

# ***Existentialist Philosophies of Anxiety: A Comparative Exploration of Kierkegaard and Heidegger***

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**Abstract:** This academic essay delves into the intricate realm of existentialist philosophies concerning anxiety, examining the perspectives of two towering figures in philosophy: Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger. Both of these existential philosophers have made a big deal out of the concept of anxiety and have a considerable understanding of it. From a particular perspective, it is possible that Heidegger drew on Kierkegaard's interpretation of the concept of anxiety. The objective of this analysis is to comprehensively scrutinize the philosophical underpinnings of anxiety, exploring how these thinkers conceived it in the context of the human experience. Furthermore, this essay examines the religious backgrounds of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, shedding light on the profound influence of their respective religious upbringings on their philosophical interpretations of anxiety. As contemporary society grapples with a multitude of anxieties, the insights of these philosophers remain pertinent, providing valuable perspectives on the nature of anxiety, freedom, and human existence. The essay also critiques part of modern psychological approaches to anxiety, revealing the enduring relevance of existentialist thought.

**Keywords:** Anxiety, Freedom, urgent situation

## **1. Introduction**

Anxiety, a pervasive and inescapable facet of the human condition, has long been a subject of fascination for philosophers and psychologists alike. Its ethereal presence lingers from the earliest stages of life, becoming increasingly intricate as one delves into the complexities of adulthood. In the modern era, anxiety often finds itself cast in the role of a malady, a psychological affliction demanding therapeutic intervention. But is anxiety merely a condition to be pathologized and treated, or does it harbor profound philosophical significance? This essay embarks on an intellectual odyssey through the philosophical musings of Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, two luminaries of existentialist thought, to unravel the multifaceted nature of anxiety. It engages in a comprehensive exploration of their religious backgrounds to elucidate the profound influence of these backgrounds on their interpretations of anxiety. Additionally, it seeks to demonstrate the enduring relevance of their philosophical perspectives in our contemporary world, marked by a plethora of anxieties. The essay will also critique modern psychological approaches to anxiety, revealing the enduring relevance of existentialist thought.

## 2. The Philosophical Odyssey of Søren Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard, often hailed as the "father of existentialism," led a life steeped in melancholy and introspection. His philosophical journey began in Copenhagen in 1813, where he grew up amidst the specter of death, witnessing the passing of several close relatives as he matured [1]. This pervasive experience of loss deeply influenced his works, which frequently revolved around the enigma of death. However, his life narrative encompasses more than personal tragedy; it is an intricate tapestry of relationships and contemplations.

Kierkegaard's reflections on love and marriage were as intricate as the existential questions he posed. He chose to forgo marriage, a decision rooted in his unique understanding of love and its implications. His engagement to Regine, a passionate romance, ended abruptly. Fearing that his melancholic disposition would cast a shadow over Regine's life, he made the difficult choice to part ways, resorting to morally questionable tactics to dissolve the engagement [2]. In his seminal work "Either/Or," he famously penned the paradoxical assertion, "Marry, and you will regret it; don't marry, you will also regret it." This paradox encapsulates the essence of his views on love, choice, and the human condition.

Kierkegaard's intellectual journey was significantly shaped by his time in Berlin, where he immersed himself in Germanic culture. Figures like Hegel and Schelling left an indelible mark on his philosophical outlook [1]. Notably, Kierkegaard's philosophical project included a systematic critique of Hegel's elaborate philosophical system. It was in Berlin, during the aftermath of his broken engagement, that he penned many of his most prolific works [1].

A distinctive feature of Kierkegaard's writings was his use of pseudonyms, each representing different stages of life and spheres of existence. These pseudonyms allowed him to provide multifaceted perspectives on existential themes. In "Fear and Trembling," for instance, Kierkegaard wrote under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio. Here, he delved into the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, exploring the intricate relationship between faith and doubt. This pseudonymous approach enabled him to offer a diverse array of insights despite his strong Lutheran background and criticism of the Lutheran Church in Denmark [2].

In his work "The Concept of Anxiety," Kierkegaard adopted the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis to explore the very essence of anxiety itself. He introduced the idea that anxiety arises not from a specific object of fear but from the recognition of one's own freedom and the possibilities that accompany it. It is the precursor to the feeling of freedom, he argued, making anxiety a fundamental aspect of the human condition [3].

To illustrate this point further, Kierkegaard turned to the biblical tale of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He posited that their serene existence was disrupted when God forbade them from eating the fruit of the tree of good and evil. This prohibition awakened anxiety in Adam by revealing the possibility of disobedience [4]. In this narrative, Kierkegaard underscored the notion that anxiety arises from the awareness of one's freedom and the potential for choice.

## 3. Heidegger's "Groundless Floating" in the Phenomenology of Anxiety

Almost a century later, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger offered his own interpretation of anxiety, building upon Kierkegaard's foundations. Heidegger viewed anxiety as a fundamental mood that reveals the core of human existence, a concept he termed "Dasein," meaning existence or being there. Heidegger's perspective drew heavily from Kierkegaard but introduced unique elements.

He described anxiety as a state of "groundless floating," a mood that discloses both nothingness and freedom [5]. Heidegger's notion of anxiety resonates with Kierkegaard's idea that anxiety arises from the recognition of one's freedom and the accompanying possibilities. In Heidegger's view, anxiety is not merely a transient emotional state but a profound existential experience.

Heidegger also introduced the concept of "unhomeliness" (*unheimlich*), wherein anxiety transforms the once-familiar world into something strange and meaningless. This idea finds a parallel with Kierkegaard's perspective that anxiety unveils the possibilities and uncertainties of existence as individuals immerse themselves in the digital age, where the boundaries between the real and virtual blur, the sense of "unhomeliness" becomes increasingly relevant. The digital landscape, with its constant connectivity and virtual realities, engenders a feeling of disorientation. It challenges individuals to navigate a world where the familiar becomes strange, and the real intertwines with the virtual [5].

#### 4. Comparative Analysis of Religious Backgrounds: Kierkegaard and Heidegger

To fully appreciate the nuances of Kierkegaard and Heidegger's views on anxiety, we must consider the religious and cultural backgrounds that shaped their perspectives. Both philosophers had intricate relationships with religious traditions, which influenced their interpretations of anxiety.

Kierkegaard's early exposure to the gospel of Danish Lutheran Christianity played a pivotal role in his intellectual development. His father, a devout Christian, read the gospel to him regularly, fostering a deep connection with faith [1]. Despite this strong foundation, Kierkegaard later critiqued the state of local Christianity in Copenhagen. He believed that true Christianity had been lost, asserting that only through embracing the pain and fear inherent in faith could individuals rediscover their connection with God [1].

In contrast, Martin Heidegger hailed from a conservative and religious German town. His early studies veered toward theology at the University of Freiburg before he transitioned to philosophy. Heidegger's philosophical journey was marked by intellectual exploration and philosophical disagreements. Notably, he engaged in controversial political affiliations during World War II, including joining the German Nazi Party [6]. These aspects of his life demonstrate a more complex relationship with religion.

#### 5. Contemporary Relevance of Kierkegaard and Heidegger's Ideas

In the context of the 21st century, Kierkegaard and Heidegger's philosophical explorations of anxiety continue to resonate deeply with individuals grappling with the complexities of modern life. The global COVID-19 pandemic has acted as an unprecedented catalyst for heightened levels of anxiety. Lockdowns, social isolation, economic instability, and an uncertain future have created an environment where anxiety thrives.

Central to Kierkegaard's philosophy is the idea that anxiety emerges from the recognition of one's freedom and the possibilities that come with it. In the contemporary world, the pandemic abruptly thrust many into a new realm of freedom. With lockdowns and restrictions lifted, individuals were faced with the daunting task of navigating this newfound freedom responsibly. Anxiety surged as people grappled with questions about safety, health, and personal choices.

Heidegger's concept of "unhomeliness" becomes especially relevant in the digital age, which is the exact period that we are facing. The constant connectivity, the pressure to curate an ideal online presence, and the fear of missing out contribute to a unique form of anxiety known as "digital anxiety" [7]. Individuals today grapple with anxiety related to their online identities, the incessant influx of information, and the blending of real and virtual realities.

Furthermore, the socio-political landscape in many countries has given rise to collective societal anxiety. Issues such as climate change, economic inequality, and political polarization have created an atmosphere of uncertainty and concern. This anxiety is not confined to individuals but extends to entire communities and societies [8].

## 6. Expanding on Contemporary Perspectives

Beyond the realms of existentialism and phenomenology, contemporary psychology and sociology have provided insights into the pervasive nature of anxiety in modern society. Clinical psychologists emphasize the importance of distinguishing between healthy anxiety, which serves as a protective mechanism, and chronic anxiety, which can be debilitating [9].

The digital age has introduced new dimensions of anxiety, often referred to as "digital anxiety." The constant connectivity, social media pressures, and the need to maintain a curated online persona have contributed to a unique form of anxiety [7]. Individuals today experience anxiety related to their online identities, fear of missing out (FOMO), and the constant barrage of information and notifications.

Moreover, the socio-political landscape in many countries has led to heightened societal anxiety. Issues such as climate change, economic inequality, and political polarization have created an atmosphere of uncertainty and concern. The anxiety stemming from these societal challenges is not only individual but collective, affecting entire communities and societies [8].

## 7. The Role of Resilience and Coping Strategies

In the face of anxiety, individuals often employ various coping strategies to manage their emotional states. Some turn to mindfulness practices, meditation, or therapy to gain better control over their anxiety [9]. These strategies align with both Kierkegaard and Heidegger's ideas, as they emphasize self-awareness and the ability to navigate one's emotional landscape.

From an existential perspective, anxiety can be seen as an inherent aspect of human existence. Embracing anxiety as a part of life's uncertainties may empower individuals to develop resilience. Kierkegaard's call to move through doubt to reach faith can be applied more broadly to facing life's challenges with courage and determination.

## 8. Critiques of Modern Psychological Approaches to Anxiety

While contemporary psychology offers valuable insights into anxiety, it is not without its critiques. Modern psychological approaches often pathologize anxiety, categorizing it as a disorder that requires medical intervention [9]. This medicalization may inadvertently stigmatize individuals experiencing anxiety as mentally ill, overlooking the existential dimensions of the experience.

Additionally, the focus on symptom reduction and quick fixes in psychological interventions may neglect the deeper existential questions that anxiety raises. Kierkegaard and Heidegger's perspectives underscore that anxiety is not merely an undesirable emotional state to be eradicated but a fundamental aspect of human existence. It serves as a reminder of our freedom and the responsibilities that come with it. Modern psychology could benefit from a more holistic approach that acknowledges the existential and philosophical dimensions of anxiety.

## 9. Conclusion

In conclusion, anxiety remains a prominent and multifaceted aspect of the human experience, both historically and in contemporary society. Philosophical perspectives from Kierkegaard and Heidegger offer profound insights into the nature of anxiety, its relationship to freedom, and its impact on individuals and societies. In today's world, marked by unprecedented challenges and uncertainties, these insights take on renewed relevance.

As individuals and communities grapple with anxiety in various forms, from personal to societal, the philosophical exploration of anxiety can serve as a source of wisdom and reflection. By understanding anxiety not as a mere affliction but as a fundamental aspect of the human condition,

individuals may find the strength to confront their anxieties, navigate their choices, and ultimately embrace the possibilities that come with their freedom.

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