

What Is Going On? On Anxiety's Temporal Gaze

Abstract

Psychologists and philosophers generally agree that anxiety is about future threats. Yet I can be anxious about whether I left the stove on, about whether I said something inappropriate, about what another person is currently thinking, about the advisability of what I'm currently doing, and much else that is present or past. Some might seek to explain such apparent counterexamples away. The aim of this paper, however, is to offer an account of the 'temporal-gaze' of anxiety that both accommodates the counterexamples and explains why anxiety might seem to be forward-looking. I offer a general analysis of backward- and forward-looking emotions, argue against two assumptions that might lead one to insist that anxiety is always forward-looking, and suggest that anxiety is about threats to our narrative sense of self.

Keywords: anxiety; emotion; time; narrative; self; fittingness

1. Introduction

Last spring I found myself, like many others around the world, frantically wiping surfaces. I was trying to reduce the risk of contracting the new coronavirus by disinfecting door knobs, chair handles, railings, counters, food packages—anything I could imagine covered with invisible, malicious virus germs. Wearing a face mask, on the other hand, seemed to me excessive and hysterical. The common view at the time was that the virus is unlikely to be airborne. Six months later, my own behavior seems foolish. A *New York Times* headline from Nov. 18, 2020, reads: "The Coronavirus Is Airborne Indoor. Why Are We Still Scrubbing Surfaces?" The article reports: "Scientists who initially warned about contaminated surfaces now say that the virus spreads primarily through inhaled droplets, and that there is little to no evidence that deep cleaning mitigates the threat indoors" (Ives and Mandavilli 2020). Last spring seems like ages ago.

The experience of the current global pandemic is an experience of rapid and significant epistemic adjustments: we keep revising our view of what is dangerous and what is safe, what is negligent and what is responsible conduct, what is wishful thinking and what we can reasonably hope for. It is therefore not in the least surprising that researchers have found heightened levels of anxiety worldwide since the outbreak began.¹

That conditions of epistemic instability lead to anxiety seems obvious enough. The common view of anxiety explains why. Notwithstanding differences in detail, contemporary psychologists and philosophers agree that anxiety is an emotion concerned with threats that can impact one's ability to achieve one's goals. In his definitive *Anxiety and Its Disorders*, David Barlow writes that at the heart of anxiety

is a sense of uncontrollability focused largely on possible future threat, danger, or other potentially negative events. Thus this state can be roughly characterized as a state of helplessness, because of a perceived inability to predict, control, or obtain desired results

¹ A recent research reports: "The emergence of COVID-19, with its rapid spread, has exacerbated anxiety in populations globally, leading to mental health disorders in individuals" (Salari, et al. 2020).

or outcomes in certain upcoming personally salient situations or contexts. (Barlow 2002, 64)

Similarly, Miceli and Castelfranchi write:

Anxiety is in fact a very general and basic emotion, as it “revolves” around the notion of threat. Any goal-regulated system is constantly required to deal with threats, which basically coincide with the possibility of goals being thwarted. This possibility extends to every type of domain: from the struggle for existence to artistic creation, from the acquisition of resources to moral development, from private affection to the desire for social prestige. (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2005, 292)

What these and many other theories of anxiety have in common is the idea that anxiety is concerned with uncertainties about the future. We can draw on such views to explain heightened levels of anxiety during the current global pandemic. A new virus, dangerous and unknown, spreads rapidly and disrupts life world-wide, thereby putting many, many people in a situation of great uncertainty about a serious threat to their health. Moreover, the disruption caused by the virus brings about many more threats and uncertainties: economic, social, professional, personal, communal, and others. Heightened anxiety is thus a predictable response to the exponential growth of uncertainty about the future.

However, despite its initial appeal, the common view of anxiety seems incomplete. Anxiety in these times of COVID-19 is not only concerned with future threats. Alongside worries about what *will* happen, our anxiety also leaves us wondering: “what is going on?” The constant shifts in what we have reason to believe and in the norms of conduct we have reason to abide by also undermine our understanding of what we are *presently* undergoing. Just as our ignorance about the nature of the virus and who is presently infected limits our capacity to form expectations about the future, so our ignorance about what will happen constrains our understanding of the present. Are we sufficiently cautious? Are we putting our elder loved ones at risk by meeting them or are we making the situation needlessly harder for them by staying away? Is the current lockdown wise or is it a huge mistake? Are we experiencing a temporary crisis or is this the beginning of a new era, where work, culture, and social life take on a different form? We are anxious about the present as much as we are about the future.

Moreover, uncertainties spiral backward in time. We might be anxious about the possibility that we infected someone with coronavirus, or that we offended someone by being careful to maintain social distance. We might be anxious that we have overlooked a friend who is struggling to get by, or that we stayed in a closed public space for too long. Furthermore, some of the values and goals that used to guide us—as individuals and communities—have been cast into doubt by the pandemic. Have we failed to appreciate the significance of physical presence in our interactions with others or maybe we have failed to appreciate how much can be done without it? Have we, as a society, been too confident in our abilities to deal with public health threats? Have we overlooked the dire state of our healthcare system? Have we been oblivious to the dangers of globalization and to the significance of global cooperation? The pandemic exposes economic, political, and personal vulnerabilities that were there all along; it also exposes strengths and convictions we

might not have appreciated before. These backward-looking implications often yield anxiety about the past.

Given that anxiety appears to look in various temporal directions, it seems at least odd that almost all accounts construe anxiety as future oriented. I will argue that little if anything is said to discount apparent counterexamples (section 3). My goal in this paper is to offer an analysis of the temporal gaze of anxiety that explains cases where it is forward-looking as well as cases where it is not. To do this, I offer a general analysis of seemingly backward- and forward-looking emotions (section 4). I also identify and argue against assumptions about rationality and our sense of self that lead to the view that fitting anxiety is always, at bottom, forward-looking (section 5). And, finally, I propose that anxiety is about possibilities—whether past, present, or future—that threaten our narrative sense of self (section 6). But first, some stage-setting is in order (section 2).

2. Stage-Setting

This section explains the general approach to emotions that I will be presupposing and situates anxiety as a distinctive kind of emotion. Philosophers of emotion tend to agree that emotions have an *intentionality* in the sense that they are *about* something. While emotions can be about a great variety of objects, each kind of emotion is concerned with a distinctive evaluative property—its so-called ‘formal object’—that it ascribes to a particular object on a particular occasion. Fear of a tiger is about the dangerousness of the tiger, anger in response to something done to you is about the offensiveness or wrongness of the action, amusement in response to a joke is about the joke’s funniness, grief over a person’s death is about the loss the death constitutes, etc.²

An emotion is said to be *fitting* to its object when its object in fact has the evaluative property the emotion ascribes to it. It is not fitting to fear a mouse because (and insofar as) the mouse is not dangerous, and it is not fitting to be amused by a bad joke because the joke is not funny. There may be other reasons that count for or against emotions—moral, prudential, or rational reasons—but those reasons do not count for or against the *fittingness* of the emotion. Thus, envy of another’s achievements might be fitting because the person’s achievements are indeed enviable, and yet there might be powerful moral and prudential reasons against envy. Fittingness is a distinctive normative status, not to be confused with other kinds of evaluations (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000). So the claim that envy is always morally wrong or never beneficial to the agent doesn’t yet settle the question of whether envy is ever fitting. Similarly, anxiety might be instrumentally valuable, but even on occasions when it is not it might still be fitting. Another possible position is that anxiety both lacks instrumental value and it is never fitting. We will return to these possibilities momentarily.

It might initially seem dubious to suppose that anxiety is an emotion at all. Freud famously argued that anxiety is fear without a specific feared object (Freud 1926). The psychoanalytic tradition has taken this to imply that the object of anxiety lies outside the agent’s consciousness. For instance, it has been argued that anxiety is explained by the unconscious fear of death or non-being (Becker 1973) or by the fear of separation from the mother (Bowlby 1969; 1973). Understood as an affective state that lacks an object, anxiety might seem to be better described as a *mood* rather than

² For the distinction between formal and particular objects of emotion, see (de Sousa 1987, 115ff; Helm 2002, 15-16; Prinz 2004, 62-63).

an *emotion* (Kurth, *The anxious mind: An investigation into the varieties and virtues of anxiety* 2018, 9-10). Moreover, some influential philosophical investigations of existential anxiety, or *angst*, seem to construe anxiety as a mood, which lacks an object (Heidegger 1962; Baillie 2020). However, more recent psychological literature maintains that anxiety can often have an object and be properly understood as an emotion (e.g., Baumeister and Tice 1990; Kurth 2018). So anxiety comes in various forms: sometimes it is a mood but often an emotion. In this paper, I focus on the emotion of anxiety.

As a distinctive type of emotion, anxiety has a formal object: an evaluative property that *merits* it or makes it fitting. Kurth argues that “the formal object of anxiety is *problematic uncertainty*: to feel anxious about a situation is to see that situation as involving a threat or danger whose potential is unpredictable, uncontrollable, or otherwise open to question” (Kurth 2015, 175). In a similar vein, Juliette Vazard writes: “Anxiety thus involves the apprehension of potential negative outcomes (implied by some particular event or situation) over which we lack information” (Vazard Forthcoming). These authors follow the psychological literature in construing anxiety as concerned with potential threats and dangers that lie ahead, in the future.³

The idea that anxiety can be fitting might seem surprising at first, since anxiety is often thought to be pathological and destructive. However, certain levels and manifestations of anxiety are widely thought by psychologists to be healthy and important for our proper functioning. Barlow, for example, writes: “Without anxiety, little would be accomplished. The performance of athletes, entertainers, executives, artisans, and students would suffer; creativity would diminish; crops might not be planted” (Barlow 2002, 9). Similarly, Marks and Nesse argue: “If a drug were found that abolished all anxiety for all time it could be as harmful as a drug that induced anxiety of crippling degree” (Marks and Nesse 1994, 247-248). Continuing this line of thought, Kurth argues that “though anxiety can sometimes go awry, it is also an important feature of our psychology: by making us more aware of, and sensitive to, a wide range of potential physical and social threats, anxiety can better enable us to navigate life’s complexities” (Kurth 2018, 103). Kurth adds to the instrumental significance of anxiety the idea that, like emotions such as anger or fear, anxiety, too, can be fitting.⁴ To ask whether anxiety is forward-looking is to ask whether it is a defining feature of fitting anxiety that its particular object is in the future? I take up this question in the next section.

3. Is Anxiety Forward-Looking?

We naturally associate anxiety with a concern about the future. I’m anxious about my talk tomorrow, about climate change, about whether my spouse will be angry or sad when I get home late tonight. But is anxiety essentially forward-looking—is looking forward in time essential to the kind of emotion it is—or can anxiety look in other temporal directions?

³ Note that although Kurth and Vazard both think of anxiety as forward-looking, they sometimes speak of the object of anxiety as being present and *implying* a future threat. I can be anxious about tomorrow’s meeting, but I can also be anxious about walking through the woods *as I’m walking through the woods*. As I explain in the next section, I suspect that they assume that anxiety about a present situation or object is explained by an anxiety about its future implications and therefore that all anxiety is at bottom about the future.

⁴ Kurth goes even further than this: he argues that anxiety is “aretaically valuable”—that feeling fitting anxiety is part of what it is to be a virtuous person—and that anxiety is a central mechanism for moral progress. See (Kurth 2018, chapters 4 and 6).

If the temporal gaze of a particular instantiation of an emotion is determined by the temporal relation between a fitting occurrence of the emotion and its particular object, then it seems that anxiety can sometimes look backward in time. When my doctor calls, I can be fittingly anxious about my test results even if I know they had already been determined. Similarly, I can be fittingly anxious about how I did in a job interview a week ago or about the impression I made at social event on a person I like. I can also be fittingly anxious about the present: about the impression I'm making, about whether my talk is going well, about whether I'm making a mistake, etc.⁵

Perhaps such apparent counterexamples can be redescribed and disarmed. Maybe I'm not anxious about the already-determined test results, but about finding out what they are; I'm not anxious about how I did in the interview but about whether I will be offered the position; I'm not anxious about the impression I made but about how I'll be treated by the person upon whom I made it. In each of these cases, seemingly fitting backward-looking anxiety is described as being, in fact, forward-looking. But what reason do we have to accept these redescriptions of plausible cases of fitting anxiety?

It might seem possible to sidestep these issues by conceding some exceptions and insisting that anxiety is *primarily* forward-looking. Thus, Kurth writes:

Granted, we can sometimes be anxious about things in the past (e.g., when we worry about whether we said something silly at last night's party). However, as a response that—like fear—concerns threats and challenges, anxiety is an emotion that, at its core, is oriented toward the future (e.g., anxiety about, say, your big talk tomorrow or whether to take the new job). In this way, anxiety contrasts with emotions like guilt, sadness, and shame. Though these emotions can be forward-looking (e.g., anticipatory guilt), they are in the first place backward-looking. (Kurth 2018, 11)

It is not obvious how to understand Kurth's suggestion that anxiety is forward-looking *at its core* while *occasionally* backward-looking. Perhaps the idea is that behind every *backward-looking anxiety* is a *forward-looking anxiety*. When I'm anxious about yesterday's exam I am more fundamentally anxious about my final grade in the course; when I am anxious about the impression I left on the other guests at dinner I am more fundamentally anxious about how I'll be treated by them in the future. But, again, what reason do we have to accept the claim that backward-looking anxiety is always explained by forward-looking anxiety?

At the very least, the claim that all anxiety is at bottom forward-looking is not immediately plausible. I can be fittingly anxious about whether my ancestors were slaveholders even if this anxiety cannot be traced to one of my concerns about the future; I can be fittingly anxious about the impression I made at dinner last night even if I'm aware that I will never see the other guests again and would never have to deal with the social consequences. Similarly, I can be fittingly anxious about whether I am or was sufficiently cautious not to contract COVID, not only because I worry that I will contract COVID but because I care about acting (and having acted) responsibly.

⁵ For brevity, I will sometimes drop the qualifier 'fitting' in what follows, but the reader should note that my concern in this paper is with the temporal gaze of *fitting* anxiety and the cases I discuss are meant to invoke fitting anxiety unless noted otherwise. A case of anxiety that looks backward is only a counterexample to the claim that all fitting anxiety is forward-looking if it is a case of *fitting* backward-looking anxiety.

Even if later I find out that I *did not* contract COVID, I might still care (and be anxious) about whether I acted responsibly. In fact, even if I *do* contract COVID, the issue of whether I was as careful as could reasonably be expected is a fitting object of anxiety. These examples illustrate that it is at least initially plausible that I be fittingly anxious about my past or present conduct independently of its consequences. The idea that all anxiety about the past and present can be reduced to or explained by forward-looking anxiety requires an argument.

Furthermore, while anxiety about past and present occurrences might occasionally be couched in anxiety about the future, the opposite is also true. Our uncertainties about what the future holds reflect back on the significance and meaning of the present and the past. Was this a beginning of a beautiful friendship or merely a pleasant encounter that will never repeat again? Did we just find the house that will be our home for many years to come or will it turn out to have been just another false lead? Only time will tell the meaning of our past. Anxieties about the future might be couched in anxieties about the past just as much as anxieties about the past might occasionally be couched in anxieties about the future.

In summary, there is a strong tendency to view anxiety as forward-looking despite evidence to the contrary. There is no quick and easy fix that would explain away apparent counterexamples. What we should seek is an account of anxiety's temporal gaze that accommodates the counterexamples but also explains the strong intuition that anxiety is forward-looking.

4. An Analysis of the Temporal Gaze of Emotions

In this section, I offer a general account of the temporal gaze of emotions, particularly of emotions that seem to be forward-looking (*FL emotions*) and emotions that seem to be backward-looking (*BL emotions*). The account explains the distinction between the two kinds of emotions and the tendency to associate each kind with a specific temporal gaze despite evidence to the contrary. Since anxiety is itself a FL emotion, the account sheds light on the tendency to view anxiety as forward-looking. But there might also seem to be other reasons to hold that anxiety is forward-looking. In the following section (section 5), I address such apparent reasons. But first, let's consider the temporal gaze of various emotions.

It is often taken for granted that some emotions look back and others look forward in time. Regret, grief, guilt, sadness, shame, and anger are often said to be backward-looking while fear, hope, and anxiety are said to be forward-looking. In fact, intuitions on this matter are so strong that not much has been said to elucidate these notions. Something, however, needs to be said, for as we saw in the previous section with regard to anxiety there is no shortage of counterexamples to these generalizations.

I believe that attempts to disarm the counterexamples would prove unsuccessful. However, instead of arguing over the plausibility of counterexamples, I want to offer an account of the distinction between the two kinds of emotions that explains why one group (FL emotions) seems to be forward-looking but occasionally looks back and another (BL emotions) seems to be backward-looking but occasionally looks forward. Such an explanation goes a long way toward vindicating the counterexamples because it also explains the intuition that initially appears to be incompatible with them.

First, however, it is worth noting that not all emotions fall into one of these two categories. Some emotions might be essentially about present objects, which is to say that it is distinctive of the kind of emotions they are that their objects obtain *at the same time* the emotion occurs. For example, it is arguable that fitting awe is about an object that is present, as when one is at awe of a great performance, or a beautiful landscape, and this might also be true, more generally, of other fitting emotional reactions to aesthetic qualities. To complete the spatial metaphor, we might call these: *sideways-looking emotions*.

Apart from FL, BL, and sideways-looking emotions, there are also emotions that look in all temporal directions in the sense that their temporal gaze is not essential to the kind of emotion they are (nor is it determined by the kind of emotion they are.) Admiration, for example, can be directed at a *past* action or achievement, or at a landscape one is *currently* observing, or at the *future* completion of a great feat. Envy, too, does not seem to be bounded to any particular temporal direction: I can envy someone's past achievement, current status, or promising future. It is also arguable that shame and anger do not have a distinctive temporal gaze, despite the tendency to describe them as backward-looking. The fittingness conditions of these emotions neither include nor imply a specific temporal gaze. So alongside FL and BL emotions—which still await a satisfactory analysis—there are sideways-looking emotions and emotions that lack a distinctive temporal gaze and might therefore look in all temporal directions.

Now I want to offer an analysis that explains why FL emotions seem forward-looking though they are occasionally backward-looking and why BL emotions seem backward-looking though they are occasionally forward-looking. My account explains the distinction between these kinds of emotions in terms of the possibility or actuality of their object. As a first pass that will soon be revised, consider the following analysis:

The Actuality Account of BL and FL Emotions

BL emotions are those emotions that are fitting only when their object is *actual* while FL emotions are those emotions that are fitting only when their object is *merely but actually possible*.

The term 'object' should be understood broadly, to include anything a fitting emotion can be about: concrete objects, events, ideas, actions, opinions, roles, etc. An object is *actual* if and only if it exists in this (the actual) world (rather than only existing in a different possible world); an object is *merely but actually possible* if and only if it might *and* might not exist in this (actual) world; and an object is *actually impossible* if and only if it cannot exist in this (actual) world. If I went to bed late last night, then it is actually impossible that I went to bed early last night, but presumably it is actually possible that I will go to bed early tonight. Some actual objects no longer exist (like the old Penn Station in New York City) and some actually possible objects might never exist (like the first female President of the United States), in which case they will become actually impossible. Both *actual objects* and *merely but actually possible* objects are actually possible, but of the two only the former actually exist and only the latter might not actually exist. Finally, logically and metaphysically possible objects might not be *actually possible* because they might be impossible in this world. For instance, it might be logically and metaphysically possible that your lover will

come back to you, but if it is not possible in this world then hoping for your lover's return is not fitting.⁶

To see the appeal of this analysis, consider some examples. Suppose I begin to say something in class and immediately realize I shouldn't. If I regret opening my mouth, well, it's too late to do anything about *that*—it is actual—and therefore regret might be fitting. However, if I realize that I shouldn't say what I've began saying, then I should stop midsentence. It makes no sense to regret saying the sentence while I am still in a position not to complete it. A natural explanation of these observations is that as long as the utterance of the sentence is not fully determined—i.e., as long as the sentence is merely (but actually) possible—regret cannot be a fitting response to it.

Similarly, if I confess my love to a person and observe his or her reaction, it might be fitting to fear rejection and hope for reciprocation as long as it is not clear whether the response is negative or positive. However, once I realize the response is, say, negative, neither fear nor hope is intelligible any longer. At this point, fitting fear and hope fittingly transform into disappointment, hurt, or sadness. If, alternatively, the response is positive, then fitting fear and hope transform into fitting relief, joy, and excitement. A natural explanation of these observations is that fear and hope can only be fitting in response to what is not yet actual but actually possible. The moment that an object of fear and hope becomes either actual or actually impossible, these emotions fittingly dissipate or transform into other emotions.

This analysis seems to explain why regret and grief are backward-looking while fear and hope are forward-looking. While some of what actually exists exists in the present, most of what is actual lies in the past, so BL emotions tend to look back. By contrast, what is merely but actually possible lies in the future, so FL emotions look forward. We thus have an explanation of the temporal gaze of emotions in terms of their modal commitments.

However, as it stands, *the actuality account* faces a serious objection. Suppose I am waiting to hear back about a job application and I see a response-email in my inbox. The subject line reads: "Decision About Job Application". At this point, not knowing what the decision is, I might fittingly fear rejection and fittingly hope that my application was successful. But of course I'm aware that the object of my fear and hope lies in the past and is either already actual or already impossible—the decision was made and a report about it is waiting in my inbox.

How might the current analysis accommodate such cases of backward-looking fear and hope? As we have seen before, it might be suggested that the true object of my fear and hope is not the fate of my job application, which had already been determined, but *finding out I did or didn't get the job*, which is still forthcoming. I doubt this response is plausible. To be sure, I might also fear the experience of finding out I was rejected and hope that I will find out I was accepted, but I primarily fear being rejected and hope to be accepted. The reason my fear and hope are fitting is that, for all I know, either option is possible: I might have been rejected or I might have been accepted. Of course, one of these options is no longer actually possible and the other not merely possible but

⁶ I wish to avoid taking sides in the debate between actualists and possibilists about how these distinctions should be analyzed. Presumably, even those who deny that there are possible objects would allow that some objects might actually exist while others do actually exist. See (Yagisawa 2020).

actual. However, which option prevailed is not settled by my current evidence. To resolve my epistemic indeterminacy, I must open the email.

Yet another attempt to disarm this example maintains that fear and hope are both rational in the decision-email case but neither is fitting. Limited or misleading evidence might rationally justify an attitude that is not in fact fitting. Suppose my evidence indicates that someone is stalking me. Fear might be rational in this case even if it turns out that no one was stalking me and my fear was not fitting. Similarly, one might argue, my lack of evidence about whether I got the job rationally justifies my fear and hope but since the matter was already determined my fear and hope are not fitting.

Note, however, that in the decision email case I have strong evidence that whether or not I got the job is already determined and, indeed, I rationally believe it to be settled. Unlike the stalker case, the lack of evidence does not mislead me about the truth, it simply keeps the truth hidden from me: I don't know what happened. This is why, by contrast to the stalker case, when I learn the truth—that I did get the job, or that I didn't—I should not infer that my fear and hope were unfitting. My lack of evidence made my fear and hope fitting, not merely rational. The change in the temporal location of the object of my fear did not matter to the fittingness of my fear precisely because my evidence about whether what I fear actually happened remained indecisive. When my epistemic situation changed, so did the fittingness of my fear and hope.

The foregoing suggests that we should revise our initial account. FL emotions cannot be only about what is merely actually possible, because we can fittingly feel such emotions with regard to actual or impossible objects when we can't tell whether the objects are actual or impossible. The relevant sense of possibility and actuality in the analysis of FL and BL emotions must therefore pertain to the agent's epistemic situation. Consider, therefore, a revised account:

The Apparent Actuality Account of BL and FL Emotions

BL emotions are those emotions that are fitting only when their objects are *apparently actual* in the sense that one has sufficient reason to believe they are (were, or will be) actual. FL emotions are those emotions that are fitting only when their objects are *apparently only actually possible* in the sense that one has reason to believe they are actually possible but lacks sufficient reason to believe they are (were, or will be) actual.

The *apparent actuality account* explains why FL emotions are often forward-looking and why occasionally they are not. It is generally harder to tell the future than it is to tell the past. Often our evidence about what will happen is indecisive, so the future usually merits FL emotions, which are about what is apparently only actually possible. However, when, occasionally, the evidence suggests that some occurrence *was actually possible* but is not sufficient to establish that it *actually occurred*, then we may experience fitting FL emotions toward the past. We're not sure, given our evidence, whether the event happened or not (or whether the fact obtained or not), but we fear it did and hope it didn't, or vice versa. Once we open the email or gain some other decisive reason to form a belief one way or another, the gap between appearance and reality closes and our fitting fear and hope fittingly shift into relief or disappointment, whatever the case may be.

On the other hand, when we consider the past we often consider facts with regard to which we have sufficient reason to believe they are actual. The past therefore tends to merit BL emotions, which focus on what appears actual. It is nevertheless noteworthy that the interest of BL emotions in the actual is also an interest in possibilities. Once we learn of something that happened, we also learn of what can no longer happen. When we experience grief, regret, and guilt, our intense focus on what actually occurred leads directly to all that its occurrence made impossible. “If only I chose differently...” but I didn’t choose differently, and due to my actual choice I can no longer live a life that was once available to me; “then and there, he died...” and all other possible endings or continuations of his life turned, at once, impossible; “if only I could take it back...” but this is exactly what I cannot do since the deed is done.

It is an interesting question whether we can experience fitting regret and grief about the future when we have decisive evidence that a great misdeed or loss *will* occur. Can we regret or grieve such a future occurrence? The answer seems to depend on whether the fittingness of these emotions requires that their object be actual by the time the emotion occurs. If so, then we cannot fittingly grieve or regret a future occurrence no matter how strong the evidence that it will happen. But perhaps we can fittingly grieve or regret occurrences that *will be* actual but are not yet so. Consider grief over the impending death of a loved one who is terminally ill: can we not grieve the end of this person’s life *before* it has actually ended? Or consider grief over the destruction of various forms of life and eco-systems due to climate change. Might it be already fitting to grieve the loss that will be brought about next summer by predictable wildfires along the West Coast of the United States? There seems to be such a thing as fitting anticipatory grief, grief about future loss.⁷

I conclude that some emotions (e.g., regret) are often backward-looking because they are about what is apparently actual (BL emotions), some (e.g., fear) are often forward-looking because they are about what is apparently only actually possible (FL emotions), some are sideways-looking (e.g., awe) because their objects must obtain at the same time as the emotion occurs, and some (e.g., envy) look in all directions, which is to say that the temporal direction they happen to have on a particular occasion is not determined by the kind of emotion they are.

Anxiety seems to meet the description of a FL emotion. We are anxious about apparent possibilities, whether future or past. Still, there might seem to be principled reasons to insist that past possibilities are a source of fitting anxiety only because of their implications for our future. In section 5, I identify such principled reasons and argue against them.

5. Against a Forward-looking Rationality and a Forward-looking Sense of Self

In this section I argue against two related assumptions that lead to the idea that, despite evidence to the contrary, all fitting anxiety is, or is explained by, forward-looking anxiety. The first

⁷ For a case in support of anticipatory grief, see Varga and Gallagher 2020. A further question is whether sufficient evidence of the object’s actuality is sufficient for the fittingness of BL emotions. Suppose that one has sufficient evidence that a regrettable event occurred but in fact the event did not occur. It is arguable that regret is rational but not fitting in this case. If that’s true, then the fittingness of BL emotions requires both that one has sufficient evidence of the past, present or future actuality of the object *and* that the object in fact be actual (at the relevant time). The apparent actuality account is compatible with this view because it is meant as a necessary but not sufficient condition of fittingness.

assumption is that rationality is only forward-looking; the second is that a person's sense of self is, or should be, only forward-looking.

Forward-looking rationality. Backward-looking emotions are occasionally met with suspicion. It has been argued that regret and grief are never justified in themselves (Bittner 1992; Wilkinson 2000). The idea is that painful reactions to past occurrences can in principle be distinguished from judgments about the past, indications about one's character, and regulation of one's future behavior. Once backward-looking emotions are disentangled from their desirable associates, it becomes clear, the argument goes, that there is no non-derivative reason in favor of experiencing them. In fact, the only reason left standing, it is argued, is a reason to avoid such painful emotions. Rüdiger Bittner goes as far as arguing that regret is overall unreasonable because in addition to being disvaluable in itself it also lacks any instrumental value. Bittner subscribes to a line of reasoning he attributes to Spinoza: "it is not reasonable, because one did something bad, to go and make things worse. But that is what regret is, double misery, the second for the sake of the first. So, regret is not reasonable" (Bittner 1992, 265). If one finds this thought compelling, and yet believes that anxiety can be fitting and even instrumental for human functioning, then one might be inclined to construe anxiety as forward-looking. One might hold that anxiety is fitting and instrumentally important because (and insofar as) it is aimed at uncertainties pertaining to our goals and helps us address such uncertainties.⁸

Skeptics such as Bittner and Wilkinson deny without argument that there are non-instrumental reasons for backward-looking emotions. However, given that various backward-looking emotions seem initially fitting independently of their instrumental value, skeptics should offer a principled reason for rejecting this initial appearance. Such a reason can be found in the view that practical rationality is essentially forward-looking.

Consider the case of grief. Donald Gustafson argues that grief involves a belief that a person is deceased and a desire that the person not be deceased. Since such a belief-desire pair does not allow the agent to satisfy her desires in light of what she believes, it is irrational (Gustafson 1989). Michael Cholbi (2017) makes a convincing case that Gustafson's view of rationality is incomplete: even if grief is *strategically* irrational, grief's rationality is essentially backward-looking and pertains to the fittingness of grief to its object. Others have rejected skepticism about the rationality of grief and other backward-looking emotions for similar reasons (Jollimore 2004, Wallace 2013, Marušić 2018, Moller forthcoming).

The rejection of general skepticism about backward-looking emotions and of the idea that practical rationality is strictly forward-looking disarms a possible motivation for the view that anxiety is always or fundamentally forward-looking. It is true that there might be no use in being anxious about whether I got the job or about whether I left the stove on if there is nothing that I can do about it now, but this doesn't mean that being anxious in such cases is irrational or unfitting.

⁸ In his book, Kurth explicitly argues that fitting anxiety is also instrumentally valuable (Kurth 2018, ch. 4). In principle, it is possible for fitting anxiety to be backward-looking and instrumentally valuable (just as the anguish of regret might be instrumentally beneficial with regard to the regulation of future behavior, though Bittner argues it is not, Bittner 1992.) But the case for the instrumental value of anxiety seems easier to make and more easily explained if fitting anxiety is goal oriented. See especially Kurth 2018, 115-116.

Rationality and fittingness do not always require that our emotions serve some end or lead to the satisfaction of our desires.

Forward-looking sense of self. Another, more serious motivation for the view that anxiety is forward-looking might be traced back to a certain picture of a person's sense of self as defined by the person's ends. In the psychological literature, it is common to view anxiety as a response to threats to oneself. Anxiety is said to be a response to possible loss to one's reproductive resources (Marks and Nesse 1994), to aspects of one's self that might lead to social exclusion (Baumeister and Tice 1990), to negative social appraisal or self-appraisal (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2005), or to inability to predict, control, or obtain desired results or outcomes (Barlow 2002). Insofar as anxiety, and particularly fitting anxiety, responds to threats to what one cares about and identifies with, we can say that fitting anxiety targets threats to one's *sense of self*.

In the remainder of this section and the following section, I adopt the view that anxiety concerns threats to one's sense of self without offering an argument for it or examining alternatives. If this claim is false, then a forward-looking view of our sense of self would not lead to the view that all fitting anxiety is fundamentally forward-looking. However, the view that anxiety is about threats to our sense of self is widespread and compelling, and even if some instances of fitting anxiety are not about threats to our sense of self, it might still be true that many or significant instances of anxiety are. At the very least, the reader might consider what follows as an exploration (rather than endorsement) of the view that anxiety is about threats to our sense of self.

The relevant idea of 'a sense of self' is not a metaphysical one; anxiety need not be about threats to those properties that make a particular person the same particular person over time. Rather, a person's sense of self refers to the things an individual is committed to such that she views or experiences her commitments as determining who she is as an individual with a distinctive, ongoing, meaningful life. Thus, threats to our goals need not threaten our metaphysical self in order to be fitting objects of anxiety, it is enough that the goals threatened are constituents of our sense of self. Some goals are of course more central to our sense of self than others, so threats to peripheral goals merit little anxiety and threats to central ones merit a great deal of anxiety. If fitting anxiety is indeed about vulnerabilities of our sense of self, then a forward-looking conception of our sense of self would naturally lead to a forward-looking view of anxiety.

Consider a prominent example of a forward-looking conception of a person's sense of self. John Rawls famously employed the idea of 'a rational life plan' to account for the good of a person. In so doing, Rawls adopted Josiah Royce's thought "that a person may be regarded as a human life lived according to a plan" (Rawls 1999, 358). Rawls explains: "for Royce an individual says who he is by describing his purposes and causes, what he intends to do in his life. If this plan is a rational one, then I shall say that a person's conception of his good is likewise rational" (ibid.)

Acting in accordance with her good as defined by her rational plan—acting according to what Rawls calls 'deliberative rationality'—shields a person from later regret even in cases of great misfortune and uncontrollable contingencies:

Nothing can protect us from the ambiguities and limitations of our knowledge, or guarantee that we find the best alternative open to us. Acting with deliberative rationality can only insure that our conduct is above reproach, and that we are responsible to ourselves as one person over time. (ibid, 371)

By acting according to the principles of deliberative rationality we insure that we are faithful to ourselves, that is to say, that we do what we can do given our limited knowledge and capacities for the sake of the life plan we identify with. Deliberative rationality thereby assuages anxiety about the possibility of regret and self-reproach by guiding us through the jungle of life's eventualities toward the goals that define us as individuals with temporally extended lives.⁹

If, as Rawls suggests, our sense of self is wholly defined by our goals, by our rational life plan, then it is forward-looking. And if our sense of self is forward-looking and anxiety is a fitting response to threats to our sense of self, then anxiety is also, at bottom, forward-looking. To be sure, this view can allow that sometimes we are fittingly anxious about the past, for instance, when we are anxious about whether we made a mistake. But the view maintains that backward-looking anxiety must be explained by a further anxiety about the goal whose achievement would be thwarted or delayed by such a mistake. So the view that our sense of self is forward-looking need not lead us to deny that anxiety can look back; it only insists that *at bottom* anxiety always looks forward.

However, I doubt that our sense of self is wholly forward-looking. Like Gustafson's incomplete view of rationality, Royce and Rawls's view of a person's sense of self is crucially incomplete. To be sure, we do identify with certain goals and there is an important sense in which being responsible to ourselves over time involves being guided by the achievement of these goals. Anxiety is indeed sometimes forward-looking. However, it is not the case that our sense of self is wholly determined by our goals in the way Royce and Rawls suggest. Therefore, even if we can foreclose the possibility of regret and self-reproach with regard to our sincere attempts to promote our ends, there are other occasions for the fitting onset of these emotions.

Consider the example of Oedipus. Oedipus does all he possibly can to live according to his vision of a decent life. In particular, he tries as best he can to avoid fulfilling the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. And yet he ends up doing both without even realizing his actions fall under these descriptions: he kills a man he does not recognize as his father and marries a woman he does not recognize as his mother. Later, when he learns the truth, he is crushed by it. In his despair he gouges out his eyes.

It would be of little use to try to console Oedipus by telling him he had "no way of knowing which was the best or even better [life] plan" (Rawls 1999 , 370). That he couldn't have known does not change the fact he killed his father and married his mother, nor does it stop this fact from impacting who he is as a person. Oedipus' sense of self draws on the past, the present, and the future. His

⁹ It is noteworthy that anxiety about future regrets plays a role in the argument for Rawls's principles of justice:

From the standpoint of the original position the relevance of responsibility to self seems clear enough. Since the notion of deliberative rationality applies there, it means that the parties cannot agree to a conception of justice if the consequences of applying it may lead to self-reproach should the least happy possibilities be realized. They should strive to be free from such regrets. (Rawls 1999, 371)

sense of self is partly determined by what he has done, even if he did so unintentionally; by what his past actions make of him in the present; and, finally, by how, if at all, he can go on living as the person he turned out to be.

Thus, I propose that a wholly forward-looking sense of self, defined by one's life plan and goals, fails to account for a crucial element of our sense of self and individuality, which finds expression in the famous story of Oedipus. Our sense of who we are as individuals with meaningful lives depends on our past as well as our future. Although I find compelling that idea that fitting anxiety is about possibilities that pose a threat to our sense of self, I believe such threats lie in various temporal directions.

Next, I elaborate on the conception of a sense of self illustrated by Oedipus's story and propose, following Peter Goldie, that we conceive of it as a *narrative sense of self*. I offer a way of understanding the idea that anxiety is intimately related to our narrative sense of self. When we are anxious about something—be it in the past, present, or future—our sense of who we are is under threat due to uncertainty about how our past, present, and future hang together as a narrative whole that we can identify with. This, I will argue, explains why anxiety can look in various temporal directions while, *at the same time*, always looking forward: toward the survival of our sense of self.

6. Anxiety and a Narrative Sense of Self

This section is more speculative than previous ones. I continue to operate under the assumption that anxiety is about threats to our sense of self without offering direct support for it. Instead, my aim is to explore how this idea might be flashed out in an illuminating way. If the resulting picture is attractive, it would support the assumption on which it is based. Moreover, and as I mentioned before, even if one rejects the claim that all anxiety is about threats to our sense of self, one might still accept that many or significant instances of anxiety are. The view I develop here would be relevant and illuminating even on this more restricted view.

Peter Goldie argues that we have a *narrative sense of self*. “The narrative sense of self is a quite simple notion,” Goldie says, “it is the sense that one has of oneself in narrative thinking, as having a past, a present, and a future” (Goldie 2012, 118). Though we can think of ourselves and others in various ways—for example, we have a visual sense of who we are—one important way in which we understand ourselves and others is through narratives. This does not mean that the self *is* a narrative, just that narrative thinking is a way in which we understand it. In particular, narrative thinking affords a way of understanding ourselves as agents persisting over time.

You, the thinker, the ‘external narrator’, can think of yourself *in past episodes*, doing and saying things, and you now do this in a way that enables you to conceive of the episode as having an emotional import that you did not recognize at the time, and thus you are now able to have an emotional response that you did not have at the time. Correlatively, when you engage in narrative thinking of yourself in the future, for example acting on the self-governing policy that you have now adopted because of your regrets for what you did in the past, you now are thinking of yourself in *future episodes*, acting as you should, and you now feel, external to the narrative, emotions that express your satisfaction, through strong reflective endorsement, with that self-governing policy. (Goldie 2012, 118)

Goldie emphasizes that narrative thinking need not be conscious or explicit to inform our way of understanding ourselves and others. Our sense of other people as having a past and a future colors the way we perceive and think of them in the present:

When you meet your good friend for lunch, your perception of her is soaked with your knowledge of her past: with memories of all the times you have spent together, of her life when you were apart, and with thoughts of the myriad ways in which things might have been different. And your perception of her is equally soaked with the future, and with the branching possible ways in which things might turn out. (ibid, 119-120)

Goldie says much more about narrative thinking and about the ways in which one relates to oneself and to others in narrative thinking, but for my purposes here what is important is the idea that our narrative sense of self ties together our past, present, and future in a way that allows us to make sense of who we are right now. When our narrative sense of self disintegrates, we experience disorientation, we lose our bearings and become unsure of how to make sense of what we are seeing, hearing, and feeling. In these moments we can find ourselves asking: what is going on?

A stark and harrowing example of the disintegration of a person's narrative sense of self is found in Oliver Sacks' essay, "The Abyss," about Clive Wearing (Sacks 2007). Wearing, an English musician and musicologist, suffered a brain infection that affected his memory and left him with a memory span of only seconds. Wearing's wife, Deborah Wearing, writes in her 2005 memoir, *Forever Today*: "His ability to perceive what he saw and heard was unimpaired. But he did not seem to be able to retain any impression of anything for more than a blink. Indeed, if he did blink, his eyelids parted to reveal a new scene. The view before the blink was utterly forgotten" (Wearing 2005, 165). According to Sacks, Clive "showed a desperate aloneness, fear, and bewilderment. He was acutely, continually, agonizingly conscious that something bizarre, something awful, was the matter. His constantly repeated complaint, however, was not of a faulty memory but of being deprived, in some uncanny and terrible way, of all experience, deprived of consciousness and life itself." (Sacks 2007). Deborah writes: "Clive was under the constant impression that he had just emerged from unconsciousness because he had no evidence in his own mind of ever being awake before... 'I haven't heard anything, seen anything, touched anything, smelled anything,' he would say. 'It's like being dead'" (Wearing 2005, 159).

To explain Clive's predicament, Deborah draws on a description from Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* in which the narrator is waking up from deep sleep in the middle of the night. Sacks explains:

Not knowing at first where he was, who he was, what he was. He had only "the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal's consciousness," until memory came back to him, "like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself." This gave him back his personal consciousness and identity. No rope from Heaven, no autobiographical memory will ever come down in this way to Clive. (Sacks 2007)

And yet, Sacks writes, two things did serve as Clive's saviors: the first is Deborah and his love for her and the second is music. Deborah discovered that Clive hasn't lost his ability to read and perform music. She writes:

The momentum of the music carried Clive from bar to bar. Within the structure of the piece, he was held, as if the staves were tramlines and there was only one way to go. He knew exactly where he was because in every phrase there is context implied, by rhythm, key, melody. It was marvellous to be free. When the music stopped Clive fell through to the lost place. But for those moments he was playing he seemed normal. (Wearing 2005, 135)

Sacks understands music as playing the role Clive's narrative thinking could no longer play:

Clive's performance self seems, to those who know him, just as vivid and complete as it was before his illness. This mode of being, this self, is seemingly untouched by his amnesia, even though his autobiographical self, the self that depends on explicit, episodic memories, is virtually lost. The rope that is let down from Heaven for Clive comes not with recalling the past, as for Proust, but with performance—and it holds only as long as the performance lasts. Without performance, the thread is broken, and he is thrown back once again into the abyss. (Sacks 2007)

Musical pieces are processes. On one view of processes, this means that the identity of a musical piece is not fully determined at every moment of its existence (Hofweber and Velleman 2010). Consider, as an example of a process, the process of writing a check: "What there is of this process at a particular moment—the laying down of a particular drop [of ink]—is not sufficient to determine that a check is being written, and so it is not sufficient to determine which particular process is taking place..." (Ibid, 14). Our self-understanding at a given moment is similarly dependent on our grasp of the temporally-extended processes in which we are taking part. One kind of processes on which we heavily rely are narrative processes. By grasping a musical piece he was playing as a temporally-extended whole, Clive was able to identify the present moment and himself in the present moment. He replaced narrative thinking with musical performance in order to find himself in, and over, time.

When and insofar as our anxiety is about threats to our narrative sense of self, it is an inkling of our own abyss, of the possibility of being lost, unable to make sense of ourselves in light of our past, present, and possible future. As such, anxiety is about uncertainties that pertain to the past, present, or future and can look in all temporal directions. However, no matter in which direction anxiety looks, it is always also, at the same time, concerned with the continuation of our present sense of self. Fitting anxiety keeps us on our narrative path.

For example, when I am anxious about the possibility that my partner was unfaithful to me, my anxiety need not be explained by a further, forward-looking anxiety about one of my goals in life. Rather, my anxiety can be explained by the fact that I understand myself, my partner, and our relationship as having a certain past, present, and future that make sense as a coherent narrative whole. If my partner was unfaithful, then my sense of who I am, who my partner is, and what our relationship is, would disintegrate. I would no longer be able to endorse these narrative

conceptions, in light of which I understand myself as a distinctive individual with an ongoing, meaningful life. So I am anxious about the past in this case, but in being anxious about the past I am also anxious about the present and the future. I want—I need—the story I'm telling about myself and my partner to be true, and if it turns out to be false I would not know who I am, I'd be lost.

7. Conclusion

I have proposed that past, present, and future possibilities can pose a threat to our present sense of self. Therefore, no matter in which temporal direction anxiety looks, it is always also about the future of our present sense of self. This view might seem suspiciously close to the view, which I have rejected, that every backward-looking anxiety is explained by a more fundamental forward-looking anxiety. However, on the view I am proposing, we do not have two distinct anxieties, one forward-looking and one backward-looking, where the former explains the latter. Rather, we have a single instance of anxiety which is, at once, both about anxiety's immediate particular object and about one's present sense of self. The idea is that the immediate object of anxiety is a constituent of one's sense of self. Therefore, it is not the case that I am anxious about my past *because* I am anxious about my future, but that being anxious about my past *is* being anxious about my future.

We constantly draw on narrative conceptions of ourselves, of the people in our lives, and of the world we live in, and these conceptions unify our past, present, and future into a coherent, meaningful whole. Whether in these times of COVID or in normal times, anxiety is a way of sensing that this whole might fall apart.

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