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Moral Anxiety: A Kantian Perspective

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Abstract: Moral anxiety is the unease that we experience in the face of a novel or difficult moral decision, an unease that helps us recognize the significance of the issue we face and engages epistemic behaviors aimed at helping us work through it (reflection, information gathering, etc.). But recent discussions in philosophy raise questions about the value of moral anxiety (do we really do better when we're anxious?); and work in cognitive science challenges its psychological plausibility (is there really such an emotion?). Drawing on Kant and Kantians, I develop a model of moral anxiety (or 'conscience' in Kant's terminology) that highlights both its empirical credentials and its distinctive value. Kant, it turns out, was an early—and sophisticated—dual-process theorist.

In the early 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized that he would need the support of President Lyndon Johnson if civil rights legislation was going to be passed. As result, King chose not to say anything negative about the United States' involvement in Vietnam. But as time wore on, not only did the war in Vietnam escalate, but people started calling King out for being a hypocrite. In particular, they did not understand how King could be so vocal an opponent of the use of violence in his fight for civil rights, but be completely silent about the violence in Vietnam. As King details in his autobiography, these developments led him to become increasingly "uncertain" and uncomfortable about his initial decision not to speak out: "doubts gnawed at [his] conscience" and he did "a lot of thinking" about the problem he faced (King 1998: 322). The result of this uncertainty and unease—and the thinking they spurred—was King's decision to confront the Johnson administration on the war.

What should we make of King's experience? His talk of his gnawing conscience is suggestive—pointing to his awareness of the moral significance of the situation he faced. But pointing to the pangs of his conscience only gets us so far given that the term 'conscience' is, at least in its folk usage, a catch-all label for a variety of distinct psychological phenomenon: shame, guilt, fear of punishment, and the like.¹ However, if we looks at King's experience as a whole—his talk not just of his conscience, but also his unease, uncertainty, and reflection that brought about his decision to protest the war—it suggests an alternative description of what he was going through. It suggests that King's experience was undergirded by anxiety: he was *worried* that he was making an exception to his explicit rejection of violence as a means to political change, doing so on the dubious grounds of wanting to stay in the good graces of the Johnson administration (1998: 342; Kurth 2019 for review). We get some confirmation of this account of King's psychology from his remarks in a speech that he delivered in Chicago on March 25, 1967, one of his first public statements against the

¹ This broad use of 'conscience' also finds its way in to academic writing. See, for instance, Boehm 2012 and Songhorian 2022.

war. There he exclaimed, “I speak out against [the war] not in anger but with *anxiety* and sorrow in my heart” (King 1967, emphasis added).

However, if King’s decision to start protesting the war was driven by anxiety, it was anxiety of a very distinctive and morally-laced sort. To see this, consider the social anxiety that one might feel on a blind date or before giving a public presentation—in these cases, one’s anxiety prompts efforts toward deference and caution as one tries to minimize the cost of negative evaluations from one’s date or the audience. This is quite different from what King experienced. His anxiety, after all, motivated not deference, but engagement as he reflected on, and reassessed, his initial decision not to protest. King does not seem to have been concerned about a negative social evaluation; rather, he was trying to come the right decision about what he ought to do. Moreover, King’s anxiety seems not just distinctive, but distinctly valuable. His anxiety was instrumentally valuable insofar as it piqued his awareness of the fraught decision he faced and prompted the reflection that led to his revised decision about protesting the war. But King’s anxiety also seems non-instrumentally insofar it reflects well on his character—in being worried about whether to reverse course and start protesting the war, he displays an admirable emotional attunement to what matters.

Bringing these observations together, the King case points us to something we might call “moral anxiety”—an unease that is experienced in the face of a new or complex moral situation and that prompts various forms of higher cognition (deliberation, reflection, reassessment, etc.) aimed at helping one come to morally justified decision about what to do. Not only does thinking about King’s case as an instance of moral anxiety shed new light on the psychology of his decision, bringing clarity to his vague talk of conscience, but it also connects up with a growing body of scholarship examining the nature and moral value of anxiety (e.g., Fritz 2022; Harbin 2016; Kurth 2015, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Lacewing 2005; Maibom 2022; Munch-Juriscic 2020, 2022; Pihkala 2021).²

But the picture of “moral anxiety” that emerges from the King example also raises a trio of challenging questions:

- (1) What, exactly, is moral anxiety and in what sense is it “moral”?
- (2) Is moral anxiety plausibly understood as a genuine psychological phenomenon, or is it merely a loose way of talking about (say) the aversion we have to making difficult decisions?
- (3) Given all the ways that anxiety can go awry, how can we make sense of the idea that moral anxiety a distinctly valuable emotion?

In what follows, I want to approach these questions through a Kantian lens. While this Kantian framework isn’t essential to either the phenomenon of moral anxiety or our understanding of it, we will see that it’s an approach that brings conceptual, empirical, and normative insights for our understanding of the nature and value of moral anxiety.

Here is how we will proceed. In §1, I draw on discussions of “conscience” from Kant and Kantians to develop a Kantian model of moral anxiety. In §2, I develop this model further, showing

² For additional examples, see the discussion of John Woolman, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Nelson Mandela in Kurth 2018a, 2019.

how—initial appearances to the contrary—it fits with, and gains empirical support from, recent work on dual-process theories and associated work in the social and cognitive sciences. Finally, in §3, I turn a critical eye to the Kantian model, showing how its core insights can be retained even after some of the more controversial elements of the proposal have been trimmed. The payoff of all this is two-fold. First, we will see how taking a Kantian lens allows us to better assess recent debates about the nature and value of moral anxiety. More provocatively, we will also see that Kant turns out to be an early—and particularly sophisticated—dual-process theorist.

1. A Kantian Model of Moral Anxiety

Kant is typically viewed as the paradigm of a moral rationalist.³ So it's worth noting that he also gives significant place to “non-rationalistic” mechanisms in his account of both human moral psychology and ethical education. For instance, in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant discusses the four “moral endowments” that he takes to be *essential* to our ability to appreciate and be moved by the concept of duty. These are moral feeling, conscience, love, and self-esteem. As Kant explains, these are not rational capacities, but rather *affective* ones (1797/1996: 6:399, 528). So, for instance, moral feelings of pleasure and displeasure are essential in Kant's eyes because it is only through these feelings that we are able to be “aware that our actions are consistent with or contrary to the law of duty” (1797/1996: 6:399, 528). Similarly, in his discussion of moral education and pedagogy, Kant emphasizes the need for teachers to focus not just on developing students' rational capacities, but also their habits and non-cognitive drives (2007: 9:451, 445). In fact, Kant's writings on virtue reveal that he takes our need to develop our non-rational capacities to extend beyond adolescence—hence his discussion of, for instance, our duty to bolster feelings of sympathy by visiting hospitals and poor houses (e.g., 1797/1996: 6:457, 575).

Against this backdrop, I want to look at Kant's comments on the role of conscience in shaping moral thought and action—for, as with King, Kant's conception of conscience has much in common with contemporary discussions of the nature and value of moral anxiety. Not only will this allow us to better appreciate the affective dimensions of Kant's moral psychology, but it will also provide us with an entry way for developing a Kantian model of moral anxiety.

(1.1) Kant's Account. We can see Kant's account of conscience as grounded in three claims. First, he takes conscience to be an innate mechanism that is central to our capacity for *moral self-regulation* (6:399, 528; 6:438, 560). As he explains, a person's conscience functions as an “internal judge,” one that “follows him like a shadow when he plans to escape” from doing his duty (6:438-440, 560-1). Second, Kant sees conscience's ability to operate as a self-regulatory mechanism to be grounded in its *distinctive affectivity*. When one is inclined to act contrary to the moral law, one's conscience sounds an alarm, “warning him before he makes his decision” about what he ought to do. Moreover, this alarm signals moral danger and manifests itself as a feeling of “anxiety” (6: 440, 561-2).⁴ Finally, given conscience's status as a core moral endowment, it is something that Kant

³ Here I'm understanding moral rationalism as the view that moral thought and action are the upshot of reason and principles, not (say) emotions or desires.

⁴ More carefully, Kant's discussion suggests that he saw conscience as concerned with two types of moral danger: one where one must make a decision in the face of moral conflict or uncertainty (6: 440, 561-2), and another where we are

maintains we have a duty to *cultivate*—specifically, one has a duty “to cultivate one’s conscience, to sharpen one’s attentiveness to the voice of [this] inner judge” (6:401, 530). Together, these three elements help us understand Kant’s view of conscience as an emotionally-grounded mechanism of moral restraint—an aversively experienced signal that flags the need to proceed cautiously.

But important questions remain. In particular, Kant’s comments do little to help us understand either why he took conscience to be a *foundational* moral capacity or how the role that he assigns to this non-cognitive mechanism is compatible with his *rationalism*. Moreover, while we see that there is a place for anxiety in Kant’s proposal, his discussion of it seems to lack the substance necessary to explain things like King’s experience of moral anxiety—the gnawing conscience, the uncertainty, and the reflection and reconsideration it brought.

Enter the work of Barbara Herman. As part of a larger project of refining Kant’s account of moral judgment, Herman takes up questions about the role that deliberative and non-deliberative capacities play in a Kantian moral psychology—a discussion that helps us fill in the above gaps in the remarks we get from Kant.

(1.2) Herman’s Elaborations. Kant is often understood—caricatured—as directing us to constantly be deliberating about what we ought to do (e.g., Hampshire 1978; Williams 1981). Against this, Herman takes Kant’s discussion of moral reasoning to be aimed at highlighting the *limited* role that he sees for moral deliberation. On the picture she develops, deliberation is not something Kant thinks we are, or should always be, engaged in. Rather, it is something we need to do only when we face a novel or difficult moral situation (1993: 76-8, 145-6, 157). So, for instance, the point of Kant’s lying promise example from the *Groundwork* isn’t merely to illustrate how we are to use the Categorical Imperative (as is standardly presumed in the literature), but also to highlight the kinds of *novel* situations that demand deliberation. So understood, the questions that interest Herman are ones that concern *how* one comes to see that deliberation is needed and *why* one is motivated to engage in it.

It’s here that conscience re-enters the picture. According to Herman, in focusing on conscience as a core moral endowment, Kant isn’t just circumscribing a mechanism of moral restraint. He is also identifying a more encompassing, emotion-driven alarm—one whose function is to “cause the agent to be aware of and attentive to the significance of ‘moral danger’” (78; c.f., Eran 2021). In developing this idea, Herman provides important detail on two central aspects of how conscience works, detail that help fill in some of the gaps we noted in Kant’s own account.

The first elaboration concerns how conscience flags moral danger. Here Herman points to what she calls “rules of moral salience” (RMS)—distinctive pieces of content that “constitute the structure of [an individual’s] moral sensitivity” and that “indicate when certain sorts of action should not be taken without moral justification” (78). As she presents them, RMS are “predeliberative” mechanisms (147)—heuristics or scripts, perhaps—that flag instances “of moral conflict (or uncertainty)” for which moral deliberation is needed (157). Importantly, since the role of RMS is

tempted by contrary inclinations to stray from our duty (6:399, 528). In what follows, I will focus on the first strand. But it’s worth noting that the second strand—where Kant focuses on conscience’s role in countering akratic inclinations—can also be seen as a further dimension of moral anxiety. For elaboration, see the discussion of how moral anxiety can bring restraint in face of temptation and the empirical work that supports in Kurth 2018a: 88-90.

merely to warn of moral danger—not resolve it—these rules needn't be very complicated. In fact, and in line with Kant's ideas about moral education needing to focus on the development of both reason *and* habit, Herman takes much of our learning of RMS to come passively during childhood “as part of socialization” (78). That said, and this is the second core feature of conscience, a person's RMS are connected up with a distinctive form of motivation—in Herman's words, a “higher-order (or regulative) concern for the permissibility of his actions and projects” (83). It's this motivation, then, that gets one to engage in *moral* deliberation to resolve the danger that one's conscience has flagged; it's a motivation that gets one to think through one's situation by way of the Categorical Imperative and not, say, more self-serving egoistic principles (146-7, 157).⁵

To put all this together, let's return to our earlier example. What gets the individual in Kant's lying-promises example to engage in moral deliberation is “his feeling” that, if he were to make an insincere promise, he might be making himself an exception to the rule that one ought not lie for personal gain (77-8). Given the unease—the anxiety—that he feels about the possibility of acting in a way that's morally unjustified, he's move to deliberate. Thus, he reflects on whether allowing lying promises in situations like the one he faces is something that could be willed as a universal law. Determining that it is not, he pulls away from his initial inclination to lie.

(1.3) Upshots and Open Issues. Combining what we get from Kant and Herman suggests a picture on which the moral endowment of conscience is best understood as a distinctive, anxiety-driven type of moral self-regulation: an affective mechanism that uses simple, learned scripts (the RMS) to identify moral danger, and that sounds a moral-deliberation-engaging, aversively experienced alarm when an apparent danger is found.

Moreover, this proposal is explanatorily fruitful. For starters, it helps us understand why Kant may have taken conscience to be a foundational part of human moral psychology. Given that we're not always deliberating, Kant saw the need to explain what gets an individual to start reasoning. Moreover, he understood that his explanation couldn't rely on reasoning about when to reason—for that would just launch a vicious “regress of reasoning” (1797/1996: 6: 402-3, 531; also, Kurth 2018a: 149-51, Railton 2009). Conscience solves this problem. After all, it's a *predeliberative* emotional capacity that alerts one to moral danger and prompts deliberation to help one avoid acting contrary to duty. Notice as well that if conscience/moral anxiety is a *predeliberative* mechanism that one develop via socialization, then we also get some clarity on why Kant thought moral education requires one to develop *non-rational* capacities like the RMS. Finally, our Kantian model is also rich enough to capture the role that moral anxiety appears to play in the King example from above.

But this progress aside, some of our original questions remain, especially those regarding the empirical plausibility of moral anxiety. To help draw out why we should be concerned about the empirical credentials of moral anxiety, notice that the role that the Kantian model gives to the emotion seems to fit poorly with the dual-process accounts of (moral) thought and action that dominate the social and cognitive sciences. More specifically, according to the standard dual-process

⁵ For a more detailed articulation of what these higher-order regulative (or meta-cognitive) capacities likely involve, see Kurth 2015, esp. 182-90. Moreover, the idea that moral cognition involves capacities of this sort is not unique to Kant(ians). It is, for instance, 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.

model, cognition is driven by two distinct systems: a “System-1” that is fast, automatic, and often emotion-engaging and a “System-2” that is slow, deliberative, and often rule based. Moreover, on the standard proposals, the two systems are presumed to operate in a manner that is quite different than what’s suggested by the Kantian model.

To see this, first notice that the leading account of System-1/System-2 interaction builds from a *default-interventionist* structure: while much of (moral) cognition is driven by System-1 mechanisms, System-2 processes monitor this System-1 activity in order to determine when System-2 processing needs to be ramped up (e.g., Kahneman 2011; Stanovich & West 2000). But on a plausible translation of the Kantian picture in to dual-process terminology, we get something different: while the Kantian model accepts the default-interventionist structure, it differs in its account of which mechanisms do the monitoring and engaging. More specifically, on the Kantian proposal, it’s moral anxiety—a System-1 mechanism—that looks for trouble and calls in System-2 deliberation when an apparent danger is found. But it’s not just that the Kantian model differs from the standard dual-process view in its account which system does the monitoring and engaging, but also that the standard proposal seems more plausible. After all, the default-interventionist structure presumes that a decision needs to be made about when System-2 cognition should be engaged; but if a *decision* needs to be made, functioning of that sort seems to be the domain of deliberative System-2 processing, not quick-and-dirty System-1 heuristics. In short, if the truth about moral cognition lies in something like the standard dual-process proposal, then the Kantian model is in trouble.

2. The Empirical Plausibility of the Kantian Model

(2.1) First Steps. In light of the above challenge, the Kantian could respond by saying, “so much the worse for dual-process thinking.” While I believe there’s something to this response, there are important subtleties that we need to take care to develop. To preview, there are other ways of thinking about dual-process theory, and the empirical evidence for them fits better with the Kantian model. Moreover, we have independent reason to want an alternative to the standard dual-process account that we just looked at. To see this, first notice that while the standard account is based on empirical findings, much of that work is correlational (e.g., Rand et al. 2012; Stanovich & West 2000), thus limiting the support it can provide. Add to this that meta-studies of work testing the predictions of the standard dual-process proposal reveal, at best, thin confirmation (e.g., Rand 2019, Kvarven et al. 2020). Finally, there are also important theoretical problems that undermine the standard proposal. For instance, taking System-2 to play a monitoring role, as the standard account does, invites regress of reasoning worries—for we have System-2 being cognition being posited to say when System-2 cognition should begin. Making matters worse, if one maintains—as that standard model does—that System-2 cognition is always operating, then we lose one of the primary selling points of the default-interventionist proposal—namely, the computational efficacy that comes with only selectively using more costly System-2 processing. Together, these issues provide us

with reason to look for alternative to the standard proposal, reasons that stand independently of our interest in building an empirical case for the Kantian model.⁶

In part because of problems of the sort just reviewed, and in part for reasons independent of them, philosophers and cognitive scientists have started to develop alternative ways of understanding System-1/System-2 interactions. To date, most of this work has focused on developing a better understanding of transitions from System-2 to System-1 cognition.⁷ Moreover, the little work that has focused on the alternative—understanding when and how System-1 cognition might transition to System-2—tends to focus on making a conceptual, not empirical, case for these transitions (e.g., Thomson 2008; Botvinick et al. 2001; c.f., Wunderlich et al. 2012). Against this backdrop, thinking about the Kantian model of moral anxiety is interesting for several reasons. First, the lack of significant research on System-1 to System-2 transitions forces us to get creative in building an empirical case for the Kantian model. But doing this reveals two avenues of support—one indirect, one direct. As we will see, not only do these findings bolster the credentials of the Kantian model, but seeing the empirical plausibility of the Kantian model, in turn, provides dual-system theorists with a much needed, concrete example of these transitions and the mechanisms that undergird them.

(2.2) Indirect Support for the Kantian Model. Though not always recognized as such, work on *meta-cognitive emotions* provides us with theoretical and empirical evidence of mechanisms that underwrite System-1 to System-2 transitions. Moreover, these mechanisms are functionally very similar to the Kantian model's account of moral anxiety, and so offer indirect support for the Kantian account. Turning to details, the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon (TOT) provides what is perhaps the best studied instance of a meta-cognitive emotion (Arango-Muñoz 2011; Thompson 2008; Schwartz & Metcalfe 2014). The TOT experience is familiar: it's what one experiences when one cannot remember (say) someone's name, but nonetheless one has partial recall of the content (e.g., the first letter of the name). This combination not only leaves one feeling that the name is just at the tip of one's tongue, but also gets one working to jog one's memory of what one cannot recall.

Shifting to the science, the most worked out account of TOT suggests that the phenomenon is the upshot of a distinctive, emotion-driven mechanism. More specifically, TOT is taken to be underwritten by a two-part mechanism. First, there is a set of heuristics that map combinations of failed memory and partial recall to the distinctive TOT feeling: the feeling of familiarity. Second, these feeling are, in turn, accompanied by the motivations characteristic of TOT: the prompting of higher cognitive processing that's geared toward facilitating remembering (e.g., working through a particular mnemonic strategy). Put differently, in TOT, we have an emotion—a System-1 process—that works to both identify occasions where System-2 processing is needed and engage the requisite higher cognition.

⁶ For an extensive and insightful critical discussion of the problems with standard dual-process accounts, see De Neys, forthcoming.

⁷ For instance, some of this work supports a hierarchical model on which System-2 processes function, at least under certain conditions, to select among of System-1 habitual routines (e.g., Dezfouli & Balleine 2013). Other work adds to this by specifying some of situational conditions—e.g., high uncertainty about reward values or probabilities, stability of reward probabilities—under which System-2 processes will give way to System-1 (e.g., Kool et al. 2016). Similar work has flagged how reliance on S1 processing increases with cognate load and stress.

In the present context, this account of the mechanisms underlying TOT is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, TOT gives us an existence proof: a concrete, empirically-vetted example of an alternative to the standard dual-process account of System-1 to System-2 transitions. But we also get indirect support for the Kantian model. To see this, recall that the TOT model is just an instance of a more general mechanism—namely, a meta-cognitive emotion (Arango-Muñoz 2011; Proust 2009). In line with the above, we can understand meta-cognitive emotions as mechanisms that (i) use heuristics to map occasions of positive/negative value to distinctive feelings, and that (ii) incorporates these feelings into an “affective alarm” that engages a distinctive suit of high cognitive processing. But now notice that the Kantian model also fits this template: as we’ve seen, it takes moral anxiety to be a mechanism that engages instances of (i) and (ii) and is thought of as a form of meta-cognitive regulation (recall the Herman quote from above). Given these parallels, one could reasonably take the Kantian model to inherit some of the empirical plausibility enjoyed by the TOT account. More specifically, to the extent that we’re comfortable with the empirical credentials of the TOT account, we should also be optimistic about the empirical plausibility of the Kantian proposal.⁸

(2.3) Direct Support for the Kantian Model. While indirect support is good, we should hope to do better. And we can. If the Kantian model is correct, then we should expect to find empirical work that affirms its distinct functional profile. To see that this is the case, consider the following three examples.

First, given the Kantian understanding of moral anxiety as a sensitivity to moral danger, we should expect to see connections between moral uncertainty and anxiety. And we do. For instance, there is research indicating that self-reported uncertainty about moral issues like the harm of climate change or the legitimacy of the Iraq War correlates with self-reported anxiety about these issues (Haltinner et al. 2021, Jylhä et al. 2016, Huddy et al. 2007). Further support comes from work in abnormal psychology. In particular, clinician case reports reveal that individuals suffering from scrupulosity—a form of obsessive-compulsive anxiety disorder—become highly anxious about the correctness of their behavior when faced with moral uncertainty.⁹

Second, given the Kantian model, we should also expect to see connections between anxiety experienced in the face of new or complex moral issues and System-2 cognition (e.g., deliberation,

⁸ Objection: The analogy is dubious: while TOT may be plausibly understood as using System-1 heuristics, the Kantian model explicitly appeals to something more cognitively robust: *rules* of moral salience. So the posited structural parallels aren’t really there.

Reply: To see why we needn’t be worried here, first recall that Herman takes the role of the RMS to be “*predeliberative*” (147, emphasis added). So we shouldn’t think of the RMS as akin to the Categorical Imperative—i.e., an explicit, *ex ante* rule that we have stored in memory and draw on in the course of deciding if we are in moral danger. Rather, we should understand the RMS as *ex post* rules—that is, things we posit retrospectively in order to explain when and why an individual’s habitual moral response gave way to a deliberated decision about what to do. So, contra the objection, the structural parallels are in fact there.

⁹ The argument here presumes that we can use findings in clinical research to shed light on the functioning of (normal) psychological processes. Though one might object to appeals of this sort, there’s reason to think such worries are misguided, especially in the present context. As the clinical psychologist Bunmi Olatunji explains, looking to disorders can illuminate our understanding of the nature of well-functioning cognitive systems: “A substantial body of empirical research supports theoretical propositions that clinical obsessive-compulsive symptoms [including those associated with scrupulosity] have their origins in normally occurring phenomena and that such symptoms occur on a continuum, with many individuals in the general population reporting subclinical obsessions and compulsions” (Olatunji et al., 2007, p. 774, emphasis added). For others who have adopted a similar “pathology-as-guide-to-normal-functioning” approach, see Doris 2015, Maibom 2005, Nichols 2004, and Roskies 2003. Also see Kurth 2018a, 2016.

information gathering, reflection). And again, we do. For instance, there is a wealth of correlational findings showing that self-reported anxiety about difficult moral issues (e.g., the legitimacy of liberal economic policy, how best to respond to climate change) are correlated with efforts to become more informed about these issues (Hmielowski et al. 2018; Yang & Kahlor 2012; Marcus, MacKuen, & Neuman, 2011; Huddy, Feldman, and Cassese 2007; Brader 2006; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). More importantly, we also have experimental work showing that anxiety about novel or difficult moral questions brings cognitive engagement (information gathering, reflection, deliberation) that is aimed at helping one come to a better, more informed decision. One family of studies, for instance, contrasted the behavioral profiles of anxiety and anger. This work found that individuals who experience anxiety in the face of a news story challenging their views on contentious ethical issues (e.g., affirmative action, liberal economic policy) tend to engage in more—and more open-minded—efforts to learn about the issue. By contrast, those who felt anger after reading the news story tend to seek out less information and primarily look to sources likely to support their pre-existing views (e.g., MacKuen et al. 2010; Valentino et al. 2008; Sweeny & Dooley 2017).

Finally, if moral anxiety is a distinct form of anxiety—different from things like social or performance anxiety—then we should see evidence of differences in, e.g., the functional profiles of these phenomena. On this front, work in psychology affirms the prediction. For instance, we have work confirming the basic behavioral patterns characteristic of both moral and social anxiety. More specifically, we have findings affirming that anxiety about what to do in a novel moral situation tends to bring reflection and information gathering efforts geared toward figuring out what to do. Other work indicates that anxiety about how one will be perceived by others (say, when on a date or while giving a public talk) tends to prompt caution and risk minimization efforts as one tries to reduce the chance or severity of negative social evaluation (see, e.g., Endler & Kocovski 2001; Leary & Kowalski 1995: chap. 8).¹⁰

(2.4) Summing Up. We have a range of findings—across a variety of disciplines (e.g., neuroscience, social and clinical psychology, political science, philosophy) and methodologies (e.g., correlational, clinical, experimental)—that bring converging theoretical and empirical support for the core elements of the Kantian model. This is cause for optimism about the model’s credentials. But the discussion brings further insights. For starters, we noted above that current dual-processing research provides only very general working models of the mechanism that undergird System-1 to System-2 transitions. As Wim De Neys notes, this means that there is much need for “further fleshed out, fine-tuned, and developed” accounts (forthcoming, §4). The Kantian model of moral anxiety speaks to this need by providing empirically-vetted detail on what at least one of these mechanisms plausibly looks like.

Pushing further, given that we now have evidence not just of moral anxiety as a mechanism driving System-1 to System-2 transitions, but that the System-2 cognition brings open-minded inquiry and (re)assessment, we also have a response to those skeptical of genuine moral deliberation (e.g., Haidt 2001, Greene 2008, Doris 2009). Of course these authors are correct in holding not just that much of moral cognition is automatic and intuitive, but also that some of what may seem like

¹⁰ This picture is also supported by research in abnormal psychology and neuroscience: this work suggests that the behavioral patterns characteristic of these types of anxiety are the upshot of distinctive underlying mechanisms (Kurth 2016, 2018a: 77-84).

“deliberation” is really just post hoc rationalization. That said, they push these truths too far. The Kantian model, and the evidence for it, helps us see that we do engage in genuine, productive (i.e., non-post hoc) reasoning—and we do so when circumstances present us with challenges that System-1 processing alone cannot handle. The secrete joke, then, is that Kant was on to something in his work on human moral cognition.

3. Departing from Kant

With support for the Kantian model in hand, I now want to take a closer look at a few aspects of it that are particularly relevant to understanding moral anxiety as a *distinct* and *distinctly valuable* moral emotion. In doing this, we will see that there are reasons to be skeptical of parts of the Kantian model. But we will also see that we can purge these features while still retaining the core aspects of the account. As a further benefit, looking more closely at the Kantian proposal will allow us to engage with several issues that have come up in recent discussions of moral anxiety and its value.

(3.1) What Makes This Moral Anxiety? As we’ve seen, Kant takes conscience to be an *innate* moral predisposition, a claim that offers a straightforward account of why moral anxiety is a distinctly moral sensitivity. But we should be skeptical of this proposal. While there may be some evidence of a distinct, genetic basis to *moral* anxiety (see, e.g., Martinez et al. 2020), the overall empirical case for the claim is scant. A more plausible alternative, I believe, is that moral anxiety is a “cognitive sharpening” of practical anxiety. To draw this out, some background will be helpful.

In other work (2018a: chap 2-3), I’ve argued that research in emotion science suggests ‘anxiety’ is best understood as the label for an umbrella category ranging over (at least) the following three distinct, biologically-grounded sub-types of anxiety:

Environmental. Environmental anxiety is anxiety about potential physical dangers. In the paradigmatic case, it is triggered by the possibility of something in one’s environment that could bring physical harm (e.g., predators, cliff edges, conspecific aggression). It typically brings response behaviors that emphasize caution in one’s movements (e.g., withdrawal, avoidance) and increased vigilance toward one’s surroundings.

Punishment (or social). Punishment anxiety is anxiety about the possibility of receiving negative evaluations or sanctions from others. The paradigmatic source of this type of anxiety is uncertainty about the outcome of a (public) performance, action, or social encounter—will one be viewed negatively and what consequences will occur if one is? As such, it tends to prompt socially oriented risk-minimization efforts (e.g., deference; efforts to ingratiate, flatter, or even appease).

Practical. Practical anxiety is anxiety about what the correct or appropriate thing to do is. Its paradigmatic elicitors are situations where one is uncertain about what the (social, moral) norms prescribe or prohibit. It can also be prompted by uncertainty about how one might influence future, potentially threatening events. Anxiety of this sort tends to result in epistemic behaviors (e.g., inquiry, deliberation, reflection, (re)assessment) aimed at helping one better understand and so respond to the situation at hand.

If we assume that something like this picture of anxiety’s sub-types is correct (and we saw that there is support for it in the discussion from §2.3), then we can see moral anxiety as a cognitive sharpening of practical anxiety.

Following Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2003), consider fear of flying as the paradigmatic instance of a cognitive sharpening—in this case, a cognitive sharpening of fear. More specifically, fear of flying is a cognitive sharpening in the sense that the label picks out the combination of a non-cognitive, biologically-based emotion type (here the fear affect program) and some specific cognitive content that the fear is directed toward (namely, beliefs about air travel). Applying this model to moral anxiety, we can see that label as referring to tokens of practical anxiety that are focused on moral content (e.g., beliefs about right and wrong, praise and blame). The benefit of understanding moral anxiety in this manner is that it allows us to hold on to a biologically-grounded account of *practical* anxiety without committing to the further, and more controversial, claim that there’s a genetic basis for a distinctly *moral* form anxiety.¹¹

But these gains may seem to come at a significant cost. If we jettison Kant’s innateness claim, then moral anxiety becomes detached from genuine moral value. This would be bad—for, as the Kantian model suggests, moral anxiety is normatively significant in part because it acts as a bulwark to moral danger. To better see the issue here, consider the Duke of Wellington. When speaking before Parliament in 1833 about pending emancipation legislation, Wellington defended his opposition by pointing to his “anxiety” about freeing slaves before “they had become civilized” (Debates in Parliament 1833: 533-4). We want to say, of course, that Wellington’s worries are badly misplaced. But if moral anxiety is a mere cognitive sharpening, then what reason do we have for thinking that moral anxiety will tend to be moral corrective and not a mechanism that perpetuates prejudice?¹²

The issue here is real, but its force should be tempered. First, we have seen—both anecdotally (the King example) and empirically (the experiments of, e.g., MacKuen et al. 2010 and Valentino et al. 2008 discussed in §2.3)—that moral anxiety is undergirded by a distinctive motivation. This motivation manifests in moral anxiety’s concern to get it right, a motivation that promotes open-minded inquiry. And as we noted above, this distinctive motivation is part of what distinguishes moral anxiety from other forms of anxiety: moral anxiety brings an accuracy concern that contrasts with, for instance, the more ego-defensive motivations that are characteristic of social anxiety (Kurth 2016, 2018a: 67-84). Second, we shouldn’t take moral anxiety to be some magical elixir—an all-powerful corrective to deviant moral thinking. Rather, it is one of many cognitive mechanisms that help us recognize, and think through, moral complexity. Taken together, I see this combination as going some distance toward deflating the worry of an unmoored moral anxiety.

(3.2) How is Moral Anxiety Valuable? Famously, Kant maintains that the only thing that has moral value is action from duty. If that’s right, then moral anxiety can only be instrumental valuable—only valuable insofar as it contributes to our ability to understand and do what the moral law commands. But one might challenge this in a couple of ways: one might deny that moral anxiety

¹¹ This, of course, assumes that there is a plausible account of practical anxiety as a biologically-grounded emotion. For a defense of that, see: Kurth 2016, 2018a: chaps 2-3, 2018b. For further discussion of cognitive sharpenings of anxiety, see the discussion of “practical eco-anxiety” in Kurth & Pihkala 2022.

¹² Shepherd 2019 raises worries along these lines.

is even instrumentally valuable or, in the other direction, one might argue that it can also be non-instrumentally valuable. Let's look at each of these more closely.

In recent work, James Fritz (2022) provides the makings of a challenge to the claim of moral anxiety's instrumental value on the grounds of overwhelming trumping. The basic idea is this. A moment's reflection on all the world's ills (COVID, war, crime, etc.) reveals not only that we have nearly limitless occasion to feel morally anxious, but that such anxiety would be a fitting response to the moral danger we're surrounded by. But to feel all the moral anxiety that we have reason to feel would have devastating consequences for our wellbeing—we'd be in something like a perpetual episode of a general anxiety disorder. So whatever instrumental value moral anxiety might have gets massively outweighed by the costs that feeling it would bring.

But it's unclear how forceful this worry is. To see this, notice that the Fritz-inspired argument seems to generalize in ways that undermine its plausibility. Consider: A moment's reflection on all the world's wonders (the Grand Canyon, all the babies born today, acts of selfless giving, etc.) reveals not only that we have nearly limitless occasion to feel happy, but that such happiness would be a fitting response to the moral good we're surrounded by. But to feel all the happiness that we have reason to feel would have devastating consequences for our wellbeing—we'd be in something like a perpetual episode of mania. So whatever instrumental value happiness may have gets massively outweighed by the costs that feeling it would bring.

As this parity suggest, the conclusion to draw is not that moral anxiety (or, for that matter, happiness) lack instrumental value, but that there are complex normative questions about how we are to aggregate worries (joys). In fact, recognizing this reveals that the issue here is just part of a more general set of questions about how we're to determine what we have all-things-considered reason to do, think, and feel. So while there may be a problem here, it's not a problem that's specific to moral anxiety or our Kantian account of it.¹³

Let's now consider the idea that, contra Kant, moral anxiety is more than just instrumentally valuable. We can draw out the plausibility of this possibility by returning to the example of King from above. Part of what we admire about King in that example is that he was worried about something that really was worrisome. This suggests that moral anxiety of the sort that we see in King isn't merely instrumentally valuable—something that just leads to a better decision. It's also something that has non-instrumental value. More specifically, King's moral anxiety is aretaically valuable insofar as it reflects well on his character. In being anxious about his decision, he is *emotionally attuned to what matters*: the seriousness and moral complexity of the decision he faces. In fact, were King not worried in the ways that he was, our admiration for him as a moral exemplar would presumably diminish. If this is right, then looking to paradigmatic examples of moral anxiety in action reveal Kant's account of its value to be too narrow.¹⁴

(3.3) What Role Should Moral Anxiety play in Moral Development? Not everyone is a moral exemplar. When we feel anxious about what we ought to do, those worries sometimes get the better of us. We may become overwhelmed or feel powerless and so shut down or try to evade the (moral)

¹³ To be clear, Fritz is sensitive these issues; he takes the case of anxiety to be a particularly instructive way of drawing them out.

¹⁴ I develop this argument more fully in Kurth 2015; 2018a: 126-34; 2018c .

issue we face. Thus, there is much to be said of Kant's prescription for cultivation. But here two issues surface. First, Kant would likely qualify his call to cultivate moral anxiety given the concerns he had about the use of "external incentives" in moral education: without significant care, efforts to develop emotional capacities like anxiety risk inculcating bad motivations—doing good, not because it's what morality demands, but rather to avoid anxiety's unpleasantness.¹⁵ These concerns feed into more recent skepticism about our ability to cultivate anxiety so that it is better able to track what's anxiety-worthy—especially nowadays, given that our social and physical environment is so "systematically, toxically anxiety inducing" (Kelly 2021: 254; Doris 2018: 784-5; 2009).

The best response to all this is, I think, to point to concrete examples of occasions where progress has been made in cultivating anxiety, and to examine the research that's been done to understand why the effective interventions were able to bring about the results that they did. On this front, "eco-anxiety" offers an informative case study. While the label "eco-anxiety" as it's used in both academic and popular contexts refers to a wide range of (at best) loosely related phenomena, a substantive core of this discussion seems to be referring to an ecologically-oriented form of moral anxiety (see Kurth & Pihkala 2022 for an extended discussion). Moreover, debates about the value of this morally-infused eco-anxiety are, in many ways, analogous to the issues we are discussing here: some maintain that eco-anxiety is valuable (Sims et al. 2020), while others see it as profoundly problematic (Clayton & Karazsia 2020).

But as with our discussion of moral anxiety, much of what's at issue in these disagreements turns on the question of what—if anything—can be done to shape eco-anxiety for the better. Briefly, here's what work examining the prospects for cultivating eco-anxiety suggests. First, it appears that we can make progress in addressing occasions where we feel either too much and too little eco-anxiety. For instance, various reappraisal strategies have been shown to be effective in countering tendencies to feel too much eco-anxiety or experience it on occasions that aren't actually worrisome (Ojala 2012; Grose 2020; Hamilton 2020). Additional work has identified ways to help individuals develop emotional sensitivities toward things that are worrisome, but that they aren't anxious about. The bulk of this work builds from research on "fear appeals," that is, advertisements and other communications aimed at arousing fear and anxiety in order to promote precautionary motivations. A range of studies suggest that these interventions can be an effective way to cultivate eco-anxiety in those who are not sufficiently eco-anxious (Moser 2019; Nabi et al. 2018; Witte & Allen 2000). Moreover, recent efforts by the psychologist Maria Ojala and others have helped shed light on why these techniques work. For instance, Ojala's research has not only found that interventions that engage combinations of eco-anxiety and hope are particularly effective, but also points to why. In short, the experience of anxiety elicits an aversive signal about the need for greater attention to environmental considerations; hope then brings positive affect that works to sustain the inquiry that anxiety has engaged (Ojala 2012). All told, then, research like this sanctions cautious optimism that the skeptical worries can be addressed.

¹⁵ The worry here seems well-founded: individuals with social anxiety disorders report lower life satisfaction than people infected with herpes (Wittchen & Beloch 1996)—no surprise then that some individuals are so averse to feeling anxious that they will opt for a larger shock now rather than enduring the anxiety associated with the anticipation of a milder shock in the near future (Berns et al. 2006).

4. Conclusion: Reasons to be Morally Anxious

The above discussion suggests that Kant was an early—and particularly insightful—dual-process theorists. But it also invites a couple of big picture questions that I want to briefly discuss by way of conclusion.

First, we’ve just seen that there’s good reason to back away from some of Kant’s more contentious claims about the nature and value of moral anxiety—that it’s innate, that it’s only instrumentally valuable. Yet we’ve also seen that we can do this while nonetheless retaining the core insights of the Kantian model. But might we take this further? In particular, what might the lessons that we’ve learned about the function and value of moral anxiety say about the plausibility of Kant’s rationalism? On the model we’ve developed, Kant remains a rationalist: though there is a deep and important role for affect-based moral endowments like conscience, the contribution these emotional capacities make remains secondary—the real work in tracking and engaging moral value is still left to reason. But this picture may underplay the place of sentiments.¹⁶ Moral anxiety, as an emotion that sensitizes us to occasions of moral danger and justification, is in the very business of tracking a *particularly important* form of moral value. It, of course, needs to be refined and restrained—as the case of the Duke of Wellington makes plain. Yet one might reasonably see all this as pointing—not to a milder, emotion-infused Kantian rationalism, but a rationally-tempered sentimentalism.

Second, the discussion (especially in §3.3) provides reason to be morally anxious, for it raises the thorny question of how we might responsibly cultivate moral anxiety (and emotions more generally). After all, to say that we want to cultivate moral anxiety is not to say that we want to experience it more often or more intensely. Rather, it’s to say, in an Aristotelian spirit, that we want to feel morally anxious at the right time and in the right way. But how do we do that? The issue here is both empirical and normative. Empirically, we’ve seen that there is much we don’t know about how to shape emotions like anxiety for the better. Normatively, recent work by feminists and disability scholars shows that in thinking about how best to cultivate moral anxiety (and emotions more generally), we must also be sensitive to how prescriptions to “correct your inappropriate anxiety” can work to further marginalize the already marginalized (Gotlib 2020, Calhoun 2004). Thus there’s real work to do in developing *responsible* moral and emotional development programs.¹⁷ But success on this front may well point to moral anxiety as the source of the moral law within us.¹⁸

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¹⁶ There are also questions about how this Kantian account of moral anxiety might fit with Kant’s claims about respect—e.g., if moral anxiety is developmentally prior to respect (a claim Kant seems committed to), then how does moral anxiety get its distinctly *moral* orientation? Thanks to Roberto Mordacci for a helpful discussion of this issue.

¹⁷ For work that starts to do this, see Kurth 2022, Archer & Mills 2019, and Liebow & Glazer 2019.

¹⁸ Thanks to audiences at the Moral and Political Philosophy Research Seminar at the University of Helsinki and the Philosophy Department at Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele for their input on earlier versions of this paper. Here special thanks is owed to Federico Bina, Jaakko Hirvelä, Antti Kauppinen, Max Lewis, Roberto Mordacci, Stefano Pinzan, Massimo Reichlin, and Sarah Songhorian.

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