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Charlie Kurth's *The Anxious Mind: An Investigation into the Varieties and Virtues of Anxiety* (2018)
Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

By Daniel Kelly

“Now Holly won’t say hi to me ‘Cause I’m in love with my anxiety”
– The Hold Steady, “Ask Her for Adderall”, *Stay Positive* (2008)

I was not surprised that this particular song lyric kept getting stuck in my head while I was reading this book; they both strike a similar chord. Kurth doesn’t go quite so far as to recommend that we, too, should be in love with our anxiety, but he certainly wants us to appreciate it more than we typically do. His concise and crisply written monograph makes a good case that we should. It deepens our understanding of what anxiety is, and of how it animates different facets of our mental and moral lives. The case he builds that, roughly, anxiety is one of the brain’s ways of affectively signaling and responding to uncertainty is clearly argued and meticulously organized. Kurth hits the targets he sets for himself, and advances his agenda in a way that I found largely convincing. The result is a book that is a must-read for anyone working on anxiety and other moral emotions, and that will reward anyone who is curious about the nature and value of this increasingly, and perhaps alarmingly, prominent component of our minds.

By using his empirically supported account of anxiety as a single, well-delineated lens through which to probe issues in moral theory, Kurth is participating in a recognizable trend. Entries in this recently coalesced tradition include numerous collected volumes (see especially the series on the Moral Psychology of the Emotions, edited by Mark Alfano and published by Rowman & Littlefield) and monograph length treatments dedicated to specific parts of our moral minds. Early installments focused on components like our facility with rules (Nichols 2004, and also 2021), or our propensity to explain and assess behavior by appeal to character traits (Doris 2002). Many of the trend’s more recent and visible exemplars, however, have looked at specific emotions and affective states like disgust (Nussbaum 2004, Kelly 2011), happiness (Haybron 2008), contempt (Bell 2013), anger (Nussbaum 2016, Cherry forthcoming), empathy (Bloom 2016), and hope (Martin 2016). Of the many virtues of this divide-and-conquer approach, one is that sustained, selective attention to distinct components of our moral minds can better clarify the idiosyncrasies of how each one operates, thus bringing into focus its unique contributions to thought, evaluation, and behavior. This, in turn, can inform close and careful analysis of whether and which of the contributions distinctive to each one we should embrace or reject. For example, Cherry argues anger is indispensable to fighting racism, while Bloom holds that appeals to people’s empathy should be

replaced with appeals to rational compassion. For those who wish to avoid the use of certain emotions, the empirical detail can help guide efforts to effectively minimize their influence, either in constructing moral theory, shaping policy, designing nudges, or living our own individual lives.

The Anxious Mind is an important addition to this genre. In between its introduction and conclusion are five substantive chapters arranged in two parts, each of which is devoted to addressing one of the book's two main questions. In response to the first, "what is anxiety?", Kurth develops and defends an account that perhaps surprisingly construes anxiety as an emotion we share with other animals, rather than as a mood, disorder, or some more amorphous or uniquely human feeling. He then turns in the second part to a number of normative matters that grow out of the fundamental question of whether anxiety is ever valuable. Building on the psychological account he develops in the first part, Kurth argues that while anxiety, like most other emotions, can occasionally misfire and is thus not immune from producing pathological outcomes, it can and often does provide an array of benefits, both practical and moral.

While the details covered in the first part are important to the normative claims in the second, many are interesting in their own right. Kurth considers a range of empirical literatures, and his treatment of them is careful, thorough, and judicious. The interdisciplinary approach used to substantiate the more specific claims can be demanding, both on the practitioner and the reader, but the effort lends the account of anxiety a particular kind of heft. Kurth has very much brought the receipts, and his arguments cannot be easily dismissed. Indeed, responsible engagement with those arguments would seem to demand similar methodological sophistication, and the willingness to follow Kurth into the empirical trenches, so as to reckon with his reasoning on its own terms. Luckily for the curious reader, he is not only a skilled practitioner but an artful writer, and the more technical parts of his discussion are anchored with concrete and gripping examples that illustrate his theoretical points while keeping the inevitable abstraction and jargon from getting overwhelming.

One of the central and most interesting claims that Kurth defends here is that anxiety is an *affect program*, and so qualifies as a member of the same family of emotions as more familiar exemplars like disgust, fear, joy, and anger. Each of these can be distinguished from the others along several dimensions; indeed, Kurth argues convincingly that anxiety is a distinct emotion from fear. But affect programs share a number of characteristics (62) that mark them as members of a single family (and perhaps as a genre of psychological natural kinds, a la Griffiths 1997): 1) each supports a fairly close stimulus-response pairing that produces an adaptive reaction to a class of evolutionarily salient threats and opportunities, 2) each is homologous to a similar emotion-like state found in other primates and mammals, 3) each involves a distinctive pattern of neural and physiological activity, 4) the characteristic response of each is activated quickly and directly once any of the 5) relevant stimuli are automatically detected and appraised as such. In making the case that anxiety fits this bill, Kurth identifies several subtypes of the emotion (environmental, punishment, and practical), but argues that they all share the core function of detecting conditions of uncertainty and potential threat, and activating psychological processes to increase alertness, minimize risk, and intensify assessment of the situation. Anxiety is a sensitivity not to clear and present danger but rather to menacing ambiguity and the ominous unknown. The response it triggers is protective, but rather than inducing a specific fight or flight behavior in response to a concrete threat, it ramps up

hunger for information, inducing us to look before we leap and think before we act. This function is carried out in slightly different ways in different domains, when the core mechanisms that perform it work in conjunction with different companion psychological systems—hence the three subtypes. Moreover, as with other affect programs, differences in circumstance, culture, and the norms that shape and govern anxiety can produce further variations on the emotion’s core themes, some of which can be quite dramatic (for more general discussion see Mallon and Stich 2000, and for an especially striking and detailed example see Simons 1996 on surprise and the startle reflex).

Assuming this picture is broadly correct raises further interesting questions. For example, if anxiety is an emotion, is it usefully thought of as an epistemic one (Morton 2010, Carruthers 2017)? On Kurth’s view, and especially in light of his discussion of the “accuracy motivation” triggered by practical anxiety (70, 165-172), this does not seem implausible. If the claim that anxiety is an affect program is surprising, perhaps one reason is that the response produced by most instances of the category involve reflex-like tendencies for *overt* behaviors, often recognizable forms of physical approach (anger) or avoidance (fear, disgust). The core elements of anxiety, on the other hand, appear less aimed at producing knee-jerk actions (and may actually inhibit them) and more towards gathering and sifting through information relevant to better grasping a murky situation, so as to better figure out what an appropriate action would be. Exploring how anxiety compares and contrasts to other epistemic emotions like insight (Gopnik 1998), mirth (Hurley et al 2011), curiosity and interest (Carruthers 2018), boredom (Millgram 2004, Westgate and Steidle 2020), and confusion (Vogl et al 2019) promises to shed further light both on these individual instances and on the intriguing category of epistemic emotions in general. Kurth does not take up these questions—he is more at pains to establish anxiety’s affect program *bona fides*, and to distinguish it from other affect programs like fear and surprise, on the one hand, and from other mental states that have recently occupied a similar place in the public imagination like scrupulosity and existential angst, on the other. His detailed account of anxiety, however, provides an ideal platform from which to launch a systematic investigation into its similarities and differences with other epistemic emotions (also see Vazard 2019 for thoughts along these lines).

The second half of the book addresses more straightforwardly normative issues. Kurth first takes up questions about anxiety’s value, arguing that it is not some irredeemably maladaptive bug in our psychological makeup, but is instead often a fitting response to the circumstances that activate it. When it is, it can provide, in different settings, instrumental, aretaic, or moral benefits, all of which flow from the way it directs attention and induces caution and reflection. Kurth builds on this position in the next chapter, arguing that these values can be cultivated through this emotion (c.f. Kurth 2021). He develops his view that well-attuned anxiety can be incorporated into an account of virtuous agency that is skill-based but also countenances an important role for deliberation and explicit reasoning, thus giving it an advantage on grounds of psychological plausibility. A chapter on progress goes further still, noting that while it can obviously go astray, adversely affecting mental health and feeding morally regressive attitudes (euphemistic uses of “economic anxiety” come to mind), properly cultivated anxiety has and will likely continue to play important positive roles in driving moral improvement, at both the individual and collective level.

In making his case throughout this part, Kurth is also contributing to a broader school of thought. A central strand of the Romantic tradition is skepticism about the idea that characteristics like serenity, tranquility, and sage-like repose are ideals, representing the kinds of psychological states we should aspire to achieve. Though it is more by implication than explicit argumentation, Kurth's defense of anxiety's value lends support to such skepticism. It also points to an alternative ideal that sees unpleasant affect and psychological conflict as having their virtues too. Perhaps the Romantics were right to worry that someone free from angst and anxiety, who was untroubled by any experiences of their own attitudes struggling to correct one another, would be in danger of becoming boringly static or stifled, without impetus to mature, grow, or improve.

These discussions are consistently insightful and thought-provoking. They also pair well thematically with earlier chapters. The first part of the book succeeds as a modestly revisionary account of what kind of mental state anxiety is; the second succeeds as a modestly rehabilitating account of what it is good for, especially from the point of view of moral theory. Together the arguments found here can serve as a corrective to the connotations the emotion has recently accrued, that make it easy to see anxiety as something like conscientiousness run amok, and so as unavoidably corrosive psychologically, ethically, or both. On Kurth's alternative picture anxiety has its uses. Despite its unpleasant phenomenology and the bad rap it gets from our folk psychology, it is better seen as a morally legitimate and potentially powerful tool. Progressives and would-be reformers may want to better understand it, so they might more effectively harness and direct its power towards morally desirable ends (c.f. Kelly and Morar 2014 on disgust).

The concluding chapter situates the account within an evolutionary context, focusing on how anxiety might fit with recent work on the roots of cooperation and morality. Kurth considers research that sees our species' emergence as being driven by an increased reliance on and facility with cumulative culture, by the unique forms of cooperation that have been unlocked by our systems of culturally inherited, punishment-stabilized social norms, and by the distinctive kind of psychological machinery we have evolved handle them. The discussion here is intriguing, more speculative than the book's tightly argued body, but finishing this way is strategically sound. By closing with some allusive ideas rather than just recapitulating his previously established theses, the programmatic ending has a refreshingly expansive feel, opening up and suggesting lines of thought that can be pursued from the sturdy foundation provided by the rest of the book. I will end with comments on two that seem most promising, offered less as criticisms than suggestions for moving forward.

The first is about where anxiety might fit into the puzzling landscape of normative motivation. In his discussion of norms, Kurth draws primarily on recent work by Kitcher (2011) and Sterenly (2012, 2013), focusing on fear of punishment and reasoning from there to the other roles that might be available to anxiety. A larger perspective on the psychology of normative cognition (e.g. Kelly and Setman 2020) suggests a wider and more interesting range of options. There is reason to think that internalizing any norm entails becoming intrinsically motivated to both follow it and to enforce it (Sripada and Stich 2007, Chudek and Henrich 2011). However, different emotions (fear, anger, disgust, contempt, shame, guilt, etc.) can provide these intrinsic motivations for different norms (Rozin et al 1999, Haidt 2001, Nichols 2004, Kelly 2020, c.f. Prinz 2009). Anxiety, though,

with its core functions of inducing caution and increased attentiveness, does not seem a good candidate to provide either the compliance or punishment motivation that mark internalization. It appears better suited, however, to perform a function that is importantly different from those typically assigned to emotions in the context of norm psychology.

More specifically, anxiety can provide a useful response to situations that are normatively ambiguous, or in which normative conflict arises when several norms are potentially applicable, but each prescribes a behavior incompatible with the others. On this picture, anxiety helps snap a person out of the intuitive and relatively unthinking kind of cognition that often drives behavior guided by internalized norms, that allows her move smoothly through the less fraught parts of her social world. When a person encounters normative ambiguity or conflict, the activation of her anxiety leads her to explicitly consider the situation and to think more carefully about how to proceed in it. In some cases, this may lead to internal deliberation about the specific case. In others, it may push the person to look outward, searching for more clues in the social world about the best way forward. In still others, anxiety might be instrumental in prompting a person to formulate and avow a new norm for the type of situation in question, rather than continuing to rely on any of the potentially relevant norms acquired from her peers and culture (Kelly forthcoming). While it is less clear that anxiety is equipped to provide the distinctive kind of motivational resources a person would need to resolutely *abide by* these kinds of self-imposed personal rules (c.f. Setman and Kelly in press), this emotion may be crucial for sparking the sequence of reflective, self-regulative processes that leads people to fashion and adopt them. This seems broadly consistent both with the idea that anxiety is an epistemic emotion, and with Kurth's arguments that it often makes important contributions to moral progress.

The second comment concerns the operation of anxiety in our current moment, and the worry that it is alarmingly widespread—and was even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Put as a question, one might reasonably wonder if we are, as it seems to many, living in a new Age of Anxiety, and if life in contemporary WEIRD cultures is especially, systematically, toxically anxiety-inducing. Kurth is not sure—for example he acknowledges that diagnoses of anxiety disorders have recently spiked, but cites (120) Horwitz and Wakefield's (2012) suggestion that the trend is mainly due to diagnostic criteria being applied more liberally than in the past. Certainly more data will further clarify the situation, but the theoretical components of Kurth's view can help inspire and sharpen hypotheses, too.

The bad rap the emotion gets in our contemporary folk psychology, and that Kurth's arguments about its value are in part set against (Kurth 2015), may still be justified. As mentioned above, circumstances and cultural norms can shape the functioning of affect programs and emotions, pushing some to the margins of a society while moving others center stage, making them more hypertrophied, conspicuous, and difficult to avoid in the lives of its members. Consider in this context the advent of the internet and the digital panopticon of social media, and the unprecedented forms of interpersonal visibility and interconnectivity they make available. Examples of massive inequality and widespread systemic injustice are now on constant display, and the enormously complex algorithms that put them in front of our eyeballs are being constantly personalized to keep us looking and engaged. The interpersonal comparisons this invites can give rise to many forms of

psychological distress, and Kurth's view suggests a specific one. His subtype of *punishment anxiety* is triggered by the possibility of receiving negative evaluations or sanctions from others. Life online is a life of unnaturally constant evaluation, where assessments are explicitly represented by the functionality of the different venues (numbers of followers and likes, space for comments, etc.), and are often made by an audience that has the potential to be enormous, wildly heterogenous, virtually inescapable, and invested with trolls (see e.g., Tolentino 2019). This sounds like a perfect storm for generating punishment anxiety on a mass scale.

If this characterization is on target, it would not be the first time that humans have created, unintentionally or with malice aforethought, technologies and cultural environments that exploit our own biological and psychological vulnerabilities (see Ross 2020 for a sophisticated discussion along these lines about addiction). Moreover, as similar technological innovations accumulate and the contexts in which we live continue to become increasingly culturally constructed and more distant from those of past generations, more of these kinds of vulnerabilities are apt to be exposed. Projects like Kurth's can help us to better understand the mismatches that often arise between the different components of our individual psychological repertoires (moral and otherwise), on the one hand, and the context in which they are being asked to operate, on the other. An important companion point, though, is that thinking through the value (moral and otherwise) of each psychological mechanism will increasingly require also taking into account the character of the particular cultures, technologies, institutions, and social structures in which it performs its functions (Kelly 2017, Muthukrishna et al 2021).

This book is already a valuable contribution to moral psychology, and is well positioned to serve as a building block in this broader kind of work in the future. It shaped and sharpened, changed and clarified many of the previously vague thoughts I had about anxiety, and it took me in directions I wouldn't have expected beforehand. I'm still not in love with my anxiety, but Kurth has very much succeeded in getting me to appreciate it more.

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