



Virtue, Sainthood and Anxious Morality

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 10th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 8th – Saturday 10th September 2022. These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.



I'm not much of a worrier, but my wife is. When our infant once had a particularly bad night's sleep, she insisted that we take him to the hospital in the middle of the night. I, on the other hand, thought that we could wait until the morning. Later that night—in the hospital—we learned that he had pyloric stenosis, a condition that, untreated, could have been deadly. Then, a few years later, I thought that my slightly abnormal labs weren't worth worrying about, but she pushed for my doctor to order me a colonoscopy two years before I was eligible. And, again, it turns out the doctor discovered what would have been deadly and, in this case, probably also untreatable if I'd waited until I'd become worried myself.

That's the thing with worriers: they're sometimes right. To co-opt an old joke, a worrier successfully predicts ten out of every two serious health issues. But, by contrast, the easy-going non-worrier might miss all of them.

Ours has been called the “age of anxiety.” There's certainly evidence for it. Anxiety-related diagnoses and prescriptions for treatment are up dramatically across the board, and especially in kids and young adults.¹ For many, the pandemic has only increased their anxiety, giving all of us—at least in the early days, when we weren't yet sure how covid spread and how deadly it could be—a feeling strongly akin to what some OCD sufferers feel when every surface looks like a potential health hazard, when your hands can't get clean enough.

Perhaps “these days” aren't so different from other times in human history: let's not forget that our “anxious age” coincides with historically unprecedented security and comfort for most of us, and hundreds of historical epochs would be more stressful for me than this one. But even if our age isn't especially anxious by historical standards, it's certainly the age of noticing and discussing anxiety. (In fact, maybe our relatively safe and comfortable conditions are precisely what make it so easy for us to notice and discuss the anxiety that we do feel: our ancestors might not have had as much time for reflection about their feelings while they were recovering from the most recent drought, plague, or invading armies.)

Of the things that we currently feel anxious about, some are legitimate and some are less so. Worry about the pandemic feels less legitimate over time for those of us who are vaccinated and without serious health risks, while worry about whether the earth will remain habitable for human civilization in anything like its current form has become even more legitimate. And individuals each have their own sources of anxiety, too numerous and personalized to generalize about.

I'm going to discuss what it means for anxiety to be legitimate or justified and then consider whether it's justified to feel anxious about our possible moral failings. But I first want to make a small digression in order to set up a distinction between two ways that anxiety could be legitimate or justified.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a negative feeling or state—let's ignore that difference here—in which a person feels aversively in anticipation of some possible negative event. For someone who has the occasional poisonous snake in their overgrown yard, they might feel anxious about walking through the tall grass near where snakes have been seen before. If they see a snake, then what they feel is no longer called anxiety, but is fear: they are afraid of that snake. But if they've seen no snake, they're on high alert for the snake that could be anywhere; or, that could be nowhere.

When I ask, then, if it's *legitimate* or *justifiable* for me to feel anxiety when I walk through the yard, we need to distinguish two different ways in which my anxiety could be defended. One is that there *is* a snake in the yard. I don't know where it is, but there is something there, hiding, that I would be afraid of were I to see it. In that case, I would say that the anxiety is *legitimate*: there is something legitimately meriting the anxiety.

The other is that, while there's no snake in the yard, my yard is still a reasonable enough place for a person to expect to find a snake, so my feeling of being on high alert still makes sense. It's justifiable for a person to feel anxiety when walking through this yard, even though, in fact, there are no snakes here. In this case, I would say that my anxiety is justifiable, but not legitimate. The labels of “legitimate” and “justifiable” are imperfect, but I'll use it to track the distinction, which is what's important here.

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7441973/>

Now, when we ask about whether someone should feel anxious, we could be asking whether the thing that the person is worried about could actually occur, or we could be asking only whether it's justifiable for a person to worry about it, though it's not likely to occur. During early days of the pandemic, for example, it was justifiable for people to worry about touching surfaces without then using hand sanitizer; now that we know how the virus is transmitted, that's no longer justifiable. It was never, in any case, legitimate to worry about touching surfaces since that was never the way that the virus was likely to be transmitted. On the other hand, it was and still is justifiable to worry about being around a lot of people without masks in an enclosed space with poor airflow—even if it turns out that no one in the group is sick, so the risk of getting sick is in fact zero.

With that background, we can ask if there are some things that are *never* legitimate sources of worry because the threats can never materialize, or some things that are *always* legitimate sources of worry because the threat is ever present.

I'll leave for another time the question of whether some things can *never* be a legitimate source of worry because they are never threats—love, happiness, and rainbows, perhaps?—and focus here on what could qualify as an ever-present source of worry.

For something to be a constant, ever-present source of worry requires that there is a constant, ever-present threat that we need to be vigilant about, some concern that, were it to show up, would be a source of fear.

There are some options here. One is death, which, as existentialists and psychoanalysts both develop, is plausible as an ever-present threat, so it could legitimate constant anxiety. And there are other, less obvious options that are still worth investigation: shame or embarrassment, failure, loss, injury. Each of these could be developed in a way that shows them to be an ever-present threat, at least to some. But I'll consider another option here.

Moral Failure

One particularly interesting option of something that could be an ever-present threat is moral failure, or “sin,” to use religious language. It's a reasonable assumption that ethics is everywhere, or at least that it's pervasive enough that any human can always ask, in any situation, “What ought to be done?” or “What ought I to do?”, and that part of the answer to that question is ethical. If ethics is pervasive in this way, then ethical failure must also be an equally pervasive threat. If I can meaningfully ask “What ought I to do?”, then I can also fail to do it.

Of course, the severity of this pervasive threat is going to vary with the particular moral failure one commits. Murder and robbery are moral failures, but so might be cutting oneself a slightly larger piece of cake or telling a white lie, like “I'd love to get together” or “I enjoyed your paper.” But that's true of non-moral threats as well: some venomous snake bites are deadly, and others are just annoying, and some people are going to have different levels of anxiety that correspond to the snakes in the nearby environment and others are going to be equally worried (or not) about any venomous snake bite. So, too, here, moral failure is a kind of failure that is always possible, regardless of its severity, and therefore always a threat, though how much of a threat could vary.

The appropriate level of anxiety can also vary. To say that moral failure is an ever-present threat is not to say anything about the appropriate level of anxiety that one should have about that threat. It might be legitimate for me to worry about snakes in my yard, but that might not justify being so paralyzed with anxiety that I cannot leave my house. If the snake has just slithered from the path into the grass, perhaps being paralyzed with anxiety for a few seconds makes sense. But if we take possible threats to ourselves as seriously as the possible snake in the grass, we wouldn't do much in our lives other than worry. We certainly can't drive—the risks of driving are enormous, relative to possible snakes hidden in the grass—or go swimming, or running, and even walking; though we also can't stay seated, given the risks of a sedentary life. Threats, in short, are everywhere, and if our reaction to those threats is to avoid the source of the possible threat, then our lives won't involve doing much more than curling up in a ball.

But, while we should avoid overreacting to a source of possible anxiety, we also shouldn't underreact. While it's true that some moral failures are worse than others, many thinkers—philosophers, religious, and

neither of the above—believe that a moral failure, however small, is still worse than any other kind of non-moral failure, however large. A white lie isn't murder, but a white lie is still worse than the worst non-moral sartorial or gustatory transgression imaginable. Serving someone an unpalatable meal while wearing the most garish of outfits is better, on this view, than stealing a single penny from them.

Let's assume for the sake of argument that this view is right, and the smallest moral failing is worse than the worst non-moral failing. If it is, then, whatever the appropriate level of anxiety is that a person should feel about their possible moral failings, most of us don't feel enough of it. We worry about doing wrong in some circumstances, but not in most circumstances, despite the ever-present threat of moral failure. If moral failure is always possible, then why do we so rarely feel any moral anxiety at all? Or, to put it another way, should more of us feel like we're constantly at risk of being sinners?

Scrupulosity

To answer this question, I want to consider one group of people who do, in fact, think of themselves as constantly sinners and who, moreover, feel anxious about it.² Those are people with the anxiety disorder of scrupulosity. I'll consider a couple of possibilities for what those with scrupulosity tell us. The first possibility is that those with scrupulosity are right, and we are wrong not to feel more anxious about our own possible moral failings, however small. Or, the second possibility, those with scrupulosity are wrong to feel as anxious as they do, and, despite the ever-present possibility of moral failure, we're generally right not to be that worried.

Before considering those options, I'll summarize scrupulosity. Scrupulosity is a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), so I first need to describe OCD. OCD, in general, is characterized by obsessions and compulsions: the person with OCD has an anxiety-inducing thought, or "obsession," and responds to it with an anxiety-soothing mental or physical action, or "compulsion." In the more visible forms of OCD, a person might have a thought about how their hands are contaminated, say, and therefore could infect others with illnesses if their hands aren't cleaned. The person then, in response to that obsession, feels the need to wash their hands repeatedly until they no longer have the anxious feeling. Or they might have a thought that their house isn't secure enough, which they counteract by checking all the locks, or checking them in a ritual way.

In OCD, obsessions and/or compulsions take on many forms, though they often gravitate towards certain issues: sex, death, physical or spiritual contamination. In scrupulosity, the obsessions and/or compulsions are characteristically religious or moral in character. A person with scrupulosity might have an anxious thought about not having fasted correctly during a religious event, or about praying incorrectly, or about accidentally leaving out some possible sin while confessing to a priest, or about inadvertently cheating by taking too much change back at the store, or about a sexual thought that unexpectedly appears during a religious event. These anxious thoughts lead the person to act in a way that they anticipate will reduce their anxiety: they seek reassurance from a religious authority, like a priest or imam, that they are not irredeemably bad, or they seek reassurance from the person they think they might have harmed; or they pray, or confess, or come up with ways of making restitution.

Scrupulosity has other characteristic features, and not all cases of scrupulosity will be cleanly distinguished from other forms of OCD. But that's enough of a summary to return to the question of whether those with scrupulosity are right to be as worried as they are, or whether we're right to be more blasé than they are about whether we might have done something wrong.

We might assume that we can sidestep this question by pointing out that those with scrupulosity are motivated by their anxiety, while the rest of us are (in general) not. Those with scrupulosity have, after all, an

² Those with anxiety disorders, like scrupulosity, may not in fact "feel" anxiety all the time, even though anxiety regularly affects their actions. Earlier, I indicated that we can conceive of anxiety as a feeling or as a state. It can be either, and I can be influenced by my own anxiety even if, at the time, I don't *feel* any anxiety. I might have become so used to the feeling that it doesn't stand out, or I might act in anticipation of anxiety that I will feel if I don't act in a certain way. And all of this is made even more complicated if we admit that we can have "unconscious" or "subconscious" feelings. But these subtleties go far beyond the present discussion, so I'll continue to talk about anxiety simply as a feeling.

anxiety disorder. On this response, we don't need to compare how worried they are with how worried we all should be because, given their clinical diagnosis, they are motivated by their anxiety, and they have too much of it, so we don't need to ask the further question of how justified their anxiety is given that we know it's too much.

But this response won't distinguish those with scrupulosity from the rest of us as well as we might hope, for two reasons. The first reason is that normal moral motivation can include anxiety as well. This isn't the place to develop an account of moral motivation, but being worried about doing the right thing is an ordinary part of moral life. In fact, our anxiety might even point us towards morally relevant features of situations that we otherwise would have missed: we're worried that we might have offended a friend because, in fact, we *did* offend the friend, and we noticed it just enough ("subconsciously") that we're worried about it, even though we didn't consciously recognize it as something that we did wrong. In that way, it's like worrying that we left the stove on as we leave the house: maybe there's a reason that we're worried, and the anxiety can therefore serve as a reliable motivator. Our anxiety might not be infallible in pointing us to things that we could have done wrong, but, for most of us, being motivated by anxiety is in the same category as motivation by many other emotions or feelings, which are part of normal moral motivation. Therefore, we can't say simply that those with scrupulosity are motivated by anxiety while the rest of us aren't.

Having established that the mere presence of anxiety in one's moral motivation can't distinguish scrupulous motivation from ordinary motivation, we can also see why a clinical diagnosis also won't distinguish those with scrupulosity from those without. A clinical diagnosis is in part a judgment about how much anxiety is too much. But that's precisely the question we're after. There is no doubt that someone with scrupulosity has more anxiety than most people and that it interferes with their having a normal life. But maybe any morally good but fallible person in a morally corrupt world would also have so much anxiety that it would interfere with their living a normal life. So we can't use a clinical diagnosis to conclude that those with scrupulosity have more anxiety than they *should*, only that they have more than the rest of us *do*. Which returns us to the question of whether that additional anxiety is justified or not.

Lessons

Despite these similarities between those with scrupulosity and the rest of us, we're right to focus on anxiety as the locus of a key difference. But it's not the presence or absence of anxiety that distinguishes scrupulosity, but the way that anxiety shapes one's motivation. Earlier, I explained that anxiety is an aversive feeling that we want to diminish or eliminate. If our anxiety is well-calibrated to potential threats—worrying about snakes in the grass in an area known to have snakes—then way we act in response to feeling anxiety will also reduce the possibility that we'll be harmed. You're anxious about walking in the tall grass, so you walk out of the grass, which both reduces your anxiety and reduces the chances that you'll be bitten.

If someone's anxiety is perfectly calibrated to the threat in their environment, then the person could trust their anxiety, treat it as evidence even, and therefore use it as a justification for how they act in a situation. The problem with anxiety, though, is that anxiety needn't be reliably associated with a potential threat at all. Any number of causes can prompt the feeling of anxiety, from having too much caffeine to a neurological condition. And even if the anxiety does arise when there is a genuine threat, I might not identify what potential threat the anxiety has arisen in response to. After all, anxiety is a feeling that does not reveal its origin in the feeling itself. I might feel anxious when walking in the grass, and I might (reasonably) believe that I feel anxious because snakes are sometimes in the grass. But I might in fact be anxious because I forgot to mail a letter earlier that I promised to mail, or because a friend just shared bad news, or because I'm worried about whether I said my daily prayers.

Sometimes it's easy to identify a plausible cause of my anxiety. Feeling anxious immediately when I step into the tall grass where I've seen snakes makes it reasonably easy to identify what's likely causing my anxiety. But the interesting cases aren't so clear. Stepping out of the house and feeling anxious, I feel that something is wrong, but did I leave the stove on, leave my wallet inside, or was I supposed to be meeting someone here at the house instead of going out? The anxiety functions as a blunt mental tool to direct me towards a threat. But whether the threat I end up identifying is the one that actually led to the anxiety is sometimes complicated to determine.

It's hard to identify the cause of the anxiety if it was some possible threat, and it's even harder if the cause was purely physical, unrelated to any potential threats. I might feel anxiety when I left the house because I left my wallet inside, or it might be because I had too much coffee at breakfast. One is a psychological cause and the other is a physical cause. In both cases, what I feel is anxiety that I then interpret—though I might interpret it quickly and without realizing that I'm even interpreting it. And I might interpret it wrongly and misidentify the cause.

Now, imagine what happens when I misidentify the cause of my anxiety. In the typical case of responding to anxiety, I reduce my anxiety by trying to reduce or eliminate the possible threat that has prompted the anxiety. But if I'm wrong about what has caused the anxiety, then I won't be successful in addressing the threat. If the cause of my anxiety is all the coffee I drank, then it's not going to go away no matter how many times I check the stove because the anxiety isn't—despite what I think—actually about the stove.

In the case of those with scrupulosity, they have more anxiety than most of us, but what's more relevant is that they understand their anxiety as attributable to their own moral failings in some way. Why might they think that their anxiety is about their moral failings? Because the anxiety is ongoing, not something that pops up only in a particular situation, and there aren't that many things that are ongoing threats. If they feel anxiety in many different and varied circumstances, they can't understand that anxiety as a response to the possibility that snakes might be constantly nearby: they aren't delusional. So they have to find a threat (or series of threats) that are always present. The possibility of their own moral failing can be always present.

This, then, is the heart of how to distinguish those with scrupulosity from those without. Those with scrupulosity feel anxiety that they understand as about their own moral failings. But they're not responding to the evidence of their moral failings by feeling anxious; instead, they're feeling anxious and understanding that anxiety as evidence of their moral failings.

On its own, that might not be so bad. After all, if moral failure is a constant threat, then there is also some justification for one's constant anxiety. But because their anxiety is not a response to evidence that they are morally failing, then it also can't be addressed by moral improvements. It then becomes relevant that the *feeling* of anxiety is distinct from the *justification* for anxiety. In trying to get rid of anxiety, normally we also eliminate or reduce the possible threat; but not when the anxiety is caused in a way that the person doesn't understand. So, if I'm feeling anxiety and believe it's because I'm a sinner, I can pray all I want, but the anxiety doesn't respond to prayer. Or, if it does respond, it responds only because anxiety naturally waxes and wanes, which allows the person to interpret the anxiety as responding to the prayer.

The fact that one's anxiety naturally waxes and wanes while the person tries to interpret it as responding to their own actions explains some otherwise strange features of OCD. Someone with lock-checking OCD doesn't just check the locks. Checking the locks would reassure a person's anxiety that arose because they were genuinely responding to evidence that the locks might not be secured. But if the anxiety doesn't go away after checking in the normal ways, then the person might try other ways, maybe locking with their other hand, or opening and re-closing the door first—and the anxiety might, eventually, respond to one of these. And this is how the complicated rituals that we associate with OCD can begin: the anxiety lessens eventually, and the person then believes that what they did caused it to lessen, so they do that again the next time.

Conclusion

A person with scrupulosity has a higher than normal amount of anxiety. They might also be more prone to feel anxiety in anxiety-inducing situations. Regardless of how their anxiety is caused, though, those with scrupulosity often misidentify the possible threat that has prompted their anxiety.

Do they demonstrate, then, that the rest of us are wrong not to feel more anxiety about the ever-present possibility of moral failure? No. What they show is that it's morally important that we understand the source of our feelings, at least of those feelings that serve some evidentiary function, pointing us towards morally relevant features of our lives. If we don't understand what causes such feelings, we can't make them more reliable, and they cannot become integrated into a healthy, coherent moral psychology.

Anxiety, when well calibrated, has some benefits—like focusing us on possible threats, which helps us anticipate and think about how to address them—but even those benefits go awry when our anxiety is badly calibrated or when we’ve misidentified its cause. We focus on the wrong things *to the exclusion* of the things we should focus on. So I might repeat my daily prayers for hours, believing that anything less is sinful, when in fact, were I less anxious, I would instead try to get the prayers right but also keep in mind that I have other things to do, things that are also morally relevant, like helping my family, friends, strangers, doing my job, and developing my talents.

This is not a conclusion, though, that those with scrupulosity are wrong either to believe that they are constantly in danger of sinning. It is still possible that, while they misinterpret their anxiety, someone with correctly calibrated anxiety, anxiety that genuinely responded to the possibility of moral failure, would act similarly. The difference is that the person whose anxiety is well calibrated could be reassured. They could find evidence that they had in fact not morally failed, whereas the person with scrupulosity cannot make their anxiety go away by finding such reassurance because their anxiety didn’t actually arise from evidence that they might morally fail.

But what about a saint—a genuine, bona fide moral saint? Their anxiety *would* respond to evidence that they had not morally failed, but they also might be so morally sensitive to possible failures that they find overwhelming evidence everywhere of their own sinful nature. If such a saint is a possibility—and nothing yet has ruled it out—then we have to ask a further question, which is whether it’s morally acceptable to enjoy our lives while knowing that we might morally fail regularly; and even that we *do*. So, regardless of what might be true for us, can a saint enjoy *her* life, or would she, given her tender soul, feel constant anxiety about her possible wrongdoings?

That, however, is a question for another time.