

FROM ANXIETY TO ATARAXIA

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Abstract: Our analysis starts from the premise that anxiety is a philosophical concept, not merely a research topic for psychology, not being reducible only to anxiety neurosis. Thus, we propose the philosophical research of this particularly deep concept requiring a complex approach due to its metaphysical origin and its link to the spirit, to the human being's basic structure. It is also the reason why we appreciate that the solution to the problem of anxiety is eminently spiritual, more specifically, it resides in the 'awakening of the spirit'. A truly free spirit, even if dominated by metaphysical anxieties, cannot lock itself into destructive anxiety. In my opinion, metaphysical anxiety cannot be confused with depression, it cannot be treated with anti-depressants. Did man not have turmoil, metaphysical anxieties, he could not claim to participate in culture. Only the one who goes through metaphysical anxiety can attain the state of ataraxia.

Keywords: anxiety, anguish, ataraxia, freedom, spiritual turmoil, philosophy, faith

The Philosophy of Anxiety

The issue of this article envisages specific aspects of human condition from time immemorial, which resides in the struggle between what we are, feel, think, live and what we seek, desire, achieve and fulfill. Freud said that "our psychic life is a battlefield of antinomian couples".¹ Anxiety and ataraxia are antinomian concepts, like suffering and happiness, evil and good, but which are interrelated, because "evil is only the absence of good"², and "unlimited happiness and very violent suffering always happen to one and the same person: because they condition each other and are thus jointly conditioned by a great vitality of the spirit".³

In the history of philosophy, anxiety and anguish have been approached and we would like to remind especially the existentialist thinkers, such as S. Kierkegaard, M. Heidegger. Today, indeed, anxiety is

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¹ S. Freud, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Bucharest, Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, 1980.

² G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy – Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, Introduction, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 1997, p. 17.

³ Ah. Schopenhauer, *The Art of Being Happy through 50 Rules of Life*, Rule 5th, Bucharest, Cartex Publishing House, 2018, p. 26.

explained starting from the multiple and diverse disturbing factors that the current world is facing - pandemic, war, technological expansion, etc., being located in the cognitive register of psychology. Anxiety (confused with fear, depression, etc.) has no external cause, not having a biological basis like nervousness.

Therefore, not any turmoil triggers the anxiety of evil. The only anxieties that can lead to ataraxia are the metaphysical ones, but which are consciously experienced by those who aspire to higher knowledge or who question the meaning of life. Most people are stuck in routine without questioning the meaning of life, experiencing anxieties which are related only to the immediate aspects of their lives. For them, existence has no enigmas! Through the original sin, man fell from grace, destroying his absolute freedom. Thus, man was 'condemned' to an essential restlessness, to metaphysical anxiety. It is not by mere chance that Kierkegaard defined anxiety as a 'vertigo of freedom'.⁴ It is the reality of freedom as the possibility of possibility. This is why anxiety is not found in animals, precisely because they are not spiritually determined in their nature. Man is a synthesis of soul and body. But a synthesis is inconceivable without both sides uniting in a third. This third party is the spirit.⁵ Undoubtedly, anxiety is constitutive of the human spirit. How does the spirit relate to itself and to its condition?! It relates as anxiety. This means that it is a state of mind imparted to man from the beginning, but which goes beyond man and is related to a certain sadness of divinity. In this sense Schelling claims that anxiety primarily denotes the sufferings of the divinity at the beginning of its creation.⁶ Therefore, when asserted in *Genesis* that God commanded Adam – "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat" (*Genesis 2:17*), it goes without saying that Adam did not actually understand His word/ how could he understand the difference between good and evil, when this separation was made, wasn't it, only when he indulged into "the pleasure of life"? If we now assume that interdiction awakens desire, then we have knowledge (instead of ignorance), for Adam must have been aware of freedom - since he wanted to make use of it.....the interdiction makes him anxious, because it awakens in him the possibility of freedom. What had passed by innocence as a "nothingness of anxiety, now penetrated him, also as nothingness, as the terrifying possibility of being free. There is only the possibility of being free, as a kind of higher form of ignorance, as a higher expression of anxiety..... After the word

⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *On Anxiety*, Timișoara, Amacord Publishing House, 1998, p. 99.

⁵ Idem. The definition of what means to be a human is presented by S. Kierkegaard in *Either/Or*, the second part being subsequently developed more extensively at the beginning of the writing *The Sickness unto Death*.

⁶ F.W.J. Schelling, apud. ibidem, p. 97.

(commandment) that forbids followed the word of judgment – “thou shalt surely die” (*Genesis,2,17*).....If we say that interdiction awakens desire, we will say that the word of punishment also awakens a frightening image that disturbs us. Here the terrible turns into anxiety/ because Adam did not understand what was said, here we are facing again the ambiguity of anxiety..... thus innocence is carried to the maximum. It is anxious about the forbidden thing and about the punishment. It is not guilty and yet anxious, as if it had been lost. Psychology goes no further, the author claims, but it can go this far and, above all, it can prove all these things whenever it observes people's lives⁷. The Danish philosopher seeks the source of anxiety in the original sin, explaining the original sin regressively, in the direction of its origins. The anxiety that sin brings along exists only when the individual institutes the sin himself, being nevertheless vaguely present as a “more or less in the quantitative history of the human race. Hence, we shall encounter the phenomenon when one considers himself guilty even of his own anxiety, which cannot be said of Adam.anxiety means two things - the anxiety in which the individual institutes sin by a qualitative leap, and the anxiety that penetrated and penetrates together with sin and which, in this way, penetrates the world quantitatively whenever an individual institutes sin. Sin has penetrated anxiety, bearing anxiety with it, and the continuity of sin is the possibility that produces anxiety”. Kierkegaard speaks of the anxiety of creation which is objective/ on the other hand, the possibility of salvation is only a ‘nothing that the individual loves but also fears’/ this is always also the relation of possibility to individuality. Only at the moment when salvation is truly instituted, only then is this anxiety also overcome. I have brought to attention the arguments of the Danish philosopher precisely to demonstrate that the author himself recognized that psychology cannot go very far in the research of anxiety, because it is a metaphysical concept. From this perspective, *metaphysical anxiety is the expression of longing for God, but the longing alone cannot save him*. In fact, *therein lies the metaphysical drama of man living simultaneously in two worlds!* Hence the *unhappy consciousness* that Hegel spoke of, understanding that any consciousness is unhappy because it dislocates itself into subject and object simultaneously. As a problem related to the essential structure of man, *metaphysical anxiety* is not a disease. We encounter it in metaphysically restless spirits, and I have presented above the basis of this assertion. On the other hand, it can be converted into ataraxia, through philosophizing, faith, art, science, through knowledge and self-knowledge. In psychoanalysis and psychology, the term Angst-neurose (anxiety neurosis), used by Freud since 1890, has become an established clinical term denoting a nervous

⁷ S. Kierkegaard, *On Anxiety*, op. cit., p. 80-81.

disease caused by the repression of senses which, unable to be expressed, externalized, turn into angst. This neurosis can also be due to the inner conflict between an instinct and an interdiction. The disease manifests itself by palpitations, feeling of suffocation, dizziness. Like any disease, *angstneurosis* can be treated both by psychoanalysis, by psychotherapy and with sedative drugs (valium) or other drugs that have an effect on serotonin. However, it remains a “complex disease”, which still defies psychology and psychiatry, having metaphysical explanations. Man's metaphysical suffering is objectified by an anxious but conscious melancholy that can be held under control, not by medication, but by will. Anxiety is a ‘disease of the century’ we live in. More than 50% of the youngsters on this Planet suffer from anxiety, under various forms, for different reasons, because our life circumstances are particular. Especially after the pandemic, the phenomenon has amplified, and the situation of the war in Ukraine somehow generated a global anxiety, because those who started the war maintain the atmosphere of fear and terror with permanent threats regarding an imminent nuclear attack, a fact that could cause, without a doubt, the Third World War.

Kierkegaard – the philosopher of anxiety

Indisputably, anxiety remains a problem of philosophy because it is a state of mind, it is related to the human spirit, and philosophy is the only discipline of the spirit. Early identified in the concepts of ‘fear’, ‘horror’, as well as in the modern terms of ‘worry’, ‘anguish’, it was more widely researched by the existentialist philosophy. Anxiety, guilt, and despair are major themes in both modern art and Kierkegaard's philosophy. The most important modern philosophers are his disciples (...).⁸ Starting from his dogmatic base, Kierkegaard has sketched a most accurate portrait of times that seem to be ours rather than his. But how could the phenomena of mass hysteria, the indignation of some people towards the spiritual life and towards the weaknesses of the self be explained if not psychologically and socially? Kierkegaard's diagnosis is short and clear: all this is nothing but anxiety towards the spirit, anxiety of becoming oneself. Unlike fear, anxiety does not have an external cause, and neither does it have a biological basis like nervousness. In the beginning, anxiety is a premonition that man takes in more than he could have thought, it is anxiety towards the uncertain possibilities that frighten him but at the same time attract him. Anxiety is both a psychological prerequisite - for man to become alienated from himself (by falling into sin), as well as a consequence of this alienation. In order to calm down and exonerate himself, man can claim that this limitation is fate, being anxious to admit

⁸ Villy Sorensen, *Forward* to S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, op. cit.

the very fact that, if we judge it properly, it is his own fault. The opportunity to overcome his anxiety comes only when man recognizes that he has nothing to do with his environment, that it is not chance or strict necessity that prevents him from becoming himself, but his own sin. The free man does not take offense, blame others, but recognizes that the reason for what happens to him lies within himself. And yet man refuses again to accept his sin (anxiety of Evil, IV,1) or to recognize that there is a way out of sin (anxiety of Good, IV,2), namely faith (V).⁹ Kierkegaard interprets everything from within, he is not as one-sided as his Hegelian-Marxist counterparts who explain everything from without. The fact that his work encompasses more ethical force than the others' is indisputable. Even more surprising is the fact that no one has penetrated the spiritual, psychological and social phenomenon of anxiety (*angst*), from an inter and transdisciplinary perspective - philosophical, psychological, sociological, as deeply as the Danish thinker did.

We dare appreciate that S. Kierkegaard - *the philosopher of anxiety*¹⁰, places himself in the horizon of metaphysics with his work "*On Anxiety*"¹¹, combining somehow the philosophical explanation with the theological one. Thus, according to the Danish philosopher, anxiety does not have a concrete object such as 'fear' or 'fright'. It is an A of 'nothing'.

It has a dogmatic, Christian dimension, relating to sin and spirit. Anxiety arises from the freedom to choose between good and evil, etc. The concept of *Angst* was later resumed by Martin Heidegger¹², who considers that the man suffering from A realizes that there is nothing that constitutes an absolute support point for his principles, ideas and life, these being based on 'nothingness'. Kierkegaard's concept also exerted influence, in the early 1900s, on the existential theology of Gabriel Marcel, Rudolf Bultmann and on the existential philosophy of K. Jaspers, J. P. Sartre and A. Camus, the latter two widely contributing to the spread of the Kierkegaardian thought in Europe. The philosophical and scientific research carried out has revealed that 'anxiety' has a philosophical, physiological, religious and psychological value. The philosophical force of the word 'anxiety' is limited in the Romanian language, although the tendency of using it seems to be on the rise. The term anxiety is currently used in psychology, which denotes a one-sided and negative approach to this word, because at the level of common

⁹ Ibidem, p. 25.

¹⁰ For Kierkegaard, anxiety was not just a concept, but the analysis of a "concrete" state of mind he had been suffering from ever since his birth. His diary entries from 1837, 1839, 1850 describe this long lasting suffering of his, without a direct "reason", this psychic suffocation handed down from one generation to another and acquired through one's own fault.

¹¹ S. Kierkegaard, *On Anxiety*, *op. cit.*

¹² M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2003.

sense anxiety is identified with a pathological state of mind. Kierkegaard himself claims that psychology has anxiety as its object. But he somehow warns that it is necessary to be cautious, because “the history of individual life moves forward from one state of mind to another. Each state of mind is achieved by a leap....Each such leap is preceded by a state of mind which is the closest psychological approximation. This state makes the object of psychology.¹³ We do not share the idea that anxiety is influenced by sex, that “women are more anxious than men”.¹⁴ What influences anxiety with its forms of manifestation is the freedom of the spirit. Otherwise, as I have shown above, anxiety is related to spirit, it is defined as freedom revealing itself in possibility. The metaphysical perspective of anxiety that transcends the psychological approach entitles us to argue that anxiety is not entirely undesirable. In this sense, in chapter V entitled “*Anxiety - as savior through faith*”, Kierkegaard emphasizes that “every man should go through such an adventure in order to learn to be anxious and not to lose because he has never tried anxiety, or because he sank into anxiety, so he who has properly learned to be anxious has learned the highest thing”.¹⁵ *Learning to be anxious means becoming aware of the finitude of existence, assuming it and seeking inner peace (ataraxia), as a relinquishment to one's own fate.* The need for peacefulness, detachment, ataraxia, the need for faith, for God emerge from anxiety! Let's remember Augustine's *Confessions*¹⁶, his metaphysical anxieties and the desire to overcome them through faith and philosophy - “*Our heart is restless until it rests in You!*” It is very important to understand that anxiety is a specifically human state of mind. Only man can experience anxiety, because he is ambivalent. “However, being a synthesis, he can be anxious, the deeper his anxiety, the greater the man; not in the sense that the world usually considers anxiety - when it is towards something external, towards those things which are outside of man - but in the sense that anxiety is produced by himself. Only in this sense is it meaningful and when it is said that Christ would have been gripped by the anxiety of death¹⁷ and that he would have said to Judas¹⁸: “what you will to do, do it quickly”. And the terrible words that caused Luther anxiety until he preached them: “My God, why have you forsaken me?”, not even these words express the suffering so strongly, due to the fact that the latter words describe the state in which Christ is, and the former describe the relationship to a state of mind that does not exist. The Kierkegaardian

¹³ S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, op. cit., p. 99.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 105.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 203.

¹⁶ Augustin, *Confessions*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2018.

¹⁷ Matei 26, 37-38, Marcu 14, 33-34.

¹⁸ *The Gospel of John*, 13-27.

approach to anxiety deserves due analysis because it insists on the idea of spiritualizing this specifically human condition when it claims: “Anxiety is the possibility of freedom, only such anxiety is absolutely educational, formative, through faith - because it devours all finitudes, discovers everything that is illusory in them. And not even a great inquisitor has at hand such terrible tortures as anxiety does, no spy knows how to attack his suspect so treacherously—at the exact moment when he is most vulnerable, or to make the noose in which he wants to lure him as enticing as anxiety does. And no sagacious judge knows how to examine the accused like anxiety, without letting him slip off, neither to fun, nor to make noise, nor at work, nor by day or by night. The one educated and shaped by anxiety is formed by possibility, and only he who has been formed by possibility is formed according to his infinitude”¹⁹.

Instead of conclusions

Anxiety is *a research topic* that has been proper to the human condition. At the same time, it is *a state of mind*, not always a negative one. Ataraxia is an eminently philosophical concept, denoting the goal of ancient wisdom (Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skepticism)²⁰, because it means the peace of mind happiness consists of. In this sense, we support the idea that *metaphysical anxiety* is the one that uplifts man and develops his spiritual freedom. “The sage’s ataraxia”²¹ means ‘his refusal to react to good or bad of any kind that could happen to him”²². Not by chance, Andrei Pleșu, in his *Introduction to Epictetus' Manual*, appreciates that there are, indeed, more effective and less risky drugs than those prescribed by psychiatrists. In our turn, with this book in hand, we can also proclaim, for the benefit of the neurotics around us (and our own neuroses): “Epictet, not antidepressants”.²³ You will see that it really works..... Philosophically practiced, through positive and deep thinking, anxiety can lead to the state of ataraxia. All our life goes through all kinds of anxieties: from annoyances, sufferings, turmoil, restlessness, worries, anguish, despair²⁴ and even the horror and fear of death! The great Roman philosopher and emperor who was Marcus Aurelius, sensing the struggle

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

²⁰ Frederick Copleston, *The History of Philosophy. Greece and Rome*, vol. I, Bucharest, All Publishing House, 2008, p. 368.

²¹ H. Arendt, *The Life on the Spirit*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2018, p. 142.

²² Epictetus, *Manual*, Bucharest, Seneca Lucius Annaeus Publishing House, 2016.

²³ Andrei Pleșu, apud. *Ibidem*.

²⁴ E. Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1990, appreciated as “the most philosophical book” by the author himself. *Anxiety means despair* for Cioran.

of the human being in this world, states: "Life is warfare, and a sojourn in foreign land. What is it then that will guide man? One thing alone: philosophy."²⁵ The Roman philosopher has in mind the soteriological function of philosophy (salvation through reason), the detachment acquired through philosophy can lead him towards the state of ataraxia, (peace of mind), a condition of freedom and happiness.

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²⁵ M. Aurelius, *Thoughts to Myself*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2013.