Anxiety and Hume's Philosophy[1]

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Introduction

Anxiety, perhaps the prevalent dark passion of the modern age, plays an important role in Hume's philosophy and here I shall explore this passion and the roles it plays. I begin with a sketch of the nature and function of anxiety as emotion. I then turn to examine Hume's texts in light of this discussion. First, I excavate Hume's understanding of anxiety and, second, turn to its role in his understanding of doubt. Finally, I examine the role of anxiety in the 'false religions' of enthusiasm and superstition, and this will involve a discussion of anxiety as a mood rather than an emotion.

Anxiety

In contemporary culture, first thoughts about anxiety tend to the clinical, the thoughts that anxiety is a mental health condition requiring treatment and management. This obviously qualifies anxiety as a dark passion, but I shall not be concerned with the clinical side of anxiety here.[2] Instead, my concern will be with the emotion and mood. We begin by noting that anxiety is an affective state in the sense that it has both phenomenal and motivational aspects.[3] The phenomenal aspect, part of is 'darkness', is its typically unpleasant sensory character. Its motivational aspects are a matter of triggering certain thoughts and behaviours

which we will discuss presently, noting again that some of these effects are themselves dark.

Affective states can be distinguished into emotions and moods, and anxiety is no exception. I shall postpone discussion of anxiety as a mood until we discuss Hume's treatment of superstition and enthusiasm and focus here on it as an emotion. Following the work of Charlie Kurth on anxiety I shall think of emotions, along a broadly functionalist framework, as states

> …whose core function is to monitor an individual's situation vis-à-vis their environment (what threats/opportunities are present); they do this by engaging mechanisms…that forge a tight causal connection between one's appraisal of particular features of one's situation and the response behaviours that result.[4]

Emotions are on this picture states that monitor, and are responses to, the environment. They also have intentional objects, both concrete and formal. Suppose I am anxious about rope bridge that I have to cross. The bridge is the concrete object, but the formal object is the particular aspect of that object that elicits the emotion. What is it about the bridge, or any other concrete object, that makes me anxious? One initially plausible answer is that it is a potential harm. Were I to get on the bridge, it might collapse. The unpleasant anxious feeling warns of the danger and makes me pause. However, although on the right lines, the formal object of anxiety cannot be potential harm, not least because anxiety can have nothing to do with harm. I might be anxious about whether I was successful in getting a job, for example. Although I would be disappointed not to get it, my failure to get it would

not constitute a harm. Again, watching the end of a thrilling and close cricket match might feel anxious about the result but it is as much about my team winning as it is losing. Indeed, it this particular case I might wish for that situation since the anxiety induced by a close finish is thrilling in a way that a one-side match is not. What is important here is not potential harm as much as uncertainty. This can help to distinguish, albeit on a spectrum, cases where the relevant emotion is fear rather than anxiety. I can see a fast-moving car coming towards me, a clear potential harm, and I feel fear rather than anxiety because the degree of certainty that I will be harmed is high, whereas. in the case of the rope bridge there is a much higher degree of uncertainty. Uncertainty also attaches to the case of the job – I am uncertain whether I was successful or not.

Uncertainty then seems to be a feature of the formal object of anxiety. But that can't be the whole of it, since there are plenty of things of which I am uncertain which have no tendency to elicit anxiety. I am, for example, uncertain whether Bank tube station is on the Central or District line but feel no anxiety about that. When that uncertainty leads to anxiety is when it becomes 'problematic' in the sense that there is some investment or concern connected with it. When I need to get to Bank tube station in a hurry my uncertainty about which line it is on my anxiety is triggered. To change the example, since I stand to gain much by getting the job my present uncertainty about my success elicits my anxiety, and since I might get badly injured if the bridge collapses my uncertainty about its robustness elicits anxiety. The formal object of anxiety then problematic uncertainty, where 'problematic' picks

up on the degree of personal investment the agent has in the object of the uncertainty.

Problematic uncertainty can be distinguished into kinds which, in turn, helps to individuate kinds of anxiety. We can think of the uncertainties, and hence anxieties, as *environmental*, *social*, *practical*, and *epistemic*.[5] Following Juliette Vazard, we can briefly characterize these in the following way. Environmental anxiety is that which 'helps us respond efficiently to uncertain threats pertaining to our physical integrity'.[6] The anxiety I feel at the rope bridge indicates uncertainty about its safety. The problematic character of the uncertainty in this case obviously turns on the unknown safety of the bridge. Social anxiety 'functions to warn us of possible negative social evaluation'.[7] Thus, I might feel uneasy among a group of persons whom I barely know, concerned that I might violate some norm of which I am unaware. Practical anxiety is supposed to 'alert us of misguided decision-making'.[8] Thus, I might feel fretful about my decision to leave my cat unsupervised when he is unwell.

Obviously, there is an epistemic dimension to these three forms of anxiety since the involve problematic uncertainty essentially. This might leave us wondering whether there is any space for a distinctively epistemic form of anxiety. However, it is possible to isolate a distinct kind epistemic form of anxiety, though one that is nevertheless linked to practical concern. Let us suppose some event or outcome is of high practical concern. Suppose, for example, I have a flight to catch and the consequences of missing it are high. The importance attached to getting things right might motivate a concern about whether I have been sufficiently diligent in

determining the facts relevant to my success in catching that flight. The problematic uncertainty regards the quality of my epistemic performance and such anxiety can motivate the expenditure of further cognitive resources on checking I was correct in my original judgment. I might check again the validity of my passport and visa, transport to the airport, and other related matters. This is distinct from practical anxiety inasmuch as the worry in practical anxiety is whether the outcome decided is the correct one whereas in epistemic anxiety the worry is focussed on whether one was sufficiently epistemically diligent in the processing of that decision.

Anxiety constitutes low- level awareness of problematic uncertainty and can prompt reflection and appropriate responses. This itself doesn't make it a dark passion, despite its unpleasant character. *Qua* emotion, anxiety, when appropriate, constitutes a quick and dirty indication of problematic uncertainty, and so, at the very least, it has an instrumental value.[9] It is a form of sensitivity to danger and, given its affective character, readies the agent for appropriate behaviour such as avoidance and risk minimization. Furthermore, a due anxiety in performance situations tends to better performance than without it,[10] and in epistemic contexts it can motivate reasonable doubt and epistemically responsible action.[11] Moreover, some argue that is more to the positive value of anxiety that its mere instrumental value. Kurth, for example, argues that the disposition to feel anxiety in appropriate circumstances can be construed as a virtue.[12]

Before we finally turn to Hume a few remarks are necessary about its place and role in what I take to be a relatively uncontroversial view of cognitive structures, which leads us into a darker aspect of anxiety.[13] Affective states like emotions are

involuntary and automatic, but nevertheless contentful, and are concerned mundane and routine tasks and relations to environment, operating at a lower level of psychology. Though often conscious, such states are relatively recalcitrant to the consciously normative reflection that typifies higher-level cognitive processes. Lower-level states can nevertheless trigger the exercise of higher-level cognitive resources. Anxiety can do this by signalling to the agent some problematic uncertainty and thus prompting reflection on a range of possible states of affairs as outcomes of the object of the uncertainty and the consequences of each. Call this 'hypothetical thinking'.[14] Suppose I am expecting my son to come home at 6pm but he is late and I become anxious since I don't know why he is not yet home. The unpleasant feeling makes me consider various possibilities regarding what is uncertain, namely the cause of his lateness. I might check if his train was cancelled or with the parents of his friend with whom he was staying. I might find out that his train was in fact cancelled or that he is still with his friend, and this closes down the problematic uncertainty.

However, if I cannot resolve the uncertainty my mind can range over the various possibilities from the benign (he simply missed the train) to the dark (he has been kidnapped). As those who have experienced anxiety will attest, anxiety is often resistant to be the point of recalcitrance to higher-level reflection. Despite efforts to reassure one's self about the object of problematic uncertainty, the lower-level feeling of anxiety can cause an oscillation between reflective and epistemically warranted thought about object of uncertainty and the imagination-generated conception of a range of more unpleasant outcomes. Thus, to return to an earlier

example, my anxiety prompted me to check my passport and tickets for my forthcoming flight, and I do so and get some reassurance. Nevertheless, the lower-level feeling remains, and not only prompts me to go back and re-check the documents but also brings to mind, and makes salient, other possibilities that might prevent me making my flight. The presence of the anxious state leads in turn to an unsettled cognitive state in the sense that the hypothetical thoughts continue to be generated and no settled determination can be found but instead generates an oscillation between different possibilities being placed at the centre of one's imagination. That itself has an unpleasant affective dimension compounding the original anxiety.

Hume's Conception of Anxiety

This concludes the part of the paper which consists of some general reflections on anxiety and although I shall add a few more remarks as we proceed, we now turn to Hume. He uses the word 'anxiety', its cognates and near synonyms, in a number of places, but he doesn't give us an explicit account of that affection. The closest we get to any discussion is in 'Of the direct passions' (T 2.3.9)[15] wherein Hume discusses the passions of hope and fear which, as we shall see, are related to problematic uncertainty. In this section there is a passage which focusses on an example of anxiety and Hume's remark that anxiety is a species of fear that is individuated by the particular 'mixture of different views and reflections' (T 2.3.9.31) which motivate that passion. We begin by noting what Hume says about hope and fear in 'Of the direct passions'.

Most direct passions involve hedonic good or evil, pleasure and pain, in their aetiology. For many passions this relation is relatively straightforward but when the object of the passion involves uncertainty the object 'gives rise to FEAR or HOPE, according to the degree of certainty on one side or the other' (T. 2.3.9.6). Notice that the reference to fear and hope implies that the uncertainty is problematic in the sense that some consequence attaches to the uncertain object. When this uncertainty involves opposition of 'contrary chances or causes'

> the mind is not allow'd to fix on either side, but is incessantly tost from one to another….The imagination or understanding…fluctuates betwixt the oppositive views;…and the mind, surveying the object in its opposite principles, finds such a contrariety as utterly destroys all certainty and establish'd opinion. (T 2.3.9.10)

This observation of Hume's is reminiscent of what we said above about the potential cognitive instability and oscillation that anxiety can trigger. However, it is there is a key difference. The oscillation to which Hume is referring here in an *input* into the mechanism that turns joy and grief into hope and fear. Hope and fear, of which anxiety is a subspecies, is the result of the blending of the passions of grief and joy in broadly the following manner. So rather than anxiety causing the oscillation, the oscillation causes the anxiety. The mind swings between viewing the same object as near certain and near impossible. When viewed as near certain (and the object is good) it produces joy, and when viewed near impossible, it produces grief (and vice versa when the object is evil). These two passions blend into hope or fear because they are sluggish in response to the quick and lithe oscillation of the

imagination (T. 2.3.9.12). The key difference here is that in the situation described above anxiety was an *input* to cognitive fluctuation whereas, since for Hume anxiety is a species of fear, it must be for him the *output* of the oscillation.

This suggests that the oscillation Hume describes occurs at the lower level of psychology and not at the level of personal reflection we described in the previous section. It is, that is, something that occurs below the level of conscious reflection and judgment. The affective state that is the product of this process is the conscious awareness of the uncertainty though not a grasp of the full content of the uncertainty. It indicates that the object is uncertain without constituting full grasp of the extent and nature of the uncertainty.

There are clearly examples in Hume's texts where we must understand as requiring the postulation of psychological mechanisms operative below the level of conscious reflection. Consider, for example, the mechanism productive of the supposition of continued existence, central to his account of the belief in the external world. Prior to the emergence of the belief the mind is drawn to view resembling perceptions as identical and yet at the same time is aware that such perceptions are not identical, and this 'contradiction' is resolved, or better disguised, by the 'supposition of continued existence' (T 1.4.2.40). Key to this Hume describes as following psychological situation:

> Nothing is more certain from experience, than that any contradiction either to the sentiments or passions gives a sensible uneasiness…Now there being here an opposition betwixt the notion of the identity of resembling perceptions,

> and the interruption of their appearance, the mind must be uneasy in that situation, and will naturally seek relief from the uneasiness. Since the uneasiness arises from the opposition of two contrary principles, it must look for relief by sacrificing one to the other (T 1.4.2.37).

But, as Hume goes onto say, the uneasiness remains because we cannot sacrifice either, whereas the supposition of continued existence allows us to reconcile these two views, removing the uneasiness, when we 'indulge our inclination'. (T 1.4.2.40). Whatever one thinks of this account, the point to be made here is that it would be absurd to see this process being conducted at the personal level of reflection. It would involve the attribution to thinkers who lack a concept of continued existence the explicit grasp of numerical identity, of the fact that resembling perceptions are numerically distinct, and that the two notions are contradictory, and that they feel the uneasiness in virtue of a grasp of the propositional representation of these facts. Instead, the process occurs at a lower level of psychology, quite independently of the subject's conscious reflection.

This allows us to think that Hume's account of the oscillation productive of anxiety as operative at a low level. A further point can be made in this connection. What Hume says about sensible uneasiness makes it akin anxiety inasmuch as it is an affective indication at the conscious level of a cognitive problem at a lower psychological level. So we could read Hume's discussion of the oscillation as, at least sometimes, operative at a lower-level level and productive of anxiety, which functions as an indicator of problematic uncertainty.

I mentioned that in 'Of the direct passions' that there is one passage in this section that centres on anxiety. It is this:

> A person, who has left his friend in any malady, will feel more anxiety upon his account, than if he were present, tho' perhaps he is not only incapable of giving him assistance, but likewise of judging of the event of his sickness. In this case, tho' the principal object of the passion, *viz*. the life or death of his friend, be to him equally uncertain when present as when absent; yet there are a thousand little circumstances of his friend's situation and condition, the knowledge of which fixes the idea, and prevents that fluctuation and uncertainty so near ally'd to fear. Uncertainty is, indeed, in one respect as near ally'd to hope as to fear, since it makes an essential part in the composition of the former passion; but the reason, why it inclines not to that side, is, that uncertainty alone is uneasy, and has a relation of impressions to the uneasy passions. (T 2.3.9.27)

There are several things to note from this passage. The first is Hume's remark that 'uncertainty alone is uneasy', and is 'ally'd to fear'. This complicates matters a little. When I introduced this section I noted that Hume identified anxiety with a species of fear. However, the claim that uncertainty itself is uneasy suggests a more basic form of anxiety, that is an uneasy awareness of problematic uncertainty. Second, the tendency that uneasiness has towards fear rather than hope, though both products of uncertainty, owes itself to the association of impressions, where resembling impressions associate themselves, and given that uncertainty is unpleasant, the unpleasant impression of fear comes to mind. Third, the 'fluctuation'

that one feels when one's sick friend is absent sounds more like the oscillation of hypothetical thinking at the higher level of psychology discussed in the previous section. So although we have been talking about anxiety as a species of fear as Hume officially dubs it, I want now to explore a little the uneasiness of uncertainty itself and its relations to hypothetical thinking.

Uncertainty and Uneasiness

In discussing anxiety above I noted that one of its effects is that of hypothetical thinking. This seems to sit well with what Hume tells us about the effect of uncertainty and doubt. Belief functions to 'infix any idea in the imagination, and prevent all kind of hesitation and uncertainty' (T 2.3.10.12). Doubt and uncertainty – which Hume says is uneasy – is such as to

> cause a variation in the thought, and transport us suddenly from one idea to another...[and be] the occasion of pain. This pain chiefly takes place, where interest, relation, of the greatness and novelty of any event interests us in it. 'Tis not every matter of fact, of which we have a curiosity to be inform'd; neither are they such only as we have an interest to know. 'Tis sufficient if the idea strikes on us with such force, and concerns us so nearly as to give us an uneasiness in its instability and inconstancy. (T 2.3.10.12).

The context of this quotation is Hume's discussion of curiosity but what is relevant for our concerns is the motivational character of doubt. The uneasiness of the initial doubt yields something like hypothetical thinking – the sudden transportation from one idea to another. Elsewhere, Hume writes that uncertainty

has the same effect as opposition, namely, the 'agitation of the thought; the quick turns it makes from one view to another; the variety of passions, which succeed each other, according to the different views.' (T 2.3.4.7). The uneasiness, which I am taking to be an affective indication of uncertainty, triggers hypothetical thinking. Note further that what Hume says here shows that the uncertainty must be problematic in the sense we introduced when discussing anxiety in general. 'The pain chiefly takes place, where interest, relation, of the greatness and novelty of any event interests us in it' (T 2.3.10.12). Finally, as I noted, sometimes the cognitive instability triggered by anxiety itself has an unpleasant affective dimension, and this again is something Hume seems to recognise. The agitation of thought and quick turns made by the mind themselves produce a further 'agitation in the mind, and transfuse themselves into the predomination passion' (T 2.3.4.7).

Is there a reason why Hume draws a connection between uneasiness and uncertainty? Louis Loeb[16] draw our attention to the widespread connection between uneasiness and the doxastic in Hume's *Treatise*, and argued we can make sense of this connection in light of a Pyrrhonian concern with freedom from disturbance. Hume seeks out ways to relieve us from the uneasiness of uncertainty by aiming at doxastic stability. Without prejudice to Loeb's reading, there is however a different way of understanding this connection, which though admittedly one for which there is no explicit evidence in Hume's text, is worth considering. Consider the fact that there are all sorts of remote probabilities that are, in one sense 'uncertain' and in another sense are not.[17] There is a remote probability that I have a long-lost twin brother and this remote probability cannot be ruled out *a priori*. So in some

restrictive epistemic sense one could say that it is uncertain that I have no twin brother, and so, again in some restrictive sense, there is some doubt or uncertainty that I have no twin brother. It might become a possibility I consider in the context of a tutorial about scepticism but it is not something I would normally count as an uncertainty. Uncertainty, outside the artificial context of philosophy discussions, involves not merely the epistemic standing of a proposition but its relevancy and saliency to the concerns of the agent.

This raises a question of how some uncertainty takes on a relevancy and saliency to an agent. Suppose I am standing at the bus stop and I am uncertain whether I have left my wallet home. How do I come to an awareness of that uncertainty? The uncertainty is not the product of my calmly recalling each and every thing I did in the time before arriving at bus stop. I might do that *after* the uncertainty strikes me, and I put my hand in my pocket to discover I haven't got my wallet with me. Instead, what first strikes me is an uneasiness about whether I have my wallet. The uneasiness makes the uncertainty salient to consciousness and that saliency is typically *affective* in character and hence motivational. The uneasiness of the doubt makes me check my pockets to make sure I have the wallet. Its relevancy has to do with since it means, *inter alia*, I won't be able to pay for the bus if I don't have my wallet, and the uneasiness makes its relevance *immediate* to consciousness, and connected to my concerns. This makes such an awareness an awareness of problematic uncertainty operative at low-level psychology, and so a species of anxiety, and, as such, an epistemically useful affection. Even though Hume doesn't

explicitly make this observation, it is certainly consistent with his connecting uncertainty with uneasiness.

Anxiety and Religious Belief

It is in his treatment of the psychology of religious belief where anxiety figures most in Hume's thinking. In Part X of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*[18] there are eight uses of the terms 'anxiety' or 'anxious', and nine instances of them in 'The Natural History of Religion'.[19] In the *Dialogues*, Demea says that 'so anxious or so tedious are even the best scenes of life, that futurity is still the object of all our hopes and fears' (DNR 10.1; 68), and the 'weak and the infirm' are agitated by '[f]ear, anxiety [and] terror' (DNR 10.9; 70). Philo tells us that even when humanity has mastery over its environment, the imagination furnishes 'new materials to anxious fear'. The 'wolf [does not] molest more the timid flock, than superstition does the anxious breast of the wretched mortals' (DNR 10.11; 70). Anxiety is one of the symptoms of a 'distempered condition of mind and body' (DNR 10.13; 71).

In the 'The Natural History of Religion' Hume tells us that human beings in early pre-religious societies have 'an anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery [and] the terror of death' (NHR 2.5; 39). A key object of anxiety is the 'unknown causes' of the events upon which their lives depend, the objects of 'anxious expectation' and this problematic uncertainty means that 'the passions are kept in perpetual alarm' (NHR 3.1; 40). A little later, Hume again connects our ignorance of the causes of natural events with our being 'anxious' about with our future well-being (NHR 3.2; 41), a point repeated at NHR 5.9.

There are further and similar uses of 'anxiety' and its cognates in the NHR but we don't need to mention them since they essentially repeat the same point. Why though does Hume use 'anxiety' and its cognates occur most prominently in his treatment of religious belief? The answer lies in that fact that much of what he was to say in this context concerns what he calls the 'false' religions of superstition and enthusiasm, the character of which is determined by the passions of fear and hope respectively. As we have seen these passions are born from the uneasiness of uncertainty. Superstition is born when someone is subject to 'unaccountable terrors and apprehensions' (E-SE 72),[20] which are brought about by unhappiness, ill health, from 'a gloomy and melancholy disposition' or a combination of these factors. The mind in such a state needs objects for its terror and among these are imaginary ones, which and the superstitious person engages in practices that are absurd or frivolous. A person of the opposite disposition - someone with 'prosperous success', 'luxuriant health', 'strong spirits' and with a 'bold and confident disposition' (E-SE 74) – will have a different conception of the unknown, fostering hope and the false religion of enthusiasm. These circumstances lead to the imagination to be swollen with 'great, but confused conceptions, to which no sublunary beauties or enjoyments can correspond', namely a sublime conception of the unknown (E-SE 74).

How does this relate to anxiety? Here we have to turn from anxiety as an emotion to anxiety as a mood. When it comes to anxiety as a mood, we can consider it along the functionalist lines as the monitoring of the internal psycho-physical resources of the subject. Again, following Kurth, we can say someone

> … in an anxious mood (because, say, she's psychologically overwhelmed or fatigued) will experience a sense of unease that either isn't directed at anything at particular or is only 'about' very general/diffuse features of one's situation (e.g. a broad, negative assessment about what the future holds).[21]

This mood manifests itself not only affectively, but also doxastically in the form of biasing the cognitive processing of the subject. Thus she 'will be more likely to see features of her situation as potentially threating',[22] and thus in turn will manifest itself not only in token emotions of anxiety but possibly other negative emotions like fear.

Notice how this description of anxiety as a mood describes the type of person Hume thinks is prone to superstition. The general foreboding and the 'terrors and apprehensions' have psycho-physical grounding such as ill-health, ill-fortune and a 'gloomy and melancholy disposition', and lead, in Kurth's words, to a 'negative assessment about what the future holds'. Evidently, the suggestion here is that subject's view of the future is 'coloured' in some way by their mood, and this colouring can be understood in terms of anxiety causing the cognitive biassing the agent. Anxiety, that is, can make the agent selectively process information in a way that leads to a distorted evaluation of the problematic uncertainty.[23]

One such form of biassing is attention biassing. Anxiety biases attention by, inter alia, focussing one's orientation towards some object, in its allocation of attention that object, and in one's capacity and ability to control attention.[24] Thus, to return to my example above, my anxiety prompts me away from my normal tasks and towards checking my documents and the airport schedule and drains my

attention from my normal tasks and makes me expend more attention than necessary. A second form of biassing is interpretative: information, and particularly ambiguous information, is accorded a positive or negative significance, either in a generative and selective manner.[25] A piece of information can be given a particular meaning (its generative aspect) which further accords with the mood of the thinker (the selective aspect). Things here though are more complicated since there is more at play than simply an anxious mood. Starting with a relatively straightforward example, someone in the kind of low mood Hume describes is apt to interpret some event in such a way as having negative import. For example, the rotten tomatoes in the garden might be taken as a form of punishment for some mildly blasphemous behaviour. Complications however arise when there is an object that is problematically uncertain, and hence the object of anxiety and yet the mood differs from that of simple anxiety. To see this, recall that problematic uncertainty and the associated anxiety need not be conceived in terms of something that is threatening but rather when there is some investment or concern attached to that object. Thus, to repeat the example from earlier, the uncertainty attached to whether I was successful in a job interview can be the object of anxiety without there being some particular threat to me. Now, suppose that after that job interview I am in a particularly ebullient mood, perhaps fuelled by the nice weather and the good espresso I have before getting on the plane home. My mind turns to the slightly odd smile I received from the chair of the appointments committee. My particularly good mood leads me to interpret that ambiguous smile as a sure sign that I have got the job. So here my mood selects an interpretation of some ambiguous feature associated with the object

of my anxiety. Here the biassing works through anxiety by trying to align information associated with its object with the predominant mood of the subject. The anxiety and the mood can shift the interpretation as well, so generating an interpretation selected for the mood. So as the long flight continues, tiredness, the come down from too many coffees, and a chronic ache in my back overtakes me and my mood sinks. I then assign a different meaning to the smile. Now it strikes me that the smile must really have expressed the chair's sneering amusement at my poor performance.

This more subtle and complex interplay between problematic uncertainty and mood is important when considering what Hume says about enthusiasm, where the connection with anxiety is far less straightforward than it is in superstition. There is problematic uncertainty in the sense that the objects of the swollen and confused imagination are at once unknown but of considerable importance in that the enthusiast finds in the confused contents themselves to be 'a distinguished favourite of the Divinity' (E SE 74). The elevated mood further can conspire with the uncertainty by generating interpretations that are consonant with the mood. The clearest example of this in Hume's text is the following remark he makes about Joan of Arc:

> Her unexperienced mind, working night and on this favourite object [her infatuation with Charles VII], mistook the impulses of passion for heavenly inspiration; and she fancied, that she saw visions, and heard voices, exhorting her to re-establish the throne of France, and to expel the foreign invaders.[26]

Her passion for another lead her to interpretate stimuli in this cognitively biased manner, selected to her mood and as divine communication.

What we might naturally call anxiety certainty isn't foregrounded in enthusiasm, but I have included it since it is plausible to see a connection between problematic uncertainty and interpretative biassing. The presence of anxiety and its biassing role however is relatively straightforward in the case of superstition however, and its most significant role for is in Hume's view of the origin of religious belief in the birth of polytheism. Here the object of problematic uncertainty is the unknown causes of natural events. The problematic character of the uncertainty lies in the fact that our wellbeing, indeed our very lives, depend upon the course of nature. Thus

> We hang in perpetual suspence between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want; which are distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable. These *unknown causes*, then, become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers, on which we have so entire a dependance. (NHR 3.1; 40, italics original)

Hume then refers us to a standing and independent disposition to attribute human psychology to non-human nature, a disposition he had previously identified in T 1.4.3, 'Of the antient philosophy'. This disposition provides the content for the

core of religious belief, namely that of invisible, intelligent power, which Hume thinks emerges as polytheism. We come to conceive of these causes of which we are ignorant as invisible intelligent powers, and this is triggered by the anxiety. Being ignorant of such causes and 'so anxious concerning their future fortune', it is 'no wonder' that these persons 'immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers, possessed of sentiment and intelligence' (NHR 3.2; 41).

The biassing here seems closest to the interpretative kind. Events are interpreted as having a significance as expressive of the actions of intelligence. Whilst this may align with the hopeful attitude to problematic uncertainty expressive of enthusiasm, like the Joan of Arc example above, Hume writes that 'men are much oftener thrown on their knees by the melancholy than by the agreeable passions' and

> …every disastrous accident alarms…Apprehensions spring up with regard to futurity: And the mind, sunk into diffidence, terror, and melancholy, has recourse to every method of appeasing those secret intelligent powers, on whom our fortune is supposed entirely to depend. (NHR 3.4; 42)

The word 'appeasing' here reflects the particular aspects of the content of superstitious belief, namely such invisible intelligent powers are 'jealous and revengeful, capricious and partial' (NHR 3.2; 41).

The interpretation of the events is negative one in line with the prevailing psychological mood, in contrast with Joan of Arc's positive interpretation in line with her infatuation. There is therefore both generative and selective biassing here.

Further, the connection between such biassing and problematic uncertainty is reinforced in the following observation of Hume's.

> In proportion as any man's course of life is governed by accident, we always find, that he increases in superstition; as may particularly be observed of gamesters and sailors, who, though of all mankind, the least capable of serious reflection, abound most in frivolous and superstitious apprehensions. (NHR 3.3; 41)

The key point here is not Hume's defamation of the intellectual capacities of sailors and gamblers but rather that those who are more exposed to problematic uncertainty are more prone to the superstitious views that are the consequences of the anxiety generated by that problematic uncertainty.

Conclusion

I hope I have managed to excavate the notion of the dark passion of anxiety from Hume's text and showed at least some of the roles it plays in his philosophy. A further interesting and potentially fruitful task would be connect this with Hume's own expression of the his successive moods in confronting his reflections in the conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise*, where some case could be made for his sometimes expressing his own anxiety, but this task is too difficult for the scope of this paper.[27]

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[1] A version of this paper was presented at the Dark Passions Workshop held in Rome in June 2025, and I thank the audience for many helpful comments, including those from Don Ainslie, Rachel Cohon, Tito Magri Alessio Vaccari, and Anik Waldow.

[2] I shall also ignore the broadly existential notion of anxiety that can be traced at least as far back as Kierkegaard since I see no evidence for this notion in Hume.

[3] Anxiety can also have somatic effects such as fatigue.

[4] Charlie Kurth, *The Anxious Mind: An Investigation into the Varieties and Virtues of Anxiety* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2018), 9. Much of what I say here is indebted to his work.

[5] For further discussion see, for example, Norman Endler and Nancy Kocovski, 'State and Trait Anxiety Revisited', *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 15, no.3 (2001): 231-245 and Juliette Vazard, 'Everyday Anxious Doubt' *Synthese* 200, 224 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03711-0

[6] Vazard, 'Everyday Anxious Doubt', 6.

[7] Vazard, 'Everyday Anxious Doubt', 6.

[8] Vazard, 'Everyday Anxious Doubt', 6.

[9] For discussions of the instrumental value of anxiety, and its value in general, see Julliette Vazard and Charlie Kurth, 'Apprehending Anxiety: an Introduction to the Topical Collection on worry and wellbeing', *Synthese* 200, 325 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03794-9 and Kurth, *The Anxious Mind*, chapter 4.

[10] Kurth, *The Anxious Mind*, chapter 1.

[11] Christopher Hookway discusses the role of anxiety in epistemic contexts in a number of different places. See, for examples, Christopher Hookway, *Truth, Rationality and Pragmaticism: Themes from Peirce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Christopher Hookway 'Affective States and Epistemic Immediacy' *Metaphilosophy* 34, no.1 (2003): 78-96.

[12] Kurth, *The Anxious Mind*, chapter 5.

[13] Here I again I follow Vazard, 'Everyday Anxious Doubt'.

[14] Vazard, 'Everyday Anxious Doubt', 13.

[15] References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Hume Nature*, ed. Norton and Norton, hereafter cited in the texts as 'T' followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph number.

[16] See for example Louis Loeb *Stability and Justification in Hume's* Treatise (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[17] Here I am following Hookway, *Truth, Rationality and Pragmaticism*, chapter 10.

[18] *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* ed. Coleman, hereafter cited in the text as DNR, followed by part, paragraph, and page number.

[19] 'The Natural History of Religion' in Beauchamp ed., hereafter cited in the text as NHR, followed by part, paragraph, and page number.

[20] 'Of superstition and enthusiasm' in Miller ed., cited in the text by SE and page number.

[21] Kurth, *The Anxious Mind*, 9.

[22] Kurth, *The Anxious Mind*, 9.

[23] The discussion here is based on Courtney Beard, 'Cognitive bias modification for anxiety: Current evidence and future directions', *Expert Review of Neurotheraputics*, 11, No.2 (2011): 299-311 and Chantel Leung, Jenny Yeind, Antonella Trotta, and Tatia Lee, 'The combined cognitive bias hypothesis in anxiety: A systematic review and meta-analysis', *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 89 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2022.102575.

[24] Leung *et al*, 'The combined bias hypothesis', 1.

[25] Leung *et al*, 'The combined bias hypothesis', 2.

[26] *A History of England*, vol.2, 397-298.

[27] This was suggested to me by Don Ainslie.