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Above: James Moyer PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Top left: Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre are among the authors of existentialism covered in a course offered last fall. PHOTO OF HEIDEGGER: LANDESARCHIV BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG ARCHIVES

Age of Anxiety

STUDYING EXISTENTIALISM OFFERS INSIGHTS INTO THE MODERN ERA.

BY JAMES MOYER

The Concept of Anxiety was the strikingly modern title that the 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard gave to one of his books. Kierkegaard faces this unpleasant emotion and makes it central to his view of human freedom. Anxiety is as old as humanity, but the book seems also to imply that anxiety is modern, and that more and more people will feel it, if not face it. These days, in many places, anxiety fits the mood. It is credited or blamed for disturbing, even surreal, turns of events. All over the world, people are voting, literally or figuratively, to reject something and risk something else.

Curtis students may be rather insulated from such events, and are aware of their insulation—which makes them not so insulated, after all. “My being is highly conflicted,” writes one of my students. “At Curtis, we are extremely shielded in comfort, and what is happening in the ‘real world’ seems not to happen to us.” Kierkegaard’s analysis of anxiety is so trenchant and enduring because of the use he says we should make of it. Anxiety,

he says, just is the emotional sign or symptom of my freedom. I am anxious because I can choose among possibilities and the outcome is unknown to me. If I were not uniquely a choosing being—“if a human being were a beast or an angel,” as he puts it—then I wouldn’t be anxious. I should pay attention to my anxiety, rather than try, as I too often do, to alleviate it by letting others choose for me or evading my choice. “The deeper the anxiety, the greater the man,” Kierkegaard provocatively says—“greater” meaning something like “more dignified, because the author of his or her life.”

Kierkegaard is retrospectively a founder of existentialism, which restores the emotions—especially the “yucky” ones, as my students and I call them—to the center of philosophical inquiry dominated by rationalism. Martin Heidegger, writing roughly a century later, builds on Kierkegaard by saying that angst is about my *being*. I am anxious about being in the world as such—and about, one day, my no longer being. What makes angst uniquely “yucky” is that I can’t locate its source—unlike fear, which clearly threatens me from without. Angst is close, so close I can avoid it only by avoiding myself, by avoiding or denying my time-bound freedom to choose among possibilities. Who do I want to be? Will I be up to the challenge? Am I wasting my time? Angst is that restless, wordless feeling that murmurs such questions, if I take time to listen—if I am “attuned” to it, in Heidegger’s aural metaphor.

WHAT TO DO?

Another student, after worrying that people in power are normalizing “sexism, racism, bullying, xenophobia, and the non-existence of climate change,” says simply, and not so simply: “What am *I* doing?” Note that any of those things may frighten me or people I care about, but what gives me angst is *me*: what I am to do, whether I can, whether I should.

The existentialist, whether godly like Kierkegaard or an atheist like Jean-Paul Sartre, thinks that no one can answer these questions but me. And once I’ve answered them, anxieties about new possibilities follow, which I evade or face. By their analysis of anxiety, boredom, *ressentiment* (resentment)—another feeling much in the news of the world—and other disagreeable emotions, the existentialists individuate what often seems attributable to the public, crowd, or group. If I’m told, or tell myself, that “the group is anxious and resentful,” this becomes one more way I evade or justify my own anxiety or resentment, rather than face its meaning for me, what it says about my life, and how my choice affects others.

Today’s world is uncertain and disturbing in ways that give the lie to “the end of history” and other nostrums that comforted after the Cold War, as global capitalism reached far and wide with the upbeat pretext of consumerism. Rarely has philosophy, not least existentialism, been so readily invoked in journalism as in recent months, for the effort—the need—to make sense of who we are in confusing times is one description of philosophy. “Man is in anguish,” says Sartre, bringing another, maybe the least pleasant, emotion to bear—anguish adding to angst the pain of responsibility I cannot escape and that I convey to others through my example, be it courageous or cowardly.

Another student, paradoxically, finds this terrible uncertainty “optimistic” even while a “burden”: “Nothing is ready-made, there is no prototype. We must make something out of ourselves and we have no choice but to accept that responsibility and embrace it, no matter how difficult that might be. There is undoubtedly a pressure one feels when one thinks for all mankind, but there certainly is a beauty—that we are free, ‘we are freedom,’ as Sartre says, we are ‘condemned to be free.’” ♦

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