

Anxiety: A Case Study on the Value of Negative Emotion

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Why do we feel bad—angry, anxious, afraid, what have you? Are negative emotions like these ever valuable? Does feeling bad ever do good? Among both philosophers and folk, a common response is *no*: negative emotions are things it would be better not to experience. For instance, the Stoic philosopher Seneca maintains that anger “changes all things from the best and justest condition in to the opposite” (1995, 18). Immanuel Kant helps flesh out this worry. As he sees it, in order for an individual to be virtuous, he must “bring all his capacities and inclinations under his (reason’s) control” (1996, 536). In this respect, emotions—especially negative emotions—are problematic insofar as they make reflection “impossible or more difficult” (535); the “true strength of virtue is a *tranquil mind*”—for it “is the state of *health* in the moral life...” (536, original emphasis). The picture that emerges from all this is not flattering: negative emotions lack value because they are pernicious, inherently unpleasant, and inconsistent with human virtue.

I reject this skepticism. As a slogan: negative emotions matter. Not only can they help us manage risks, dangers, and threats, they are also central elements of what a good or virtuous character consists in. Negative emotions, that is, have both instrumental and aretaic value. To draw this out, I take anxiety as a case study. I show that, contrary to much folk and philosophical wisdom, anxiety can be a very valuable—both for our ability to successfully navigate the complexities of social life and as a central dimension of being virtuous. Along the way, we will also draw some conclusions about the value of other negative emotions—particularly, anger and fear.

1. A Primer on Emotion and Anxiety

For the discussion that follows, it will be helpful for me to say a little about how I'm understanding emotion in general and anxiety in particular. Speaking at a high level, emotions are responses to perceived threats and opportunities. And so to experience a given emotion is to respond to a particular threat/opportunity with a distinctive combination of feelings, thoughts, and actions. To see this, consider some familiar emotions.

Joy: A response to progress or success that tends to bring associated thoughts ('I've done well,' 'That was nice'), positively valenced feelings, and a motivational tendency to affirm one's efforts or stay the course.

Fear: A response to imminent threats or dangers that tends to bring associated thoughts ('Oh no!'), negatively valenced feelings, and a motivational tendency to avoid or escape the threat/danger at hand.

Anger: A response to affronts or slights from others that tends to bring associated thoughts ('How dare you!', 'That's out of line'), negatively valenced feelings, and a motivational tendency to defend oneself or one's interests.¹

Understanding emotions in this way draws out that they function as distinctive forms of evaluative awareness. To fear the dog is to see the dog *as dangerous*—as something to be avoided; to be a happy about the talk you just gave is to see the talk *as a success*—as a commendable performance.

Moreover, if emotions are evaluative responses of this sort, then they have accuracy conditions—they are things that can be (un)fitting in virtue of (mis)representing the evaluative content of their targets. Consider: it's fitting to fear the dog when the dog *really is* dangerous, and it's fitting to be happy about your presentation when the presentation *actually was* a success. Recognizing that emotions can be (un)fitting is significant for two reasons. First, it reveals that when we are considering whether a particular emotion has value, we are (typically) asking whether *fitting* instances of that emotion are valuable. That is, we're interested in questions like whether it's helpful to fear

¹ These sketches are not intended as a substantive account of what emotions are—that's a thorny issue that I don't want (or need) to take a stand on. Rather, my aim is to give an intuitive picture of how I'm thinking about emotions.

the (vicious, snarling) dog when the dog is, in fact, dangerous. Second, just because an emotion is fitting in this (technical) sense doesn't automatically mean that it's useful: your fear of the dog, though fitting, may nonetheless provoke it to attack.

With this background in hand, we can turn to anxiety. Anxiety is a response to uncertainty about a possible threat or challenge.² More specifically, when one feels anxious, one sees one's situation as involving a threat or challenge whose potential is unpredictable, uncontrollable, or otherwise open to question. Anxiety of this sort typically brings thoughts about one's predicament ('I'm worried,' 'What should I do?'), negatively valenced feelings of unease and concern, and a motivational tendency to be cautious toward the uncertain threat or challenge one faces. Moreover, how one responds will turn on one's perception of the difficulty at hand. For instance, if one sees one's situation as involving a potential physical harm (e.g., the large man approaching in the dark parking lot) or social threat (e.g., criticism from peers about one's debate performance), one will tend to respond *defensively*—avoidance, withdrawal, appeasement, and other risk minimization efforts. By contrast, if one's anxiety results from uncertainty about the correctness of one's beliefs or choices (e.g., a decision about what to do in a novel situation; concerns about how best to respond to a difficult objection to one's views), one will tend more toward *epistemic behaviors*—reflection, investigation, deliberation, and the like. This suggests anxiety has (at least) two dimensions: a defensive response that's directed toward protecting oneself against physical or social threats, and a more epistemically-oriented response that's concerned with (good or accurate) decision making (Kurth 2016). With this initial picture of emotion and anxiety in hand, we can turn to the central project: determining whether a negative emotion like anxiety is valuable, and if so, in what way.

² The term 'anxiety' as used in ordinary speech, philosophy, and psychology refers to a range of phenomena that are unlikely to have a common core. So here I focus on an important dimension of what we refer to as 'anxiety'—namely, an emotion that concerns *uncertainty* about what to do in the face of a potential threat/challenge.

2. Is Anxiety Instrumentally Valuable?

As we noted, when asking about the instrumental value of an emotion, we're typically asking whether *fitting* instances of that emotion are useful. On this front, the quotes from the introduction suggest that negative emotions are unhelpful because they interfere with judgment and action. This worry can be fleshed out in a couple of ways. First, there's the charge that negative emotions will rarely, if ever, be fitting—much less instrumentally valuable—because they're too likely to generate false-positives and false-negatives: we regularly fear things like the murderer in the horror movie that pose no danger; and we routinely fail to fear things like handguns and climate change that do. Second, even when negative emotions are fitting (i.e., when they're not systematically misfiring), they can still distort our understanding of our situations and so motivate us to act in problematic ways. Anger, for instance, can get us to lash out at others in ways that are disproportionate (e.g., the offense was minor) or misdirected (e.g., they were merely a bystander to a genuine offense).³

Along both these dimensions, anxiety seems to be in big trouble. With regard to misfires, Woody Allen is a wonderful case in point—he not only finds occasion for anxiety *everywhere* but he's a hopeless mess as a result. However, even if we just focus on fitting anxiety, there's no shortage of examples of it leading to disaster. Consider, for instance, what we find in Scott Stossel's recent memoir *My Age of Anxiety* (2013). He gets anxious whenever he needs to speak before a large group—a fitting response given the potential for a negative reaction from his audience. However, his anxiety about public speaking brings such intense cycles of dread, nausea, and sweating that he must resort to Xanax and vodka to prevent himself from running out on the talk he's supposed to give. Hardly a picture of anxiety contributing to health and well-being—much less one's career prospects.

³ Seneca's concerns about anger's value are, at least in part, driven by observations like these.

But while these examples of anxiety run amok provide a rhetorically powerful way to raise concerns about the fittingness and instrumental value of anxiety, we should pause to ask whether they really make for a convincing case. Are individuals who have anxiety disorders like Allen and Stossel really good examples of how anxiety *generally* functions, or merely anxiety when it happens to *go awry*? Notice as well that it's not difficult to find examples of fitting and instrumentally valuable anxiety. Consider Henry Marsh, one of the world's most accomplished neurosurgeon. Though he's performed over 400 brain surgeries, these procedures still make him anxious. However, he doesn't see his anxiety as unfitting or problematic. Rather, he sees it as the manifestation of his accumulated surgical expertise. For instance, when trying to figure out whether to remove more of a tumor—at the risk of damaging healthy brain tissue—he's guided by his anxiety. As he explains, “you stop when you start getting more anxious. That's experience” (Knausgaard 2015).

Recognizing all this reveals that the real question is not *whether* fitting anxiety is helpful, but rather whether there's anything interesting we can say about *when* and *why* it can be useful. This is obviously a huge empirical question—one that psychologist, cognitive scientists, and emotion researchers are only just starting to understand. But for the beginnings of an answer, we can turn to research on a common technique used in public health and safety advertisements. These ads make use of graphic images, audio, and text in order to elicit anxiety and related emotions (worry, unease, distress) in an effort to curb smoking, drunk driving, and other harmful behaviors. For our purposes, this research is important in several ways. First, because these campaigns present individuals with information and images about potential threats, the anxiety they trigger will (typically) be *fitting*. Moreover, the research on the effectiveness of these campaigns helps us understand the conditions under which fitting anxiety can bring (health, safety) benefits. Generally speaking, these ad campaigns are better able to reduce the targeted harmful behaviors when the anxiety they provoke (i) conveys

the sense that the viewer is *vulnerable* to being harmed by the risky behavior and (ii) instills the feeling that they *can do something* to avoid those harms (Lewis, Watson, Tay & White 2007; c.f., Brader 2006).

Extending these findings to more general questions about (fitting) anxiety's usefulness suggests that anxiety will be helpful on occasions where it doesn't just make potential threats and challenges more salient, but also helps one identify potential solutions or otherwise leaves one feeling empowered. By contrast, anxiety is likely to bring trouble when it elicits feelings of vulnerability and undermines one's sense of efficacy. Moreover, notice that these findings fit nicely with what we see in Stossel and Marsh. Stossel is an occasional public speaker with (by his own account) a track record of unfortunate performances. His history of flubbed talks thus leaves him feeling not just vulnerable, but also unable to prevent another embarrassing episode—hence all the vodka and Xanax (Stossel 2013). Marsh, by comparison, is an accomplished neurosurgeon with decades of training and experience. So while he both feels unease during a surgery and is well aware of the damage that a poor judgment on his part can bring, his anxiety doesn't leave him feeling unnerved or distracted. Rather, he sees it as a corrective for potentially disastrous overconfidence (Marsh 2014).

Stepping back, viewing the examples of Stossel and Marsh in light of the research on public safety campaigns suggests a negative emotion like anxiety is more useful to the extent that it's experienced not just at the *right time* but also in the *right way*. That is, we don't just want our anxiety to *fit* the situation, but to also be *well-regulated*—we want its intensity to be appropriately calibrated to the challenge at hand. Moreover, if we focus on the Marsh example, two further insights emerge. First, we see that the tendency to experience anxiety at the right time and in the right way isn't just instrumentally beneficial, but also valuable in a deeper sense. Marsh's anxiety doesn't just help him be a more effective surgeon. It also reveals something important about his character: his anxiety demonstrates an admirable emotional attunement—a sensitivity to the surgical risks and uncertainty at hand. Second, Marsh's remark that his anxiety is a product of his experience suggests that effective

emotion regulation is skill-like: it's something we can get better at through practice and learning. In the next two sections, we'll look more closely at these two ideas. Doing this will further enrich our understanding of the value that negative emotions can have.

3. Anxiety, Anger, and Virtuous Character

Let's start with the idea that anxiety is more than just instrumentally valuable—in particular, the suggestion from above that anxiety is a component of virtuous character (i.e., that it has what philosophers call *aretaic value*). To do this, it will be helpful to say a little about virtue more generally. As standardly understood, virtues are excellences of character in the sense that they are comprised of integrated packages of beliefs, motivations, and feelings.⁴ The underlying idea here is that virtues must involve more than just occasions where one's actions or habits happen to bring (morally) good outcomes. Rather, a virtue like benevolence is an excellence of character that has cognitive, conative, and affective dimensions. So, for example, instances of benevolence are not merely cases where one is prompted to help another in need. Rather, they are situations where the assistance one provides is undergirded by both the belief that the person needs help and a feeling of sympathy for her plight. The belief is necessary because we do not (typically) admire those who blindly manage to do good. The affective component is also necessary: to not give to someone in need from a feeling of sympathy (or, worse, to resent giving assistance) would be indicative of a deficient character—you would be emotionally out of tune with what's happening.

With this general picture of virtue in hand, we can turn to the distinctive *moral concern* that virtuous individuals display. Doing this will help draw out the deeper value that negative emotions like anxiety and anger can have. To begin, notice that virtuous individuals are persons who stand up for

⁴ While the claim that virtues are constituted by integrated combinations of beliefs, motivations, and feelings is contested by some, it is the received view about virtue. See, for instance, Aristotle 1998 and Annas 2011. David Hume (1975) and Kant (1996) are prominent dissenting voices (but on Kant, see Baxley 2010, chap. 4).

what's right and good in the sense that they'll *defend* what they see as valuable when it is in danger (Aristotle 1998, 96-8). Virtuous individuals are also *sensitive to uncertainty* in the sense that they appreciate the limits of their knowledge and the extent of their fallibility (e.g., Stohr 2003). Admirable character traits like these form the core of the virtue I'm calling "moral concern."⁵

Now since moral concern is a virtue, its characteristic behaviors—namely, to defend what's valuable and to be sensitive to uncertainty—are (as we saw above) undergirded by a distinctive combination of beliefs, motivations, and feelings. It's here that anxiety and anger enter the picture. They are the emotions that comprise the feeling dimension of moral concern. To flesh this out, first consider anger. As we saw in §1, anger has a distinctive phenomenology and functional role: it's a response to affronts and slights that brings negatively valenced feelings and a motivational tendency to defend oneself, one's interests, or one's standing. So we have a nice fit: our understanding of anger meshes with the dimension of moral concern that involves the defense of what one sees as valuable. To further draw out this fit, consider a person who discovers that she has been lied to by someone she trusts, but who isn't at all angry about it. An individual like this strikes us not just as odd, but deficient—she fails to appreciate the violation of her moral worth that has occurred. Moreover, recognizing anger as a constitutive feature of the defense-dimension of moral concern explains our reactions to an unperturbed individual like this. Anger not only helps one stand up for oneself as an individual who has value and merits respect; it is also an *expression* of the moral significance that one takes oneself to have. To not be angry in the face of betrayal is to evince a lack of emotional and evaluative attunement to what matters.

We find something similar for anxiety—especially in its epistemically-oriented form (§1). It is, as we've seen, an emotion that's concerned with uncertainty and that prompts a combination of

⁵ Here I'm using "moral" in the broad sense typical of virtue theory: it refers not just to (e.g.) right and wrong behavior but to the more encompassing "practical wisdom" that virtuous individuals display.

caution and inquiry (information gathering, deliberation, reflection, etc.). Thus, anxiety of this sort fits nicely with the dimension of moral concern that involves a sensitivity and responsiveness to the possibility that one's choice might be mistaken. To draw this out, consider some difficult moral decisions. (i) It's becoming hard for you to care for your Alzheimer's-stricken mother. Her doctors have suggested it's time to put her in a nursing home, but you know she's terrified of those places. What should do you do? (ii) Your colleague has again been mistreated by your mutual boss. Should you stand up for her even though you know it will come at a (significant) cost to your career? (iii) You're a senior professor and have a talented graduate student looking for a job. You've written her a very strong recommendation. But should you do more—say, contact departments where she's applying to try and give them a nudge? Or would that be to take advantage of the system?

In situations like these, you face a decision that involves complex and potentially competing considerations. Worse, these cases are ones where the existing (moral, professional) norms and your own prior experiences provide insufficient guidance about what to do. To be unfazed—to not feel uneasy or uncomfortable about decisions like these—strikes us not just as odd, but deficient. Such an individual would be troublingly disconnected from the significance and complexity of her choice. Seeing anxiety as constitutive of a virtuous moral concern helps explain this. Anxiety doesn't just bring a sensitivity to the problematic uncertainty we find in cases like these; it is also an *expression* of one's appreciation of the complexity of the decision at hand. It evinces one's emotional and evaluative attunement.

If these reflections are on point, they suggest not just that anxiety and anger are essential elements of moral concern, but that they are valuable because of what they say about one's emotional attunement. Importantly, the value here isn't (merely) instrumental in nature. Rather, it's value grounded in the contribution these emotions make to one's *character*: to have the virtue of moral

concern is to be a person who feels angry when what they care about is threatened and who feels anxious in the face of a difficult or novel choice.

But one might be skeptical that anxiety (or anger) is aretaically valuable—that it's important beyond the instrumental benefits it brings. To give this worry more substance, consider the following possibility. Suppose you could take a pill—a new version of Xanax, say—that would bring the instrumental benefits associated with anxiety (e.g., caution and reflection) but without the felt unpleasantness and unease. If you had such a pill, would you take it? If you answer yes, it suggests you think there's nothing aretaically valuable in anxiety. It's only valuable in virtue of the moral concern it helps bring about.

For anyone who has battled with anxiety, I suspect the pill has appeal. But to draw out that there's something amiss in this thought, we should consider a case where although anxiety is neither fitting nor instrumentally beneficial, we nonetheless deem it valuable. Such a case, after all, would be an example of a situation where anxiety has non-instrumental value. So consider again your Alzheimer's-stricken mother. Her disease has now run its course and, tragically, each day only brings her more pain and suffering. You promised her that when this moment came, you would give her a euthanizing dose of morphine. So you must now decide whether to keep that promise. You are anxious—is this the right thing to do?—and, as a result, think hard about both your promise and your mother's condition.⁶ After much reflection, you conclude that you ought to do what you promised. And you do. But days later, you're still anxious. Though you keep rethinking your decision, you keep coming to the same conclusion: it was the right thing to do. Yet your anxiety about the choice remains.

What can we say about your anxiety? First, given that it's anxiety about a difficult decision that prompts reflection and reassessment, we can see that we are dealing with the epistemically-oriented

⁶ Clearly, in a situation like this, anxiety is unlikely to be the only emotion you feel. Anger, sadness, and frustration are other likely possibilities. Here I focus just on anxiety to help draw out the aretaic dimension of its value.

form of anxiety. This, in turn, helps us understand when your anxiety is (un)fitting. More specifically, your anxiety is clearly *fitting* as you contemplate whether to keep the promise: you face a difficult choice and have reason to reflect and reassess. However, it's less clear—doubtful even—that your anxiety *remains* fitting after you have administered the morphine: since you no longer face a hard choice and since the choice you made cannot be reversed, you have no reason to revisit or reassess it. Moreover, your post-decision anxiety doesn't just seem unfitting, it also seems to *lack instrumental value*: not only is your lingering anxiety unpleasant, but the reflection it prompts does nothing to change either your conclusion or enrich your understanding of what was at stake—each new round of anxiety-induced reflection leads you back to the same considerations and the same conclusion.

However, your persisting anxiety—though unfitting and void of instrumental value—still *reflects well on you*. It is the manifestation of your admirable sensitivity to the difficult choice you faced (c.f., Williams 1976). We'd find someone who had no lingering unease in a situation like yours disconcerting; a quick transition back to an anxiety-free demeanor would prompt worries about their *character*. It would suggest they hadn't really appreciated the gravity of their choice. But notice what this means: it means we are again seeing that anxiety has aretaic value—it is an integral part of what we admire about you and the concern you demonstrate in this awful situation.

Stepping back, this case reveals that the aretaic value of anxiety is independent of its fittingness or instrumental contributions. Anxiety is important not just because of the benefits it can bring, but also because of what it says about the character of the individual who experiences it. Moreover, given that negative emotions like anxiety (and anger) are central to human agency, they are features of our (moral) psychology that, if eliminated by popping some special pill, would come at real cost to how we understand and assess ourselves and others. So while the Xanax objection might have initially seemed to cause trouble for our claims about the aretaic value of anxiety, its plausibility fades on closer examination.

4. Cultivating More Valuable Anxiety

Turn now to the second suggestion that emerged from our discussion of Henry Marsh—namely, that learning to effectively regulate negative emotions like anxiety is much like developing a skill: it's something we can get better at through learning and experience. More specifically, if emotions are forms of evaluative awareness whereby we see (aspects of) our situation in an evaluatively-loaded manner (§1), then becoming better emotionally attuned will involve developing a better understanding of what sorts of features merit a given response. This thought has been taken up by philosophers, especially those working in the Aristotelian tradition. Nancy Sherman, for instance, explains that “[c]ultivating the dispositional capacities to feel fear, anger, goodwill, compassion, or pity appropriately will be bound up with learning how to discern the circumstances that warrant these responses” (1989, 167; also Annas 2011). And she argues that we develop such an understanding via a combination of our individual experiences and our interactions with others who help us recognize the particular features of a situation that make a given emotion (in)appropriate.

While these observations about how to cultivate emotions have a breezy plausibility to them, one might reasonably wonder whether they're correct: can we really cultivate our emotional capacities in the same way that we develop a skill? On this front, research on cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) may offer some answers. CBT is used to treat individuals with (e.g.) severe anxiety, phobias, and depression. Its driving premise is that these emotional disorders are sustained by cognitive factors (e.g., minimizing the positive aspects of a situation, catastrophizing, overgeneralizing) and so can be effectively treated by helping individuals develop coping skills that allow them to both better identify situations that trigger the problematic emotional response, and engage coping strategies that can help correct the distorting thoughts/attitudes.

In the present context, CBT is interesting for two reasons. First, the techniques at the heart of CBT are of the very sort that Aristotelians like Sherman point to as the core tools for effective emotion

cultivation—namely, working with others to better understand when and why an emotional response is (in)appropriate. Thus, it provides us with a concrete model for thinking about how best to regulate and cultivate emotions. Second, research indicates that CBT is quite effective. For instance, a recent meta-analysis found “strong support for the efficacy of CBT” as a treatment for anxiety disorders (Hofmann & Smits 2008). To be clear, the suggestion here is not that we should sign ourselves and our children up for psychiatry appointments! Rather, the point is that research on CBT’s effectiveness suggests that the techniques it emphasizes provide support and substance to the Aristotelian suggestion that cultivating emotions is much like developing a skill.

5. Conclusion

Recognizing the essential place that negative emotions have in our understanding of human agency helps us see what is wrong with Kant’s claims about the incompatibility of virtue and negative emotion. Recall that on Kant’s picture, virtue is understood in terms of rational self-control: virtue is “the moral strength of a human being’s *will* in fulfilling his duty” (1996, 533) and thus the virtuous agent is one for whom “reason holds the reins of government in its own hands” (536). So understood, the problem with feeling negative emotions is that it represents a failure of self-control: emotion—not reason—determines one’s behavior. But what Kant seems to have missed is the essential role that negative emotions like anxiety play in *promoting* self-control. Recall the Marsh example. The anxiety he experiences in surgery doesn’t represent a failure of self-control, but rather the manifestation of it. It’s because he feels anxious and it’s because this anxiety is unpleasant, that it can bring the focus and caution that it does. That gets missed, however, if one focuses—as Kant (and Seneca) seems to—on cases where anxiety, anger, or other negative emotions manifest in extreme or clinical forms. But once we set these atypical cases aside, we can see the value—instrumental and aretaic—that negative emotions can have.

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