Kurth, Charlie. *The Anxious Mind: An Investigation into the Varieties and Virtues of Anxiety.*
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018. Pp. 264. $35.00 (cloth).

> "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 esp. the Moral Psychology of the Emotions series, 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 (Shaun Nichols, *Sentimental Rules: On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgment* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004]; Shaun Nichols, *Rational Rules: Towards a Theory of Moral Learning* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021]), or our propensity to explain and assess behavior by appeal to character traits (John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002]). Many of the trend's more recent and visible exemplars, however, have looked at specific emotions and affective states like disgust (Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004]; Daniel Kelly, *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011]), happiness (Dan Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2008]), contempt (Macalester Bell, *Hard Feelings: The Moral Psychology of Contempt* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2013]), anger (Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2016]; Myisha Cherry, *The Case for Rage: Why Anger Is Essential to the Anti-racist Struggle* [New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming]), empathy (Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* [New York: Ecco, 2016]), and hope (Adrienne Martin, *How We Hope: A Moral Psychology* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013]). 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 that 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, in either 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 on 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 also 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, à la Griffiths (Paul Griffiths, *What the Emotions Really Are* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 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, and (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 he 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 Ron Mallon and Stephen P. Stich, "The Odd Couple: The Compatibility of Social Construction and Evolutionary Psychology," *Philosophy of Science* 67 [2000]: 133–54, and for an especially striking and detailed example, see Ronald Simons, *Boo! Culture, Experience, and the Startle Reflex* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996], on surprise and the startle reflex.)

Assuming that 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 (Adam Morton, "Epistemic Emotions," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, ed. P. Goldie [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 385–400; Peter Carruthers, "Are Epistemic Emotions Metacognitive?," *Philosophical Psychology* 30 [2017]: 58–78)? On Kurth's view, and especially in light of his discussion of the "accuracy motivation" triggered by practical anxiety (70, 165–72), 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 involves 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 toward 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 (Alison Gopnik, "Explanation as Orgasm," *Minds and Machines* 8 [1998]: 101–18), mirth (Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011]), curiosity and interest (Peter Carruthers, "Basic Questions," *Mind and Language* 33 [2018]: 130–47), boredom (Elijah Millgram, "On Being Bored Out of Your Mind," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104 [2004]: 163–84; Erin Westgate and Brianna Steidle, "Lost by Definition: Why Boredom Matters for Psychology and Society," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 14 [2020]: e12562), and confusion (Elisabeth Vogl et al., "Surprise, Curiosity, and Confusion Promote Knowledge Exploration: Evidence for Robust Effects of Epistemic Emotions," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 [2019]: 2474) 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 (see also Juliette Vazard, "(Un)reasonable Doubt as Affective Experience: Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder, Epistemic Anxiety and the Feeling of Uncertainty," *Synthese* [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 (see also Charlie Kurth, "Cultivating Disgust: Prospects and Moral Implications," *Emotion Review* 13 [2021]: 101–12). 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 played 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 toward morally

desirable ends (cf. Daniel Kelly and Nicolae Morar, "Against the Yuck Factor: On the Ideal Role of Disgust in Society," *Utilitas* 26 [2014]: 153–77).

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 to 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 as 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 (Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011]) and Sterenly (Kim Sterelny, *The Evolved Apprentice* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012]; Kim Sterelny, "Life in Interesting Times," in *Cooperation and Its Evolution*, ed. K. Sterelny et al. [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press], 89–108), 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., Daniel Kelly and Stephen Setman, "The Psychology of Normative Cognition," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta [Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2020], https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/psychology-normative-cognition/) 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 enforce it (Chandra Sripada and Stephen Stich, "A Framework for the Psychology of Norms," in *The Innate Mind: Culture and Cognition*, ed. P. Carruthers, S. Laurence, and S. Stich [New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], 280–301; Maciej Chudek and Joseph Henrich, "Culture–Gene Coevolution, Norm-Psychology and the Emergence of Human Prosociality," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 15 [2011]: 218–26). However, different emotions (fear, anger, disgust, contempt, shame, guilt, etc.) can provide these intrinsic motivations for different norms (Paul Rozin et al., "The CAD Triad Hypothesis: A Mapping between Three Moral Emotions (Contempt, Anger, Disgust) and Three Moral Codes (Community, Autonomy, Divinity)," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76 [1999]: 574–86; Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108 [2001]: 814–34; Shaun Nichols, *Sentimental Rules: On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgment* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004]; Daniel Kelly, "Internalized Norms and Intrinsic Motivation: Are Normative Motivations Psychologically Primitive," *Emotion Review*, June 2020, 36–45). 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 marks 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 to 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 (Daniel Kelly, "Two Ways to Adopt a Norm: The (Moral?) Psychology of Avowal and Internalization," in *The Oxford Handbook of Moral Psychology*, ed. Manuel Vargas and John Doris [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 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 (see Stephen Setman and Daniel Kelly, "Socializing Willpower: Resolve from the Outside In," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 44 [2021]: E53), 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 whether we are, as it seems to many, living in a new Age of Anxiety, and whether 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 he cites (120) Horwitz and Wakefield's suggestion that the trend is mainly due to diagnostic criteria being applied more liberally than in the past (Allan Horwitz and Jerome Wakefield, *All We Have to Fear: Psychiatry's Transformation of Natural Anxieties into Mental Disorders* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2012]). 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 (see Charlie Kurth, "Worried Well," *Aeon*, February 12, 2015, https://aeon.co/essays/anxiety-isn-t-just-a-useless-emotion-it-s-also-a-moral-goad), 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, as well as 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., Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* [New York: Random House, 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 Don Ross, "Addiction Is Socially Engineered Exploitation of Natural Biological Vulnerability," *Behavioral Brain Research* 386 [2020]: 112598, 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 (Daniel Kelly, "Moral Cheesecake, Evolved Psychology, and the Debunking Impulse," in *The Routledge Handbook of Evolution and Philosophy*, ed. R. Joyce [New York: Routledge, 2017], 342–58; Michael Muthukrishna, Joseph Henrich, and Edward Slingerland, "Psychology as a Historical Science," *Annual Review of Psychology* 72 [2021]: 717–49).

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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