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The Danish Doctor of Dread

By [GORDON MARINO](#)

[Anxiety](#): We worry. A gallery of contributors count the ways.

The way we negotiate anxiety plays no small part in shaping our lives and character. And yet, historically speaking, the lovers of wisdom, the philosophers, have all but repressed thinking about that amorphous feeling that haunts many of us hour by hour, and day by day. The 19th-century philosopher-theologian Soren Kierkegaard stands as a striking exception to this rule. It was because of this virtuoso of the inner life that other members of the Socrates guild, such as Heidegger and Sartre, could begin to philosophize about angst. It is in our anxiety that we come to understand feelingly that we are free, that the possibilities are endless.

Though he was a genius of the intellectual high wire, Kierkegaard was a philosopher who wrote from experience. And that experience included considerable acquaintance with the chronic, disquieting feeling that something not so good was about to happen. In one journal entry, he wrote, “All existence makes me anxious, from the smallest fly to the mysteries of the Incarnation; the whole thing is inexplicable, I most of all; to me all existence is infected, I most of all. My distress is enormous, boundless; no one knows it except God in heaven, and he will not console me....”

Is there any doubt that were he alive today he would be supplied with a refillable prescription for Xanax? On virtually every third page of Kierkegaard’s authorship some note about angst is scrawled. But the adytum of Kierkegaard’s understanding of anxiety is located in his work “The Concept of Anxiety” — a book at once so profound and byzantine that it seems to aim at evoking the very feeling it dissects.

Perhaps more than any other philosopher, Kierkegaard reflected on the question of how to communicate the truths that we live by — that is the truths about ethics and religion. In the process, he devised a method of indirect communication, which involved the use of pseudonyms. Writing in “The Concept of Anxiety” under the guise of Vigilius Haufniensis (watchman of the harbor), Kierkegaard observes that anxiety “is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite.” He continues, “Anxiety is a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy,” a simultaneous feeling of attraction and repulsion. Kierkegaard explains: “In observing children, one will discover this anxiety intimated more particularly as a seeking for the adventurous, the monstrous, and the enigmatic.”

Henrik Drescher

Deeper into this text, it becomes plain that the ledge that we both want and do not want to look over runs along the abyss of our own possibilities. In some of his most immortal lines, the watchman of the inner world notes: “Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eyes as in the abyss . . . Hence, anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.” (“The Concept of Anxiety”)



Many philosophers treat emotions as though they were merely an impediment to reason, but for Kierkegaard there is a cognitive component to angst. It is in our anxiety that we come to understand feelingly that we are free, that the possibilities are endless, we can do what we want — jump off the cliff or, in my case, perhaps one day go into the class I teach and, like Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*, say absolutely nothing.

Inquiries about our inner lives and emotions are more complicated than conversing about things in the external world. We can triangulate on objects like rocks, examine them together with various senses and from different perspectives. Not so with the emotions. It could be that what Kierkegaard meant by anxiety is different from the experience we bomb with pills — but I don’t think so.

Writing in different key, Kierkegaard registered this journal entry: “Deep within every human being there still lives the anxiety over the possibility of being alone in the world, forgotten by God, overlooked among the millions and millions in this enormous household. A person keeps this anxiety at a distance by looking at the many round about who are related to him as kin and friends, but the anxiety is still there.”

In something approaching a Freudian notion of defense mechanisms, Kierkegaard argues that we have ways of trying to deflect and defang our anxieties. I might remind myself that there were many friends at the New Year’s Day brunch and that I have the love and support of my family, but assurances or no, I still harbor that deep anxiety about being all alone.

In the age of Big Pharma, we have, of course come to medicalize such thoughts — not to mention just about every other whim and pang. When I once confided with a physician friend that one of my children seemed to overheat with anxiety around tests, he smiled kindly and literally assured, “No need to worry about that, we have a cure for anxiety today.” On current reckoning, anxiety is a symptom, a problem, but Kierkegaard insists, “Only a prosaic stupidity maintains that this (anxiety) is a disorganization.” And again, if a “speaker maintains that the great thing about him is that he has never been in anxiety, I will gladly provide him with my explanation: that is because he is very spiritless.”

Kierkegaard understood that anxiety can ignite all kinds of transgressions and maladaptive behaviors — drinking, carousing, obsessions with work, you name it. We will do most anything to steady ourselves from the dizzying feeling that can take almost anything as its object. However, Kierkegaard also believed that, “Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate.”

In his “Works of Love,” Kierkegaard remarks that all talk about the spirit has to be metaphorical. Sometimes anxiety is cast as a teacher, and at others, a form of surgery. The prescription in “The Concept of Anxiety” and other texts is that if we can, as the Buddhists say, “stay with the feeling” of anxiety, it will spirit away our finite concerns and educate us as to who we really are, “Then the assaults of anxiety, even though they be terrifying, will not be such that he flees from them.” According to Kierkegaard’s analysis, anxiety like nothing else brings home the lesson that I cannot look to others, to the crowd, when I want to measure my progress in becoming a full human being.

But this, of course, is not the counsel you are likely to hear these days at the mental health clinic.



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