward a very funny joke, amusement might be both *fitting* and *imprudent* for you. Nearly everyone accepts that, in this sort of idiosyncratic case, norms of prudence and norms of fitting emotion can come into conflict.³

My goal will be to argue for a much bolder conclusion: when it comes to anxiety, norms of prudence and norms of fittingness are in pervasive, nearly-inescapable conflict. For almost any actual person, anxiety toward a huge range of propositions is both fitting and imprudent. What's more, the fittingness of anxiety is a *demanding* normative status, not a permissive one. This means that, for almost any actual person, it's impossible to have an overall emotional state that meets the standards of both fitting emotion and prudent emotion.

My argument participates in, and sharpens, a tradition of philosophical work that draws out tension between norms on specific emotions. Cholbi (2016, 270), for instance, notes that significant losses frequently make a great deal of grief both fitting and imprudent (or, in Cholbi's terms, "strategically irrational"); Moller (2007) and Marušić (2018), using different terminology, agree. Marušić (2020) argues for a related conclusion about injustice; though it's crucial for our well-being that our emotional responses to injustice fade over time, he argues, they cease to fit their objects when they do so.

Anxiety provides perhaps the clearest and most powerful case study for this sort of tension between fittingness and prudence. In order to fittingly feel grief, we must first learn of a significant loss; in order to fittingly feel moral indignation, we must first learn of an injustice. But fitting anxiety works differently; we can fittingly be anxious merely by noticing the *possibility* of some bad outcome. The result: everyone is always

² It's common for discussions of fittingness to distinguish between the *objective* and *subjective* fittingness of an emotion (see Chappell 2012: 689n10)—or, in other words, between an emotion's being *fitting* and its being *warranted* (see D'Arms and Jacobson 2000: 78 and Scarantino and De Sousa 2018: sec. 10.1). The case-pair in the main text illustrates a difference in the *subjective* fittingness, not the *objective* fittingness, of envy—the initial episode of envy does not fit the world *as it is*, but it does fit the world *as represented by the subject's epistemic position*. My focus in this paper will be limited to the subjective fittingness of anxiety.

³ Considerations like this bribe are sometimes called "reasons of the wrong kind." For introductions to reasons of the wrong kind, see Hieronymi (2005), Gertken and Kiesewetter (2017), and Schroeder (2012). Some hold that "reasons of the wrong kind" are, rightly considered, not reasons for or against emotion; for more on that view, see footnote 22.

in a position to fittingly feel a great deal of anxiety. This point helps to illustrate just how deep the tension between norms of prudent emotion and norms of fitting emotion runs. This tension is not an ethicist's curio but an inescapable fact of everyday life.

I begin, in section 1, by articulating a simple, attractive view of the conditions that make anxiety fitting. On this simple view, I argue, fittingness-norms demand that we feel a great deal of anxiety. Section 2 argues that prudential norms speak against feeling all the anxiety that is fitting. Section 3 considers several alternative approaches to fitting anxiety, and shows that on any plausible one, the tension I've identified between fittingness-norms and prudential norms remains.

Section 1: Why Fittingness-Norms Demand a Great Deal of Anxiety

My argument relies on two claims. The first is a claim about fitting anxiety: norms of fitting emotion demand that we feel anxiety toward an enormous range of possibilities. The second is a claim about prudent anxiety: prudential norms speak against feeling all of the anxiety demanded by fittingness-norms. Of these two claims, the first is by far the more surprising. Many will consider it *prima facie* implausible, if not obviously false. In this section, I defend that surprising claim.

Some suspicion about my thesis may stem from disagreement about how to use the term 'anxiety.' So I'll start by offering some clarifications about the mental state I have in mind. First, I do not reserve the term 'anxiety' for states that are in some respect disproportionate, unreasonable, or pathological. I grant that there are ways to use the term 'anxiety' on which anxiety is necessarily problematic along some axis. But even if we were to reserve 'anxiety' for distinctively problematic states, we should acknowledge that these states are instances of a broader psychological kind, and one that deserves theoretical attention in its own right. We can imagine bouts of emotion that are similar in phenomenological, cognitive, and functional profile to paradigmatic instances of anxiety, but that are no more intense than seems reasonable. This paper asks: under what conditions is *that* sort of emotional response fitting? I'll use 'anxiety' to pick out the broader psychological kind in question, but readers who use 'anxiety' in a more restricted way should feel free to substitute another term (like 'worry' or 'apprehension').⁴

My second clarification has to do with the *object-directedness* of anxiety. Some episodes of anxiety are directed toward particular possible states of affairs: I can feel anxious about the possibility *that there is a gas leak in my apartment*, or anxious about the chance *that my favorite team will lose the big game*. Some other episodes of

⁴ This usage follows in the footsteps of some recent philosophical work on anxiety; see Kurth (2015, 2016, 2018). Psychological work on anxiety also often rejects the assumption that anxiety is by definition disproportionate or maladaptive; see Barlow (2001: 8), Baumeister & Tice (1990), and Marks & Nesse (1994).

anxiety, by contrast, are not directed toward any obvious object; a person can be anxious, it seems, without being anxious about anything in particular. I set the latter sort of anxiety aside, and focus on anxiety directed toward particular states of affairs.⁵

In what circumstances, if any, do norms of fittingness direct us to feel anxiety of the sort that I've isolated? I'll answer this question by defending the following argument:

(P1) For almost all people, it is fitting to feel anxiety toward an enormous range of possible states of affairs.

(P2) The fittingness of an emotion gives rise to a demand to have that emotion.

C. So the norms of fittingness demand that almost all people feel anxiety about an enormous range of possible states of affairs.

Start with (P1), which claims that, for almost any person, anxiety toward an enormous range of propositions is fitting. To see why this is true, we'll need a rough sketch of the conditions that make anxiety fitting. Here, our methodology should mirror the methodology used to determine when other emotions are fitting. The starting-point for such theorizing involves identifying, in general terms, the evaluative features of the world to which an emotion characteristically and paradigmatically responds. Some theorists call this a search for the *formal object* of an emotion.⁶ Some call it a search for the *representational* or *perceptual content* of emotions.⁷ Some hold that identify the characteristic evaluative concerns of emotions will allow us to successfully *individuate* emotions.⁸ My argument does not rely on any of this machinery; I assume only that the scenarios in which an emotion is fitting are, at least usually, unified by some stereotypical evaluative property or properties. Anger, for instance, is fitting in response to behavior that is *offensive* or *wrongful*. Grief, by contrast, is fitting in response to the *loss* of something or someone *valuable*.

What unifies the scenarios where anxiety is fitting? Consider a few examples: anxiety is fitting when one faces a possibility of significant financial loss, witnesses an innocent person unknowingly running risks of serious injury, or notes that a valued relationship may be coming to an end. At a first pass, these cases share two important traits.⁹ The first of these traits has to do with *value*: paradigmatic grounds for anxiety

⁵ These questions are connected to a debate about the nature of affective states—like generalized happiness, or generalized sadness—that do not seem to be directed toward particular states of affairs. For more on that debate, see Frijda (1994), Goldie (2000), Price (2006), and Stephan (2017).

⁶ For work on formal objects, see Kenny (1963: ch. 9), DeSousa (1987: 122-126), and Teroni (2007).

⁷ See Prinz (2004: ch. 3) and Tappolet (2016: ch. 1).

⁸ See Lyons (1980: 62-63) and DeSousa (1987: 126).

⁹ The two traits to which I call attention also take center stage in Kurth's account, on which the formal object of anxiety is "problematic uncertainty" (2015: 174). Kurth (2018, 109) adds an extra condition: in order for anxiety to fitting, he claims, one must have "reason to further assess the nature of the threat/challenge and to take steps to minimize exposure to it." I

involve the chance of a *bad* state of affairs. In what follows, for brevity's sake, I'll refer to the bad states of affairs that provide grounds for anxiety as 'outcomes.' The second of these traits has to do with *epistemic likelihood*: it's likely to some degree, but not settled one way or the other from the subject's epistemic position, that the bad outcome in question will obtain.¹⁰ On what I will call the Simple View, these two conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for fitting anxiety. Any time it's not settled one way or the other by a person's epistemic position whether a bad outcome will obtain, then, anxiety about that outcome is fitting.¹¹

Both of the conditions I've sketched might be made more precise in a variety of ways. What does it mean for an outcome to be *bad*? And what does it mean for a subject's epistemic position to *settle* that an outcome will obtain? Different answers to these questions will yield different precisifications of the Simple View. But the differences between these precisifications will not affect my argument: any plausible way of developing the Simple View yields the result that anxiety is fitting toward an enormous number of possible outcomes.

To see this point, consider a case:

Terrible Lottery You have been entered, against your will, in a terrible game of chance. Your name has been written on a slip of paper and mixed with 999 other blank slips of paper. One of these slips of paper will soon be chosen at random. If a blank slip is chosen, the game ends with no penalties or rewards for you or anyone else. But if the slip of paper with your name is selected, then you will be forced to give away all of your most prized possessions and live in solitary confinement for three months.

If any scenarios ever make anxiety fitting, Terrible Lottery is one. But notice that the epistemic probability that your name will be selected is very low: since the selection process is random, the epistemic probability of a negative outcome for you is .001. And there is nothing special about the precise numbers involved in this example; even if we re-imagine the game to involve 99,999 blank slips of paper, so that the epistemic probability that your name will be selected is .00001, some amount of anxiety still

suspect that some of the examples discussed in section 2, in which a bad unsettled outcome is irrelevant for practical reasoning, offer *prima facie* grounds for rejecting this third condition, but won't press the point further here.

¹⁰ It's not totally clear whether this distinction can be cogently drawn when it comes to anxiety. Discussions of *objective* fittingness generally abstract away from a subject's epistemic limits, but once we ignore epistemic limits, there may not be any propositions that are uncertain in the right way to make anxiety objectively fitting. I'll set this question aside; if there is a distinction to be drawn between the objective and the subjective fittingness of anxiety, my discussion is directed toward the latter property.

¹¹ Some might prefer to say that, strictly speaking, the object of anxiety is the *possibility* of a given outcome, not the bad outcome itself. My argument is neutral on this issue.

seems fitting in this scenario. (If you suspect otherwise, imagine a variant of the example where the badness of having your name selected is even more intense.)

Terrible Lottery shows that fitting anxiety can be based on very slim epistemic chances. Anyone who sets out to make the Simple View more precise must accommodate this datum. One way to do so is to claim that, whenever the epistemic probability of some bad outcome lies between 0 and 1, the epistemic criterion on fitting anxiety is met.¹² But there are other viable approaches for the defender of the Simple View, too. Many hold that lottery cases have special features that make it rational to keep one's mind in suspense—that is, unsettled—rather than forming an outright belief about the outcome. These very same special features might be plausibly cited to explain why the Terrible Lottery case makes it fitting for you to feel anxiety, rather than settling on the conclusion that your name will not be selected. On some theories, for instance, the distinctive feature of lottery cases is that they provide purely *statistical* evidence, which does not suffice to support rational outright belief.¹³ On other approaches, lottery cases are special because they make the possibility of error *salient*, or that they make it impossible to have *safe* or *sensitive* outright belief that one's ticket will lose.¹⁴ These theories point the way to an alternative way to flesh out the notion of being epistemically “unsettled” that appears in the Simple View. Perhaps, though not just *any* epistemic possibility of a bad outcome makes room for fitting anxiety, anxiety's epistemic condition *is* met whenever one's epistemic position has the special features that make *suspension of judgment* epistemically rational.¹⁵

I'll be neutral between these ways of developing the Simple View, because any of them will support (P1). On any of the approaches I've just surveyed, anxiety's epistemic condition will be met for a truly enormous number of propositions. From within any given epistemic position, an enormous number of bad outcomes are not only uncertain—in the sense that their epistemic probability lies between 0 and 1—but also presented to us a way that makes suspension of judgment uniquely epistemically rational. Consider some examples: it's epistemically possible, but not certain, for me that *I will get some form of cancer before I die*, that *my nation will become embroiled in a new war in the next year*, that *severe economic turmoil will soon force me or my loved ones out of a job*, and so on. What's more, my uncertainty about these propositions is significant enough to make outright belief epistemically irrational; to the extent that I have any doxastic attitudes about them at all, the epistemically rational one is suspension of judgment. When it comes to a veritable ocean of bad outcomes, my

¹² Benton (2018: 5) defends a similar principle regarding the epistemic conditions on fitting hope: “If there is a chance for one that p , and a chance for one that $\neg p$, then one may hope that p .”

¹³ For this view, see Buchak (2014), Nelkin (2000), and Staffel (2015: 1725).

¹⁴ For the salience approach, see Jackson (2018); for an approach that emphasizes sensitivity, see Enoch et al (2012). See also Smith (2010, 2016), who calls belief justified only when it has “normic support” from a body of evidence.

¹⁵ I discuss this view in more depth in my “Hope for Fallibilists” (ms).

epistemic position represents these epistemic possibilities strongly enough to meet any viable epistemic requirement on fitting anxiety.

Once this point about the *epistemic* conditions on fitting anxiety is made clear, it should also be clear that any plausible understanding of what it is for a state of affairs to be *bad* will also allow the Simple View to support (P1). Suppose, for the sake of argument, that in order to be grounds for *S*'s anxiety, a state of affairs must be bad *for S*. Even though this view rules out a wide variety of possibilities that intuitively make anxiety fitting, it leaves an enormous array untouched. There are an ocean of epistemically unsettled outcomes that would be very bad for me. And while some are so exotic that I can rationally believe they will not come to pass (say, that *I will be murdered by Bigfoot tonight*), many others are live possibilities of the sort that makes suspension of judgment uniquely epistemically rational (say, that *my identity will be stolen in the next year* or that *I will one day be hurt in a car accident*). These possibilities have the special features, whatever they may be, that meet the epistemic conditions on fitting anxiety. Even on the most restrictive versions of the Simple View, then, all possibilities of this sort will be fitting targets for anxiety.¹⁶

On any attractive version of the Simple View, (P1) comes out true: for almost any person, it's fitting to feel anxiety about an enormous range of bad, unsettled outcomes. Let's now move on to (P2), which states that the fittingness of an emotion gives rise to a demand to have that emotion.

Some norms are *permissive*, in the sense that they allow a subject to ϕ but would not be violated by the subject's failure to ϕ . A restaurant policy that allows smoking on a patio, for example, is permissive in this sense; it allows smoking, but is not violated by those who choose not to smoke. Some norms, by contrast, are *demanding*: they require certain subjects to ϕ , and are violated when those subjects fail to ϕ . The legal norm that requires some people to submit a tax return is demanding in this sense; it requires those people to submit a tax return, and it is violated whenever one of them does not. (P2) claims that the fittingness of an emotion is a *demanding* normative status; it claims, in other words, that the absence of a fitting emotion violates fittingness-norms.

This is a counterintuitive conclusion. In fact, some readers may suspect that norms of fitting emotion *couldn't possibly* be demanding norms, precisely because of the point that I've been at pains to establish so far: we are constantly confronted with an enormous host of propositions that make anxiety fitting. And, in fact, the issue is even more severe: if fittingness-norms for emotion *in general* are demanding, as (P2) claims, then we face normative demands to take every opportunity for fitting anger, fitting delight, fitting disgust, fitting envy, fitting amusement, and so on.¹⁷ Given our cognitive limits, it would be extremely difficult—perhaps even impossible—to have

¹⁶ I set aside, here, the proposal that only outcomes that are *sufficiently* bad merit anxiety; for that proposal, see section 3.2.

¹⁷ I discuss this general problem in my "Unfitting Absent Emotion" (ms).

every one of these fitting emotions. It seems *prima facie* preferable to avoid the conclusion that we are, simply by virtue of our cognitive limits, doomed to violate an enormous host of demands to feel emotions. And a permissive approach to fitting emotion does avoid that conclusion. So perhaps we should understand the fittingness of an emotion to be a kind of permission rather than a kind of demand.¹⁸

This reasoning is familiar from other contexts; Whiting (forthcoming), for instance, calls it “the argument from excess,” and uses it to defend a permissive approach to aesthetic responses. Similar reasoning leads some to adopt a permissive approach to epistemic norms (see Feldman 2000, Nelson 2010). In both of these domains, a permissive construal of norms seems initially attractive precisely because our opportunities for appropriate attitudes wildly outstrip our cognitive capacities.

Upon closer inspection, however, a permissive approach to norms on fitting emotion is not attractive. To see this, first note that even if fitting emotion make no *positive* demands, they must be able to make *negative* demands—or, in other words, rule out certain *unfitting* emotions. Without negative demands, fittingness-norms will be so permissive that they fail to forbid any emotion toward any object, even in cases of preposterous mismatch. A person who feels glee about the fact that a good friend has been seriously hurt, for instance, will not thereby run afoul of norms on fitting emotion. The most promising approach to permissive norms avoids this result; it grants that there are certain *negative* fittingness-demands on emotion, but insists that there are no *positive* fittingness-demands on emotion. Nelson (2010) grants this point when developing a permissive approach to epistemic norms, and Whiting (forthcoming: 8) does the same when developing a permissive approach to aesthetic affect. On an analogous “no-positive-demands” view to fitting emotion, one can violate fittingness-demands by having the *wrong* emotions, but one cannot violate those demands by having no emotions at all.

Unfortunately, even this more sophisticated “no-positive-demands” view is untenable. To see why, we can make use of a distinction, drawn in D’Arms and Jacobson (2000, 73-4), between two ways in which an emotion can violate a *negative* demand of fittingness. First, an emotion might have the wrong *shape*: in D’Arms and Jacobson’s words, the emotion might present “its object as having certain evaluative features,” even though the object “lacks those features” (73). If I feel irrational anxiety toward a totally harmless insect, for instance, my anxiety is unfitting in virtue of

¹⁸ I’ve written, for simplicity’s sake, as if fittingness of an emotion must be either a kind of demand to have it or a kind of permission to have it. But some hold, instead, that fittingness is neither permission-like nor demand-like. (Thanks for Selim Berker for discussion of this view.) But even for those who take this third approach, a question arises about the normative status of missed opportunities for fitting emotion: is the absence of fitting emotion, itself, *unfitting*? The argument I offer in this section provides some reasons for thinking that failures to have a fitting emotion *are* unfitting (for just the same reasons that inappropriately weak emotion is unfitting). And this is sufficient for a kind of tension between the fittingness and the prudence of having (or lacking) certain emotions.

having the wrong shape. Second, an emotion might have the wrong *size* for its object (74): it might be an overreaction, or an underreaction, to the object in question.

Anxiety, like any other emotion, can be unfitting in virtue of having the wrong size. In fact, some of the most easily recognized examples of anxiety fit this description: they involve a more intense reaction than is fitting. Less obviously, anxiety can also be *weaker* than is fitting. One way to see this point is through appeal to examples: just as some bouts of anxiety seem mismatched with their objects in virtue of being too intense, some seem mismatched with their objects in virtue of being too weak. Suppose, for instance, that I learn for the first time that there is a significant chance of massive ecological disaster. In response, I feel only a very slight twinge of anxiety. Suppose it's the level of anxiety that I sometimes feel when I notice that my niece, running around the playground carelessly, is likely to stub her toe. On the face of it, this reaction to massive ecological disaster is unfitting precisely because it's too weak.

Another way to see the point that anxiety can be unfittingly weak is to consider the unattractiveness of alternative approaches. Nearly everyone will agree that anxiety can be unfitting in virtue of being too intense. So the defender of the view that anxiety cannot be unfittingly weak is forced to accept an asymmetry claim: she claims that anxiety can fail to match its object by being too strong, but never by being too weak. This asymmetry cries out for explanation, and it's not clear that the needed explanation can be provided. Recall that fittingness, on a traditional gloss, is a matter of an emotion *matching* its object; on many prominent views, this is a matter of the emotion *representing* (some dimension of) its object accurately. But if weakenings of a fitting emotion can never compress it into a size that fails to match (or fit, or represent) the relevant object, then why would strengthenings of that emotion be able to stretch it into a size that fails to match (or fit, or represent) the relevant object? Put differently: if anxiety at the very lower bound of psychologically-possible intensity can successfully "match" any worrisome object at all, why can't anxiety at the very upper bound of psychologically-possible intensity successfully "match" any worrisome object in just the same way?

The challenge for the theorist faced with this question isn't that there are no normatively significant asymmetries between maximally intense anxiety and minimally intense anxiety; there certainly are. Maximally intense anxiety is often prudentially bad, unhealthy, and counterproductive in a way that minimally intense anxiety is not. And we'd be more likely to say that an agent feeling the former kind of anxiety has a serious problem, or one worth correcting, than an agent feeling the latter kind of anxiety. But it's far from clear that any of these considerations are apt to explain an asymmetry in *fittingness*. Recall that we get a grip on questions fitting emotion precisely by setting aside questions about whether an emotion is healthy, or virtuous, or all-things-considered worth correcting. Once we've set all of this aside,

the explanatory challenge for views that reject altogether the possibility of unfittingly weak anxiety seems daunting indeed.¹⁹

Anxiety, then, can be unfitting in virtue of being too weak. The no-positive-demands view can accommodate this point; by having an emotion with the wrong intensity, I violate only a *negative* fittingness-demand. But a nearby case causes trouble: on the no-positive-demands view, I cannot violate norms on fitting emotion by having *no* emotional response when I first learn about the possibility of ecological disaster. This is an unattractive, unprincipled result; on the face of it, feeling *no* anxiety about the possibility of ecological disaster seems unfitting in just the same way, and for just the same reasons, that feeling only a slight twinge of anxiety about the possibility of ecological disaster would be unfitting. If I would violate a demand for fitting emotion by feeling a tiny bit of anxiety, I cannot escape the force of that demand by feeling *no* anxiety at all.²⁰

The no-positive-demands view, then, should be rejected: it implausibly treats the gap between weak emotion and no emotion as an enormously significant one. But the no-positive-demands view was the most promising way to develop a permissive understanding of fittingness-norms on emotion. This means that we should instead understand the fittingness of anxiety not as a permissive, but as a *demanding* normative property.²¹ Whenever anxiety about *p* is fitting, then, a lack of anxiety about *p* constitutes a violation of fittingness-norms. But anxiety is fitting toward an enormous range of bad outcomes. So anyone who fails to feel anxiety toward an enormous range of bad outcomes thereby violates norms of fitting emotion.

This concludes my initial case for the view that fittingness-norms demand anxiety toward an enormous range of bad outcomes. The case is merely an initial one; there is more to be said about both of the premises I've defended, and especially in light of the surprising conclusion I've just reached, some will want to search for alternative proposals about the conditions under which the standards of fittingness demand anxiety. In Section 3, I'll consider several of those proposals, and explain why none makes trouble for my argument. But for now, I'll move on to the final step in my positive argument: arguing that prudential norms speak against feeling all the anxiety that fittingness-norms demand.

¹⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for discussion here.

²⁰ There might be an important difference between cases in which I lack emotion because I simply *ignore* a given object and cases in which I lack emotion despite fully attending to that object. I return to this idea in subsection 3.1.

²¹ Section 3.2 considers a 'threshold' modification for this proposal—one on which fittingness gives rise to demands on some occasions, and not on others. I argue that, even on that proposal, the tension between fitting and prudent anxiety is ubiquitous.

Section 2: Why Feeling a Great Deal of Anxiety is Imprudent

Norms of prudence tell an agent how to pursue her own well-being, and how to avoid ill-being. This section argues that, for almost any realistic agent, the norms of prudence counsel against feeling all the anxiety that is demanded by fittingness-norms.²²

The point that prudence speaks against anxiety may seem obvious. After all, anxiety is an unpleasant emotion, and on many views of well-being, we have *pro tanto* prudential reasons to avoid displeasure. But my aim is not to establish that there are *pro tanto* prudential reasons not to feel all the anxiety that is fitting; I aim to defend the bolder claim that our prudential reasons *on balance* speak against feeling all the anxiety that is fitting. To evaluate this bolder claim, we'll have to take a look at the prudential reasons both *for* and *against* feeling anxiety, and consider how they should be weighed against one another.

I assume here at the outset that there are always *pro tanto* prudential reasons against feeling anxiety. This assumption reflects common sense, and it's also ecumenical: it can be, and frequently is, embraced by hedonists, desire-satisfaction theorists, and objective-list theorists alike.²³ (The notion that unpleasant feelings are *pro tanto* bad for well-being is even less controversial than the notion that pleasant feelings are *pro tanto* good, and for good reason. Some assumption along these lines is necessary to explain why lives lived in near-constant serious physical or emotional pain are, all else equal, lower in welfare than lives lived with much less pain.²⁴) Given this weak, ecumenical assumption, there is an initial presumption against feeling all the anxiety that is fitting. This places a burden of proof on my opponents: in order to show that

²² Some (see, for instance, Kelly 2002 and Shah 2006) will claim that the prudential value of feeling an emotion cannot, strictly speaking, provide reasons or obligations to feel an emotion; at most, it provides reasons, or obligations, to *get oneself* to feel an emotion. I remain neutral on this dispute. I'll speak, for brevity's sake, as if prudence directly recommends certain emotional states and forbids others. But this point could be translated into the point that prudence directs us to *bring ourselves* to feel, or avoid, some emotions.

²³ Parfit (1987, 493–502) influentially classifies theories of well-being as either hedonistic theories, desire-satisfaction theories, or objective-list theories. Hedonists (like Feldman 2004 and Crisp 2006) will universally agree that we have *pro tanto* prudential reason against feeling unpleasant emotions. So will many desire-satisfaction theorists; see especially Heathwood (2006, 2007), who suggests that an unpleasant emotion *just is* an emotion that one intrinsically desires not to feel at the time one feels it. And the most plausible "objective list" theorists will also acknowledge that unpleasant emotions always make some difference to welfare. Some, like Fletcher (2013), Hurka (2011: ch. 2) and Rice (2013), claim that pleasure is a basic welfare good. And even those like Griffin (1986) and Murphy (2001), who makes a point of omitting pleasure from the objective list, will often include other basic welfare goods (like Griffin's "enjoyment" or Murphy's "inner peace") that are plausibly frustrated by anxiety. Even these objective-list views, then, can and should accept the weak assumption that anxiety counts *pro tanto* against well-being.

²⁴ For work that motivates an asymmetrical approach to the constituents of well-being and the constituents of ill-being, see Kagan (2015).

the initial presumption against feeling anxiety is outweighed, they must identify prudential reasons that, in a suitably wide range of cases, outweigh the reasons against feeling anxiety.

There are certainly some cases in which *pro tanto* prudential reasons speak in favor of feeling anxiety. Most obviously, feeling anxiety can be *instrumentally* beneficial. Anxiety tends to dispose a person to reduce and manage uncertainty, in at least two ways. First, an anxious person is disposed to engage in “epistemic behaviors,” like “information gathering, reflection, [and] deliberation” (Kurth 2016: 180; cf. Kurth 2018: 112-116) that stand to resolve uncertainty. Second, an anxious person is disposed to make decisions in a way that is especially sensitive to certain risky possibilities. Both of these dispositions can, in some scenarios, promote well-being. Most obviously, they can sometimes guide us toward preventing or avoiding the bad outcome that inspires anxiety in the first case; if I am anxious that I might have left the stove on, I might be disposed to reduce my uncertainty by ensuring that the stove is off. Less obviously, anxiety can guide us toward well-being when we lack control over the bad outcome that principally inspires anxiety. If I am anxious about the stock market collapsing, for instance, I cannot manage my uncertainty by preventing the stock market from collapsing. But I *can* manage my uncertainty about associated risks—say, by diversifying my investments. In short, anxiety disposes us to cautious decision-making, and this can be instrumentally beneficial when we have control over (a) the outcome that makes us anxious, or (b) some associated state of affairs.

These instrumental benefits of anxiety can provide a *pro tanto* prudential reason in favor of anxiety. But they do not suffice to make it overall prudent to feel all the anxiety that norms of fittingness recommend. Many episodes of fitting anxiety—perhaps even the majority—are directed toward states of affairs that are entirely irrelevant for practical deliberation. In these cases, being carefully attuned to risks does not even slightly promote well-being. Consider an example:

High-Stakes Surgery Your loved one has just undergone a high-stakes surgery. There are two equally likely possible outcomes for the surgery: the loved one is now either happy and healthy, or seriously and irreparably harmed. You are fully aware that, at this moment, the surgery has been completed, and there is nothing that anyone can do to affect the outcome of the surgery. But you do not yet know the outcome of the surgery—and, what’s more, there is no way for you to learn the outcome for the next five minutes.

In High-Stakes Surgery, anxiety is fitting. But, since the surgery has already been completed, acute sensitivity to the risk of a bad outcome has no chance of helping you to avoid that bad outcome, or any associated ones, through careful practical deliberation. So if there is any prudential benefit to feeling anxiety in this case, it does not arise from the instrumental benefits of sensitivity to risk.

Once this point becomes clear, it's very plausible that cases of instrumentally beneficial anxiety are the exception rather than the rule. We are constantly learning of new bad, unsettled possibilities, and the cases in which it's instrumentally beneficial to factor those possibilities into our decision-making are few and far between. (Granted, there is often *some* epistemic chance that my practical reasoning will turn out best if I am acutely sensitive to a given bad outcome; perhaps, if I really put my mind to it, I could figure out precisely the words to say, or the person to call, in order to peacefully resolve a hostage negotiation unfolding on national TV. But slim possibilities like this can't, by themselves, make it prudent to feel even slightly unpleasant emotions. Compare: there's *some* epistemic chance that, if I feel slightly sad while riding the subway this morning, someone will take pity on my sadness and give me a ton of money. But this possibility is too slim to make a difference to the question of which emotions are prudent; prudence still speaks against my feeling slightly sad on the subway.)

Anxiety's effects on deliberation, then, can make it overall prudent to feel anxiety in a restricted range of cases—cases, roughly speaking, where one is well-positioned to make a difference (either to the bad outcome that inspires anxiety in the first place, or to some associated outcome). But the demand to feel fitting anxiety is not limited to cases in which one is well-positioned to make a difference. To the contrary: we are constantly learning of bad unsettled possibilities that are irrelevant to our practical reasoning. In these cases, anxiety is fitting, but not instrumentally beneficial. So anxiety's effects on deliberation cannot, by themselves, overturn the presumption against feeling all of the anxiety that is fitting.

In order to avoid this tension between fitting anxiety and prudent anxiety, we'd have to locate a different prudential benefit to feeling anxiety—one that stably arises even in cases where anxiety is both fitting and useless for improving practical reasoning. I'll consider two candidates for this prudential benefit, and argue that neither is weighty enough to overturn the prudential presumption against feeling all the anxiety that is fitting.

First, one might argue that feeling fitting emotions, including fitting anxiety, is *pro tanto* prudentially good because it is a way of being responsive to, or fully aware of, evaluative truths about one's world. On certain "objective-list" theories of well-being, true belief or knowledge about one's world is *pro tanto* prudentially good. Perhaps it is *pro tanto* prudentially good, in just the same way, to have emotions that 'match' evaluative truths about one's world—that is, fitting emotions. This view might be particularly compelling against the background assumption that emotions have representational content. Perhaps *representing reality* is a constituent of well-being, one that can be realized both in true beliefs and in fitting emotions. Deonna and Teroni (2013) make some remarks suggestive of this view: they favorably mention the idea that "a positive attitude toward what is finally good is in itself finally good, and that a negative attitude toward it is in itself finally bad," and suggest that "[i]f this

is along the right track, there is no reason why this idea should not apply to what is finally good for a subject” (2013: 136-7; see also Chisholm 1986: ch. 7 and Zimmerman 2001: ch. 6). Anxiety is a negative attitude toward possible states of affairs that are finally bad—so, on this approach, fitting anxiety is “finally good for a subject.”²⁵

I’ll grant, for the sake of argument, that fitting emotions help us to respond to reality in a way that is *pro tanto* prudentially good. Even if this is right, it’s deeply implausible that this prudential benefit systematically outweighs the prudential reasons against feeling unpleasant emotions. To see this, consider a case involving another unpleasant emotion: sadness.

Sad Book You’ve just finished reading a book about a series of historical atrocities. In reading the book, you form a variety of true beliefs about the atrocities, and you also feel a variety of unpleasant emotions, including sadness. But, fortunately, you have a strategy that you know will distract you, bringing you to abruptly stop thinking about the atrocities. If you take that strategy, you know that your sadness will come to an unfittingly early end.²⁶ You won’t forget about the historical atrocities; you’ll remember them, but they won’t continue to occupy your attention or make you sad. Suppose, further, that distracting yourself won’t give rise to any future problems for your welfare.

I’ll grant that, in this case, you have *pro tanto* prudential reason to continue feeling sad because sadness is a fitting response to truths about your world. Even so, it would be *overall* better for you if you managed to distract yourself. For one thing, even if you distract yourself, your *beliefs* will still continue to represent and to respond to the relevant historical atrocities. The notion that it’s important for your benefit to continue responding to these atrocities not only doxastically but also emotionally—and that the prudential goodness of doing so outweighs the prudential goodness of your present happiness—would be plausible only on a perversely masochistic approach to well-being. For another, everyone is constantly faced with an enormous plenitude of options for fitting emotion—that is, options to emote in a way that represents reality. So even if you sacrifice one welfare good when you bring your sadness to an unfittingly early end, you can easily replace it with a welfare good of just the same sort by feeling a more pleasant fitting emotion toward another

²⁵ Things are slightly more complicated: the most plausible view in this territory holds that *objectively* fitting emotions, not subjectively fitting ones, are of final prudential value. But subjective prudential norms will nevertheless recommend feeling subjectively fitting emotions; roughly speaking, this will be a subject’s best available strategy for getting to the emotions that represent reality.

²⁶ I do not assume, here, that sadness toward an unchanging object can never fittingly diminish; see section 3.3. I make only the weak assumption that sadness can be unfitting in virtue of coming to an end too quickly.

epistemically available object.²⁷ Responding to the world by feeling fitting emotions, then, it is not prudentially good enough that it reliably outweighs the prudential reasons against feeling unpleasant emotions.

Let's move on to consider a second way in which fitting anxiety might be considered non-instrumentally prudentially good. On some views, it's *pro tanto* prudentially good to be virtuous. And certain virtues may involve unpleasant emotions, including anxiety. Kurth (2018: 126-7) defends this view; he argues that moral concern is a crucial virtue, and that moral concern is (at least for creatures like us) partly constituted by emotions, including feelings of anxiety. Deonna and Teroni suggest some sympathy with this thought, and draw a conclusion about prudential value: "if virtues feature on the objective list [of prudential goods], it is difficult to dispute the conclusion that emotions can be finally valuable" (2013: 132). This view suggests a new way to argue that feeling anxiety is overall prudentially good even when it is not instrumentally useful. Perhaps, for instance, a failure to feel anxiety in High-Stakes Surgery or in Sad Book would manifest or constitute a lack of virtue, and therefore be *pro tanto* prudentially bad.

This approach is an unattractive one, for a variety of reasons. First, it posits an implausibly close connections between virtuousness and fitting anxiety. It's likely true that *most* virtuous people feel fitting anxiety about a wide range of morally or personally significant possibilities. But the connection here is a contingent one, not a necessary one. As Nicolas Bommarito (2017: 105-6) argues, what's important for virtue is not that one actually have any particular set of emotions, but that one have certain commitments and concerns. Although emotions like anxiety can serve as a sign of a person's commitments and concerns, and can thereby be an indicator of virtue, anxiety is not itself a necessary component of moral concern for others. To see this, imagine a variant on the High-Stakes Surgery case: suppose that, while you wait for the results of your loved one's surgery, someone injects you with a powerful drug that temporarily removed all feelings of anxiety. Your lack of anxiety here does not make you less virtuous, and Bommarito's view explains why: your lack of anxiety neither causes nor manifests a problematic lack of concern for your loved one.²⁸ The upshot: even if virtue is always of prudential value, it's not plausible that prudence speaks in favor of fitting anxiety itself.

²⁷ Some may suspect that a person who *always* or *very frequently* distracted herself from feeling unpleasant emotions would be missing something important in a life well-lived. I can grant this point; even if prudence does not speak against avoiding unpleasant emotions too frequently, prudence might still speak against feeling all the anxiety that is fitting.

²⁸ Kurth (2018, 126-34) responds to a related point, which he calls the "Xanax objection," by noting that totally eliminating anxiety from one's mental life might make it impossible (at least for creatures like us) to have fully virtuous moral concern for others. But, even if it's right, this point about the wholesale elimination of anxiety does not cast doubt on my point: that neither virtue nor prudence speaks in favor of feeling all the anxiety that is fitting.

But set this first issue aside. Suppose that it is always *pro tanto* prudentially good to feel anxiety in cases where a typical virtuous agent would feel anxiety. This would still not suffice to show that it is prudentially good, even *pro tanto*, to feel all the anxiety that is fitting. It's likely true that a typical virtuous person feels anxiety in a wide range of cases where important values are at stake. But it's deeply implausible that a typical virtuous person manages to meet *all* the demands for anxiety that were posited by the Simple View canvassed in section 1. And there is a principled reason for this mismatch. The facts about which emotions fit which objects are not sensitive to facts about the many competing strains on an agent's limited cognitive and emotional resources. To say an emotion is fitting toward *X* is simply to say that it matches *X*; if the agent is pulled in many directions, so that her time would be better-spent ignoring *X*, this does not make the emotion less fitting toward *X*. Facts about virtue work differently; virtue is a holistic status that takes into account all the strains on an agent's attention and mental resources, and finds a balance that is sensitive to contingent psychological limitations. Since those contingent limitations require us to divide our psychological resources among an enormous array of opportunities for fitting attitudes, actions, and other cognitive endeavors, we should not expect virtue—even ideal virtue—to involve responsiveness to every single possibility that merits anxiety.

Finally, this picture will only successfully defuse the tension between fitting anxiety and prudent anxiety if, as a general matter, virtuousness is *so good for us* that it is prudentially better to be virtuous and feel unpleasant emotion than it is to fall short of virtue and lead a much more pleasant life. This is an implausibly moralistic view of well-being; among other things, it threatens to force the conclusion that an entire life of constant unpleasant emotion, if attended by full virtue, will be better *for the one who lives it* than would be a much more pleasant life attended by less-than-full virtue.

This section surveyed three respects in which anxiety might be thought to contribute positively to well-being. Most obviously, it can be instrumentally beneficial. Less obviously, anxiety might contribute to well-being by reflecting important truths about our world, or by being a necessary component of virtue. I've argued that none of these considerations can overturn the presumption against feeling all the anxiety that is fitting. Even if *some* anxiety is on-balance prudentially valuable, then, a pervasive tension between fitting anxiety and prudent anxiety remains intact.

Section 3: Strategies for Avoiding a Fittingness-Prudence Tension

Section 1 sketched the Simple View of norms on fitting anxiety. On that view, anxiety is fitting whenever an epistemic possibility *p* is both bad and left unsettled by a person's epistemic position. The Simple View is intuitively compelling, and it's natural to consider it the default view of anxiety's fittingness-conditions. But, when it's

conjoined with an understanding of fittingness as a demanding normative property, the Simple View yields a surprisingly demanding picture of anxiety's fittingness. The surprising feature of this picture isn't the mere fact that standards of fitting emotion sometimes come into conflict with standards of prudent emotion; as mentioned in the introduction, it's widely accepted that this sort of clash does occasionally arise. What's surprising about this picture is the *amount* of conflict between prudence and fittingness that it licenses. On this picture, any realistic agent who manages their emotions prudently will also high-constantly violate the demands of fitting emotion.

Now, just as we have an ocean of opportunities for fitting anxiety, we have an ocean of opportunities for other fitting emotions: fitting happiness, fitting sadness, fitting envy, fitting aesthetic enjoyment, and so on. Though I lack the space to argue the point here, I suspect that the arguments in section 1 and 2 generalize, to at least some extent, to these other emotions. I suspect, in other words, that we are constantly subject to an enormous array of fittingness-demands to feel a wide variety of emotions, and that prudence will rule out meeting many of those demands. If that's right, then the tension between fitting anxiety and prudent anxiety is a subcase of the more general tension between fitting emotion and prudent emotion.

Not everyone will agree, however, that demands to feel fitting emotion are so ubiquitous. Some will want to modify the picture I've offered in a way that significantly reduces those demands, or their duration. So, in this section, I'll consider four strategies for modifying or replacing my demanding picture of fitting emotion. For the purposes of this paper, I'll grant that some of these strategies might significantly reduce the general tension between fitting emotion and prudent emotion. But the more specific tension between fitting and prudent *anxiety*, I'll argue, remains striking and ubiquitous on *any* plausible picture of fitting emotion. In a slogan, the reason is that opportunities for fitting anxiety are much cheaper than opportunities for most other fitting emotions. So, even if standards of fitting emotion and prudent emotion are in quite general conflict, anxiety has special significance within this dialectic: it provides the clearest, most indisputable illustration of that inter-normative conflict.

3.1 Fittingness-Demands Require Attention

First, one might argue that fittingness-demands only arise in cases involving *attention*. The most promising version of this approach avoids the problems for the no-positive-demands view by granting that, in cases where one does pay attention to a bad, unsettled outcome, fittingness-norms demand anxiety. But it insists that, in cases where one pays no attention to a given outcome, a demand to feel anxiety about that outcome does not arise. Emotionlessness, in such cases, does not violate fittingness-norms.

This proposal has some *prima facie* odd results. For example, it seems to suggest that I can, through willful ignorance and inattention, change the facts about what emotions are fitting for me to feel. Suppose that, out of self-centeredness alone, I manage to avoid attending to the possibility that there is serious racial injustice. The attention-restricted proposal loses the ability to say my lack of distress and indignation about racial injustice is unfitting.²⁹ (For related worries, see Whiting forthcoming, sec. V.3.) I won't press these worries further; for the sake of argument, I'll grant that fittingness-norms only demand anxiety toward the objects of attention.

This attention-restricted picture, whatever its other demerits, is ill-suited for the task at hand: it leaves intact a pervasive tension between fitting anxiety and prudent anxiety. The attention-restricted picture goes some distance toward reducing the amount of demands for fitting emotion; it may even place those demands within human reach. But even if it does so, it will still be enormously demanding. And anxiety is especially helpful for making this point. Most emotions—anger, delight, shame, amusement, envy—are fitting only when one learns something about how the world actually stands.³⁰ Opportunities for fitting anxiety, by contrast, are more readily available: in order for anxiety to be fitting, one simply has to be aware that some bad state of affairs is a live possibility. Our opportunities for fitting anxiety, then, are legion; millions are fully available from the armchair. And even on the attention-restricted picture, any opportunity for anxiety—that is, any bad, unsettled possibility within one's epistemic ken—turns into a demand as soon as one notices that possibility. For any realistic agent, even one who aims to look on the bright side, demands of this sort will be extremely common. It may be that some cheerful souls manage not to *dwell* on bad unsettled outcomes, but no realistic agent manages altogether to avoid consciously attending to a great many bad unsettled outcomes.

3.2 Demands Only Above a Threshold

In section 1, I argued that weak or absent emotions can violate fittingness-norms. I made my point, in part, by example; in a case where one first learns of the real possibility of massive ecological disaster, I suggested, it would be unfitting for one to

²⁹ As an anonymous referee points out, some cousins of the attention-restricted picture can avoid this result. Perhaps, for instance, fittingness-demands arise regarding not only objects that one *actually* attends to, but also to objects that one *ought to* attend to. (Or perhaps fittingness-demands arise *only* regarding the objects that one ought to attend to.) These views raise interesting questions. For instance: what, exactly, is the normative flavor of the 'ought' in play here? And can this view be developed in a way that respects the idea that the fittingness of an emotion is a distinctive normative status? I discuss these questions in more depth in my "Unfitting Absent Emotion" (ms). For the purposes of this paper, however, we can set these views, and the questions that they raise, aside. For any recognizable, non-*ad hoc* way of understanding obligations to attend, there will be a host of cases in which we *ought to* attend (at least briefly) to some bad unsettled outcome, but anxiety toward that outcome would not be prudentially good.

³⁰ Recall that my focus in this paper is on the *subjective* fittingness, not the *objective* fittingness, of anxiety. See footnote 3.

feel only a twinge of anxiety. Some readers may suspect that positive demands to feel anxiety are limited to extreme cases like these. When it comes to lesser ills, they might argue, the fittingness of anxiety toward those ills gives rise not to a *demand* but instead to a *permission* to feel anxious. This line of thought can be modelled as a threshold proposal: only when the badness of an unsettled outcome rises above a threshold of severity, the thought goes, do the norms of fittingness demand that we feel anxiety.³¹ Massive ecological disaster is a severe enough outcome to give rise to such a demand; many lesser bad outcomes are not.

This threshold proposal will need to be refined: there are an infinitude of distinct catastrophic events that are both likely to *some* degree and also bad enough to clear any plausible threshold set by badness alone. The defender of the threshold proposal will want to avoid claiming that fittingness-norms demand anxiety about each of these catastrophes. The most plausible way to do so is to say that the threshold for demands to feel anxiety is set by a function of an outcome's badness *and* its epistemic probability. Now, even given this refinement, the threshold proposal faces significant challenges. Its defender will have to explain, in a principled and satisfactory way, why the threshold for demand is located where it is. This is no small explanatory task. But I'll grant that challenges of this sort can be addressed. Even if the threshold strategy can be successfully defended, the tension between fitting anxiety and prudent anxiety will remain both intact and pervasive.

To see this, first note that any variant of the threshold proposal will have to acknowledge that demands for anxiety can arise even in comparatively low-stakes cases. To see this, consider a case:

Dangerous Toy I am watching a child play with a dangerous toy. My evidence makes it about 95% likely that the child will finish playing with the toy without incident, but about 5% likely that the toy will slip and permanently blind the child in one eye. Unfortunately, there is an unbreakable transparent barrier between me and the child, one that effectively traps me and makes it impossible for me to stop the child from playing with the toy.

This case does not involve a fairly-probable global catastrophe. It involves only a slim chance of injury to one child. Nevertheless, in this case, anxiety is not just permitted but demanded by fittingness-norms. Imagine that I watch the child play with the toy, my attention focused solely on the threat that the child will go blind, and remain perfectly calm and emotionless the entire time. This is a case, just like the case where

³¹ This evaluative claim about fittingness-demands for anxiety could be, but need not be, coupled with a descriptive claim about anxiety: the claim that anxiety itself only occurs when an agent psychologically represents an outcome as being sufficiently likely, and sufficiently problematic, to clear some threshold. (For discussion of this descriptive claim, see Kurth 2018n65).

I feel only a twinge of concern for massive ecological catastrophe, where my failure to have a stronger reaction seems problematic.³² So if fittingness-norms ever call upon a person to feel anxiety (and we saw in section 1 that they must), they should do so here. Defenders of the threshold proposal must lower the threshold for demanded emotion sufficiently far that it can generate demands even in cases like this: cases where there is a slim chance of injury to one child.

But if the threshold is low enough to demand anxiety even in cases like Dangerous Toy, demands to feel anxiety will remain legion. There are an enormous range of outcomes that are both much *worse* than injury to one child, and much more *probable* than the injury in the Dangerous Toy case. What's more, we are constantly learning of new such possibilities, in a way that affords us fresh opportunities for fitting anxiety. Imagine, for instance, an occasion when you listen to the evening news round-up on the radio. You will invariably learn of specific individuals struggling with serious hardships, entire groups whose long-term health and safety depend on uncertain support from governments, weather events that will very likely bring about serious injury to at least one person, and so on. Your attention will be called, in other words, to a host of bad outcomes that are even more severe, and even more probable, than the possible injury involved in Dangerous Toy. The threshold proposal must acknowledge not only that it is fitting for you to feel anxious about each of these incomes, but also that fittingness-norms *demand* your anxiety. So the threshold proposal does not offer the tools to help us avoid a pervasive tension between fittingness-norms and prudential norms on anxiety.

³² Some might feel suspicious of this verdict about the Dangerous Toy case. One source of suspicion might be a sympathy for the view that there are no positive demands for anxiety at all; I argue against that view in section 1. Another source of suspicion might be the sense that the probability of injury in the Dangerous Toy case is too low to require anxiety. Readers feeling this suspicion should feel free to imagine an analogous case that involves a significantly higher probability of injury; the point in the main text will still hold. A final source of suspicion might be a sense that, even given a significantly higher epistemic probability that it will obtain, the outcome that is salient in this case (partial blindness for a child) is not a serious enough, or a bad enough, outcome to demand anxiety. To put some pressure on this final sort of suspicion, I invite the reader to consider a further development of the case: suppose that the toy actually does slip and blind the child in one eye, causing the child enormous pain. And imagine that I continue to watch, attention firmly and solely trained on the badness of this injury, and as before, I remain totally calm and emotionless. Here, I take it, most readers will agree that my reaction is unfitting; this is now a case where the bad event involved demands, rather than merely permitting, a negative emotional response of some sort. (Perhaps *sadness* instead of anxiety, since the relevant bad outcome is now settled rather than unsettled.) But the bad outcome in question here is precisely the bad outcome relevant to the original case; though it is now much more *probable* than it used to be, and no longer *epistemically unsettled*, it is just as disvaluable. So an injury to one child is a serious enough matter to give rise to a demand for *some* emotions (like sadness or distress). If that's true, it's highly unclear, once we've set aside questions about level of probability, why this sort of outcome couldn't also be a serious enough matter to give rise to a demand for anxiety too.

3.3. A Process View of Fitting Emotion

According to the Simple View, the question of whether anxiety toward p is fitting is settled by two facts: facts about the badness of p , and facts about one's epistemic position regarding p . But perhaps this is too simple. Oded Na'aman (forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b) has recently defended a "process model" of rational emotion, on which the fittingness of an emotion toward some object can change over time even when the object itself does not change over that period of time. For example, Na'aman proposes that grief is "rationally self-consuming"; as time goes on, it is fitting for one's grief toward the same loss to diminish, even though the facts about the loss itself do not change (forthcoming-a).

Suppose that anxiety is rationally self-consuming in this sense: it is fitting for anxiety toward p to diminish—and even, perhaps, to disappear—as time goes on, even when facts about the badness and epistemic likelihood of p do not change. This might explain why we are not constantly beset with demands to feel anxiety; perhaps, when it comes to most of the bad possibilities left unsettled by our epistemic position, our anxiety toward those possibilities has already run its course, and fittingly vanished.³³

If anxiety were rationally self-consuming, then, fitting anxiety and prudent anxiety might come into conflict less frequently. But there are reasons to doubt that anxiety is rationally self-consuming. To see this, return to the High-Stakes Surgery case discussed in section 2. Imagine that you first learn that your loved one will undergo the surgery at 8 AM, and that you will not learn the outcome of the surgery until one minute after midnight. Now, if anxiety were as a general matter self-consuming, it would be fitting for you to feel less anxiety at midnight you felt at noon. (If you suspect that anxiety is generally rationally self-consuming, but only over much longer periods of time, I invite you to imagine a longer wait.) But, intuitively, this is the wrong result: it's entirely fitting (and perhaps even *uniquely* fitting) for you to feel more anxiety at midnight, right as you're about to learn the outcome of the surgery, than you do at noon—perhaps even more than you feel at any other moment.

This case does not give us reason to doubt the process view of fitting anxiety. To the contrary, defenders of a process view might use cases like this one to motivate rejecting the Simple View in favor of their own.³⁴ But the High-Stakes Surgery case *does* give us reason to suspect that fittingness-demands to feel anxiety do not, in any straightforward or simple way, tend to disappear over periods of time. So even defenders of a process view of fitting emotion should not claim that demands to feel

³³ This move is much more promising when coupled with the attention-restricted proposal canvassed above: if demands for anxiety about p only arise when one attends to p , and it needn't last forever, then perhaps it's within an agent's grasp to feel a fitting bout of anxiety when p first occurs to us.

³⁴ Compare Na'aman's criticism of the "object view of fittingness" (forthcoming-a).

anxiety quite generally tend to dissipate—which they would need to do in order for our ocean of demands for anxiety to be reduced to a manageable amount.

3.4 Only Productive Anxiety is Fitting

As a last-ditch attempt to avoid the tension that I’ve noted, one might amend the Simple View in a particularly drastic way. One might propose that anxiety is only fitting (or only fitting in a way that gives rise to a demand) toward possibilities that are relevant for one’s practical deliberation—in other words, toward possibilities that one prudentially ought to take into account while deciding how to act.³⁵ (A variant of this proposal claims that anxiety is only fitting toward possibilities that are *within one’s control*.) This proposal would, unlike the others we’ve considered, promise to successfully avoid a troubling tension between fitting and anxiety and prudent anxiety. But it faces at least two serious challenges.

First, the facts about whether anxiety will help me in my practical deliberation is, on the face of it, a paradigmatic *reason of the wrong kind*; it is precisely the sort of consideration, like a monetary bribe for feeling anxiety, that appraisal of anxiety’s should set aside. This challenge might in principle be overcome; perhaps, although only practically relevant possibilities make anxiety fitting, they do not make anxiety fitting *in virtue of the fact* that anxiety will causally promote well-being. But the burden of proof is certainly on the defender of this strategy to explain in a principled way why the practical relevance of a possibility should make a difference to the fittingness of anxiety.

Second, and more straightforwardly, this proposal is vulnerable to counterexample. There are examples in which anxiety is clearly, paradigmatically fitting toward possibilities that are irrelevant for practical decision-making. We’ve already surveyed several cases of this sort, including High-Stakes Surgery and Dangerous Toy. In these cases, one simply has no control over the bad outcome that merits anxiety, nor toward any associated outcomes. But anxiety is still fitting in cases like these, and there is no non-*ad hoc* reason to think otherwise. So there are no non-*ad hoc* reasons to embrace the view that anxiety is fitting only toward practically relevant possibilities.

Conclusion

This paper argued that, for almost any person, it is both fitting and imprudent to feel anxiety toward an enormous range of possible bad outcomes. This is a *prima facie* uncomfortable conclusion. I’ll close by making two remarks that may help readers to feel more comfortable with it.

³⁵ Kurth (2018) might be interpreted as adopting this strategy; he claims that anxiety is fitting only when “one has reason to further assess the nature of the threat/challenge and to take steps to minimize exposure to it” (109; cf. his discussion of anxiety regarding the possibility that one has already made a bad decision on p. 132).

First, some may worry that fittingness-norms, as I've described them, are inadequately sensitive to our limits: they demand more emotions than we can possibly feel. Though I cannot fully defend this point here, I'll note that this is a respect in which fittingness-norms have plenty of companions in guilt. There are, in other words, plenty of examples of normative standards that outstrip agents' actual abilities. We can assess a person's credences against the standard of perfect coherence. We can assess a person's sculpture against the standard of perfect qualitative similarity to a model. It's perfectly intelligible to think of these standards as placing demands on performance, even if any actual person is doomed to fall short of those demands.³⁶

Second, some may worry that my picture leaves us without guidance—or with the wrong guidance—about how to organize our emotional lives. But this worry would be premature. There are plenty of existing models for weighing competing normative demands against one another, and there is no reason to think that the best weighting of fittingness-demands against prudential demands will result in any particular final verdict. To take an extreme example: Maguire and Woods (2020: conclusion) suggest that “correctness-based” norms on affective attitudes (an objectivized variant of the fittingness-norms I've discussed here) wholly lack “authoritative normativity” of the sort that practical norms have. On this sort of approach, prudential demands will trump fittingness-demands whenever they appear to come into conflict.³⁷

It's true that the picture that I've offered involves a great many fittingness-demands to feel anxiety. And it's true that those demands come into pervasive conflict with norms of prudence. Both of these conclusions are surprising. But it's far from clear that either should cause us any anxiety.

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³⁶ For defense of unachievable requirements in epistemology, see Conee and Feldman (1985, 19), Feldman (2000: 676), and Smithies (2019: 274-5).

³⁷ For more moderate approaches, see Reisner (2008) and Howard (2020).

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