

Moral Anxiety and Moral Agency

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Nothing in human affairs is worthy of great anxiety. – Plato

How much should I give to charity? Is it okay for me to break this promise? As an advocate of women's rights, can I vote for the pro-life candidate? When we face difficult moral decisions like these, we feel a distinctive unease: we must make a choice but we are unsure what the correct thing to do is. Yet despite the pervasiveness of this phenomenon, surprisingly little work has been done to either characterize this emotion—this *moral anxiety*—or explain the role it plays in moral decision making. That's a mistake. Given that moral anxiety is a pervasive feature of our lives, it is important that we understand what it is. Moreover, and more importantly, given the many ways in which emotions can inform and distort our reasoning, it is also important to understand the role that moral anxiety plays in moral decision making.

In what follows, I will argue that moral anxiety is central to good moral decision making and agency—it's an emotion that we ought to cultivate. This claim is striking on its own. But it also upends the familiar picture, one found among philosophers and folk alike, of anxiety as an inherently destructive emotion: the anxious person is someone consumed—paralyzed—by intense anxiety. What could be valuable in that? To make my case, I begin by developing a model of moral anxiety that builds from work on anxiety in general and social anxiety in particular (§§1–3). The resulting account reveals moral anxiety to be an emotion that (i) we experience when we are uncertain about the correctness of a moral decision that we are contemplating or have made, and that (ii) prompts epistemic behaviors like deliberation and information gathering that are aimed at resolving our underlying uncertainty. With this model in hand, I then argue that moral anxiety is an emotion that is particularly well-suited to engage the capacities that are essential to good moral decision making and agency—deliberation, reflection, and

the like. Thus, it is something we ought to cultivate (§§4–5). The end result is a novel account of the moral psychology that underlies moral thought and action.

1. VARIETIES OF ANXIETY

Anxiety—as a general psychological phenomenon—is (a) an aversive emotional response to uncertainty about a possible threat or danger that (b) provokes distinctive cognitive and motivational tendencies that are aimed at addressing the uncertainty in question.¹ While anxiety in general displays this core pair of features, we also find an interesting diversity in both the situations that provoke it, and the behaviors that subsequently result. For instance, uncertainty about how to act in an unfamiliar social situation (e.g., a fancy gala) can bring anxiety that tends to provoke deference to social authorities; knowing that your behavior broke the rules, but feeling uncertain about whether you will be punished for it, brings anxiety that prompts efforts to make up for what you did (e.g., a preemptive apology); uncertainty about existential matters (e.g., does God exist?) can bring anxiety that leads to epistemic behaviors (e.g., reflection, consultation of religious texts).

Moreover, while we often focus on situations where anxiety manifests in chronic, debilitating ways, such cases are (for most of us) exceptions. In fact, it's widely accepted among social and clinical psychologists that anxiety typically manifests as a moderate and generally beneficial emotion. As the psychologist David Barlow explains,

[a]nxiety functions to warn of a potential danger situation and triggers the recruitment of internal (...) psychological defense mechanisms (...) [This] serves the adaptive purpose of protecting the integrity of the individual and allowing a higher and more mature level of functioning.²

¹ The term 'anxiety' as used in ordinary speech, philosophy, and psychology refers to a range of phenomena that are unlikely to constitute a unified kind. Thus, in this essay, I follow others (e.g., Baumeister & Tice 1990, Öhman 2008) in focusing on an important dimension of what we refer to as 'anxiety'—namely, anxiety that concerns *uncertainty*. There is also some tendency to use 'anxiety' to refer only to significant or clinical levels of unease/worry, rather than the broader psychological phenomenon that I will be focusing on. As we'll see, there's good reason to prefer the more encompassing usage I will be employing.

² Barlow 2001: 8; see also Baumeister & Tice 1990, Marks & Nesse 1994, Leary & Kowalski 1995: 22ff.

To be clear, to claim that anxiety is generally beneficial is not to deny that it can lead to problems—intense bouts (or deficits) of anxiety can be disastrous. Rather, it's meant to draw out that even though anxiety can sometimes go awry, it—like other dimensions of our emotional repertoire—typically manifests in a moderate and beneficial manner. In this way, anxiety is no different than, say, fear or anger: these emotions are good things to have even though they can at times manifest in unfortunate ways (e.g., phobias, rage).³

Taken together, these observations suggest that the label 'anxiety' picks out a family of emotional responses that share a common core (namely, (a)–(b) above), and that these responses take on distinct forms in order to help individuals address specific kinds of problems. So, for instance, social anxiety prompts things like deference and caution that help one manage uncertain social situations. Similarly, punishment anxiety brings efforts to make amends that can help reduce the likelihood of punishment.⁴

While this initial gloss on anxiety is instructive, it leaves two important questions unanswered. (1) How can we individuate particular varieties of anxiety in a way that allows us to see them as (in a sense) species of a common genus? (2) How can we explain the distinctive concern of a particular variety of anxiety in a way that allows us to both understand when such anxiety is appropriate (or rational), and make sense of the resulting behaviors as generally beneficial? In responding to these questions, it will be helpful to draw on tools from the philosophy of emotion. In particular, understanding emotions in terms of their 'formal objects' will allow us to develop a general answer that we can then use (in §§2-3) to understand moral anxiety.

The formal object of an emotion is what that emotion is about; it's the property that is implicitly ascribed by the emotion to its target. Thus, the formal object of fear is something like danger: to fear the dog is to see the dog as dangerous; the formal object of anger is, roughly, an offense

³ This suggests that the real issue is not whether anxiety (or anger or fear) is generally beneficial. Rather, it's how to cultivate anxiety (or anger or fear) so as to draw out its benefits—a question I take up in §5.

⁴ See Marks & Nesse 1994; Barlow 2001. I'm not claiming that every type of anxiety is beneficial. One might think that existential anxiety—*anxiety about (e.g.) God existence*—is unlike social or punishment anxiety in that it is not a generally beneficial emotional response (or even a genuine kind of anxiety). Whether this is true is a matter for another time.

against you (or your interests): to be angry at the comment is to see it as offensive.⁵ Moreover, and as these examples suggest, the properties that are constitutive of the formal objects of emotions are typically taken to be *evaluative* properties: they are things—like dangers and offenses—with normative significance for the individual experiencing the emotion.⁶ But if having an emotional experience involves attributing a formal object—an evaluative property—to the emotion's target, then emotional experiences are, in a real sense, forms of *evaluative* awareness: they are experiences where one sees one's situation in a normatively loaded way. Given the above renderings of the formal objects of fear and anger, our discussion suggests the following glosses on the distinctive kind of evaluative awareness associated with these emotions:

To fear the dog is to see the dog *as dangerous*—as something to be *avoided*.

To feel anger at someone's comment is to see the comment *as offensive*—as something *calling for a response*.

Moreover, recognizing that experiences of fear and anger involve evaluative awareness of this sort helps explain both why they tend to bring the distinctive behaviors that they do, and why these emotions are things that can be beneficial. Given that fear is about danger, it makes sense that it tends to result in a fight/flight/freeze response; likewise, given that anger concerns an offense to you or yours, it makes sense that it tends to trigger things like aggression and outrage.⁷

⁵ See Deonna & Teroni 2012 for an overview of emotions and formal objects. D'Arms & Jacobson (2003) reject this way of understanding emotions. As they see it, what is typically taken to be a *descriptive* account of an emotion's formal object is actually better understood as a *normative* gloss that expresses when it is appropriate to feel the emotion in question. I'm quite sympathetic to D'Arms & Jacobson's proposal and what follows could be restated in a way that fits with it. But for ease of presentation, I will stick with the more familiar formal objects model.

⁶ Here I aim to be neutral on metaethical debates regarding the nature of evaluative properties.

⁷ The general claims in the text are widely accepted among philosophers and psychologists studying emotions—e.g., Solomon (1973), de Sousa (1987), Lazarus (1991), Ekman (1992), Nussbaum (2001), D'Arms & Jacobson (2003), Roberts (2003), and Prinz (2004). That said, this sketch needs fleshing out. For instance, with regard to the claim that emotional experiences are experiences where one *sees* one's situation in a normatively loaded way, there is much controversy over both how we should understand both the nature of this awareness (e.g., do emotions provide *perceptual* awareness?), and what the underlying evaluative content of emotional experience is (e.g., is this content propositional or something more non-cognitive?). There are also important questions about how to characterize the evaluative dimension of

This appeal to the formal objects of emotions provides us with the beginnings of answers to questions (1)–(2) concerning what’s distinctive of various types of anxiety. We can start by asking what the formal object of anxiety is. The above discussion (feature (a) in particular) suggests that the formal object of anxiety is *problematic uncertainty*: to feel anxious about a situation is to see that situation as involving a threat or danger whose potential is unpredictable, uncontrollable, or otherwise open to question. But if the formal object of anxiety is problematic uncertainty, we should be able to distinguish different types of anxiety (social, punishment, moral, etc.) by saying more about the nature of the uncertainty in question. Moreover, getting clearer about the nature of the uncertainty involved in different types of anxiety should also help us understand both when it is appropriate to feel a particular form of anxiety and why anxiety of that sort can be beneficial.

In what follows, I develop this picture by taking a closer look at social anxiety. Social anxiety is a nice starting place both because its phenomenology is familiar and because it has been studied extensively by clinical and social psychologists. Thus, social anxiety will provide us with a framework that we can use to develop a model of moral anxiety. Moreover, the general strategy will also give us an important methodological tool: recognizing the significant similarities between social and moral anxiety will allow us to flesh out our account of moral anxiety by drawing on empirical work concerning social anxiety.

2. SOCIAL ANXIETY AS TEMPLATE

As a first pass, we can understand social anxiety as an aversive emotional response to uncertainty about how others will judge one’s social worthiness—one worries that others will deem one as, in some way, not socially good enough. Moreover, this concern typically leads to a distinctive combination of thoughts and behaviors aimed at both addressing one’s uncertainty (e.g., efforts to determine if one has run afoul of the social conventions), and minimizing one’s chances of being viewed as socially ‘unworthy’ (e.g., avoidance, deference to social superiors). So we have the makings of an explanation for why social anxiety is a

emotional awareness: is the normativity prudential, moral, emotion-specific? Fortunately, for the discussion that follows, we can stay largely neutral on these details.

generally beneficial emotion: it helps one to recognize possible threats to one's social standing and to respond appropriately to them. Again, this is not to deny that social anxiety can have very bad effects. In some cases (e.g., for individuals who engage in high levels of self-monitoring), anxiety can lead to the chronic self-esteem difficulties and withdrawal behavior that characterizes Social Anxiety Disorder.⁸ However, and in line with the remarks above (§1), such cases are exceptions: social anxiety is, for most of us, most of the time, a moderate and beneficial emotional response—a twinge that brings awareness and caution, not an intense dread that brings consuming worry. An example will help draw this out.

You are at a dinner party and are seated next to Sam. He's a new acquaintance, but someone with whom you have several common friends—thus you're concerned to make a good impression. So far, your conversation has been going well. But the mood quickly shifts in a way that makes you anxious: the discussion becomes awkward and Sam makes eye contact less frequently. Sensing this, you begin to worry that you've said something inappropriate. Given your anxiety, you start trying to figure out what you might have said that could have triggered the change. Was it the story about the shenanigans you pulled back in college? The talk of the election? Will he mention this to your mutual friends? Will they care? Taking advantage of a lull in the festivities, you replay portions of your conversation in your head. You're trying to understand what happened and what you could say to restore the earlier tenor of the discussion. There are also changes in your general demeanor: you become more cautious and deferential. You are, for instance, more hesitant to engage Sam in conversation again and, when you do, you are more deferential—more inclined to apologize when, say, you accidentally interrupt him. You also seek to insert comments here and there with the hope of clarifying—mitigating—some of your earlier remarks about college and politics.

Applying this example to the general framework developed in §1 indicates that we should understand the formal object of social anxiety as something like problematic uncertainty about how others will view your social worthiness. This in turn suggests the following gloss on the distinctive kind of evaluative awareness associated with social anxiety:

⁸ How exactly social anxiety manifests will, like any aspect of personality, be subject to both individual differences and situational factors. See Barlow 2001: chap. 13 for further discussion.

To feel socially anxious about (e.g.) one's comment is to see the comment as making one a *possible target of social criticism*—as something to be *addressed* or *corrected*.

Recognizing that social anxiety is a form of social awareness helps us see that it has an important place in human psychology: because social anxiety helps one see that one's comment (attire, behavior, etc.) might be deemed socially inappropriate, it provides one with a *signal* that one might be subject to social criticism and thus needs to tread lightly.⁹

This in turn helps explain both when social anxiety is appropriate, and why it tends to bring the distinctive behaviors that it does. Given that the formal object of social anxiety is problematic uncertainty about how others perceive our social worthiness, it is appropriate to feel socially anxious when there is uncertainty of this sort. Similarly, given that social anxiety concerns uncertainty about whether our behavior violates the social sensibilities of others, it makes sense that we tend to respond with the epistemic and risk avoidance behaviors that we do. More specifically, and as the dinner party example reveals, social anxiety tends to bring epistemic behaviors that are aimed at identifying and assessing the social error that one may have made so that one can repair the damage that one might have done. But if one cannot determine how one might have erred, one typically falls back on behaviors that will minimize the risks of social sanction—e.g., deference and avoidance behaviors.¹⁰

⁹ As suggested in note 7, I intend my account to be neutral with regard to debates in the philosophy of emotion. But debates between perceptual and appraisal/cognitive theories of emotion are a place where this is not entirely possible. Perceptual theories (e.g., Ekman 1992, de Sousa 1987) maintain that emotional experiences are, or necessarily involve, (something like) perceptions of value. Appraisal/cognitive theories (e.g., Lazarus 1991, Nussbaum 2001) hold that emotional experiences are, or necessarily involve, (something like) value judgments. However, while my account of anxiety as a form of social awareness can be made to fit with most perceptual and appraisal/cognitive theories, it is not compatible with extreme appraisal/cognitive views that *equate* emotions with value judgments (e.g., Solomon 1973). This is because if emotions just are cognitive evaluative judgments, then they cannot play a role, as I maintain, in raising and shaping awareness prior to those judgments. Given that we have independent reason to reject these extreme proposals on, for instance, the grounds that they cannot make sense of cases where one feels fear but judges that there's nothing to be afraid of (e.g., Roberts 2003, chap. 1), I do not see this restriction on the scope of my proposal as a cost.

¹⁰ For a nice discussion of both social anxiety's signaling function and its role in engaging epistemic and risk minimization behaviors from the perspective of psychologists, see Leary & Kowalski 1995 and Miceli & Castelfranchi 2007.

The upshot, then, is that when social anxiety is appropriate to the situation we are in, as (intuitively) it is in the dinner party case, it functions not just as a distinctive form of social awareness, but one that prompts generally useful behaviors that helps us monitor, assess, and regulate our interactions with others in social settings. It is, in short, a valuable emotion—one that enables us to better understand and navigate the complexities of social life.

3. MORAL ANXIETY: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT DOES

We now have a general account of ‘anxiety’ as a label for a family of emotional responses to distinct forms of uncertainty. We have also developed a more detailed account of social anxiety that has allowed us to both draw out its distinctive features, and understand how it can productively inform and shape social interaction. In this section, I will use this account of social anxiety as a template from which to develop a model of moral anxiety. This investigation is significant in two ways. First, it reveals that, though there are important differences between social and moral anxiety, they also share significant similarities in their basic structure—similarities that help support the claim that moral anxiety, like social anxiety, is a genuine and generally beneficial feature of human psychology (§3.1). Second, it allows us to distinguish moral anxiety from similar emotions like punishment anxiety and anticipatory guilt (§3.2).

3.1 *The Basic Model*

The examples at the beginning of the paper suggest that moral anxiety is an aversive emotional response to uncertainty about the correctness of a moral decision one is contemplating (or has made).¹¹ Moreover, when one feels morally anxious, one tends to do things that are aimed at both resolving one’s underlying uncertainty (e.g., information gathering, reflection, deliberation), and minimizing the risks that come with having to act in the face of such uncertainty (e.g., deferring to “moral authorities”). This suggests that, as with social anxiety, we can see moral anxiety as involving a distinctive form of awareness and motivation—one that

¹¹ In addition to feeling morally anxious about what to *do*, one can also feel morally anxious about what to *value*. For brevity’s sake, I will focus only on the former.

tends to provoke behaviors that help one better understand what the morally correct thing to do is. Again, an example will help illustrate this.

Your mother's Alzheimer's has advanced dramatically in the last year and you can no longer provide her with the care she needs. You're inclined to follow the doctor's recommendation and put her in a nursing home. But this decision makes you anxious.¹² Given your anxiety, you start to reflect on the details of the situation that you now face: your mother was always so concerned about elderly care facilities—in fact, last year, before things turned for the worse, you promised her that you would never put her in such a place. Recalling your promise you now wonder—would she have thought that in a situation like *this* it would be inappropriate to put her in a nursing home? In exploring this question, you're trying to sort out whether it's permissible to break the promise you've made. Still unsure, you decide to ask a close friend for guidance and are prepared to refine—perhaps even change—your thinking about what to do based on your conversation.

As with the dinner party case, we have an intuitive and familiar example that both works to highlight some of the distinctive features of moral anxiety, and helps us understand how it can contribute positively to moral thought and action. Building from this example and our initial gloss of moral anxiety, we can say that the formal object of moral anxiety is, roughly, problematic uncertainty about the correctness of a moral decision one is contemplating (or has made). This in turn suggests the following gloss on the distinctive kind of awareness associated with moral anxiety:

To feel morally anxious about a decision that one is contemplating is to see one's decision as *possibly open to moral objection*—as something calling for a *cautious* approach.

Thus, when one feels morally anxious, one sees one's situation in the same kind of evaluatively loaded way that is associated with feelings of social anxiety. This means that the claim that moral anxiety is a distinctive form of moral awareness should be just as plausible as the claim that

¹² Presumably, you're also feeling other emotions—sadness, frustration, anger. Here I want to focus specifically on your anxiety.

social anxiety is a distinctive form of social awareness: both serve as signals that one faces a particular kind of problematic uncertainty.

Moreover, and again like social anxiety, the fact that the awareness here is evaluative awareness helps explain both when moral anxiety is appropriate and why it prompts the behaviors that it does. Given that the formal object of moral anxiety is problematic uncertainty about the correctness of one's decision, it is appropriate to feel morally anxious to the extent that the decision one is contemplating might be open to moral objection. And given that moral anxiety concerns uncertainty about the correctness of one's decision, it makes sense that it prompts epistemic behaviors—information gathering, reflection, deliberation, and the like—that are aimed at helping one resolve the uncertainty about whether the decision one is contemplating is morally justified.¹³

Stepping back, we can see that looking to social anxiety has allowed us to develop an account of what moral anxiety is and what it does. In short, it is a variety of anxiety that provides us with a distinct form of normatively-loaded awareness: it both signals to us that the decision we are considering may be open to moral objection, and prompts behaviors—especially epistemic behaviors—that are aimed at helping us address our underlying uncertainty. Moreover, given the broad functional and structural similarities that we've identified between social and moral anxiety, we can also see how moral anxiety can be valuable. When our moral anxiety is appropriate to the situation we are in, as (intuitively) it is in the case of your promise to your mother, we have an emotion that can help us monitor, assess, and regulate our moral thinking and doing. Such a capacity will be particularly useful in the early stages of moral development when we are more likely to face new and novel moral situations—situations that involve the problematic uncertainty that moral anxiety can help us recognize and work through. But since even morally mature individuals can face novel and difficult moral situations,

¹³ Here we see a contrast between social and moral anxiety. In the case of social anxiety, avoidance, deference, and other efforts to minimize risk play the dominant role—epistemic behaviors typically come in just to help identify the best risk minimization strategy (Miceli & Castelfranchi 2007). With moral anxiety, by contrast, we see more emphasis on epistemic behaviors—an emphasis that makes sense given moral anxiety's formal object. That said, I do not deny that hard moral questions can provoke deference and avoidance behaviors. Clearly, they can: with regard to your promise to your mother, you might just defer to her doctors, or try to pass the decision off to your sister. But such behaviors are often a last resort. After all, you feel moral anxiety, in part, because *you* must come to a decision about what to do (more on this is §4.3).

moral anxiety will continue to be valuable even as we become wiser and more experienced.¹⁴

3.2 *Moral Anxiety as Distinct*

The discussion so far allows us to distinguish moral anxiety from both social anxiety and anxiety about punishment in terms of their formal objects. In short, moral anxiety concerns uncertainty about the correctness of a moral decision that you are contemplating, while social and punishment anxiety concern, respectively, uncertainty about how others will view your social worthiness, and uncertainty about whether you will be punished for a wrong you have done. Moreover, and as we've seen, it is because these varieties of anxiety have different formal objects that we can explain why they prompt the distinct behaviors that they do.

However, even after distinguishing between social, punishment, and moral anxiety, one still might be puzzled about how moral anxiety differs from other similar emotions—especially anticipatory guilt and what we might call ‘practical anxiety’: the anxiety you feel about the correctness of a practical decision that you are contemplating. We can start with anticipatory guilt. Anticipatory guilt is an emotion we experience in advance of acting in a certain way; it is (roughly) the concern that one will do wrong by X-ing. Thus, anticipatory guilt is different from moral anxiety in that, with anticipatory guilt, one's concern is focused on doing something that one *believes to be wrong*. With moral anxiety, by contrast, one's concern is focused on one's *uncertainty*: is the decision to X open to challenge?¹⁵ Moreover, recognizing this difference in what anticipatory guilt and moral anxiety concern (i.e., differences in their formal objects) indicates that we should also expect there to be differences in the associated behaviors that they prompt. In particular, rather than the epistemic behaviors associated with moral anxiety, we should expect anticipatory guilt to prompt things like a motivation away from X-ing and a tendency to engage in preemptive, reparative behaviors

¹⁴ I say more about moral anxiety's value in §4. In that discussion I also take up questions about the problems that moral anxiety can bring.

¹⁵ Velleman (2003) discusses a phenomenon that he terms ‘moral anxiety’ but he's clearly looking at something akin to anticipatory guilt, not the uncertainty-based form of moral anxiety I'm exploring.

(e.g., apology) when one suspects that such motivation will not be sufficient to keep one from X-ing.¹⁶

The more difficult case concerns distinguishing moral anxiety from practical anxiety—the anxiety that one feels about the correctness of a practical decision that one is contemplating.¹⁷ After all, both concern the correctness of a decision under consideration. How these emotions differ will turn on larger questions about how to distinguish the moral from the practical, and what the correct theory of emotion is. I want to remain neutral on these issues. That said, it's still possible to illustrate how one might distinguish these varieties of anxiety.¹⁸ For instance, while the formal objects of moral and practical anxiety both appeal to concerns about the *correctness* of the decision at hand, one might characterize this 'correctness' in different ways. For instance, one might hold that for moral anxiety, correctness amounts to being justified from an impartial point of view; while for practical anxiety correctness amounts to being justified from a more agent-centered point of view. Moreover, given this way of articulating the difference in the formal objects of these emotions, we should expect to find corresponding differences in the behaviors they prompt. In particular, if moral anxiety concerns uncertainty about the correctness of a decision as viewed from an impartial point of view, then we should expect there to be epistemic behaviors (e.g., reflection, deliberation) that tend to be impartial in this way; and if practical anxiety concerns uncertainty about the correctness of a decision as viewed from an agent-centered point of view, then we should expect epistemic behaviors that tend to be agent-centered.

The upshot, then, is that our general model of anxiety allows us to make principled and plausible distinctions between different varieties of anxiety. It warrants us in taking moral anxiety to be a genuine and important psychological phenomenon.

4. MORAL ANXIETY, DELIBERATIVE VIRTUE, AND AGENCY

The model of moral anxiety we now have provides a descriptive account of what moral anxiety is and what it does: moral anxiety is a response to

¹⁶ See Frank 1988 for a discussion of these features of anticipatory guilt.

¹⁷ I discuss practical anxiety at length in Kurth (MS.1).

¹⁸ I do not believe much of substance turns on the possibility that, *pace* the discussion that follows, moral anxiety is just practical anxiety with moral content.

uncertainty about the correctness of a moral decision that prompts epistemic behaviors (e.g., deliberation, information gathering) aimed at resolving the uncertainty at hand. Having made these descriptive claims, we are in a position to defend a normative one: moral anxiety is something we *ought* to cultivate, for it is central to good moral decision making and agency.¹⁹ The core of my argument is as follows:

- P1) Our concepts of good moral decision making and agency presume that individuals have certain deliberative virtues—e.g., they're appropriately attuned and receptive to reasons.
- P2) Having these deliberative virtues requires that individuals have distinctive metacognitive capacities.
- P3) Moral anxiety is a psychological mechanism that engages the needed metacognitive capacities.
- C1) So, moral anxiety is a mechanism that engages the very capacities that are essential to good moral decision making and agency.
- P4) We ought to cultivate capacities that make distinctive and important contributions to our ability to engage in good moral decision making and agency.
- P5) Moral anxiety makes distinctive and important contributions to our ability to engage in good moral decision making and agency.
- C2) So, moral anxiety is something that we ought to cultivate.

I take P1 to be an uncontroversial claim about the relationship between certain deliberative virtues and our concepts of good moral decision making and agency. More specifically, these concepts presume that individuals are *appropriately* sensitive to matters of moral justification: to deem a moral decision a good one, or to see an individual as exhibiting effective moral agency, is to (among other things) see the decision making/individual in question as being attuned and receptive to the *relevant* reasons in the *right* sort of way.²⁰ I take P4 to be similarly

¹⁹ In making this claim, my focus is on the decision making and agency of actual humans, not ideal or perfect decision making and agency as such.

²⁰ A couple points: (1) I take this gloss on the deliberative virtues associated with good moral decision making and agency to border on platitude. For advocates, see the references in footnote 22 later in this chapter. (2) I do not take reasons-responsiveness to exhaust the deliberative virtues that underlie good moral decision making and agency; things like curiosity, imagination, humility, and enthusiasm are also likely to play an important role.

uncontroversial. So the real substance of the argument lies in P2, P3, and P5. In what follows, I flesh out and defend these premises and argue that, given their plausibility, we have reason to conclude that moral anxiety is an emotion we ought to cultivate.²¹

4.1 *Premise 2: Moral Decision Making and Moral Metacognition*

Good moral decision making and agency presume that individuals are appropriately attuned and receptive to the reasons that are pertinent to the issue at hand. This is a claim about the psychology of good moral agents. So we should ask what—psychologically speaking—it involves. At minimum, the kind of attunement and receptivity implicit in these concepts involves a distinctive set of metacognitive capacities, three of which are noteworthy:

- (1) The ability to monitor one's (moral) cognitions (e.g., beliefs, desires, emotions, and attitudes) as they relate to each other and to the features of the world that they purport to be about.
- (2) The ability to recognize and assess problems with one's (moral) cognitions (e.g., inconsistency, falsity, insufficient justification).
- (3) The ability to bolster, revise, qualify, or even abandon one's (moral) cognitions in light of one's assessments of them.²²

Here two points of elaboration will be helpful. First, the capacities described in (1)–(3) are *metacognitive* in the sense that they are forms of mental processing that—at the conscious or unconscious level—function to monitor, assess, and regulate other aspects of mental processing. Second, these capacities are *moral* in the sense that the abilities in

²¹ To be clear: the claim here is not that we should see moral anxiety itself as a virtue; rather, the claim is that moral anxiety is something to cultivate because it is central to our ability to exhibit the deliberative virtues—e.g., attunement and receptivity—that are essential to good moral decision making and agency.

²² While the capacities in (1)–(3) are not generally made explicit, they're clearly presumed in a wide range of proposals in normative and metaethics. For instance, these metacognitive capacities underlie the distinctive form of self-consciousness that is central to Christine Korsgaard's (2009) account of agency as self-constitution, the wants/interests mechanism that is key to Peter Railton's (1986) accounts of moral and prudential judgment, Allan Gibbard (1990) and Philip Kitcher's (2011) accounts of the role of normative discussion in practical decision making, and Valarie Tiberius's (2008) virtue theoretic account of practical reflection.

question are tied to the engagement of, e.g., a distinctly moral perspective (c.f., §3).

4.2 Premise 3: Moral Anxiety and Moral Metacognition

We've already seen that moral anxiety is implicated in moral metacognition (§3). But we can say more. In fact, recent work in social and clinical psychology allows us to flesh out the model of moral anxiety that we developed above. The result will be a theoretically and empirically grounded defense of P3.

Support for the claim that moral anxiety performs (or is engaged in) the metacognitive monitoring and assessing function of (1)–(2) comes from the earlier observation that moral anxiety is a form of moral awareness. After all, in order for moral anxiety to function as a signal that one's decision may be vulnerable to challenge, it must be (or be associated with) mechanisms that perform the monitoring and assessing functions noted above. Moreover, work in psychology and cognitive science gives empirical backing to this theoretical claim. In particular, this work suggests that anxiety is “the phenomenological correlate of (...) [cognitive] conflict” in the sense that we feel anxious when we recognize (perhaps only at the unconscious level) that our cognitions—e.g., our beliefs, desires, intentions, feelings—are in tension with one another.²³ Importantly, this research doesn't just focus on social anxiety or anxiety in general—some of it examines the anxiety that results from conflicts concerning *moral* matters. For instance, recent research indicates that recognizing that one's decision conflicts with one's conception of oneself as a moral person tends to produce the unease and stress that is characteristic of anxiety.²⁴ This adds further support to the claim that moral anxiety involves a set of mechanisms that both monitor and assess one's moral cognitions, and makes one aware of any tensions in them.

²³ McClure et al. (2007): 221. See also, Barlow (2001): chap. 3, Miceli & Castelfranchi (2007): 310, and Öhman (2008). The quote in the text raises interesting questions about the differences between (moral) anxiety and cognitive dissonance. Briefly, these phenomena can be distinguished along at least two dimensions. First, (moral) anxiety concerns not just the conflicting cognitions that are characteristic of cognitive dissonance, but more specifically the ones that provoke *uncertainty*. Second, while resolution of cognitive dissonance tends to take the path of least resistance (Aronson 1999), this is not the case for (moral) anxiety.

²⁴ See, e.g., Burroughs & Rindlfleish (2002): 351–5; Aquino et al. (2009).

For evidence that moral anxiety is engaged in the regulatory metacognitive functions of (3), we can return to the claim from §3 that moral anxiety prompts distinctive epistemic behaviors. These behaviors function, as we saw, to help one resolve one's underlying uncertainty about the correctness of the moral decision that one is considering. But for moral anxiety to engage such behaviors (e.g., reflection, deliberation, information gathering) *just is* for it to engage the metacognitive regulatory functions in (3). Again, empirical research supports this account of moral anxiety's regulative role. In particular, this work indicates that anxiety about the correctness of a decision one is contemplating engages four broad patterns of regulating behavior. (i) Anxiety tends to bring *more focused thoughts and reflections*. When anxious, one will be more focused on the threatening features of one's situation and more inclined toward reflection about them.²⁵ (ii) Anxiety also prompts *distinctive forms of reasoning*. It tends to engage one in various forms of detailed, hypothetical reasoning as one tries to think through how best to respond to the situation one faces.²⁶ (iii) Anxiety also tends to bring a *shift in one's deliberative perspective*. As a result of anxiety, one will tend to seek out alternative viewpoints in an effort to enrich one's understanding of the situation one faces. One might, for example, ask a friend for advice about what to do, or seek out more information about the details of one's situation.²⁷ Relatedly, (iv) anxiety tends to prompt *more open-minded inquiry*. When anxious, one becomes more receptive to new information and less likely to be dismissive of conflicting viewpoints.²⁸ Taken together, this research nicely supports the theoretical picture of moral anxiety as a psychological mechanism that regulates moral judgment by informing and shaping our understanding of the moral decision we face.

²⁵ On anxiety's role in focusing attention and increasing vigilance, see Mathews 1990: 461, Faucher & Tappolet 2002, and Öhman 2008, 715–16. On increased reflection, see Messer 1970.

²⁶ For discussion of the role that anxiety and other emotions concerned with uncertainty play in generating detail-oriented processing, see Mathews 1990: 456–7, Tiedens & Linton 2001, and Schwartz & Clore 2007.

²⁷ MacKuen et. al. 2010 shows that anxiety prompted by challenges to one's position on affirmative action policy leads one to seek out more information on affirmative action policy, and to seek information that both affirms *and* challenges one's viewpoint. Anxiety's role in shifting one to a more social perspective is a central theme of Baumeister & Tice 1990.

²⁸ MacKuen et. al. 2010.

That is, it supports the claim that moral anxiety performs the metacognitive functions in (3).²⁹

4.3 Premise 5: Moral Anxiety Contributes Productively

The discussion so far indicates that our concepts of good moral decision making and agency presuppose that we have certain metacognitive capacities—capacities of the very sort that moral anxiety functions to engage. Thus, in moral anxiety, we have a psychological mechanism that can do the very things that we're interested in. This just is conclusion C1 from above. But why think that moral anxiety plays a *distinctive and important* role in the metacognition that underlies moral decision making and agency such that it's something we *ought* to cultivate? That is, why accept P5 and the resulting conclusion C2?³⁰

To draw out the plausibility of P5—namely, the claim that moral anxiety plays a distinctive and important role in engaging metacognition—first notice that the discussion so far indicates that moral anxiety is an emotional response that is *in the business* of engaging

²⁹ Objection: The discussion in the text maintains that moral anxiety causes epistemic behaviors like reflection and information gathering. But surely the causal process also runs in the other direction: reflection and information gathering can bring anxiety. If that's so, then two worries arise. First, unless there's reason to think that this alternative causal route is infrequent, we have a challenge to P3 (i.e., the claim that moral anxiety prompts important forms of metacognition). Moreover, rumination that leads to anxiety is a symptom of General Anxiety Disorder and other clinical conditions. So we also have reason to doubt that moral anxiety is generally beneficial.

Reply: I grant that this alternative (and potentially pernicious) causal pattern occurs. However, there is good reason to think that it is atypical. As we've seen (§1), the consensus among psychologists is that anxiety is a generally beneficial response. More importantly, the empirical work cited above (notes 25–8) provides evidence that—among normals—anxiety causes epistemic behaviors like reflection and information gathering. Moreover, recent work also suggests that in cases where reflection brings anxiety, this alternative causal route is the upshot of specific (but atypical) triggers. For instance, clinical levels self-monitoring appear to engage feedback mechanisms that lead to anxiety-provoking levels of reflection (Barlow 2001, Mor & Winquist 2002). There are similar findings for individuals inclined to take an immersed, first-personal reflective perspective on their situations as opposed to a distance, third-personal one (Kross & Ayduk 2008). In light of all this, we can set the objector's concerns aside.

³⁰ The argument that follows is not meant to establish that moral anxiety is *necessary* for good moral decision making and agency. It may be, but I won't (and needn't) argue for that here. For present purposes, all I need to establish is that moral anxiety plays a *distinct and important* role in engaging the metacognition—i.e., the monitoring, assessing, and regulating functions described in (1)–(3) above—that is essential to good moral decision making and agency.

the metacognitive functions that are essential to good moral decision making and agency. More specifically, moral anxiety is, as we've seen, a sensitivity to problematic uncertainty that we have developed in order to better negotiate the complexities of moral life (§3). So even if there are other ways to engage these metacognitive functions, these functions are things that moral anxiety is particularly well-placed to perform (more on this shortly). Moreover, the corresponding claim for social anxiety (namely, that it's in the business of engaging the metacognitive functions that allow us to navigate the complexities of social interaction) is one that is well supported by both personal experience and work in psychology (§§1–2). So combining this claim about social anxiety with the structural similarities that we've identified between social and moral anxiety, gives further support to the claim that moral anxiety is important: just as social anxiety brings an awareness and sensitivity that is central to our ability to understand and navigate the complexities of social life, moral anxiety brings a corresponding awareness and sensitivity that is central to our ability to understand and navigate the complexities of moral life.

One might be skeptical. One might allow that moral anxiety *can* do what we take to be essential to good moral decision making and agency, but maintain that it only makes a small contribution—after all, things like humility, open-mindedness, or just a general curiosity and desire for improvement are more plausible candidates for the kinds psychological mechanisms whose cultivation would matter for good moral decision making and agency. In fact, one might think that given (moral) anxiety's tendency to bring pernicious forms of motivated reasoning, it will have a detrimental, not just a trivial, effect on decision making and agency.

I suspect that much of what drives the thought that moral anxiety is unhelpful—even pernicious—comes from conflating it with related phenomena like social and punishment anxiety. As we've seen (§3), these varieties of anxiety are concerned with uncertainty about (respectively) how others will view one's social worthiness and whether one will be punished for a wrong that one has done. As such, they are more likely to prompt reasoning that is motivated by *self-interested* concerns (e.g., a biased search for reasons aimed at presenting oneself in a favorable light). By contrast, moral anxiety is concerned with uncertainty about the correctness of a moral decision that one is contemplating. So it will

typically engage reasoning that's motivated by a concern for *accuracy*.³¹ But once we recognize this difference, the thought that moral anxiety will make one particularly susceptible to pernicious forms of motivated reasoning fades—in fact, it's likely to engage the very sort of constructive reasoning that we're interested in. Moreover, recognizing these differences also helps explain something that would otherwise be puzzling—namely, why psychologists sometimes find “anxiety” leading to maladaptive behaviors, but other times ones that are quite helpful.³²

But there's still the thought that things like humility, open-mindedness, and curiosity are more effective ways to secure the deliberative virtues that underlie good moral decision making and agency. I do not deny that character traits/skills like these are valuable. Humility and open-mindedness bring an important degree of caution and a willingness to consider new or conflicting evidence.³³ Curiosity motivates us to work through challenges and to explore issues we find puzzling.³⁴ Clearly these are valuable traits to have. But moral anxiety adds something further. As we've seen, moral anxiety functions as a distinctive kind of signal—namely, one that disrupts our current behavior and prompts reassessment.³⁵ So while traits like humility and curiosity play an important epistemic role, they are unlike moral anxiety in that they are not *inherently disruptive epistemic mechanisms*. Rather, they are traits that take hold *after* we've come to see that we face a puzzle or problem. Thus, moral anxiety's distinctive value lies in both (a) its ability to make us *aware* of the need to engage the deliberation and inquiry that humility, open-mindedness, and curiosity help guide and (b) its tendency to give us a *motivational push* in this direction.³⁶

³¹ The claim that differences in concern (self-interest vs. accuracy) affect the motivations that drive one's deliberation and inquiry in these ways has significant empirical support. See, e.g., Chen, Shechter & Chaiken 1996; Tiedens & Linton 2001; MacKuen et. al. 2010.

³² For a similar conclusion about the need to specify different kinds of anxiety in order to explain how “anxiety” can have both positive and negative consequences, see Matthews 1986. More specifically, this experimental work indicates that while forms of anxiety associated with worry, apprehensiveness, and self-reproach tend to negatively influence performance on creativity tasks, forms of anxiety associated with a tense, frustrated drive tend to enhance performance.

³³ See, e.g., Arpaly & Schroeder 2014: 241–5.

³⁴ For more, see Morton 2010.

³⁵ For a similar point, see Baumeister & Tice 1990 and Öhman 2008.

³⁶ MacKuen et. al. 2010 provides empirical support for this: it shows that anxiety prompted by challenges to one's position on affirmative action policy not only leads one to seek out more

To further draw this out, consider a modified version of the case of your promise to your Alzheimer's stricken mother. Her doctors have just told you that it's time to put her in a nursing home and you're inclined to go along with their recommendation. But you feel anxious about this—an anxiety that gets you to recall your promise. This both disrupts your initial inclination to just follow the doctor's advice, and prompts reassessment and reflection. So even if you ultimately decide to put your mother in a nursing home, moral anxiety has played an important role: it has helped you recognize the significance of the situation you face in a way that gets you to think through your decision.³⁷

The upshot, then, is an affirmation of P5—the claim that moral anxiety matters. Though one might worry that moral anxiety is trivial or pernicious, such concerns are misplaced. Moreover, in comparison with things like humility, curiosity, and open-mindedness, moral anxiety has distinctive signaling and motivational features that give it a particularly important role to play in engaging the metacognitive capacities that we're interested in when we're interested in what makes for good moral decision making and agency.

4.4 *The Pay-Off: Moral Anxiety as an Emotion to Cultivate*

Recognizing the importance of moral anxiety's role in moral decision making and agency is significant. It gives us the evidence that we need to accept P5, and so (with C1 and P4) makes a case for the conclusion C2—namely, that moral anxiety is an emotion that we ought to cultivate. But once we see this, we also get a better understanding of *why* we ought to cultivate moral anxiety. In short, the capacity to feel moral anxiety stands to the virtues associated with good moral decision making and agency (e.g., attunement and receptivity) in the same way that the capacity to feel sympathy stands to the virtue of benevolence, or the capacity to feel anger stands to the virtue of moral outrage/courage: we can exhibit these virtues in large part *because* we have the associated emotional capacities. Sympathy, anger, and anxiety bring the

information (see note 27) but also prompts an increased willingness to explore new solutions to affirmative action issues—that is, it prompts a kind of *open-mindedness* and *curiosity*.

³⁷ As noted in §3.1, while moral anxiety's value as a disruptive signal is likely to be more beneficial in the earlier stages of moral development, it will still be an important part of the moral psychology of the mature moral agent—though difficult and novel moral decisions will become less frequent as one grows older and wiser, they're not going to go away.

normatively loaded awareness and motivation that is distinctive of emotional engagement, and that facilitates the moral sensitivity central to virtuous agency.

5. THREE IMPLICATIONS

5.1 *Cultivation*

Recognizing the above relationship between emotions like anxiety, sympathy, and anger on the one hand, and their associated virtues on the other, helps us understand what it means to say that moral anxiety should be *cultivated*. To say that moral anxiety (or sympathy or anger) is an emotion to cultivate is not to suggest that we want to just experience it more often or more intensely. Rather, it's to say that moral anxiety (or sympathy or anger) is something we should learn to feel at the right times and in the right ways. In the case of moral anxiety, this will involve, among other things, leaning to recognize when our unease is the result of problematic uncertainty about what to do (as opposed to concerns about, say, punishment). It will also involve developing the ability to channel the motivational dimension of moral anxiety into the epistemic behaviors that will help us address our uncertainty about what to do. Clearly, more needs to be done to flesh this out. While I cannot do that here, two points are worth noting. First, providing an account of cultivation is something *anyone* who countenances talk of virtue must do—so there's no special problem for moral anxiety. Second, with regard to moral anxiety, we're likely in a *better* position to develop a plausible, substantive answer insofar as there is a wealth of work in clinical and social psychology on which we can draw.

5.2 *The Significance of Psychological Conflict*

The conclusion that moral anxiety is something that should be cultivated comes with a novel, empirically grounded picture of the moral psychology of the virtuous agent. On this picture, good moral decision making and agency are a function of, among other things, one's tendency to feel morally anxious in the face of hard moral choices. This in turn indicates that a good moral decision is (often) the product of *psychological conflict*—conflict that leads one to consciously explore, evaluate, and reject possible challenges to the moral decision that one is contemplating. This

is not to deny that much of (good) moral decision making and agency is the product of automatic processes.³⁸ But it is to insist that any account of moral decision making must acknowledge that moral decisions will often benefit from the moral anxiety that gets one to consciously explore and assess possible objections to the moral decision that one is contemplating.

5.3 *A Challenge to Existing Accounts*

The picture of the moral psychology of the virtuous agent that comes out of my account of moral anxiety is significant in its own right. But it also challenges other prominent proposals. For instance, the claim that moral anxiety is something that we ought to cultivate contrasts with what we find in Hellenistic (and perhaps Platonic) accounts. The Stoic's concern with passions, for instance, is (in part) that these emotions bring impulsive action. Thus, passions must be transformed into other affective states or motivational dispositions that will be more conducive to helping one secure the good life—e.g., a lustful passion becomes a desire for a loving friend.³⁹ Applying this to moral anxiety suggests a picture on which it is valuable, if it is, only because it can be *transformed* into some other affective state or motivational disposition that will help one engage in good decision making. But given what we've learned here, this thought is mistaken. Moral anxiety *itself* can play a constructive role in moral life: it is useful both as a signal and as a motivator.

My proposal also challenges the picture of the virtuous agent that we get from contemporary Aristotelians. While these neo-Aristotelians recognize that learning to be virtuous will bring frustration and psychological conflict, they insist that this will *not* be the case for virtuous individuals. For the virtuous, thought and action is “effortless” and “unimpeded by frustration and inner conflict.”⁴⁰ Against this picture, our investigation of moral anxiety suggests that anxiety is part of what makes certain decisions—like your decision about your Alzheimer's-stricken mother—virtuous: your concerns about whether you're doing the right thing, and the deliberation it brings, express an admirable moral sensitivity—an attunement that reveals your understanding of the

³⁸ See, e.g., Railton 2009, Arpaly & Schroeder 2014, chaps 1–3.

³⁹ This sketch glosses over much richness in the Stoic position. See Brennan 2003 for details.

⁴⁰ Annas 2011: 73.

complexity of moral life.⁴¹ If that's right (and more needs to be done to show that it is), then we have reason to question these neo-Aristotelian accounts of the psychology of the virtuous agent.⁴²

6. CONCLUSION

Moral anxiety is not just a familiar part of moral life. It is an emotion that has an important role to play in moral decision making and agency. In particular, we have seen that moral anxiety is like sympathy and anger in that each is crucial to virtuous thought and action. Moreover, the picture of good moral decision making and agency that results from our examination of moral anxiety is one that challenges other prominent accounts. On the picture developed here, the mark of many good moral decisions is that they are the product of psychological conflict—*anxiety*—that leads one to explore, evaluate, and reject possible challenges to the moral decision that one is contemplating. In a slogan: Much in human affairs is worthy of anxiety.

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⁴¹ This is a point that has been recognized by others—e.g., Arpaly & Schroeder 2014, 241–5, Stohr 2003.

⁴² I further develop this argument in Kurth (MS.2).

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