



Anxieties of Knowing

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EDITORIAL

Anxieties of Knowing

Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, 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. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness.

(Søren Kierkegaard, *The concept of anxiety*, 1844/1980, p. 152)

‘Anxieties of knowing’ include anxieties about reading, writing, speaking, thinking and learning. By anxiety I mean the commonly accepted definition that emphasizes ‘uneasiness’ or ‘apprehension’ or ‘uncertainty’ and sometimes ‘fear’ of an anticipated state, event or situation that may cause psychological impairment or feelings of insecurity and helplessness. The notion of anxiety here could easily be called by a variety of other kinship terms: ‘dread’, ‘angst’, even ‘despair’ or less dramatically, ‘annoyance’, ‘irritation’, ‘disturbance’. It is a universal sentiment or feeling that is often associated in the philosophical literature with ‘doubt’ or ‘scepticism’ and sometimes with forms of ‘madness’ that we might say take the form of pronounced, exaggerated, deep anxiety that can lead to desperation, despair, anguish and depression.

This is the ‘dark epistemology’ of not-knowing, the neuroanatomy of the visceral mind, the confusion of unruly, inchoate and formless thought that troubles us and calls for resolution and order, if only temporarily. The word ‘knowing’ is used here with imprecision: some people will say why not ‘writing’ or ‘thinking’? I am happy to contemplate these substitute notions but I also employ the poet’s licence to invent the metaphors. ‘Anxieties of knowing’, ‘academic pathologies’: *Anxiety, Dread, Angst, Despair*. This run of concepts reminds me of the great Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, widely considered one of the foundational thinkers of existentialism, who wrote and published *Fear and trembling* (1843/1983), *The concept of anxiety* (1844/1980) and some 21 major works in a period of nine years between 1841 and 1850, often under pseudonyms, on topics concerning Christianity, theology and the philosophy of religion, ethics and psychology.

His highly personal and poetic work focusing on ‘truth as subjectivity’ engages with how one lives an ethical life as an individual with freedom, choice, commitment and faith. He wrote *The concept of anxiety* in 1844 as a psychological deliberation on the dogmatic issue of hereditary sin. In this work he examines the experience of anxiety

through the example of a man standing on the edge of a cliff who both fears falling into the abyss and feels the terrifying impulse to throw himself over the cliff.

The experience of anxiety or dread is a fact of our complete freedom to do something that includes the most terrifying possibilities and triggers our feelings of dread. In Kierkegaard's theological discussion 'anxiety' precedes 'sin'. Hence, for Kierkegaard, 'anxiety is the dizziness of freedom'. As he says in one of his journals, 'Anxiety is the first reflex of possibility, a look yet a terrible spell' (JP, vol 1, 102: Pap. X2, A22 cited in Grøn, 2008). Arne Grøn (2008), a researcher affiliated with the Center for Subjectivity Research at the University of Copenhagen and an expert theologian on Kierkegaard, explains: 'The concept of anxiety leads us directly to freedom, but what freedom means is encircled negatively by examining forms of unfreedom. In anxiety the possibility of freedom presents itself, but in anxiety a human being also becomes unfree' (p. ix). For Kierkegaard, as Grøn reminds us, anxiety opens up the question of what it means to be a human being.

I use the term 'anxieties of knowing' to suggest the 'burden of freedom' that one faces in choosing words to formulate a sentence, or a research topic, or an interpretation of a work, or indeed an utterance. On any topic seemingly there is a vast literature, a myriad of choices of word and phrases. The past is strewn with many literatures: so many great thinkers, poets, writers have gone before us. The prospect of saying something—anything of significance—is so daunting and many students and faculty, in the face of adding to knowledge, say to themselves: what do I have to say? Do I have *anything* to say? Who am I in the history of ideas to add anything of consequence? Conscious of the past couple of thousand years of tradition of literacy, these anxious individuals are reduced to silence and to the anguish of thinking they have nothing to contribute.

The phrase 'anxieties of knowing' also reminds me of one the greatest living Jewish New York philosophers, film director Woody Allen. The gravity of his philosophy is explored in a series of movies, scripts, roles, plays and books that exemplify the American tradition of stand-up and slapstick comedy coloured with European art cinema and particularly Bergman and Fellini. He starts his 'Speech to the graduates' (1979) with the following remark:

More than at any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly. I speak, by the way, not with any sense of futility, but with a panicky conviction of the absolute meaninglessness of existence which could easily be misinterpreted as pessimism.

Woody Allen's instincts are not untutored yet, in contrast to Kierkegaard, he uses comedy rather than tragedy to explore the fundamental existential condition of humanity. Adam Cohen (2007), writing for the *New York Times*, suggests: 'More than any other American writer, Mr. Allen put existential dread on the map'. He reviews Allen's two collections of his comedic essays: *The insanity defense: The complete prose* and *Mere anarchy*, and goes on to write:

When Mr. Allen started out doing stand-up comedy in Greenwich Village clubs, young people sat in cafes reading books like Sartre's 'Being and Nothingness', and debated man's fate late into the night. Mr. Allen found himself turning to the same questions. 'What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists?' he wondered. 'In that case, I definitely overpaid for my -carpet.'

Existence is considered as an absurd cosmic joke. As Allen once said about all the characters in his films: 'You're born and you don't know the script, you suffer tragedy and catastrophe, and then you are wiped out for no offence that you have committed'. Allen explores the desire of many of his characters to ground their lives in traditional ethical values despite their realization that such values may no longer be certain and the idea that contemporary American society is rapidly descending into barbarism precisely because of societal failure to maintain a sense of individual moral responsibility.

I am talking about the fear of writing not as a neurological problem but rather as a philosophical and educational problem that is connected with a range of other problems of self, fundamentally of self-expression, of the culture of the academic self, often exacerbated by 'performance anxiety' in a publish or perish environment. But the fear of writing is a fear experienced not simply by scholars and students who experience problems with writing but also by those for whom writing is everything. Let me elaborate by viewing a clip of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida talking about the fear of writing. The comments posted on this YouTube clip are interesting. Somebody writes (grammar and writing in the original):

Holy shit this is exactly how i felt writing my term paper

Another adds:

Monsieur Derrida, the charlatan.

In the same vein, someone adds:

Such agony, living as he does, as the divine instrument of great cosmic philosophical forces: the danger, the sense of mission, the posturing and hairstyling. The vanity is overwhelming.

One person, closer to where I'm standing, writes:

It's all about nudity. Writing (good writing) rips your clothes off. It's an expression. Your soul has spoken, and perhaps somebody has listened. Taking your (actual) clothes off, letting the dreams and thoughts overwhelm you—how could you possibly avoid anxiety?

Judith Butler's (1997) *Excitable speech* introduces the gender dimension into the speaking, writing, thinking subject—a not so obvious a category before Simone de Beauvoir's (2009, orig. 1948) *The second sex*. Butler, drawing on this philosophical tradition, demonstrates that gender is a *performative* category rather than a fixed or stable identity and in this work she explores the phenomenon of 'hate speech' in the USA. 'Excitable speech' is a metaphor for the complex interrelations between language, identity and

agency. Butler argues that in our status as linguistic animals we only become ourselves through the continual and forever risky negotiation with the very cultural semiotic that encourages us to emerge through a kind of performance. For Butler, linguistic being proceeds from the intersubjective nature of language that is both enabling and disabling, with great power to wound, but also makes possible the speaking and writing time of the subject (Chandler, 2007). If the notion of ‘anxieties of knowledge’ applies at all, most certainly it applies with regard to the discursive (self)-positioning of women who up until very recently have often been reduced to silence.

In relation to educational and philosophical themes that run so deep in Aotearoa/New Zealand—what I am going to call the ‘imperial writing subject’—it is clear that Maori children who are fluent speakers of te reo Maori (the Maori language), who grew up on marae in rural areas like Pungaru, were forced to write te reo Maori rather than speak it at school and in New Zealand School Certificate Examinations prior to 1988. Successive generations of Maori children fluent in te reo Maori were failed at the subject ‘Maori’ because it was an examination that examined only written Maori (i.e. the Anglicized, alphabetized English literate form) and for many this was equivalent to failing at their own culture. The pathological consequences have been enormously damaging for Maori students.

The *positionality* of the subject is important and one might say the cultural specificity of the subject has become central to how understanding how fear is experienced, how anxiety manifests itself and how power relations are perceived. For instance, how does the fear of writing manifest itself in traditionally oral cultures? How are women textually represented and what fears do they experience in representing themselves within a male semiotic? What of the writing and speaking subject in the process of becoming an academic self, especially for women, for cultural minorities, for immigrants, and for those for whom thinking and writing in ideographs is the cultural norm?

To deal adequately with these anxiety disorders—‘anxieties of knowing’—we need to locate them firmly within the wider psychological ecology of the culture of the academic self and to encourage an ongoing set of reflections on the question of academic self-knowledge. In this way we may come to understand more deeply that knowing has its own pathologies.

Note

1. This editorial is an excerpt based on an Inaugural Professorial Lecture delivered at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, on 26 March 2013.

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