



## **Against Absolute Anxiety: An Analysis of the Concept of Anxiety as a Cultural Phenomenon from a Perspective Received from the Frankfurt School of Thought.**

Anxiety as a contemporary phenomenon can potentially be seen as an overarching concept, one which recognises the primary affective condition of someone socialised within the current cultural climate. This climate, consisting of a society structured upon a capitalist economic base reinforced by an ideology of consumerism, is bolstered by a media which condone it and a population which conform to its ideals. Accordingly, the central strand of this essay will argue that anxiety is not an ahistorical or *apriori* condition of humanity, but rather a socially and culturally determined perception of an affect that does not exist as such, but which has been constructed and conditioned in a particular historical sphere. The ‘age of anxiety’<sup>1</sup> has not come to an end, but has rather become ingrained in the popular imagination as well as in the current social mores and values. Perhaps the anxious individual is necessary to the functioning of the current era of technological capitalism and the idea of anxiety serves the purpose of facilitating the insecurities required for consumer society to perpetuate itself. Alternatively, anxiety could potentially allow one to perceive society for what it really is; a means of control. This anxiety as it is currently conceived has its roots in the thought of Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger in the first half of the twentieth century. The concept of anxiety still seems to have contemporary relevance to the individuals of this society in the twenty-first century due to the fact that popular culture has seemingly adopted Freudian and existentialist ideals and subsumed them into its framework. But the academics associated with the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, while not being part of a united system of thought, would predominantly take a critical view, which has its basis in Marxism, to question the prevailing norms and ideas of these orthodox theorists, utilising a more interdisciplinary method. Freud may then be seen as a product of Victorian value systems

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Fromm, ‘The Crisis of Psychoanalysis’, in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis: Essays on Freud, Marx and Social Psychology* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 9-45 (p. 10).



which espoused a view of anxiety based on bourgeois and patriarchal modes of thought, while Heidegger's philosophy could be seen as a proto-fascist enterprise that may be perceived as ultimately condoning the worst travesties of the Second World War.

This essay will firstly examine Freud's concept of anxiety, based on the text *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* written in 1926, as well as other Freudian essays pertaining to this concept. One may thus hopefully demonstrate that Freud's ideas are the product of his own particular context, through the critique of Erich Fromm in his collection of essays, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, published in 1970. The concept of anxiety in Heidegger's work will then be outlined, taken primarily from *Being and Time*, also released in 1926, followed by an application of Theodor Adorno's critique of Heideggerian existentialism in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1973) to this concept. I chose these texts relating to anxiety as they were written in the same historical context, two of them even published in the same year, yet seemingly without any prior knowledge of the other's existence. The two critical studies by the Frankfurt theorists were also published within the same decade. It may seem anachronistic to base our concept of anxiety on the Freudian and Heideggerian models, which are certainly not contemporaneous to the present, but this seems to be a common trend in the Frankfurt School agenda. As Jürgen Habermas said of Adorno, he felt as if he had to 'try to behave as if Marx and Freud [...] were contemporaries' when speaking with him.<sup>2</sup> Also, the prevailing ideas of this society seem to have their theoretical basis in the philosophies of these thinkers.

The conceptualisation of anxiety was something that had interested Freud from the very beginning of his career, and was a subject to which he would consistently return and revise. As early as 1895, he originally conceived of anxiety as a neurosis caused by sexual excitation, such as the tension produced by coitus interruptus, which has been misdirected

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<sup>2</sup> Rolf Wiggerhaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. by Michael Robertson (Oxford: Polity Press, 2007), p. 6.

toward an ‘abnormal employment’ of this energy.<sup>3</sup> He claimed that this deflected sexual energy, or ‘libido’, which originates ‘from within’, manifests itself as anxiety and is projected outwards towards an external stimulus.<sup>4</sup> He viewed anxiety as ‘a psychological insufficiency, as a consequence of which abnormal somatic processes arise’.<sup>5</sup> In his distinction between the somatic and the psychic, Freud relies on the traditional mind/body distinction of Cartesianism which was common to the natural sciences since the Enlightenment. With his emphasis on a sexual aetiology in determining the concept of anxiety, Freud was reacting against the dominant repressive tendencies of Victorian society, particularly with regard to sexuality.<sup>6</sup> In 1916 he added that the feelings and emotions attributed to anxiety have their source in the process of one’s birth, and that therefore birth is the prototype of the anxiety affect.<sup>7</sup> He also emphasised the point that anxiety is based on an exaggerated expectation of an anticipated event.<sup>8</sup>

However, in 1926, Freud altered the content of his conception of anxiety in the essay entitled *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. He elaborated on the idea that the affect of anxiety originates in the trauma of birth, but instead of it being caused in an altered outlet for retained libido, it has become an instinctual reaction to a perceived danger.<sup>9</sup> He then relates this to his five stages of personality development and his structure of the personality, consisting of a dynamic relation between the id, the ego and the superego.<sup>10</sup> This can be seen

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<sup>3</sup> See Sigmund Freud, ‘On the Grounds for Detaching a Particular Syndrome from Neurasthenia under the Description “Anxiety Neurosis”’ in *Early Psychoanalytic Publications*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), III (2001), pp. 90-117 (p. 108).

<sup>4</sup> See Freud, ‘On the Grounds for Detaching a Particular Syndrome from Neurasthenia under the Description “Anxiety Neurosis”’, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> See Fromm, ‘The Crisis of Psychoanalysis’, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Lecture XXV: Anxiety’, in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (Part III)*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), XVI (2001), pp. 392-411 (p. 397).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398.

<sup>9</sup> See Sigmund Freud, ‘Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety’, in *An Autobiographical Study, Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety and Other Works*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), XX (2001), pp. 75-175 (p. 134).

<sup>10</sup> See Freud, ‘Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety’, pp. 141-142 and Part III, pp. 97-100, respectively.



as clear evidence that the later Freud had reconceived his original ideas to conform to an elaborate theoretical framework, which he had constructed to bolster the psychoanalytic field within the sphere of the positivistic and empirical natural sciences.

In general, the theorists working from the assumptions accepted by the Frankfurt School are automatically suspicious of intricate theoretical structures which claim to have discovered absolute knowledge or universal truth about reality. Freudian psychoanalytic theory may be seen as falling under this category, with its assertion that unconscious thought processes and dubious descriptions of childhood conflicts can be universalised. Contrarily, but no less generally, most of the theorists associated with the Institute for Social Research have maintained a positive dialogue with Freudian theory, maintaining that it sheds light on the internal processes of the mind, an aspect of reality which Karl Marx had neglected in his materialist conception of the individual within a social environment determined by an economic base.<sup>11</sup> Adorno states that the ‘productivity of Freud’s approach lies in his questioning that which is generally accepted’.<sup>12</sup> Erich Fromm is the exception to this generalisation. He maintains that Freud never truly questioned the accepted assumptions of his time. While he values psychoanalysis for its insights into the human condition, his critique of Freud is based on the notion that orthodox Freudian theory has become a sterile dogma of which the supposed truths are the privilege of the initiated, with ‘the analyst as its priest’.<sup>13</sup> As will hopefully be made clear below, Adorno will make a similar criticism of Heidegger and the existentialist movement. Fromm will attempt to combine Freudian thought with that of a sociological paradigm, but his critical stance against orthodox Freudianism ultimately resulted in his split from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2004), p. 110.

<sup>12</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda’, in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. by Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1993), pp. 118-137 (p. 128).

<sup>13</sup> See Fromm, ‘The Crisis of Psychoanalysis’, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> See Wiggerhaus, pp. 265-273, for more information.

Fromm believes that while Freud had made some genuinely radical insights into the nature of human experience, he ‘was also deeply rooted in the prejudices and philosophy of his historical period and class’, which would not allow him to see past his own epoch as the culmination of human progress.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the most significant of these prejudices is Freud’s bias towards the patriarchal assumptions of the time. He believed women were, at a fundamental level, nothing more than ‘crippled, castrated men’.<sup>16</sup> This was steadfastly accepted by Freud and his succeeding disciples, ‘in spite of the obvious clinical data as well as biological and anthropological considerations to the contrary’.<sup>17</sup> This tendency to condone and even reinforce the patriarchal ideology of the time is evident in Freud’s early conception of anxiety as a sexual tension derived from the practice of coitus interruptus. If the male interrupted the sexual act before he obtained pleasure, then he could develop the anxiety neurosis, but if he interrupted before the female’s orgasm, then she would be the one to develop this anxiety. It appears that the woman is perceived as passive in the whole process. But it is not just coitus interruptus which causes anxiety; it could also be precipitated by abstinence or even in a virgin.<sup>18</sup> It seems that Freud’s early notion of anxiety in women is conditioned exclusively on the satisfactory penetration of the phallus, or lack thereof.

Furthermore, Fromm also claims that Freud’s theory of libido was based on the principle of scarcity which was a prevailing notion in the middle-classes of the Victorian era.<sup>19</sup> This relates the scarcity of resources to the scarcity of satisfaction which then implies that equal sexual satisfaction for all individuals is an impossibility, therefore determining human behaviour within society.<sup>20</sup> For Freud this means that the pleasure principle is kept in

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<sup>15</sup> Fromm, ‘The Crisis of Psychoanalysis’, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Erich Fromm, ‘Freud’s Model of Man and its Social Determinants’, in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis: Essays on Freud, Marx and Social Psychology* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 46-67 (p. 58).

<sup>17</sup> Fromm, ‘The Crisis of Psychoanalysis’, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> See Freud, ‘On the Grounds for Detaching a Particular Syndrome from Neurasthenia under the Description “Anxiety Neurosis”’, pp. 99-101.

<sup>19</sup> See Fromm, ‘Freud’s Model of Man and its Social Determinants’, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

check by the reality principle.<sup>21</sup> In relation to anxiety as derived from an instinctual response to danger, Fromm observes that the reality principle is based on one's interest for self-preservation, as would be the instinct which leads to anxiety, which essentially leads Freud to neglect any notion of a 'moral factor' in his model of man.<sup>22</sup> This leads Fromm to conclude that the psychoanalytic conception of man is inherently egotistical at its base, which follows 'the leading concepts of bourgeois thinking' that were common in Victorian era Europe at the time.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately then, Freud's concept of anxiety, like much of his psychoanalytic theory, conforms to ingrained notions of the individual which were the product of a capitalist society derived from patriarchal and bourgeois values. Freud, despite considerable effort, could not transcend his own context.

When Heidegger published *Being and Time*, it was perhaps regarded as a return to first philosophy and an elaborate examination of the ontological nature of Being. Heideggerian anxiety, then, is an aspect of this concept of Being. Heidegger conceptualises anxiety as 'a basic state-of-mind of Dasein',<sup>24</sup> with Dasein being understood as essentially the human being which exists as part of the world, and understands itself as such. Anxiety is one of an alternative number of ways in which Dasein can be attuned to its existence, which also include serenity and sorrow.<sup>25</sup> Anxiety, for Heidegger, is distinguished from fear and related to his notion of care.<sup>26</sup> One is not anxious about objects in the world, which lack 'significance' for the anxious individual, but '[t]hat in the face of which one has anxiety [...] is Being-in-the-World as such'.<sup>27</sup> This Being-in-the-World is 'there' and yet 'nowhere'; it is

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<sup>21</sup> See Fromm, 'The Method and Function of Analytic Social Psychology', in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis: Essays on Freud, Marx and Social Psychology* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 150-180 (p. 151).

<sup>22</sup> See Fromm, 'Freud's Model of Man and its Social Determinants', p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 179.

<sup>25</sup> See Medard Boss, *Existential Foundations of Medicine and Psychology*, trans. by Stephen Conway and Anne Cleaves (New York: Jason Aronson, 1979), pp. 112-113.

<sup>26</sup> See Heidegger, pp. 227, 230.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 230-231.





so close that it is stifling yet it cannot be grasped.<sup>28</sup> The Dasein attuned to anxiety experiences existence in isolation and understands ‘the necessity of death’ for what it is; a ‘perishing into emptiness’.<sup>29</sup> These novel terms, such as Dasein, may at first glance appear convoluted, but Heidegger was attempting to escape from under the weight of his tradition by constructing a new vocabulary. This innovation of language, including the concept of anxiety, and taken in conjunction with the notion of authenticity and other such terms, set the basis for the theory upon which the existentialist movement in Germany was founded.

As was mentioned above, the individual Frankfurt theorists are, in general, particularly distrustful of movements which make a claim to a singular perspective of truth, because for them knowledge can only ever remain partial and dependant on context. This is an understandable apprehension considering that the institute was founded by intellectuals of mainly Jewish origin who had experienced firsthand the social and political consequences of blindly following absolutist rhetoric.<sup>30</sup> Adorno, in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, targets Heidegger’s philosophy and takes particular offence against the existential tradition, which spouts ‘an ideology of the simple’ that ultimately culminates in a circular logic devoid of any substantial content.<sup>31</sup> Adorno believes that the language of existentialism, including its use of terms and concepts, has become ‘a jargon’ which is at its roots meaningless.<sup>32</sup> The alteration of language which Heidegger was attempting essentially distances him from any notion of clarity or straightforwardness and therefore has the potential to lead to ‘a mystification of human domination’.<sup>33</sup> Adorno takes issue with many of the terms which Heidegger has constructed, as he believes that these concepts are loaded to allow ‘the intended object [to]

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<sup>28</sup> Heidegger, p. 231.

<sup>29</sup> Boss, p. 112.

<sup>30</sup> See Held, ‘Chapter 1’, pp. 29-39.

<sup>31</sup> See Trent Schroyer, ‘Forward’ in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, by Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. vii-xvi (p. xiii, xv).

<sup>32</sup> See Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. by Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 4-6.

<sup>33</sup> See Schroyer, p. xii.

appear present by the idealization inherent in the word itself’, which leads to ‘an objectivism’ that conflates the subject and object relation.<sup>34</sup> Heidegger therefore ‘retreats behind’ the tradition he was attempting to move away from.<sup>35</sup>

Adorno deconstructs the terminology of Heidegger’s philosophy, which he relates to the mechanisms of the advertising industry.<sup>36</sup> He claims that the use of the term ‘authentic’ as exclusionary is a formula for denying acceptance to the uninitiated.<sup>37</sup> The words of Heidegger’s jargon are ‘a cover for arbitrariness’.<sup>38</sup> Adorno points out that Heidegger’s concept of Dasein ‘supplants the traditional category of subjectivity’,<sup>39</sup> which makes the concept merely a construction that covertly signifies nothing more than consciousness.<sup>40</sup> Therefore this abstract concept becomes ‘something absolute and primary’ when it is in reality only one aspect of an individual’s Being.<sup>41</sup> As Heidegger considers Dasein as a Being-towards-death, which recognises death as a possibility, Adorno claims that one’s reflection about death is replaced by ‘endurance’, which becomes ‘a gesture of internal silence’ and creates an internal space for fascist ideologies.<sup>42</sup> In *Being and Time* then, death becomes ‘the representative of God’, for Adorno, and an absolute icon which represents the limit of mortal existence. Therefore, the ‘experience of death’ becomes ‘meaningless’ within the framework of Heidegger’s ontology.<sup>43</sup>

Heidegger’s notion of care is for him a ‘concern with the possibilities of seeing the “world” merely as it looks while one tarries and takes a rest’.<sup>44</sup> This, in Adorno’s estimation, is a ‘defaming of consciousness’ in which Heidegger’s conception of ‘free consciousness’

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<sup>34</sup> Schroyer, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>35</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>36</sup> See Adorno, p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Adorno, p. 47.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>40</sup> See Adorno, p. 93.

<sup>41</sup> Adorno, p. 93.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Adorno, p. 89.



makes as little difference to a free man devoid of praxis as to one who is constrained to duty.<sup>45</sup> This seems to be a passive notion of care which may lead to the sort of mindset that could potentially condone a fascist dictatorship, if taken to its extreme consequences. As Heidegger claims that the ‘primary item in care is the “ahead-of-itself”’, which leads him to postulate that ‘Dasein exists for the sake of itself’,<sup>46</sup> this then allows Adorno to conclude that Dasein is ‘determined by its self-preserving principle’.<sup>47</sup> Following this, it is implied that if death is ‘the essential element in Dasein’,<sup>48</sup> then Dasein essentially negates itself and both the concepts of death and Dasein become meaningless within Heidegger’s framework. For Adorno, these concepts are certainly not liberating, but potentially domineering for the individual. Angst, or anxiety, then becomes for Adorno an inability to ‘concretize’ a ‘threat from the whole of society’, ‘which is societalized’, and need not be seen as an ‘existential value’ at all.<sup>49</sup> If society has become an oppressive force, then anxiety is the feeling of this oppression weighing down upon the individual, yet the cause of this affect remains vague and undefined. Nevertheless, Adorno’s major issue with the existentialist philosophies is that they are unaware, or simply ignore, their own historical and social context and claim their ideas to be timeless and ahistorical, which can only end in ‘empty claims’ for freedom.<sup>50</sup> He therefore places existentialism in the context of the enmity felt in post-World War II Germany.<sup>51</sup> Adorno would even go so far as to say that within the existentialist terminology lurk the enkindled remnants of Fascism.<sup>52</sup>

In conclusion, it appears that the Frankfurt school theorists are highly critical of any theories which claim to account for phenomena in an abstract and absolute sense devoid of its

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<sup>45</sup> See Adorno, pp. 89-90.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Adorno, pp. 111-112.

<sup>47</sup> Adorno, p. 111.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>49</sup> See Adorno, p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> Schoyer, p. xiv.

<sup>51</sup> See Adorno, p. 39.

<sup>52</sup> See Ibid., p. 3.



social and cultural contexts. Fromm criticises Freud for failing to be aware of his own historical biases and claiming his ideas to represent the truth about the human mind, rather than as a hypothesis based on a single perspective. Adorno is even more harshly disapproving of Heidegger's obscure attempt to transcend the philosophical tradition which culminates in an ambiguous rhetoric reminiscent of the fascist ideologies of World War II. Anxiety then, if taken from within this Neo-Marxist framework received from the ideals of the Frankfurt School philosophers, becomes a phenomenon which is subject to the unstable flux of social and historical contexts. This therefore cannot be conceptualised in absolute terms. It becomes the affect felt by the self-interested individual reacting against a society filled with similarly self-interested individuals, which appears to be empty of any moral values or inherent meanings. This phenomenon seems just as prevalent today as it ever was, and is perhaps even more relevant to our contemporary context than it was forty-four (since 1970), or even eighty-eight (since 1926), years ago. As Fromm eloquently states, 'if people today were healthy in a human sense, they would less rather than more capable of fulfilling their social role'.<sup>53</sup> Anxiety, even if it is a socially constructed concept and subject to fluctuation, could still allow the individual to experience society as it actually is, whatever this might mean. One may therefore perceive the state in terms of its oppressive domination of the individual, and subsequently see it as nothing more than a means toward the end of the social control of the masses for political gain.

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<sup>53</sup> Fromm, 'The Crisis of Psychoanalysis', p. 41.



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