

# The Kierkegaardian and Heideggerian Anxiety: on To Be and Being

Bingrui Li

Zhengzhou Foreign Language School, Zhengzhou 450000, China

**Abstract.** The terminology of anxiety is included in both Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's analysis on human existence, and in both cases, it takes place when a man realizes his responsibility for his own being. Yet Kierkegaard introduces anxiety in constructing individuals' lonely journey towards god, Heidegger mainly sees anxiety as a critical point in Dasein's reaching a structural wholeness. In this essay, I will respectively illustrate Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's accounts on anxiety, including anxiety's subjects, the occurrence of anxiety, and the solution to anxiety; then, I will analyze the differences between the two seemingly-similar views on anxiety by incorporating the two views into the philosophers' core philosophies, and finally lead to the conclusion that while Kierkegaard noticed anxiety in a 'to be question', Heidegger points to anxiety to solve the 'being question'.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaard; Heidegger; Anxiety.

## 1. Introduction

In folk comprehension, anxiety is a state of mind where people subjectively feel a continuous but fluctuating tension. In academia, anxiety is a phenomenon mainly discussed within the field of psychology and philosophy. Psychological discussion on anxiety had varied from testifying the actual existence of such a state of mind to seeking to address it, generating terms such as anxiety disorder which causes symptoms like fatigue, feeling restless, or showing irrational fears (contributor to Ivory Research, 2021). The philosophical discussion on anxiety, by contrast, focuses more on its role in analyzing the human mentality, as well as its implication on the nature of human life as a whole. Along the history of philosophy, Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger are two philosophers who both left significant influence on the study of anxiety from an existentialist angle. Interestingly, though both the two philosophers defined anxiety in their theses as an important step for one to transit from living dumbly among the majority to living while being aware of one's purpose of life, they have constructed their similar theories out of different aims, thus contributing to different areas of study in philosophy and leaving long-term influences.

## 2. The Kierkegaardian Anxiety: From Despair to Bliss

### 2.1 Anxiety Relies on the Structure of the Self

In analyzing humans' being, Kierkegaard first gives out the thesis that the analysis would only make sense when it is conducted on an individual man; in other words, it's the "single individual" (Kierkegaard, 1849, p.105) that exists before god. The single individual, or a human being, is a "synthesis of the finite and infinite, of the temporal and eternal, of freedom and necessity" (Kierkegaard, 1849, p.38). Human being is also the "spirit", and the spirit is the "self" (Kierkegaard, 1849, p.38). To be a spirit and therefore a self, a man needs to be a relation, as Kierkegaard puts it, "If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self." (Kierkegaard, 1849, p.38)

But how can a man be a synthesis and at the same time an entity? And how can a man not be a self if he is a spirit? Kierkegaard reflects on these problems through the Bible.

Firstly, Kierkegaard proves that man is a synthesis using the notion of objective anxiety. "Through the first sin, sin came into the world." (Kierkegaard, 1844, p.31) As the expression of sin, guilt split the innocence which keeps creatures away from the awareness of being. With guilt, Adam and Eve became able to examine beings--they no longer take the nature they were in as granted, but they saw

that the fig trees are “being there”, the beasts of the field were “being there”, and they themselves were “being there”. This awareness attained through the original sin, is transcended through generation to every human, deciding that man is a synthesis on top of god’s design, as Kierkegaard puts it : “ The sense in which creation sank into corruption through Adam's sin, how freedom was posited by the fact that its misuse was posited and thus cast a reflection of possibility and a trembling of complicity over creation, the sense in which this had to take place because man is a synthesis whose most extreme opposites were posited and whose one opposite, precisely on account of man's sin, became a far more extreme opposite than it was before-all this has no place in a psychological deliberation but belongs in dogmatics, in the Atonement, in the explanation by which this science explains the presupposition of sinfulness.” “this anxiety in creation may rightly be called the objective anxiety.”(Kierkegaard, 1844, p.58)

Secondly, it’s within the process for a man to be a spirit and therefore a self, that the subjective anxiety takes place. “anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.”(Kierkegaard, 1844, p.61) While objective anxiety stands for all creations’ dizziness of their common freedom, single individuals must require another kind of freedom which makes them realize the freedom of their own, the anxiety “which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself.”(Kierkegaard, 1844, p.61) With subjective anxiety, a man gets to realize his infinite part of the synthesis. Once the infinite is realized, it exerts effects contradictory to the finite on the man. The finite refers to the body, and the infinite refers to the soul, but for the man to behave and think as an entity, spirit must be introduced to coordinate the two attracting forces. With the spirit’s relating itself to itself, the man is deciding for himself, and therefore being responsible for himself, the man is thus a self.

Humans objectivity allows people to be conscious of their being, and it is naturally possessed by every human as an character of this species. With only objectivity, however, a man is still not capacitated with the ability to recognized himself as a unique individual. Objective anxiety inspires subjectivity, and thus the realization of one’s self. With subjectivity, a man learns the importance of and strives for being responsible for himself.

## 2.2 Anxiety Guides to the Leap of Faith

A man is a synthesis, as well a forever-pondering spirit. As a self, a man needs to obey the laws and morality of the finite, but at the same time, being totally aware of his true internal demands. In other words, for a spirit choosing between two sets of factors, its life is about suffering from strengthening a half of himself and meanwhile undermining the other half. Such a state of living, is what Kierkegaard called, the despair:

“If a human self had itself established itself, then there could be only one form: not to will to be oneself, to will to do away with oneself, but there could not be the form: in despair to will to be oneself. This second formulation is specifically the expression for the complete dependence of the relation (of the self), the expression for the inability of the self to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation.” (Kierkegaard, 1849, p.39)

For Kierkegaard, men are designed to be in despair due to their selfhood. However, for many people, despair is never detected. “at no moment is it possible to decide anything about a person who has not been saved by having been in despair, for whenever that which triggers his despair occurs, it is immediately apparent that he has been in despair his whole life.”(Kierkegaard, 1849, p.49) This is because the selfhood is not unveiled in all man. Therefore, in some sense, it’s subjective anxiety that leads to despair and thus the leap of faith.

“The opposite to being in despair is to have faith.”(Kierkegaard, 1849, p.74) To expand the meaning of “to have faith”, faith itself needs to be understood. Kierkegaard would probably disagree with the sentence “ I believe in god”, since to believe is to be convinced, and what is required by convincing is reason and evidence. But god, the being that exceeds human reasoning, does not need

to be tested to exist. Since the subject of faith is not within human logic which is used in the spirit's deciding, faith is out of the synthesis, and therefore, is the savior for people in despair.

To build an identity out of the synthesis so that out of despair is to leap to the faith for god. This faith for god is personal and free from the church and dogmas; for Abraham, the faith is to give the choice of exist to god, and to sacrifice Issac is to follow his faith.

The pondering of the self is consisted of numerous subtle decisions, which are made according to one's belief about his current condition--in other words, according to the his identity. The self-stimulating way of life under subjectivity often fall in to the rut of subjective anxiety, a state of mind where people feel themselves guilty for not meeting the standard of a perfect self; a deeper explanation for that is when people find their behaviors are not always as perfect as they wished, they get frightened by an unknown nihility behind the seemingly-explainable reality. Therefore, a self-determining life style should logically give way to a god-determining one.

### **3. The Heideggerian Anxiety: on the Structural Wholeness of Dasein**

#### **3.1 Dasein as the Subject of Anxiety.**

Heidegger started philosophizing on the question of being with an introduction of the concept of Dasein, which the being of man. According to Heidegger, the definition of Dasein is two-fold: firstly, "The "essence" of this being lies in its to be. § The whatness (essen- tia) of this being must be understood in terms of its being (existentia) insofar as one can speak of it at all." (Heidegger, 1927, p. 39) ; this is to say that Dasein differs from "the existence of man" in that it is not something presented as an existing entity but something that can only be defined in its being, and its being mechanically includes it understanding about being. Secondly, Dasein is "always mine", because when we speak of Dasein, we must always use the personal pronoun along with whatever we say: "I am," "You are." (Heidegger, 1927, p.40) As Dasein not something objectively presented, it is the pure possibility; and when Dasein is confined to one's won in its second fold of definition, it becomes one's exclusive possibility. "Dasein is never to be understood ontologically as a case and instance of a genus of beings as objectively present. To some- thing objectively present its being is a matter of "indifference," more precisely, it "is" in such a way that its being can neither be indifferent nor non-indifferent to it." (Heidegger, 1927, p.40)

The second concept to be introduced is the world, the ground of Dasein's exposedness. As long as Dasein is to be, the world exists; as long as the world is to be, Dasein exists. Dasein is not a being in solitude, and it is inseparable from the "world": a man does not come into existence by his own, and then finds himself in a world and interacts with it; rather, he co-exists with his world. Being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927, p.54) is Dasein's most fundamental constitution--it is the transcendent stipulation that Dasein has to follow.

"Ontically, as well as ontologically, being-in-the-world has priority as taking care. This structure gets its fundamental interpretation in the analytic of Dasein."(Heidegger, 1927, p.54) A man has his own being-in-the-world, yet the world is consisted of objects and other people that are of their own. Dasein's sharing its world with other is inescapable, as one can never live in solitude completely: contacts with objects as simple as wearing shoes points to not only materials used to make the shoes, but also to people who make the shoes; reading books points to not only the printing of the books, but also people who composed, printed, and sold the books. Given that Heidegger such contact with objects and other people as "care", the fact that Dasein's being is about sharing its world others well explains why " (Dasein's) being reveals itself as care."(Heidegger, 1927, p.171)

In short, Dasein is the being of single individual in the form of possibility, the dwelling of which being the world; while being-in-the-world is Dasein's basic constitution, care is the pattern of its being in Dasein's being constitution.

### 3.2 Anxiety and the Overcome of it

Diving into the concept of care, Heidegger further elaborated on moods that Dasein would experience in its interaction with others, such as idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity, which all refer to becoming dumb when among other people, or, being in the state of “falling prey” (Heidegger, 1927, p.164). In his account of “falling prey”, Heidegger began to insult the structural wholeness of Dasein. “Idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity characterize the way in which Dasein is its “there,” the disclosedness of being-in-the-world, in an everyday way. As existential determinations, these characteristics are -not objectively present in Dasein; they constitute its being”(Heidegger, 1927, p.164). Anxiety is also a mood within care, and it is only through revealing anxiety can we reveal Dasein’s structural wholeness.

Anxiety is the fear of nothingness. “The fact that what is threatening is nowhere characterizes what Angst is about. Angst “does not know” what it is about which it is anxious. But “nowhere” does not mean nothing; rather, region in general lies therein, and disclosedness of the world in general for essentially spatial being-in.” (Heidegger, 1927, p.174) Anxiety reveals nothingness, but nothingness is not the nonexistence of things, but the part of being-in-the-world that structurally functions as possibility.

There are two dimensions in the meaning of anxiety, the first dimension being “Angst about” (Heidegger, 1927, p.174). The nothingness as the possibility provides plight for Dasein’s actual existing patterns, in other words, for Dasein’s being-in-the-world. As nothingness is also the subject of Dasein’s anxiety, what anxiety is about is “being-in-the-world itself” (Heidegger, 1927, p.175). the second dimension of anxiety is “angst for” (Heidegger, 1927, p.175). “Angst takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself, falling prey, in terms of the “world” and the public way of being interpreted.” (Heidegger, 1927, p.175) Through anxiety, people get rid of their interwindings with others, and they face themselves as the bare possibility. Finding that their will force is the sole helmsman on the boundless ocean of possibility, people often gain a sense of insecure an unsure about their own decisions about life path. Therefore, what anxiety is anxious about is the fact of being-in-the-world. Anxiety saves people from thrownness, reminding them to be responsible for themselves, yet it is also the source of people’s falling prey, because it can be too painful to bear and play with. However, as anxiety is structurally designed, it will forever exist no matter how deep one falls into the crowd.

People might avoid facing anxiety through numbing themselves, but they can never escape from death. Similar to anxiety, however, death is also a possibility that can only be faced alone. When one truly recognizes the cease of one’s being, all he/she can see would be his/her naked life; this realization allows people to understand possibility and make good use of it, to adjust their life so that they don’t regret, to live their life to the fullest and to plough their limits, and thus entering the authentic way of being. “In the unity of thrownness and the fleeting or else anticipatory being-toward-death, birth and death “are connected” in the way appropriate to Dasein. As care, Dasein is the “Between.”” (Heidegger, 1927, p.179).

As a conclusion, anxiety exists and haunts people as a kind of mood that reveals nothingness, as well as an initiator in one’s journey of accepting the possibility. Though people may fall back to thrownness and ignore their selfhood, death functions substitutionally in a practical sense. The ultimate way for one to be fully responsible for one’s being is to live towards death.

## 4. Differentiating the Question of to be and That of Being

In both philosophers’ accounts about human life explained above, anxiety is brought forward and emphasized in composed living structures. This fact have caused many scholars to wonder the relation between the two ideas: as Haynes noticed both the two philosophers’ emphasis on the ambiguous nature of anxiety (Wrathall, 2016), Geter believed that Heidegger expropriated Kierkegaard’s idea more than he himself acknowledged, probably due to the latter’s popularity during Heidegger’s teaching time. Without further differentiation between the two philosophers’ plights, however, the

two philosophers' different purposes for composing such living structures can hardly be notified, which hinders the overall understanding of anxiety in different contexts.

#### **4.1 The Question of to be as a Resist to Mechanical Age**

Crossing the boundaries of philosophy, theology, psychology, literary criticism, devotional literature and fiction, Soren Kierkegaard was a intellectual who wrote from the the beginning of modernity, an epoch where the value of human was twisted into productive resources (MacDonald, 2017). In Kierkegaard's life time, philosophy of Kant and Hegel inspired establishments of many scientific theories, like the interrelationship between magnetism and electric, the gene idea and light's electromagnetic essence. All these attempts trying to explain the world as a harmonically functioning system acknowledged an objective truth, which exists as the discipline that everything--the universe, the nature, and man's psychology--is congruous to, and condemns subjective truth extracted from personal experience as false and irrational. The boom of scientific theories have improved human technology, and therefore, the spread of information. Being provided with an excessive amount of knowledge, many people became spectators and critics and fewer and fewer were willing to take the risk of making a serious commitment (Dreyfus, 2017). Perhaps it was through witnessing a reality like this, Kierkegaard envisioned the urgency to renovate the notion of faith, thus forging a more humanistic view upon humans and relieve people's despair in life, which addresses what the writer means by "to be question".

#### **4.2 The Question of Being as an Academic Advocate**

Heidegger reaches out to his account of the structure of human life with an academic fervor of differentiating "the Ontic" and "the ontological" (Wrathall, 2021). The ontic is the study of superficial phases of entities--to know something. For an equipment, for example, its ontical characteristic is its usefulness--its texture, glory, and shape--its physical conditions that is available in using for its human owners. The ontology is the study of the beings of entities--to understand something. For an equipment, its ontological characteristic is its meaningfulness--its teleological nexus of purposeful dealings and strivings that construct the human world. From Heidegger's perspective, such differentiation was necessary as the precious philosophers have obscured these two fundamental definitions in ontology, thus forging falsified conclusions. Interestingly, Heidegger presented his ontological account on human being in a phenomenological way: instead of studying the essence of human existence, Heidegger analyzed human life through mood, which is the most direct experience one can get from existence, excluding any potential misunderstanding caused by rationality. Thus concluded, Heidegger composed his human-life structure mainly as an effort to correct philosophy's cognition about the question of being, as well as to bring forward the new-born phenomenology as a reliable deconstructing tool.

### **5. Conclusion**

Both Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger have involved the notion of anxiety as an important transitional point of human life in their works consulting human life, but they have done so out of different purposes. Kierkegaard focused on the despair faced by the contemporaries and sought to renew Christain faith as a solution. Heidegger used phenomenology to give a new insight into the question of being.

### **References**

- [1] Geter, Kenneth David, "Missed Appropriations: Uncovering Heidegger's Debt to Kierkegaard in Being and Time" (2016). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 1195. Page 2. [https:// digitalcommons. du. edu/ etd/ 1195](https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/1195).

- [2] Wheeler, Michael, "Martin Heidegger", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/heidegger/>.
- [3] Haynes, J. 5)2016, Anxiety's Ambiguity: via Kierkegaard & Heidegger. Dreyfus H. L. & Wrathall M. A. (2017). Background practices essays on the understanding of being (First). Oxford University Press. Page 94.
- [4] Dreyfus, Hubert. (2003). Christianity without Onto-Theology: Kierkegaard's account of the self's movement from despair to bliss. Dreyfus H. L. & Wrathall M. A. (2017). Background practices essays on the understanding of being (First). Oxford University Press. Page 232.
- [5] Heidegger, M. (2008). Being and Time. HarperCollins.
- [6] Kierkegaard, S. (2000). Two Ages the Age of Revolution and the Present Age a Literary Review. In Edna H. Hong (ed.), *The Essential Kierkegaard*. Princeton University Press. pp. 252-268.
- [7] Kierkegaard, Søren & Lowrie, Walter (1941). *The Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton University Press.
- [8] Kierkegaard, S. & Perkins, Robert L. (1985). *The Concept of Anxiety*. Mercer University Press.
- [9] Wrathall, M. (Ed.). (2013). *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CCO9781139047289. Page 84.