

## Anxiety

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Learning is, increasingly, dominated by anxiety. Anxiety exists in the face of challenges to, and amidst promises of, mastery. Anxiety seems opposed to good performance, and most counseling in schools and universities aims to reduce it, either by stressing the positive results of self-confidence or inculcating "life-planning skills" that avoid problems in advance, adopt coping mechanisms, and/or increase self-awareness.

Despite the obvious benefits of such approaches, anxiety has complex role in life and thought that goes beyond the scope of being a personal problem. Anxiety, in short, is the fuel of human action; something required by culture as an ambiguous force to be modeled into the variety of explicit forms where it is named but not understood.

First, it is necessary to consider the cases where anxiety is absent. The first of these is where temporality, as a possible future or regrettable past, is absent; where one is free, briefly, to "live in the present." This is the commonplace experience of enjoyment, where one is said to "forget about problems."

The second of these is the state of mind achieved by meditation, recollection, interest, affection, love, or joy, where not only is one allowed to live in the present but to gain a sense of escape of any *potential* threat to the peace of mind being experienced. Unlike perceptions of mastery, where a mental or physical strength is set up as a defense against attack, these states do not depend on the promise of victory. They accept the inevitability of defeat and hope for what the Irish novelist Iris Murdoch called "A Fairly Honorable Defeat."

The clinical evidence that guilt is also a means of overcoming anxiety helps explain how these two antidotes for anxiety work. Guilt is a means of accepting responsibility, of absorbing a loss of status and recognition of failed mastery. Feeling guilty takes the first step toward tranquility by accepting responsibility for a loss or wrong. Guilt does not absolve one from action; rather, it necessitates involvement.

Guilt moves us up one step in the scale of "reality recognition." It is a means of stepping back from experience and assessing it in terms of conditions that are understood better by being framed and defined. As a counterpart to the point of view of the subject who takes this step back is an invisible "vanishing point" on the other side of the framed situation, a place where unknowns are allowed to reside and control without requiring that one seeks to know them. The subject must exist in a state of suspension, knowing *of* the existence of such unknowns and their strategic influence but not being able to do anything about them.

If temporality is a key ingredient of anxiety, so, too, is the space anxiety creates and the space (and time) of its absence. The connection of anxiety relief and being able to take a step back implies that anxiety involves *not* being able to "escape from a situation." There are two parts to this entrapment: one, enclosure, which seems to prevent any solution or escape; two, an element within the enclosure that, like the vanishing point described above, embodies unknowns but moves about the enclosure without being locatable. This is the reverse of the game "Blind Man's Bluff," where one player is blindfolded and others frozen in space. With anxiety, everyone is blind, and the source of anxiety is able to move around without being detected or seen. It is an "it" that is unidentifiable, unnamable, unlocatable. It is theoretically near and can "appear" in some form at any time.

Lacan notes that anxiety has to do with the place, specifically, of the ego. The ego is determined in relation to others, the unknown and enigmatic demand of others. This explains much of why anxiety is particularly evident in settings where the idea of the other is highly formalized — i.e. schools — and why the infinite hierarchies associated with organizations, which conceal responsibility within echelons of bureaucracy, preserve and intensify anxiety for maximum benefit of the institution. If the image of "jumping through hoops" best expresses anxiety's deployment as a series of tasks set to create multiple messages about mastery, schools are best described as Kingdoms of Anxiety, where the past is defined as an economy of accomplishment in the eyes of the Other, and the future is elaborated as a set of vocational/aspirational guarantees.

Yet, this relation of the Other is impenetrable unless we refer directly to the specific uses of space and time required to deploy anxiety or, alternatively, escape from it.

The strategy of doing this focuses on the most intensive logical condition of anxiety, that of the "forced choice." The forced choice is embodied by the robber's demand, "Your money or your life!" The victim quickly realizes that this is not a choice but a mandate. You can't choose to have your money without losing the ability (life) to enjoy it. You get to keep your life, but without any money to enjoy it. The forced choice is used in many ways. In the lead-up to the US invasion of Iraq, for example, claims about weapons of mass destruction moved from asserting that Saddam Hussein held them, ready to use, in secret locations; to a position that explained why these locations could not be found; to a position that admitted that the weapons did not exist but that the invasion was justified anyway. This sequence follows the model of the ancient parable about the broken kettle.

1. I never borrowed your kettle.
2. I returned it to you undamaged.
3. When you loaned it to me, it already had a hole in it.

Each statement cancels the previous one, moving to a "higher order" of negation. Hegel specified the role for these three "steps": denial, renunciation, and foreclosure. Each step denies its former condition, and the system as a whole denies itself. Despite this intensive self-contradiction, the three steps of the forced choice "lock in" the victim by *removing any space or time* for a counter-position. The forced choice "sucks all the oxygen out of the room," as they say. It refers both to a situation, which it masters by negation, and to the process of communication, which it subverts and contaminates.

Institutions do this as a matter of course, and the resulting anxiety is a model of all other anxieties. The forced choice is the essence of the "super-ego," which makes unreasonable demands that continue to elude understanding and, by continually slipping away, keep anxiety going. This is the institution's means of holding on to power, and those who employ these means become addicted to the irrationality of the technique to the extent that they are not aware of their practices or the effects of their practices.

Montaigne cites the parable of the wolf and the lamb, quoted by the French philosopher Michel Serres.