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## Politicians, Policy, and Anxiety

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*Politicians, Policy, and Anxiety*

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# **Politicians, Policy, and Anxiety**

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**Charlie Kurth**

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**Dr. Charlie Kurth** received his Ph.D. from the University of California (San Diego) in 2011. He has research and teaching interests in ethics, moral and philosophical psychology, emotion theory, and metaphysics. A unifying theme of his work is that research in ethical theory, moral psychology, and the philosophy of emotion can be productively informed by empirical inquiry in the cognitive and social sciences. His book *The Anxious Mind* (MIT, 2018) investigates the cognitive science of anxiety and its implications for questions about value, agency, and virtue. His current work focuses on two fronts: meta-ethical questions about the nature of moral objectivity and more normative questions about emotions and their role in moral development and agency.

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## **Politicians, Policy, and Anxiety**

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Do we want our politicians to be anxious? The answer may seem obvious: no. Consider, for instance, what it would have been like to see John F. Kennedy in the grip of anxiety during the Cuban missile crisis. Clearly, that's not what we want—not only does anxiety signal weakness in a leader, but it also tends to bring vicious cycles of worry, disengagement, and motivated reasoning that undermine one's decision making. Instead, what it seems we want in our politicians is strength and resoluteness—the “Iron Lady,” Margaret Thatcher, not a Woody Allen-like hapless mess.

But recent research on the upside of anxiety suggests that this condemnation comes too quickly. For instance, experimental work in political science indicates that anxiety about public policy matters spurs voters to become more informed, open-minded, and engaged (MacKuen et al. 2010; Valentino et al. 2008; Brader 2006). Similarly, work in philosophy suggests that anxiety has an important role to play in promoting virtuous thought and action (Kurth 2018a, 2018b, 2015; Nagel 2010; Hookway 1999). So, initial appearances to the contrary, anxiety may be a good thing. Perhaps what we want, then, is *appropriately anxious* politicians.

In what follows, I will use a set of historical case studies as well as research in the social and cognitive sciences to explain what this appropriate anxiety involves and why it is valuable in political leaders. The result will be a richer, more complex portrait of anxiety and its value.

## **Background: Politicians and their Anxieties**

Before getting into the case studies, it will be helpful to say a little more about the focal question of this essay. In particular, I'm not interested in the descriptive question: *Are* politicians anxious? This, after all, is an easy question to answer. A quick review of the news headlines reveals that—just like the rest of us—politicians get anxious. Witness: “Amid chief of staff search, Trump increasingly anxious over political future” (Collins 2018); “‘I am worried’: Macron’s chat with Saudi prince captured at G20” (Borger 2018); “Is Theresa May right to worry about a hard border causing a united Ireland?” (Maguire 2018).

Rather, the question I'm interested in is a normative one—*Should* politicians be anxious (regardless of whether they actually are)? More specifically, I'm interested in anxiety as it pertains to *policy* issues (not, say, dinner choices or existential matters). That is, I'm interested in things like whether President Trump should have been anxious about shutting down the government to get money for a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. And I'm interested in whether Prime Minister May should be anxious about pressing for her Brexit plan in the face of strong opposition from the Labor Party. With this sharpening of the question in hand, we can now turn to the first case study to start to get some answers.

### **Case Study 1: The Abolition of Slavery**

In this first case study, I want to focus on a couple of examples of anxiety in politicians as they confronted the institution of slavery. Looking at these individuals will help us draw out some lessons about the value and diversity of anxiety.

The first example concerns the anxiety of the Duke of Wellington when, in 1833, the government of the United Kingdom was



considering legislation to abolish slavery. Speaking before Parliament on the pending emancipation legislation, Wellington remarked, “Who can regard the change from a State of slavery to a state of freedom, of a population of no less than 800,000 persons, otherwise than with feelings of *anxiety*?” As Wellington went on to explain, the cause of his anxiety was the speed with which the institution of slavery was being dismantled: he was worried that slaves would be freed before “they had become civilized” (*Debates in Parliament* 1833: 533-4).

The second example focuses on an episode in the life of the Quaker abolitionist John Woolman as it he explains it in his posthumously published Journal (1952). Early in his life, Woolman worked as a clerk and, at one point, his boss asked him to write up a bill of sale for a slave that he (the boss) was selling. With regard to that request, Woolman wrote:

I *felt uneasy* at the thoughts of writing an instrument of slavery for one of my fellow-creatures, yet I remembered that I was hired by the year [and] that it was my master who directed me to do it ... [So] through weakness I gave way, and wrote it. (1952: 26, emphasis added)

However, when it came time to actually execute the bill of sale to consummate the transaction, Woolman recounts that “I was *so afflicted in my mind*, that I said before my master and the Friend that I believed slave-keeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion” (26-7, emphasis added). Moreover, though Woolman wrote the bill of sale in this case, the event had a lasting effect on his beliefs and attitudes. For instance, the next time he was asked to write a similar document, he refused. And the memories of the incident—and the anxiety it involved—gave shape to much of his subsequent efforts as an abolitionist (1952: 27).

With these examples in hand, I now want to extract two lessons—lessons that will enrich our understanding of the nature and value of anxiety that we see in these political leaders.

The first lesson is *evaluative*: in the cases of Wellington and Woolman we have two very different responses. In particular, Wellington's response is problematic. Not only is his anxiety grounded in morally dubious claims about slaves as "uncivilized," but his anxiety appears to motivate his opposition to the abolition legislation. That is, his anxiety appears to have prompted a self-interested motivation to protect the status quo.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, Woolman's anxious response reflects well on him. Being asked to facilitate the sale of another human being, though part of his charge as a clerk, leaves him feeling uneasy. Moreover, and more importantly, the anxiety that Woolman feels leads him to reconsider—and reject—his initial decision to sanction the sale (as well as future ones). Thus, in Woolman's unease, we see an emotion that brings a concern to make the right choice—one that then prompts him to rethink his decision and protest the sale.

The second lesson—one that will be important for the discussion that follows—builds from an observation about the nature of the anxieties we see in Wellington and Woolman: though both are anxious, they appear to be experiencing *different kinds of anxiety*. To draw this out, we should first be clear about why it makes sense to see both Wellington and Woolman as experiencing anxiety (rather than, say, fear or shame). At a high level, two features unify the unease of Wellington and Woolman as instances of anxiety. In both cases the unease is elicited by *uncertainty* about a potential threat or challenge, and it prompts a combination of *risk minimization* and *risk assess-*

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<sup>1</sup> The idea that emotions are motivationally-laden, and that particular emotions shape our motivations in distinctive ways, is commonplace in both emotion research and common sense (e.g., fear prompts a fight/fight/freeze response; compassion brings efforts to help). For more on the distinctive motivations associated with anxiety, see Kurth 2018a, 2016.

*ment* efforts. But the details of how these two features manifest themselves are importantly different. It's these differences, then, that suggest Wellington and Woolman are experiencing different kinds of anxiety.

For Wellington, we have an instance of what I will call "threat anxiety." The Duke's unease is provoked by his *uncertainty about a potential (physical or social) threat*—namely, the unknowns and risks that he associates with freeing 800,000 slaves. Moreover, uncertainty of this particular sort brings a *defensively oriented response*—one that emphasizes risk minimization (e.g., opposing the legislation to forestall the potential threat). In contrast, to the threat anxiety of Wellington, Woolman displays what we can call "practical anxiety." His worries are brought about by his *uncertainty about the correctness of his decision* to write the bill of sale. Yet given the distinctiveness of this uncertainty, we get a different reaction: a set of *epistemic behaviors*—reflection, reassessment, information-gathering—that are geared toward helping Woolman work through the *difficult choice* that he faces.<sup>2</sup>

With these two lessons in hand, we can turn to see what light they shed on questions about anxiety's value for politicians. First, we get support for the earlier suggestion that *appropriate* anxiety in a politician can be valuable. Part of what the contrast between Wellington and Woolman draws out is that, while anxiety that can sometimes be a liability, it can also be an asset. But given the distinction between different kinds of anxiety we just made, we can say more. In particular, the two examples suggest that what we want in a politician is *practical anxiety* of the sort we see in Woolman, not the *threat anxiety* of Wellington. Moreover, we also get a sense for *why* we want appropriately, practically anxious politicians. The Woolman example

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<sup>2</sup> See Kurth 2018a: Chaps 2-3; 2016, for more on anxiety in general, as well as, how we might make principled (and empirically well-supported) distinctions between different kinds of anxiety.

suggests that practical anxiety is an emotion that undergirds a valuable sensitivity and responsiveness. Woolman's practical anxiety about whether to fulfill his boss's request functions as an alarm, one that helps him recognize that his initial decision to write the bill of sale might not be correct. But his anxiety also plays an important motivational role: it initiates the reflection and reassessment that helps Woolman recognize—and correct—his mistake.

To help drive home the value of this practical anxiety-driven sensitivity and responsiveness, we can look to cases of other practically anxious politicians. For instance, in her autobiography, the suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton recounts the (practical) anxiety that she felt about getting married. At the heart of her unease were worries about how she could get married—in an era when marriage entailed, both socially and legally, accepting subordination and inferior status—while also maintaining her status as a leading defender of women's equality. Not only did her anxiety appear to help her appreciate this conflict, but it also spurred reflection that enabled her see how she could reconcile the pulls of both love and the cause (1898/1993, chaps. 2–5).

Similarly, Nelson Mandela often remarked on the unease that the demands of being both a father and a freedom fighter brought. In fact, these anxieties led him to reflect on “whether one was ever justified in neglecting the welfare of one's own family in order to fight for the welfare of others” (1994: 212). Mandela's anxiety not only reveals his sensitivity to important—though clashing—values, but it also underlies our assessment of him. Were he not anxious about how to reconcile his competing obligations to his family and the cause, our admiration of him as a moral exemplar would diminish.

However, while these examples help draw out why practical anxiety is a valuable and admirable trait for political leaders to possess, the story is more complicated. After all, as anyone who has experienced anxiety knows, anxiety can lead us astray in all kinds of

unfortunate ways. This is no less true for politicians than it is for the rest of us. To see how practical anxiety in a politician can be a liability, consider the example of the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. In 1938, Chamberlain and the French Premier Édouard Daladier met with Hitler to negotiate what would become the Munich Agreement, the compact where the Allied powers agreed to hand over a significant portion of Czechoslovakia to Germany in the hopes of sating Hitler's expansionist ambitions. When Chamberlain returned to Britain after signing that unfortunate agreement, he was called before Parliament to defend his actions. In response, he explained that it was "anxiety, . . . not threats [that] made possible the concessions" to Hitler (Parliamentary Debates, 1938). In this context, it seems that the anxiety that Chamberlain mentions is practical anxiety—anxiety about the difficult choice the Allied powers faced in their meeting with a war-hungry Hitler—and it seems this anxiety was (in part) the driver of the disastrous decision to sacrifice the Czechs.<sup>3</sup>

Stepping back then, the claim that politicians should be (practically) anxious needs further defense if it's to be plausible. In particular, we need to know what—if anything—can be done to prevent occasions of anxiety-run-amok of the sort that we find in the example of Chamberlain at Munich.

## **Case Study 2:**

### **Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Vietnam War**

As a start on the question of what we might be able to do to avoid Chamberlain-like episodes of practical anxiety leading to disastrous political decisions, we can take a look at the decision of Martin Luther King, Jr., to publicly protest the War in Vietnam.

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<sup>3</sup> On the problems wrought by Chamberlain's decision, consider Winston Churchill comment: "You were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour and you will have war."

First, some background. In the early 1960s, King recognized that he would need the support of President Lyndon Johnson if civil rights legislation was going to be passed. As result, King chose not to say anything negative about the United States' involvement in Vietnam. But as time wore on, not only did the war in Vietnam escalate, but people started calling King out for being a hypocrite. In particular, they could not understand how King could be so vocal an opponent of the use of violence in his fight for civil rights, but be completely silent about the violence—the escalating war!—in Vietnam.

These criticisms stung, and as a result, King reversed his earlier decision not to confront the Johnson administration on the War. The result was King's famous "A Time to Break Silence" speech in 1967. In that speech, King explained his decision:

As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men, I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they ask—and rightly so—what about Vietnam? They ask if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government. For the sake of those boys, for the sake of this government, for the sake of the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent. (King 1967)

However, King's decision to start publicly protesting the War was immediately and severely criticized (the War, after all, was still fairly popular in the U.S. in 1967). The rebuke was a surprise—one that left King unsure about whether he had made the right decision. Here is how he explains what he was going through at that point:

When I first took my position against the war in Vietnam, almost every newspaper in the country criticized me. It was a low period in my life. ... It wasn't only white people either; it was Negroes. But then I remember a newsman coming to me one day and saying, "Dr. King, don't you think you're going to have to change your position now because so many people are criticizing you? And people who once had respect for you are going to lose respect for you. And you're going to hurt the budget, I understand, of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; people have cut off support. And don't you think that you have to move more in line with the administration's policy?" That was a good question, because he was asking me the question of whether I was going to think about what happens to me or what happens to truth and justice in this situation.

On some positions, Cowardice asks the question, "Is it safe?" Expediency asks the question, "Is it politic?" And Vanity comes along and asks the question, "Is it popular?" But Conscience asks the question, "Is it right?" And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right. (King 1998, 342)

While King's reflections and actions are powerful on their own, I also think they shed light on what we should say in response to Chamberlain-like issues of anxiety run amok in politicians.

Focusing the second paragraph in the above remarks, the first thing to notice is that King seems to be reflecting both on his feelings at the time and on the effect those emotions were having on his thoughts and actions. So, for instance, in talking about cowardice and questions about what's "safe," King seems to be reflecting not just on his feelings of *fear* (or threat anxiety), but also on how those fears were pushing him to act defensively. Similarly, in talking about vanity and what's "popular," King appears to recognize the pull of *pride* and its tendency to get him to act in ways that would help polish his public image. But more importantly for our purposes, there's also King's talk of conscience and the attendant question about what is right. Here King seems to not only be acknowledging that he's feeling something like practical anxiety about his decision to protest the War, but also that he is aware of how his anxiety is getting him to reflect on the question of whether his decision was the correct one.

Seeing the richness of King's emotional self-awareness is significant. It reveals the complexity and skill that underlies the emotional assessment he's engaged in. More specifically, we see that King is exhibiting a complex skill: what he's doing requires him to have and to engage a range of distinct mental operations. For instance, King needs a capacity for what psychologists call *emotion recognition*, the ability to appreciate that the feeling he is experiencing is an emotion, not a bout of indigestion or fatigue. But King also needs to have the capacity for *emotion differentiation*: the ability to identify what specific emotion(s) he is feeling at a given time—fear, pride, practical anxiety, etc. Finally, King needs to have *emotional knowledge*: an understanding of the effects that particular emotions can have on his subsequent thoughts, feelings, and actions.



Now here's the thing to notice. A (big) part of what lies behind King's resoluteness in the face of both the public criticisms of his decision and his own worries about whether he had made the right choice was his capacity to engage in things like emotion recognition, differentiation, and understanding. But if—as it seems—these capacities are *skill-like*, then they are capacities that politicians can *develop* in order to channel productive emotions and redirect problematic ones. Moreover, empirical work in psychology and cognitive science suggests that these capacities *are* skill-like. For instance, Buddhist techniques of mindfulness and meditation have been shown to be effective ways for individuals to enhance their ability to track their experiences and recognize when they're feeling emotions, and when they're just (say) tired or in a bad mood (Teper et al. 2013; Futsos et al. 2013). Similarly, exercises that boost people's emotional vocabulary can help them better identify the emotions that they're experiencing—it gives them the conceptual resources they need to move beyond just thinking they're upset; rather, with an enhanced emotion vocabulary, they can see that they're feeling (say) anger but not indignation, contempt, or disgust (Kashdan et al. 2015; Barrett 2017). Finally, various forms of guided instruction have been shown to help individuals better understand how particular emotions work (Hagelskamp et al. 2013; Brackett et al. 2012).

These empirical findings are noteworthy for two reasons. First, they license optimism regarding our ability to shape (practical) anxiety for the better. What we see in King—the emotional attunement he displays—is a skill that other politicians can develop. Second, recall the earlier observation that threat and practical anxiety are distinct forms of anxiety. If that's right, then the above techniques can be fine-tuned: we can use them not just for anxiety in general, but for practical anxiety in particular. That is, if practical anxiety is a distinct type of anxiety, then there is something specific in our cognitive make-up for the cultivation of these techniques to latch onto.

Stepping back, then, the King example helps us see that the anxiety-run-amok of Chamberlain is not inevitable. Emotions—including practical anxiety—are things that can be cultivated. But the King case also gives us an understanding of what it means to say that politicians should cultivate their anxiety. It does *not* mean they should just feel more anxiety or feel their anxiety more intensely. That could bring Chamberlain-like disasters. Rather, cultivating (practical) anxiety involves learning to feel it at the right times, in the right way, and to the right degree. Here the King example gives us a sense for what this amounts to.

## **Two Worries: Contagion and Manipulation**

The discussion so far—in particular the idea that politicians should be cultivating their anxiety—is likely to raise worries. I now want to consider two concerns that might have been raised.

The launching-off point for the first worry is the observation that emotions are contagious. The basic idea here is familiar. When I see that you are afraid, disgusted, or happy, that can lead me to feel afraid, disgusted, or happy too. In fact, scholars as far back as Darwin (1873), have taken this tendency for emotions to be contagious to be central to how they're able to do the important work that they do. Consider an example. If disgust is an emotion that functions to protect us from contaminants (poisons, parasites, and the like), then it would be good for feelings of disgust to be contagious. If seeing your retch at the (rotten) meat on the table makes me feel disgusted, then I won't eat what has just made you sick. Moreover, this tendency for emotions to be contagious is something we see in anxiety—both as a matter of our own experiences (seeing my wife worry about the mortgage gets me worrying too) and through the experimental work of psychologists (e.g., Parkinson & Simons 2012).

So here, then, is the issue. If we combine (i) the idea that we ought to promote anxiety in politicians with (ii) the observation that anxiety is contagious, it seems we're going to get a more anxious general public. And *that* might seem like a very bad result. After all, both mental health professionals and the news media are sounding alarms about the growing anxieties of the public. Witness a recent headline in *Time*: "A Lot of Americans Are More Anxious Than They Were Last Year" (Ducharme 2018). Similarly, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) warns that there are 40 million anxious Americans—and there's concern because this number is growing.

To assess this worry, some clarifications will be helpful. The first thing to notice is that what the NIMH and others tend to be focused on is the growing prevalence of anxiety *disorders*, not the *practical* anxiety that's our focus. Second, the reports of anxiety that we see in the news are about individuals' experiences of anxiety *in general*, not anxiety that is *appropriate* given the situation at hand. Bringing these points together, then, suggests that what NIMH and the media are worried about—disorders and general anxieties—is *not* what we've been focused on: appropriate practical anxiety. Moreover, empirical work by political scientists suggests that appropriate practical anxiety—particularly in the voting public—is beneficial: it tends to promote a more informed, more open-minded, and more engaged electorate (MacKuen et al. 2010; Valentino et al. 2008; Brader 2006). So rather than being a problem, contagious practical anxiety could be a good thing!

To draw out the second worry, a worry about manipulation, we can start with an analogy. It doesn't take much thought to realize that a good book for spotting genuine antiques is also—in the wrong hands—a good book for making it hard to detect fake antiques. With that in mind, one might worry that in helping politicians understand how to cultivate their anxiety, we are just providing them with a guidebook for how to manipulate public anxieties for their own gain

(Albertson & Gadarian 2015, Edelman 1985). The worry is real. An often-cited example concerns immigration, where appeals to violence, drugs, and disease are used to stoke anxieties with the hope of bolstering opposition to more open borders. Witness Donald Trump in the speech where he announced that he would be running for President:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. ... They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us [*sic*]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

In response to this second concern, I want to again start with a couple of clarifications. First, any system can be hijacked by a suitably vicious person, so it's unclear that this "anxiety can be manipulated" worry raises issues that are *distinct* to anxiety. That is, it seems the issue is not so much with the idea that we should cultivate anxiety in politicians as it is with the lamentable fact that there are crummy politicians out there. Second, manipulation efforts work best when the targets of the manipulation don't realize that they are being manipulated. This fact about how manipulation works suggests that we can circumvent the manipulation threat by extending our efforts to promote emotional awareness, emotion differentiation, and emotion knowledge in the general public.

Put another way, recognizing the potential for the public's anxieties to be manipulated points to a general policy prescription: *we should be doing more to promote emotion education*. On this front, there is some interesting work being done. Some of it, informed by research in psychology, goes under the label of "emotional intelligence" (e.g., Salovey et al. 2008; Goleman 2005), while other techniques build on Aristotelian insights about moral and emotional de-

velopment being like the development of musical or athletic skills (Kristjansson 2018, Snow 2015). While this is not the place to get into the details of these proposals, it's worth highlighting that there is a substantive and promising research program underway here.

## Concluding Thoughts

To bring this discussion to a close, we can return to four questions that we have been wrestling with. First, in response to the question—should politicians be anxious?—the answer is that it depends. If we're talking about appropriate anxiety, then the answer is yes. But if we're thinking about anxiety more generally, then anxiety is not something we want to see in our leaders. Second, we've learned what appropriate anxiety is. It's the practical anxiety of Woolman, Mandela, and Stanton—felt at the right time and in the right way—not the anxiety of Wellington or Chamberlain. Third, in response to why appropriate practical anxiety is valuable, we can now see that it's valuable because it brings an important form of emotional attunement: a sensitivity and responsiveness to hard choices. Finally, we can say something about what can be done to promote appropriate anxiety in politicians. Here the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. (and the empirical work that substantiates it) offers a template for what politicians can—and should—do to shape their anxieties for the better.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A version of this paper was presented as part of the WMU Center for the Study of Ethics and Society Lecture Series. I'd like to thank the audience for a fruitful discussion of the ideas discussed here.

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## ***“Essay Contest Winners on Making Ethics Vital”***

4:00 p.m. Tuesday, January 22

211 Bernhard Center

**Mitchell Winget**, philosophy graduate student

**Arthur Woodworth**, pre-engineering major, College of Engineering and Applied Sciences

## ***“Does Community-Wide Public Health Prevention Work? From Reducing Teen Births to Addressing Today’s Opioid Epidemic”***

6:00 p.m. Tuesday, January 29

157-158 Bernhard Center

**Ron A. Cisler**, Dean, College of Health and Human Services, WMU

**Co-Sponsors: College of Health and Human Services**

## ***“Engaging Communities in Difficult Conversations: Dialogue, Deliberation, and Engaged Scholarship”***

5:00 p.m. Wednesday, February 6

1028 Brown Hall

**Laura Black**, associate professor, School of Communication Studies, Ohio University

**Co-Sponsors: School of Communication, Visiting Scholars and Artists Program, and Center for Civil Discourse at WMU Cooley Law School**

## ***“Making People Better: Saving Us from Ourselves through Moral Enhancement”***

6:30 p.m. Tuesday, February 12

211 Bernhard Center

**Parker Crutchfield**, associate professor, Program in Medical Humanities, Ethics, and Law, WMU Stryker M.D. School of Medicine

**Co-Sponsors: WMU Stryker M.D. School of Medicine, Department of Psychology**

## ***“Should Politicians be Anxious?”***

6:00 p.m. Tuesday, March 12

211 Bernhard Center

**Charlie Kurth**, associate professor of philosophy, WMU

**Co-sponsors: Department of History, Department of Political Science**



**“Social Media and Mass Violence”**

6:00 p.m. Monday, March 25

Brown & Gold Room, Bernhard Center

Winnie Veenstra Peace Lecture

**Susan Benesch**, faculty associate, Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, and Director, Dangerous Speech Project

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