

Anxiety isn't a pathology. It drives us to push back the unknown

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'I'm anxious, therefore I enquire.' Anxiety isn't a problem to be solved; it drives philosophical enquiry and makes us human

Anxiety is not merely a problem or an affliction for which philosophy offers a solution. Rather, a distinctive form of anxiety, as evinced in philosophical enquiry throughout history, is a fundamental human response to our finitude, mortality and epistemic limitation. Anxiety and philosophy are intimately related because enquiry – the asking of questions, the seeking to dispel uncertainty – is how humans respond to this philosophical anxiety. Aristotle suggested in his *Metaphysics* that 'All men by nature desire to know,' but the enquiring, questioning, philosophical being is, in a crucial dimension, the anxious being. Anxiety then, rather than being a pathology, is an essential human disposition that leads us to enquire into the great, unsolvable mysteries that confront us; to philosophise is to acknowledge a crucial and animating anxiety that drives enquiry onward. The philosophical temperament is a curious *and* melancholic one, aware of the incompleteness of human knowledge, and the incapacities that constrain our actions and resultant happiness.

Thomas Hobbes suggested, in *Leviathan* (1651), that anxiety animates curiosity: 'Anxiety for the future time, disposeth men to enquire into the causes of things.' We romanticise this enquiry by calling it the love of wisdom, but philosophy itself is an acute expression of our anxiety: 'I'm anxious, therefore I enquire.' Our theories of the world, our illuminations of the unknown, are our antidotes to this anxiety. The search for knowledge pushes back the unknown that encroaches, making the world more predictable and, hopefully, making us less anxious. The most fundamental enquiry of all is into our selves; anxiety is the key to this sacred inner chamber, revealing which existential problematic – the ultimate concerns of death, meaning, isolation, freedom – we are most eager to resolve. A crucial component of the theist definition of God is omniscience, from which follows God's beatific calm: how could a being assured of all-encompassing knowledge be anxious about any eventuality? If we were not ignorant and uncertain, then we would be as gods; but we are not gods, we are anxious humans.

Philosophical enquiry, then, cannot be delinked from its associated anxiety. To ask is to reveal our anxiety about the form and content of the answer. Philosophical anxiety is variegated with epistemic, metaphysical and ethical dimensions: what do we not know? Can we ever be certain? Are there vital truths we will never know? What is the nature of our being? The central epistemic and metaphysical obsessions about the nature of the relationship of the Word to the World – characteristic of Western philosophy – convey a deep unease: are its dimensions amenable to understanding by human thought? Are our minds enclosed in their own worlds, cut off from the proverbial thing-in-itself? The varied theoretical stances that litter the history of philosophy – empiricism, idealism, rationalism – are responses to this epistemic anxiety. Ethical enquiry, too, reveals a deep moral anxiety about our actions, words and thoughts: am I doing the right thing? What is the right way to treat others? What is the right way to live? Will I be rewarded appropriately for my rightful actions?

Can intellectual query ever be purely rationalist, emotion-free, bereft of personal interest and psychological history?

We must ask, as [Friedrich Nietzsche](#), the arch-psychologist, was fond of doing: what emotion and affect underwrites these metaphysical, epistemological and ethical enquiries? The answers, as Nietzsche knew, are psychologically revealing; deep unanswered questions in philosophy carry with them a great anxiety about the possibility of the incorrect answer. Their correctness, and our susceptibility to error, strike deep anxiety into our hearts. We *must* get this right.

Enquiry by anxiety is clearly evinced in religious thought – as in Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (1670) and Augustine's *Confessions* – which displays an acute relationship between faith and uncertainty. It is also found in the idea of existential dread, which is animated by the awareness that traditional, hopeful forms of knowledge have been displaced by newer questions and priorities, as well as in Enlightenment-era valorisations of reason, such as those of René Descartes.

Consider, for instance, his state of mind in the *Meditations* (1641):

I realise that there is never any reliable way of distinguishing being awake from being asleep. This discovery makes me feel dizzy ... I feel like someone who is suddenly dropped into a deep whirlpool that tumbles him around.

The *Meditations* is overtly psychological in its confessional nature, its frank acknowledgement of the worries that drive Descartes onward, eager to secure a place for reason at humanity's banquets, a little sinecure free from the Church's 'aweful' reach. To do that, reason must provide a certainty above human frailty and cognitive flaws, revealing, for Descartes, an anxiety generated by the uncertainty of defeasible beliefs: was it possible that we could act and function – morally and politically – all the while being systematically deluded? This drive for certainty, this unwillingness to tolerate error in epistemic assessments, bespeaks a great, terrible worry – a 'drive for truth' that Nietzsche accurately described as a human obsession. We must be certain; we cannot tolerate a philosophy that leaves open the possibility that we might be mistaken. Consider, too, an equally anxious, and perhaps more sincere and less affected, self-presentation by David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) as he considers the worrying, destabilising consequences of the radically deflationary doctrines he has offered as a challenge to traditional epistemology and metaphysics.

The American pragmatist [Charles Sanders Peirce](#) reckoned in his classic [article](#) 'The Fixation of Belief' (1877) that epistemic doubt was an 'irritation', a production of unease. The resultant drive to enquire, to move to a state of belief, possessed a rule for action, urged us onward and upward into elevated realms of thought, possibly looking for grand totalising schemes that would encompass our lived experience. If anxiety, and its related doubts, didn't possess an acute affective component, it wouldn't be so richly productive of enquiry. These considerations should force upon us a radical redrawing of the rigid boundaries between the intellectual and emotional: can intellectual query ever be purely rationalist, emotion-free, bereft of personal interest and psychological history?

Humans are philosophising animals precisely because we are the anxious animal

Further afield, the religious find themselves accepting God's will or trying to determine its manifestations: the gnawing, persistent worries about redemption, sinning, forgiveness, salvation, are their preserve. The faithful are promised deliverance, but threatened too – depending on the religious tradition – with eternal damnation: what if their assessment of the probability of salvation is incorrect? The religious anxiety about whether faith is sincere enough found profound expression in the intense theological speculation about the relationship between life and reward, between salvation and knowledge. Calvinism, for instance, produced a distinctive, unmitigated terror: am I one of the chosen ones or am I marked as condemned forever? The German theologian Martin Luther described his despair over salvation as caused by his lack of trust in a judgmental God, convinced his grace was blocked by mortal guilt and inhumanly high standards. The simple Pauline claim that 'He who through faith is righteous shall live' offered relief through an epistemic therapeutic strategy – all is mystery, but if we consider one mystery resolved by unswerving, committed faith, then all mysteries fall before it.

Implicit in our much-vaunted rationality – which Aristotle considered the distinguishing mark of the human, raising it above the plant and the animal – is anxiety. We are temporal creatures, placed in this vanishing, transient and precarious interval between the past – the domain of regret and mistake – and the future – the domain of anticipation and uncertainty. We modify our present, anxiously, in response to memories and anticipations. Even our most practical definition of rationality has anxiety built into it: will we find the correct fitting of means to ends?

We are thrown into a world awaiting construction and completion by human thought and action, left to fend for ourselves, and the trauma of birth – thrust from the darkness into the light, left to make sense of it all, our primeval anxiety – is visible in our history. We are anxious; we seek relief by enquiring, by asking questions, while not knowing the answers; greater or lesser anxieties might heave into view as a result. As we realise the dimensions of our ultimate concerns, we find our anxiety is irreducible, for our increasing bounties of knowledge – scientific, technical or conceptual – merely bring us greater burdens of uncertainty. As Nietzsche noted in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872): 'as the circle of science grows larger it touches paradox at more places'. The resultant perplexity and anxiety are the inevitable companions of the enquiries we cannot cease from mounting.

Søren Kierkegaard [suggested](#) that the most basic human affect, over and above the phenomenal consciousness generated by our senses, is anxiety. The moment we begin to address it by asking *What is this feeling? What does it rise in response to?* we are philosophising. To cure anxiety, then, might remove all that is distinctively human – an accusation sometimes levelled at Stoicism and Buddhism. We should not expect or demand totalising relief for fear of neutering our affective,

enquiring selves. Humans are philosophising animals precisely because we are the anxious animal: not a creature of the present, but regretful about the past and fearful of the future. We philosophise to understand our past, to make our future more comprehensible. The unknown produces a distinctive unease; enquiry and the material and psychic tools it yields provide relief. Where anxiety underwrites enquiry, we claim that the success of the enquiry removes anxiety and is pleasurably anticipated. Enquiry comes to an end when we're not anxious, but rather sated and blissful. There is no more to be asked, answered or understood; understanding and enlightenment have been achieved. Philosophy is the path that we hope gets us there. Anxiety is our dogged, unpleasant and indispensable companion.

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<https://psyche.co/ideas/anxiety-isnt-a-pathology-it-drives-us-to-push-back-the-unknown>

The usefulness of dread

My anxiety has been lifelong but I would not wish it away. It has made me the philosopher – and person – that I am today

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One morning, my father died at home. I awoke to a call for help – my name shouted once, loudly, desperately, fearfully, by my mother – ran into my parents' bedroom, and found my father convulsing in the throes of a massive heart attack. His body bucked on a deadly trampoline, his chest heaved, spittle flecked his lips and the sides of his mouth as he desperately sought to fill his lungs with air. By the time our friendly family doctor arrived, stethoscope and black bag in tow, my father was dead. A dashing pilot and war hero, he had flown supersonic fighter jets in two wars, evaded anti-aircraft fire and airborne interceptors, only to come home and die as his wife and two sons looked on helplessly. Bullets and shells had missed their mark; a clogged artery, a fragment of plaque, had not. He was 43 years old. I was 12.

Fourteen years later, after a protracted struggle with breast cancer that included a disfiguring mastectomy, adjuvant chemotherapy, blasts of directed radiation, hormonal treatment, and a four-year remission, my mother, too, succumbed and passed away. Her last days were painful, mind-numbingly so. She was nauseated, incoherent, delirious, sleepless, her skin yellowed by her failing liver, her lungs crushed. The morphine we asked her doctors to administer made her catatonic and slowed her pulse to a barely discernible crawl. I had become unrecognisable to her; she to me. She was 52 years old. I was 26.

When my parents died, a fundamental, metaphysical sundering between the world and me took place. Lightning had struck twice. The gravity the world had promised – the anchoring of my flights of anxious fancy – had disappeared. The world was now treacherous, lurking with pitfalls, crevasses and trapdoors. The world of misfortune was once dimly glimpsed, its details barely visible, but now I lived in it. I had imagined that with my father's death, the world had exacted its pound of flesh, a tax so terrible it would be levied only once. But in 14 years, death came calling again. One God – a child's God, mythical and compassionate – died with my father; another – an adult's God, a God of reasonableness, the one that ensured this world would not do excessively badly by you – died with my mother.

My parents' deaths, occupying polar positions on a spectrum of suddenness, infected my life with a persistent dread; they suffused my life with an incurable anxiety, a dread that did not require an identifiable object. Their deaths taught me that this world is ruled by merciless probabilities: there are no warnings attached to daybreak that this might be the day of catastrophic misfortune, of fatal eventuality. In her memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2007), Joan Didion wrote that recollections of disaster always begin with the mundane nature of the day; the day my father died, the day my mother's cancer was diagnosed, began as ordinary ones before becoming extraordinary and world-historical. I learned the hard way that there is cause and occasion to fret, to feel anxious, even when there is no indication of disaster. The universe, if not actively malignant, is indifferent to our fates, and cares little for our lives and loves.

Anxiety is insidious, more than just a simple fear. It is, all at once, a fever and an occupation, an affliction and a constitution. An anxiety is a lens through which to view the world, a colouration that grants the sufferer's experiences their distinctive hue. The Buddha alerted us to a fundamental metaphysical feature of this world, the 'co-dependent arising' of all that we experience and know. That is, nothing possesses existence independent of all else that makes it so: an anxious person inhabits a world coloured and contoured by their own, highly individual anxieties; it is a world co-constructed by the sufferer and his or her anxieties. Anxiety is therefore a perspective, a hermeneutical relationship with the world, whose text now gets read in a very peculiar way by this anxiety-laden vision. Things and persons and events fall into focus depending on their interactions with our anxieties: that man in the corner becomes threatening, this chair becomes unstable and unbalanced, that food becomes the agent of a fatal illness, my family – my wife, my daughter – appear as targets for cruel twists of fate. I live in a distinctive world shaded and illuminated by an idiosyncratic anxiety.

I began therapy at 29. During the five years of visits to the clinics that followed – two sessions a week of interpersonal, psychodynamic and Kleinian psychotherapy – I 'found out' that I had always been an anxious child, that I had not started being anxious at the time of my father's death, that in some measure, my anxiety marked me out as a fellow sufferer to all humans. My anxieties had become worse; my parents' deaths traumatised a subject primed to be so. Their deaths had interrupted a continuum of development in which I would have separated myself from my parents 'naturally'; as the psychologist Rollo May would have put it, those deaths had threatened values that I held essential to my existence. In the

clinic and on the couch, I ‘found out’ that anxiety is fertile, capable of bringing forth newer versions, ever more novel imprints of itself. Prompted by the production of new traumas and losses in our lives, anxieties can interact and recombine like viruses to form newer ‘strains’ that course through us, surprising us with their ferocity and visceral feel. We should not expect our anxieties to remain the same as we age; by paying close attention to their nature, their ‘look and feel’, we can track changes in ourselves and our ‘table of values’.

I learned that I respond with anxiety to this world’s offerings. I’m a better person for this knowledge of myself

Anxiety is not singular; individual anxieties make up a sufferer’s full complement. An anxiety might be a distinctive suite packaged for application to a particular situation of time, place, circumstance and connotation. To know oneself is, very often, an injunction to know one’s anxieties – individually, distinctively – and to know how they change and morph as we do. I have learned, partially, which environments provoke and sustain my anxieties; my future steps are circumscribed by this induced caution. My trajectory through the world is thus informed, at every step, by the anxieties that afflict me.

Anxieties are not immortal. Some die on their own, subdued by exposure to enough recalcitrant facts about the world to make some terrors untenable. Moreover, anxieties are not impervious to relief: sometimes an ‘all will be well’ missive arrives from origins unknown. At that moment, the fog lifts, the burden eases, and an exhilarating giddiness makes its presence felt. The clarity of that moment is intensely pleasurable, so pronounced is the relief from the anxiety’s chafing that had preceded it. The drooping shoulder lifts, there is a slight spring in the step. Caffeine, alcohol and marijuana can induce this effect, a pleasing trait that partially accounts for their perennial popularity across cultures and civilisations. I have flirted with these palliatives, pushing them to the boundaries of their use. But when they ran out, anxiety returned. I then felt a painful, tender nostalgia for the comfort of the ones I love. Thus did I find out how acutely fear of loneliness and abandonment underwrote my anxieties. I abstain from alcohol now, because I cannot handle the anxieties associated with excessive drinking: anxiety was never conquered, it just gave way in the face of a greater one. As Friedrich Nietzsche noted in *The Dawn of Day* (1881), to master a drive, we need another just as strong, just as needy and demanding. But the ‘victory’ of that drive also informs us of its existence. We might be surprised to find out what else lurks within us.

Sigmund Freud suggested in 1895 that the purpose of therapy was to get us from hysterical misery to common unhappiness, and a key component of that movement is the attention paid to anxiety. Therapy, accordingly, did not comfort or ‘cure’ me. I had hoped to learn that ‘simple’ trauma had caused my anxiety, but instead I learned that anxiety was constitutive of my being: I respond with anxiety to this world’s offerings. I’m a better person for this knowledge of myself.

We are rational animals, but implicit in that rationality is an anxiety. The rational animal remembers and has learned from its past; it anticipates and plans for its future; it modifies its present, anxiously, in response to these memories and anticipations; it is anxious to avoid mistakes, even those it cannot remember and has consigned to the unconscious forgotten. If memory, as John Locke suggested in 1690, is constitutive of our personal identities, then so are our anxieties. The Buddha and David Hume considered the self to be a bundle of ever-changing perceptions and thoughts and images. Similarly, I propose a ‘self-as-bundled-anxieties’ theory: we are a bundle of anxieties; by examining them, to see what vexes us, what makes us anxious, we come to know who we are. Anxiety is a reminder that our selves are rather more diffuse and disorderly than we might imagine, that there are more bits to be seized as they swirl ‘about’ and ‘inside’ us.

Søren Kierkegaard suggested in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) that one of existentialism’s hard-fought rewards – our encounters with true freedom – comes with the terrible burden of encounters with [dread](#) and anxiety. This burden, he claimed, was one we should ‘happily’ bear. It is our own cross, and we will find ourselves by our willingness to go forth with it, along the paths of our choosing. Kierkegaard thus enabled an understanding of the value of the most persistent, enduring and subtle of existential responses: unease with the unrealised universe of our lives. There would be little to no anxiety if our lives were mapped out with trajectories and actions articulated for us to follow, with fates and fortunes predetermined and predestined.

Instead, confrontations with existential anxiety take place at the boundaries of each instant of our lives, each experienced as free. Anxiety, Kierkegaard suggests, is present in the movement from possibility to actuality, from the present to the future. Our confrontations with anxiety hold the possibility of self-discovery – what are we capable of, what might we do? Will we have the strength to bear up to the consequences, intended or otherwise, of our actions? To move on with our lives despite the discomfort of these encounters is, for Kierkegaard, the basis of selfhood.

The psychic burden of anxiety is offset by the gains in self-knowledge it affords; to experience anxiety is to experience our self in the making. To allow ourselves to experience anxiety is to engage in a self-observation sensitive to one's deepest affective responses, alert to the shapelessness of our lives – and our responsibility for mapping our lives anew at every step. This freedom to create ourselves, the subject, is also the vulnerability of the object to which things happen. We dread what we might become, both by our own agency and by the imprint of the world on us.

Our anxieties rush into the mental spaces we leave open, reminding us of all that can go terribly wrong

Perhaps then, anxiety – precisely because it affords a moment for discovery, reconceptualisation and self-construction – should not be medicated out of existence. (Blaise Pascal noted in *Penseés* (1670) that people employed 'diversions' to escape 'thoughts of themselves'.) Anxiety is, of course, unpleasant, and all too easily triggers the palliative responses of intoxication or medication. So medication might be necessary when anxiety becomes neurotic and crippling – a distinction present in Kierkegaard – but, as May points out, it is an 'illogical belief' that mental health consists in being anxiety-free.

Instead, living with the felt experience of anxiety, a conscious 'wallowing' and 'inspection' can enable an investigation of the self and the particular economy of its lived life. Anxiety, as Kierkegaard claimed, is a 'school' for the self. When we meditate, we allow ourselves to feel our anxieties; they rush into the mental spaces we leave open, reminding us of all that can go terribly, terribly wrong; they wash over us, almost making us leap out of our meditative postures. But, there too, while meditating, we can closely inspect the nature of the beast. As Freud might suggest, to medicate anxiety away could indicate a resistance underwritten by fear of finding out who we are. Smashing idols is never easy.

The most significant aspect of Kierkegaard's suggestion that we pay attention to anxiety is that by noticing it, and talking about it, and acknowledging it, not as pathology but as an informative part of ourselves, it becomes not something to be expelled, but to be welcomed as a message from ourselves. To stop and respond to anxiety's challenge is to accept dialogue with ourselves. There is a Nietzschean note here: we must display *amor fati*, a love of fate; we must 'own' our anxiety as part of us, to be integrated and deployed to make our lives what we wish them to be. Acceptance of anxiety is the acceptance of the Buddhist Noble Truth that suffering is ever-present in our lives, and to integrate that anxiety into our sense of ourselves is akin to the many therapeutic manoeuvres that the Buddha recommended for us along the Eight-Fold Path of Action and Righteous Duty. It is a movement from being an 'unskilled' practitioner of this life's arts to being a skilled one.

Anxiety taught me the place that death has in my life. Death's early presence ensured that every loss in my life – migration included – would be coloured by the deadly fear evoked by the most terrible losses of all, those of my parents; nothing has been quite as formative of my philosophical dispositions as those twinned blows. After my mother passed away, a fundamental crisis overcame me: I realised that I was 'free' as never before. I had understood my life till then as bound up with my parents. Perhaps I had to aspire to their standards, perhaps I had to seek their approval, perhaps I had to live life less recklessly because of their sensitivities. Now, all such barriers were removed, I was free to 'do whatever I want, any old time'. I could put myself out of my misery, secure in the knowledge that my parents would not have to grieve the loss of their precious son. This realisation provoked a terror all of its own; it was the first time I experienced true dread, the first time I understood what the existentialists had been getting at.

The upending of this world's order by my parents' deaths and my resultant anxiety made me suffer a conceptual shift in my understanding of its workings; it became a philosophical commonplace for me to believe in claims about this world's malleability through our conscious, emotional, not-entirely rational understanding of it. My parents' deaths taught me that this world was quicksand built on quicksand, that talk of certainty was laughable, that all things came to be and passed away, that God did not exist, that there were no truths more vital than love, that all we wanted was companionship and spiritual solace. I found myself drawn to philosophical theories that assured me there was no meaning or value to life save the ones we gave it, ones that told me there was no predetermined purpose to my existence. To believe that there was a final end to my life, a purpose, a destination, an intended teleology, was to be infected with an anxiety that I was not fulfilling my purpose in life, that I was 'wasting' my life. That anxiety could be relieved only by convincing myself that this life was purposeless, that I could never snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Curiously enough, this thought was more sustaining than airy directives for how to seek out the Truth about Reality and the Being that underlay it.

My anxiety is intimately related to a hard-won knowledge about this world's eternally changing nature

These philosophical doctrines provided actual, real psychic relief. By raising the possibility of this life's meaninglessness, they eased the terrible, anxiety-provoking thought of a pre-existent meaning, value and essence not discoverable or realisable by me. In a world with no 'wrong' decisions, there would not be the anxieties of cognitive dissonance either. I realised the therapeutic value of such philosophising and embraced it. My anxious state made me receptive to it; it prepared the intellectual ground by saturating it with an emotional and affective field sustained by an acute anxiety. Philosophy done in this therapeutic fashion is not a shameful state of affairs, it is precisely as it should be: philosophy employed to teach us a better way to live, to dispel those illusions and delusions that make this life harder than it needs to be.

Because of my anxieties, I have come to understand why I'm the philosopher I am, why I hold the views I do, why I do not trust that there is an inherent, essential, meaning or purpose to life. My anxiety is intimately related to a hard-won knowledge about this world's eternally changing nature, one that often runs afoul of human plans, intentions, attachments or relationships; it informs me that it cannot be so, and it is no less valuable for that as a source of my knowledge. Why privilege some supposedly logical inference over *this*? Inferences and realisations are prompted by new inputs received, new beliefs formed, new inferences made. We might find ourselves forced toward the conclusion of a train of thought by anxiety, compelling us to move on till we face the truth of that which made us anxious.

My anxieties tell me I'm still capable of feeling. They provide an acute reminder that I'm alive and responsive, and yes, anxious. My anxieties about my family inform me that I have let myself become wrapped up in their selves; they inform me of the boundaries I have formed around and about myself; they inform me of what my self is. They inform me of the risibility of the claim that we are isolated beings whose boundaries terminate at our fingertips, at the surface of our skins. Thus does anxiety inform me of who I am.

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<https://aeon.co/essays/dread-accompanies-me-through-life-but-it-is-not-without-consolation>