



Anxious feelings, anxious friends: on anxiety and friendship

Troy Jollimore¹ 

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Abstract

Although anxiety is frequently seen as a predominantly negative phenomenon, some recent researchers have argued that it plays an important positive function, serving as an alert to warn agents of possible problems or threats. I argue that not only can one's own, first-personal anxiety perform this function; because it is possible for others—in particular, one's friends—to feel anxious on one's behalf, their anxious feelings can sometimes play the same role in our functioning, and make similar contributions to our well-being. I distinguish between a number of kinds of cases in which what I call *proxy anxiety* serves a positive function, including Anxiety Avoidance (where there is good reason for an agent to avoid becoming anxious herself, but can benefit from a friend's anxiety on her behalf), Anxiety Omission (where an agent fails to become anxious due to a malfunctioning anxiety-generating system), long-term commitments involving dispositions to feel other-directed proxy anxiety, and cases in which proxy anxiety can help reduce or relieve excessive anxiety. A person's friends, it is argued, are particularly well positioned to help regulate deficient and/or excessive anxieties, precisely because friends are close enough to care for and identify with the agent, but at the same time distant enough to maintain a relatively objective perspective. I conclude by examining connections between proxy anxiety and theories of well-being.

Keywords Anxiety · Anxiety avoidance · Anxiety omission · Emotion · Friendship · Well-being

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✉ Troy Jollimore
tjollimore@csuchico.edu; tjollimore@gmail.com

¹ Department of Philosophy, California State University, Chico, ARTS Building, 3rd Floor, Chico, CA 95929-0730, USA

1 Introduction

That friendship contributes to our well-being is common knowledge. Friendships involve certain pleasures—pleasures of companionship and of shared activity, most centrally—that contribute directly to our happiness. But it is worth thinking about other ways in which friendship can enhance our well-being, particularly when these involve emotions and practices that are not immediately pleasurable. To this end, in this paper I want to focus on anxiety and its role in friendship. Unlike the claim that friendship makes us better off, the claim that anxiety enhances our well-being is not obvious. Recently, though, Charlie Kurth (2015, 2018) has argued that the emotion of anxiety plays valuable positive roles for agents, helping us function better and make better choices, thus contributing both to our happiness and to our moral character. In a fraught social situation, for instance, my anxiety might warn me that I have been behaving in a manner that others see as rude or insensitive, or that a remark I am considering making might be interpreted as such. Anxiety can alert me to the possible presence of physical or environmental dangers, and move me to proceed more cautiously. A persistent sense of unease might indicate that I am conducting my life in a morally questionable manner, or that I ought to reconsider a decision I have made or reevaluate an action I have performed. And so on.

Writers who see value in anxiety tend to emphasize its importance as a kind of warning mechanism. As psychologist David Barlow writes, anxiety “functions to warn of a potential danger situation” (Barlow, 2001, p. 8, quoted in Kurth, 2015, p. 172). Kurth himself says that what he calls *practical anxiety* “functions as an alarm: it is an emotion [...] that functions to disrupt current behaviors and prompt reassessment” (2018, p. 178). It is easy to assume that if anxiety functions as an alarm, it must be an internal alarm, based entirely on an agent’s own immediately experienced feelings. Discussions of anxiety, like discussions of emotions in general, nearly always focus on the first-personal case: the way *my* emotions affect *my* actions, and the way *my* actions and experienced situations give rise to *my* emotions. This is not surprising, given that I have direct experience only of my own emotions, and that my emotions are tied directly to my own actions and responses but not connected in the same way to other people’s actions and responses. But it is important not to ignore anxieties (and other emotions) that are focused on *others*, or to neglect the fact that emotions experienced by others, particularly my friends, can often have a very direct significance for me. Indeed, I want to suggest that what I will call *proxy anxiety*—a kind of anxiety felt by one friend on behalf of another—can sometimes play very much the same kind of role as a person’s own appropriate anxiety would, in cases where that person, for whatever reason, is not experiencing or is unable to experience appropriate anxiety for herself. (As we will see, this can include cases in which she should feel anxiety but does not, cases in which there is good reason for her to avoid becoming anxious, and cases in which she feels more anxiety than she should.) I will also argue that part of being a good friend is to experience proxy anxiety under the right sorts of circumstances, and that proxy anxiety, as part of friendship, makes significant contributions to agents’ well-being. I will conclude with a few suggestions regarding the connections between anxiety and well-being, offered against the background of larger issues that arise when theorizing about well-being.

2 The nature of proxy anxiety

We can begin to investigate the nature of proxy anxiety by asking just what it is that we mean when we say that we care about our friends and identify with them. This phenomenon of caring is of course quite broad, and involves many kinds of emotion besides anxiety. One highly significant way we manifest and express this care is by treating our friends' interests, needs, desires, and concerns to a large degree as if they were our own. The qualifier "to a large degree" is necessary here: after all, our friends are distinct individuals from ourselves, and not only does friendship not require that I literally treat a friend the same way I would treat myself, there are many cases in which this would be inappropriate and positively forbidden. But while the coincidence is not complete, it is significant. For instance, when I try to promote my friend's interests and satisfy their needs, I do not do so merely as an instrumental means to promoting *my* interests and needs. Rather, the fact that something is good for my friend has an immediate reason-giving force for me, just as does the fact that something is good for me. Making a friend happy might in turn make me happy in a variety of ways, but it is *their* happiness, not mine, that is the primary object. In terms of emotional response, when a friend's interests are frustrated or her needs unmet, I might well respond with emotions similar to what I would feel if it were my own interests or needs being frustrated or unmet. Emotions "spill over" in friendship, rather than being confined to the individual. I might be embarrassed, or ashamed, by my friend's gaffe; I might feel proud when she accomplishes something significant; I might feel sad when she suffers a loss; and so on. Practical responses are also affected. Faced with a possible event that would mean the wreckage of a close friend's ambitions, I immediately take steps to try to prevent it, as I would if I were attempting to protect my own ambitions. At no time do I pause to think to myself, "Ah, but it's not *my* projects that are threatened, just Cynthia's—so why should I bother?" (Or, equally bad if not worse: "What will she do for me in return?").

An important element of friendship, that is, is that the kinds of emotions that tend to be prompted by one's own actions, experiences, predicaments, and so on, also tend to arise, in very much the same manner, in response to one's friends' actions, experiences, predicaments, etc. Aristotle famously claims, in Book Nine of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that a friend is "another self," and this seems to me a good descriptor of the phenomenon I am drawing attention to: emotionally speaking, and to a very real degree practically as well, we often respond to events in our friends' lives in very much the way we would have responded to the same events in our own lives, in terms of how we feel, of how we evaluate and assess situations and probabilities, and of the reasons for action we take ourselves to have. In relation to friends, the boundaries between self and other are sometimes less firm, and very frequently less significant, than they are in relation to strangers or mere acquaintances.

Thus, if feeling afraid ordinarily gives me valuable information—that I likely ought to consider altering my current course of action, or take some steps to avoid or manage the danger I am facing—feeling afraid for a friend, whom I believe to be in danger, can give me the same kind of valuable information relative to her. In some situations, such a feeling might prompt me to respond by communicating my feeling to her—to try to convince her, for instance, that *she* ought to feel afraid, or ought to take immediate

steps to minimize the danger. In other situations, it may make more sense for me to take action on her behalf, whether or not I express my feeling to her. Of course, I may not need to *decide* to do anything: a sufficiently sensitive friend may well pick up on my fear whether or not I explicitly communicate it. Emotions, after all, can be communicated in all sorts of ways: body language and gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and the like. We may not feel other people's emotions in the way that we do our own, but there is nevertheless a very real sense in which we often feel the emotions of others—particularly our friends.

As another example, consider anger. Whereas fear tends to arise in connection with danger, anger tends to arise in response to, and to alert us to the existence of, some sort of offense. Anger, as Kurth has noted, has a specifically moral dimension:

The feeling of anger not only helps one stand up for oneself as an individual who has value and merits respect; it is also an *expression* of the moral significance that one takes oneself to have. Thus, to not feel angry in the face of betrayal is to evince a lack of emotional and evaluative attunement to what matters. (2018, pp. 128–129)

The first-personal account is easily extended into the interpersonal realm of friendship. I might well become angry when I see a friend being exploited, or wrongfully harmed, or treated in a disrespectful manner. Friendship, after all, may well be characterized as a kind of relationship in which we recognize in certain others the kind of moral significance that is perhaps most directly and most easily recognized in ourselves. If this is so, then one can see how a failure to feel angry when you see your friend being treated unjustly or disrespectfully would show that you are not a very good friend.

What's more, we can easily imagine cases in which a person is unable to feel angry on their own account, even though they are entitled to. (We can call these cases of *Anger Omission*.) Consider someone who has internalized a harmful ideology that makes them view their oppression as natural and justified: a mistreated woman, perhaps, who has been brought up in a highly patriarchal and misogynist culture, or a contemporary American, born poor and currently homeless, who has bought into the story that the U.S. is a land of opportunity in which people get the material rewards they deserve. In such a case, where a person's inability to feel appropriate anger on their own behalf is linked to a lack of capacity for perceiving and appreciating her own moral standing, rights, and import, *proxy* anger—the anger felt by a friend of the victim, on the victim's behalf, in response to their unfair treatment—can, if felt and handled appropriately, be very valuable indeed.

Anxiety functions in similar ways, particularly in the contexts of friendship and romantic love. As Helm (2009) writes:

[T]he commitment I undertake to [my wife's] import as this particular person, and consequently to her values as these define her identity as this person, is a commitment to respond emotionally to that which significantly impacts her well-being positively or negatively. This may mean that I feel, say, anxious on her behalf, even when she does not yet recognize [an] impending threat... (Helm 2009, p. 49)

Just as a friend's anger may help me recognize offenses against myself I have failed to register, a friend or lover's anxiety, felt on my behalf, about *my* safety, well-being, etc.—what I will refer to as *proxy anxiety*—may help bring to my attention to threats I have thus far failed to notice.

Elsewhere Helm offers a slightly more concrete example, also in connection with his wife: “That my pride in my wife fits into such a projectible, rational pattern of emotions, means in part that I ought, for example, to be anxious on her behalf before a performance that might launch her recording career” (Helm 2010, p. 31). Again, we should be clear that the idea is not simply that the relevant feelings are being replicated; that is, that the wife's anxiety is, so to speak, overflowing its bounds and infecting her husband. Rather, the proxy anxiety he feels, on her behalf, is not dependent on the existence of any similar feeling in her, but arises independently. Indeed, this is frequently necessary for such anxiety to play certain kinds of positive roles. In Helm's performance case, for instance, it might be that his wife has reason, all things considered, to prefer a state of affairs in which she herself feels no anxiety—if, as we might suppose, her felt anxiety would have a deleterious effect on her performance. But it might be still better if *someone* with a stake in the situation feels anxious. Suppose there are problems with the instrument, the microphone setup, etc., that an anxious person is more likely to notice. In such cases, assuming the performer is able to manage her own emotions well enough to avoid becoming anxious anyway, a spouse, or a friend, might experience the necessary anxiety by proxy, without risking the costliest negative effects: a kind of division of emotional labor. The husband's anxiety, then, here substitutes for the wife's, freeing her from the necessity to feel it.

Let us refer to such cases as cases of *Anxiety Avoidance*. We can contrast them with cases of *Anxiety Omission*, in which (parallel to cases of Anger Omission) an agent is for one reason or another *unable* to feel the appropriate anxiety. Imagine a variation on Helms's case, in which an overconfident singer decides not to prepare for an important audition, believing—falsely—that further preparation would undermine the spontaneity that is his greatest asset. His spouse, knowing he will not perform well without further preparation, becomes anxious, and urges him to rehearse. Once again, the spouse's anxiety can serve as a substitute for the performer's—not, in this case, because it is better for the performer not to feel anxious, but because the performer simply did not become anxious, even though anxiety was called for.

Proxy anxiety can also be viewed in the context of a long-term pattern of emotional commitments. Consider the friendship between Emma Woodhouse and George Knightley in Jane Austen's *Emma*. The following quotation is taken from a passage in which Emma is reflecting on her longstanding friendship with Knightley:

[F]rom family attachment and habit, and through excellence of mind, he had loved her, and watched over her from a girl, with an endeavor to improve her, and an *anxiety for her doing right*, which no other creature had at all shared. (Austen 2004 [1815], p. 329; my emphasis)

To say “he had loved her, and watched over her ... with ... an anxiety for her doing right” is to say that Knightley has loved and watched Emma anxiously, and that his anxiety focuses on the question of her moral behavior and virtue. We should not, I think, take it that Austen is saying that he has felt constantly anxious all of this time.

(That sort of persistent felt anxiety would presumably indicate that Mr. Knightley suffered from an anxiety *disorder*.) There are many situations, after all, in which there is little if any chance of a person's performing, either intentionally or accidentally, some morally wrong action. Viewed as a phenomenon of long standing, Knightley's anxiety is surely in large part dispositional, a latent state ready to be activated by Knightley's perception, conscious or unconscious, that there has arisen a threat to Emma's virtue—to be activated, that is, by the sorts of situations in which it is likely that Emma may well find herself performing some wrong action. It is when this dispositional state is activated that Knightley will experience occurrent, felt anxiety. Similar dispositions might characterize the spouses in the Helm example and in my variation on that example: In both of these cases, agents experience, over the long term, a disposition to feel anxious when their respective spouses face situations whose outcomes might have significant impacts on their careers.

While we frequently regard anxiety as unfortunate, we may note that Austen clearly approves of Mr. Knightley's anxious concern for Emma's virtue, as she explicitly links it with "excellence of mind." We may note, too, that Austen sees this anxiety as having a practical aspect, as she connects it directly with "an endeavor to improve her." Mr. Knightley's anxiety, then, is not *simply* a disposition to feel uneasy in situations in which Emma might well behave badly. It is a part of an ongoing practical program whose goal is to make Emma morally better, and thus less likely to perform wrongful actions. In all of these ways, Knightley's other-directed anxiety is very similar to the kind of self-directed anxiety many people feel about their own moral character. This, too, may be seen as a laudable disposition to experience felt anxiety in certain situations (those involving temptations, uncertainties, or other elements that increase the likelihood of one's doing something morally wrong) whose function is to help the agent avoid performing morally wrong actions, whether intentionally or accidentally.¹

Mr. Knightley's anxiety is very much like this, except that it is not self-directed. Indeed, it is other-directed, rather than self-directed, in two senses. First, and obviously, what makes Knightley anxious is the prospect of *Emma's* bad behavior, not *his own* bad behavior. (He is also, of course, presumably concerned about his own moral virtue, though there he perhaps has less reason for anxiety! At any rate, that is a separate concern.) But second, he does not care about Emma's behavior because it stands to have consequences for *his* happiness, or well-being, or anything else of the sort. While he might have a variety of pertinent concerns—that she be a good person, indeed the best person she can be; that she be *known* to be a good person, and hence admired; that her goodness enhance her happiness; and so forth—all of these concerns center on *Emma's* character, well-being, reputation, interests, happiness, etc., and not his own. (Surely, if Mr. Knightley thought he would predecease Emma, he would want her to continue to be a good person even after his death, when he would no longer be around to enjoy any benefits her goodness might have brought about for him.)

¹ Of course, we might worry that there is something unacceptably paternalistic about Knightley's attitude toward Emma's moral improvement. I am using the case simply as an example of anxious concern for another—and not, for instance, as an exegesis of *Emma*; so I can simply assume, or stipulate, that Knightley's intentions, etc., are admirable. (Both Emma and Austen clearly judge them to be so.) Faced with a real-world example, however, we would require far more detailed information before being in a position to judge the mentor's conduct and attitudes to be laudable.

Proxy anxiety reflects and is rooted in a genuinely other-directed concern for one's friend (or other loved one). A person who did not feel such anxiety, or related emotions, in relation to their friends would be a poor friend indeed; the lack of such feelings would indicate that they did not really care. As the above examples should make clear, moreover, our friends' proxy anxiety can play a number of important roles with respect to our well-being, particularly in cases in which we are unable to feel appropriate anxiety for ourselves, or cases in which, for one reason or another, it is better if we do not do so.

3 Undermining the anxiety mechanism

In Anxiety Omission cases, proxy anxiety can be seen as a kind of emotional redundancy. I am thinking of the strategy utilized by engineers of incorporating into a system multiple components that perform the same critical functions. A simple example would be a backup generator in a hospital, so that in a power shortage, lights, life support systems, etc. would still operate. Having a friend around who feels proxy anxiety for you can serve a similar purpose: if your own anxiety system fails, theirs will hopefully still function, and can serve the same purposes as yours would have had it remained in proper working order. A friend's feeling can serve as a backup, then, stepping in to save the day when your own feeling fails.

But why might an agent's feeling fail? The broad answer, of course, is that emotional responses are imperfect. We don't always fear what we should, and sometimes fear things we shouldn't. We don't always become angry when we should, and sometimes become angry when we shouldn't. Likewise, we don't always become anxious when we should, or in the way that we should. (And it is also true, of course, that we sometimes become anxious when we shouldn't, or feel more anxious than we should. Friends have a role here, too, as I will discuss in the following section.) For this reason alone, it is useful to have emotionally reliable friends around to help correct misguided emotional responses, just as it is helpful to have epistemically reliable friends to help one recognize and correct false or unjustified beliefs.

That, at any rate, is the broad answer. Can we get more specific? In many cases of Anxiety Omission, we can. What's more, the kind of specific account that can be offered will shed further light on the importance of proxy anxiety (and, perhaps, proxy emotions more generally) in friendship. For it turns out that anxiety poses a particular sort of problem for agents, and that friends, and the proxy anxiety and other forms of concern they can feel, are perfectly placed to offer a solution to that problem.

The place to begin is with the observation that anxiety is an aversive reaction, and hence by nature unpleasant. Being unpleasant, its very phenomenological nature gives us a motive for dulling or suppressing it, or sabotaging the very mechanisms that tend to generate it. Although agents in Anxiety Omission cases, as opposed to what I have called Anxiety Avoidance cases, do not have *all things considered* reason not to feel anxious, the unpleasantness of anxiety guarantees that they will have *some* reason to want to avoid feeling anxious. And this might cause agents, consciously or unconsciously, to take steps to avoid becoming anxious, even in cases in which anxiety would be appropriate or useful. Thus, the very feature that makes anxiety

motivationally effective—its unpleasantness—may, ironically, initiate a process whose result is to interfere with its ability to perform its function. In this way, anxiety may undermine itself.

Here it will help to draw an analogy with desire. Like a desire, an anxious state or other feeling may feel to us as if it makes a kind of demand on us, and in that way seem to define or determine, without need for any deliberation on our part, what we are to do about it. A desire tells us to satisfy it; anxiety tells us to relieve it, by taking appropriate steps (gathering information, reducing uncertainty, minimizing potential threats, and so on). But as Harry Frankfurt (2006, pp. 10–11) has pointed out, we should reject the view that a desire automatically generates a reason for satisfying that desire. Instead, as he writes, we should see a desire as giving an agent “a problem.” The solution to the problem might be to take steps to satisfy the desire. But suppose the desire is one the agent does not want to satisfy, nor even to feel; suppose, that is, it is what Frankfurt refers to as an “unacceptable intruder” in our mental landscape (p. 10). In that case the proper response is not to act on the desire as if it were one of which we approved, but to take steps to isolate it, immobilize it, and render it toothless—to *externalize* it—so as to minimize its harmful and disruptive potential. As Frankfurt writes, an agent faced with a desire

has the problem of whether to identify with the desire and thus validate it as eligible for satisfaction, or whether to dissociate himself from it, treat it as categorically unacceptable, and try to suppress it or rid himself of it entirely. If he identifies with the desire, he acknowledges that satisfying it is to be assigned *some* position—however inferior—in the order of his preferences and priorities. If he externalizes the desire, he determines to give it no position in that order at all. (p. 11; cf. Watson, 1975, p. 210)

Anxious feelings may be treated similarly. Having become anxious regarding my immediate situation, I face a choice. I might take steps to reduce the anxiety—for instance, engaging in information-gathering in order to improve my ability to deal with my current challenges; or simply pausing to reassess whether the action I am about to perform is really a good idea. To do this is to implicitly acknowledge the anxiety as a legitimate source of reasons. But a different sort of strategy for dealing with the unpleasantness of an experienced anxiety is also available, one that focuses not on the pro-active responses anxiety is meant to motivate, but on the anxiety itself and the mechanisms that produce and maintain it. Let’s suppose, for instance, that I have a certain degree of power to direct my own thinking, and in particular have the ability to choose *not* to think about certain unpleasant things. If so, I might be able to choose to deal with anxiety, in many cases, simply by not thinking about whatever it is that makes me anxious. Or perhaps there are drugs that can be used to help me feel less anxious. For people who suffer from anxiety disorders, and experience excessive anxiety, such methods might be very helpful. When used to short-circuit healthy anxiety, on the other hand, they can be quite damaging.

We can refer to the first class of responses as *endorsement strategies*, since they recommend responding to anxious feelings in ways that, on accounts like Kurth’s, are in line with anxiety’s function. When anxiety is functioning properly, it will prompt the agent to adopt some sort of endorsement strategy: gathering information, taking

steps to mitigate threats, etc. The alternative is to adopt an *undermining* strategy, chosen—either consciously or unconsciously—to avoid the unpleasantness of anxiety by interrupting or paralyzing the processes that threaten to generate, as their ultimate output, a feeling of anxiety.

How can we ensure that we pursue the proper sort of strategy, given that many of these ‘choices’ are likely made beneath the level of consciousness? The answer is: with a little help from our friends. Suppose I have an unresolved issue with my brother that badly needs to be dealt with. Our relationship is difficult, and the very thought of speaking with him makes me anxious. So I respond by avoiding all such thoughts; I put the pressing issue, and my brother, out of my mind. As time goes on the issue becomes more pressing, as pressing issues will, meaning that I would feel even more anxious if I were to allow myself to think about it. As a result, I work even harder, unconsciously, to ensure that it does not rise to consciousness. I am now caught in a vicious cycle of undermining, continually suppressing the anxiety that ought to have prompted me to resolve the issue long ago. This is precisely where my friends might step in. Prompted by their own proxy anxiety, a friend might intervene, forcing me to confront the facts of my own situation and to take action to resolve it.

We can now give a better answer to the question of why, in general, our friends are so well positioned to step in and play this sort of corrective role. We need not assume that their judgment is in general superior to ours, nor even that in the particular situation we are faced with they are more sensitive or acute. (Of course, in some cases these things will be true, and in those circumstances we will almost certainly benefit significantly from their good judgment.) As we noted earlier, Aristotle says that a friend is “another self,” and on the supposition that what motivated my deployment of undermining strategies, in the example above, was a desire to avoid becoming anxious, we can see that my friend’s ability to avoid being similarly incapacitated is directly related to the fact that she is, relative to me, precisely that. Because she is another *self*—a self closely related to me, who shares many of my goals and concerns—she cares enough to be motivated to intervene. (That is, she cares enough to feel proxy anxiety on my behalf.) Because she is *another* self (and not *myself*—that is, she and I are separate people) she is sufficiently detached from the situation for the anxiety not to be paralyzing or threatening: the idea of my talking with my brother does not distress her in the way that it distresses me. Being somewhat removed, she can take a more objective view of things, noting what needs to be done and recognizing that my (largely unconscious) reasons for procrastinating are not on the whole good reasons. She is able to put it in perspective, as an unpleasant but, in the grand scheme of things, brief and minor task that must be performed. She may also be able to focus on what I, being mired in my complex and unpleasant relationship with my brother, cannot: how relieved I will feel once the issue has been, at long last, resolved. She is, then, perfectly placed, having sufficient distance to function (without the need to resort to undermining strategies) while being close enough to care. In other words, she is what we all find ourselves needing in such situations: a friend.

4 Friendship and excessive anxiety

To this point I have emphasized cases involving absences of anxiety, many of which—those involving what I have called Anxiety Omission—involve failures of the agent’s anxiety-generating mechanism. But there are other ways, too, in which anxiety figures into friendship; in particular, other ways in which people are able to help manage their friends’ anxieties, and correct for anxiety malfunctions. It is an obvious fact that people sometimes experience *excessive* anxiety. Indeed, nearly everyone, if prompted to think about cases of misguided or unfitting anxiety, would picture cases in which people become too anxious, rather than cases in which they did not become anxious enough. We should ask, then, whether here, too, friends might have a role in regulating their friends’ emotional responses, and if so, whether this regulation also involves proxy emotions. My answer to both questions will be yes.

Although at a first glance, cases of excess anxiety may look very different than cases of anxiety deficiency, the fact is that they share the same basic structure. In both cases a person, for one reason or another, fails to experience the *appropriate* level of anxiety toward some given object. (In more extreme cases of excess anxiety, the anxious response might be directed toward an object that is itself quite inappropriate.) And this, viewed in connection with the considerations of the previous section, should suggest that here, too, friends will potentially have valuable roles to play. After all, it was there argued that what often enables friends to assist in cases of anxiety omission (or deficiency) is the fact that they may be more likely to feel the appropriate level of anxiety, and that this feeling might substitute, or serve as a model, for the agent’s inappropriate anxiety-response. And what grounds the friend’s ability to feel the appropriate level of anxiety is the fact that, as a friend, they are close enough to the agent to care, while at the same time being sufficiently distant to see things through a more objective lens.

Of course, in those cases the agent’s “inappropriate anxiety-response” consisted of a lack of response: of not feeling anxiety, or else not feeling enough. But this difference, I think, is not deep. If it is possible for an agent’s friend to experience a proper level of anxiety when the agent cannot, and for this feeling to substitute for the agent’s inappropriate response, then in principle this ought to be possible not only when the inappropriate response takes the form of insufficient anxiety, but also when it takes the form of excess anxiety. Proxy anxiety ought to be able to perform the same function in either case.²

That said, we should admit the possibility that, for psychological reasons, it is easier for proxy anxiety to step in when what is being corrected for is a failure to become anxious, than when what is being corrected for is an excess of anxiety. People in the grip of extreme anxiety, after all, might have a hard time taking in their friends’ feelings; and assurances like “It really isn’t so bad,” “You’re overreacting,” and so forth, typically ring hollow. A failure to feel anxious may well be easier to dislodge than a felt anxiety; indeed, it may be that the former, consisting merely of a *lack* of response, does not need to be “dislodged” at all.

² I owe thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for helping me see things in these terms.

As an empirical matter, then, it might be the case that friends are generally more effective at correcting Anxiety Omission than they are at helping ease the minds of those who have become over-anxious. Nonetheless, such corrections clearly happen: friends sometimes talk their friends “down from the ledge,” so to speak, or else relieve a friend’s anxiety simply by being present and projecting or manifesting an attitude of calm. Seeing that a friend, whom you trust, remains calm in the midst of what initially struck you as a crisis, gives you evidence that you might indeed be overreacting. (Similar phenomena are observable with respect to *positive* excitement: if you are very excited by a piece of news, and then notice that your friend is clearly unmoved by it, it is likely that your own excitement will be deflated or, at the very least, called into question.) As we have already noted, friends tend to share emotional responses, and their own responses are conditioned by the perceived and felt emotions of others; in forming our own emotional reactions we tend to take cues from other people, and in particular from our trusted intimates. Just as being surrounded by very anxious people can make you feel anxious, being in the company of a person who responds calmly to a fresh development is likely to condition your own response, causing you to judge the development as less serious and to experience less anxiety than you would have otherwise.

How successful a friend will be in conditioning her friend’s responses, and helping them avoid excessive anxiety (or rescuing them from it), will depend on many factors: the particular circumstances of the case, of course, and the emotional receptivities of both persons, but also the precise contours of their relationship, how much intimacy and trust they have established between them, and so on. It would be wishful thinking to believe that these sorts of interventions always succeed. But acknowledging that they sometimes do not is compatible with recognizing that helping to reduce friends’ excessive anxiety, in part by modeling and expressing more appropriate responses, is something good friends will do for one another, and may well be considered a duty of friendship.

There is one sort of anxiety that is worthy of special attention. Most people, at one point or another, are prone to self-doubt, insecurity, or anxiety about their own worth. Few of us, at any rate, are so serenely confident as to never experience such feelings. They can be triggered by serious setbacks and failures even in individuals who, most of the time, see themselves quite positively. Such emotions can be very unpleasant, and in extreme cases incapacitating. It is during such moments, when we are unable to perceive our own worth, that we may feel especially dependent on the objective-yet-caring perspective of friends. Here we find another example of a kind of proxy emotion: our friends’ love for us may serve as a proxy for our own self-love during times when, for one reason or another, we find ourselves unable to feel the love for ourselves we nonetheless merit.

There may seem to be a tension, though, between our desire that friends support and bolster us in times of self-doubt, and the fact that friendship sometimes requires us to criticize our friends, confront them with harsh realities, or perform other interventions that may well increase our friends’ anxiety—including, potentially, anxiety regarding self-worth. Consider the previously discussed example, in which an agent needed to tell her spouse that he was not sufficiently prepared for an important audition, and needed to practice more. Such a case already contains the possibility that the spouse

might react badly, particularly if the suggestion is not handled well. Moreover, we can easily imagine a less happy case. Suppose Remy plans to perform in front of an audience, but his friend Sheelagh knows that he is not nearly as talented as he believes, and that a public performance will almost certainly humiliate him. Sheelagh's proxy anxiety may prompt her, not to get Remy to practice more—in this case, more practice isn't going to help—but to try to prevent him from performing, likely by forcing him to confront his limitation and be more realistic about his actual level of talent.

One way to resolve the tension would be to deny that it is a duty of friendship to be aware of and point out a friend's flaws and limitations. One might hold, rather, that friends should always see only their friends' good qualities, and be blind to the bad. Some recent discussions of what has been called "epistemic partiality" in friendship seem to go at least some distance in this direction (Keller, 2004; Stroud, 2006). But to really eliminate the tension we would have to hold that good friends must have severely exaggerated positive views of their friends, and this is surely a mistake. Sheelagh would not be a better friend to Remy if she were completely blind to his lack of talent, and so allowed him to get up onstage and humiliate himself. Nor could Mr. Knightley succeed in his mission of improving Emma's character if he was unable to perceive her flaws and limitations. Indeed, in *Emma* Knightley proves himself a good friend through his willingness to criticize her after she has committed a serious moral error by cruelly mocking her acquaintance, Miss Bates. He tells her as much himself: "This is not pleasant to me; but I must, I will,—I will tell you truths while I can, satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel, and trusting that you will some time or other do me greater justice than you can do now" (Austen 2004 [1815], p. 300).

The proper resolution of the tension depends on recognizing that it is possible to love, support, and be loyal to a person even while one perceives that, like all human beings, they are imperfect and have flaws. This is, of course, precisely the important truth that one tends to lose sight of when one is in the midst of serious self-doubt. But here, as in other cases of excessive anxiety, a friend is well positioned to provide a correction: being close enough to care but detached enough to be objective, they can avoid being overcome by the kinds of crippling fears that afflict people in the midst of such anxiety, and can place things in proper perspective, not only for themselves, but for the afflicted friend.

The good friend, then, is prepared to forgive her friend for nearly anything, not because she will ignore her friend's faults, or even deny their significance, but because she knows that the worth of the friend, and the value of the relationship, possess a greater significance. To criticize a friend's errors or misdeeds is, in essence, to say to them: *Yes, you have done this one bad thing, and I am here to help you recognize this and come to terms with it; but you are so much more than this—and I, as your friend, see and love the entirety of what you are, not just this small part.* Indeed, as the example of Mr. Knightley and Emma shows, such criticism, though it is unpleasant for both parties in the moment, is in fact a form of special attention that shows how much you care about your friend. You wouldn't risk such discomfort for just anyone, after all. Such criticism, then, does not deny or minimize, but rather reaffirms, the value of its object.

5 Conclusion: friendship, well-being, and the emotions

It should by now be clear that friendship promotes our well-being in ways that go well beyond the enjoyments, pleasurable shared activities, and other immediately appealing aspects we tend to associate with it. A precise and comprehensive catalog of friendship's various contributions to well-being would, of course, presuppose that we had agreed upon a comprehensive theory of well-being. Since I have no room to argue for such a theory here, I will conclude with a few brief and somewhat schematic remarks.

Some theories of well-being hold it to be reducible to pleasure or desire-satisfaction. On such views it is clear, in the terms explored in this paper, how the anxieties of friendship may promote well-being, if only instrumentally. In Anxiety Avoidance cases, we have seen how people may enjoy the benefits of properly functioning anxiety while avoiding the disadvantageous effects of feeling it at certain crucial moments, by relying on the proxy anxiety of their friends. In cases of Anxiety Omission, we have seen how agents whose anxiety-generating mechanisms have malfunctioned can nevertheless enjoy those benefits. And in cases of excessive anxiety we have seen how an agent's excessively anxious responses can be regulated and corrected by the more fitting emotional responses of her friends.

Some of these cases may involve an agent's having an unpleasant experience, at least in the moment. It is surely not pleasant for Remy to hear from Sheelagh that he is less talented than he believes, and will humiliate himself if he performs before an audience. Nor is it pleasant for Emma Woodhouse to be faced, via the critique prompted by George Knightley's concern for her, with the reality that her treatment of Miss Bates was really quite awful. Still, a subjective theory of well-being ought to have little difficulty accounting for the fact that such interventions nonetheless tend to enhance one's well-being; we must simply remember that what matters is the promotion of well-being in the long term, and that actions that are painful in the moment can nonetheless effectively contribute to this project. Although being criticized by one's friends, or faced with harsh reality, is not in the short term pleasurable, in the long run it is likely to be valuable even in terms of self-interest construed solely as a matter of enjoyment or fulfilled desire. Such criticism can help us to relate to others better, and thus get more out of our various relationships; to avoid the censure and disapprobation of other, less tolerant or forgiving people; to avoid the censure and disapprobation we direct at ourselves, in the form of guilt, shame, and similar feelings; and to avoid, or more skillfully manage, an array of difficult situations.

Other theories hold that well-being consists of objective as well as subjective elements. Reflecting further on the case of Emma's treatment of Miss Bates may help elucidate one possible reason why some people find such views attractive. Let us suppose—the novel gives us some reason for thinking this, at any rate—that Emma is very good at avoiding, or suppressing, the knowledge that she has at times behaved very badly toward people, and thus very good at avoiding, or suppressing, the anxiety, shame, remorse, and other various negative emotions that would otherwise be triggered by such knowledge. If this were so over the long term—and if we assume that she does not suffer other sorts of penalties, such as the disapprobation of others—Emma might never become aware of how badly she has acted. (In the novel, of course, Mr.

Knightley is present to force her into this awareness.) As a result, the overall amount of pleasure in her life would not be diminished, nor would her desires be knowingly frustrated. Still, it would seem to some that in such cases, Emma's failure to have felt appropriately about her behavior in certain moments would indicate a failure to realize the truth about her own behavior, and would have somewhat diminished the quality of her life, even on the supposition that she would never find out about it or suffer internally as a result. On such a view, Emma's overconfidence and general lack of anxiety regarding her own moral character might itself be regarded as a detriment to her well-being, regardless of the consequences that may or may not have flowed from it.

Those who find this plausible will likely find themselves sharing the preferences reported by James Griffin:

I prefer, in important areas of my life, bitter truth to comfortable delusion. Even if I were surrounded by consummate actors able to give me sweet simulacra of love and affection, I should prefer the relatively bitter diet of their authentic reactions. And I should prefer it not because it would be morally better, or aesthetically better, or more noble, but because it would make for a better life for me to live. (Griffin, 1986, p. 9)

Such preferences signal an overall preference for an objective theory of well-being rather than a subjective one. Many such theories hold that a person is objectively better off to the degree that she possesses certain important knowledge of the world she lives in and her relations to it (Finnis 1980, p. 62; Greco 2010; Zagzebski 2003, pp. 24–25; Hurka 2011, Chapter 4). Since anxiety may motivate our friends to help us confront hard-to-face realities about ourselves and about the world—as Knightley does with Emma, and as Sheelagh, in my imagined example, does with Remy—friendship and its anxieties clearly have the potential to enhance this element of our well-being.

Additionally, many objective theories hold that friendship itself—or love more generally—is an intrinsically valuable component of well-being (Griffin, 1986; Hurka 2011, Chapter 6; Pettit 2015, pp. 17–19). If this is so, and if the kinds of anxieties I have discussed here constitute a constituent element of friendship—if, for instance, one cannot truly be a friend unless one sometimes experiences anxiety about one's friend's well-being—then friendship is a kind of intrinsic and objectively valuable good whose possession or enjoyment presupposes anxiety. Indeed, suppose that for a friendship to be genuinely intimate, the friends must be capable of significant degrees of care and truthfulness. (George Knightley might well serve as our model here.) Then—on the additional, highly plausible assumption that more intimate friendships are, in general, better friendships—anxiety and related emotions, and the behaviors they prompt, will turn out to be quite necessary for friendships to achieve their full value.

The value of truth and the value of friendship are closely bound together. For intimacy, after all, is closely linked to such qualities and traits as sincerity, truthfulness, and authenticity; and these, in turn, are closely connected with the bearing of true relations to objective reality. To fail to know whether one's friendships are actually authentic is to fail to possess a very important piece of knowledge about reality. As Griffin, Robert Nozick, Thomas Hurka, Philip Pettit, and others have observed, we

want more than that our relationships with other people be pleasant. It is also important to us that they be *real* (Griffin 1986; Hurka 2011, p. 87; Nozick, 1974; Pettit, 2015, pp. 118–120). An apparent ‘friend’—one of Griffin’s “consummate actors”—who could simulate the right sort of concern, who offered criticism when it was helpful, who forced us to confront hard realities when we needed to, who seemed uneasy on our behalf when we found ourselves in difficult and uncertain situations, and so on, but who actually felt nothing for us, would provide us with many of the benefits of friendship, but on the kind of view under consideration would hardly count as an actual friend.

A final word. Although I have focused on anxiety in this paper, it should by now be clear that many of the claims I have been making, or mildly modified versions of them, could be made with respect to a number of emotions. While it is plausible to see anxiety as a necessary constituent of friendship, for instance, it is hardly plausible to think that it is the *only* emotion of which this can be said. Other emotions besides anxiety can exist in proxy form (in this paper I have mentioned proxy anger and proxy fear, for example). And while anxiety may sometimes compel someone, for instance, to criticize their friend’s behavior, there are other emotions that may also motivate such an act. (Nor is offering criticism always the act recommended by anxiety—even in cases where a friend has acted badly.) Anxiety is part of an array of interrelated emotions that also includes, for instance, shame, guilt, fear, and pride, and which operate in conjunction with an equally diverse array of emotionally charged responses, including criticism, blame, praise, encouragement, and trust. No one emotion can do its work in isolation; the real subject of our investigation, at a certain point, must come to be seen as a complex cluster of interrelated phenomena, a system or network of emotions and behaviors. Viewing any particular emotion in isolation, then, can only take us so far. The main thrust of this paper has been to try to correct one version of this mistake, that of viewing each individual’s emotions as if they existed behind impermeable walls, isolated from the emotions of others. Although each person obviously bears a certain special relation to her own emotions, we should keep in mind that on any given occasion, the emotions that matter the most to you, or are most worth attending to, might not be your own.

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