

# *The Comparison of Heidegger's and Kierkegaard's Thoughts on Anxiety*

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**Abstract:** In Kierkegaard's analysis of human freedom and the genesis of sin, anxiety is understood as the "dizziness" experienced by the individual when confronted with possibility. Through the conceptual model of Adam's fall, Kierkegaard illustrates how anxiety functions as the precondition for the transition from a state of innocence to one of sin. Anxiety is not sin itself; rather, it is an intermediate state that emerges prior to the actualization of freedom, thereby highlighting the individual's responsibility and the inner tension inherent in freedom. By contrast, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines anxiety as a mood without a determinate object and endows it with explicit ontological significance. In moments when everyday immersion is disrupted, anxiety detaches Dasein from its involvement with particular entities and brings it face to face with its thrownness, finitude, and being-toward-death. In doing so, it discloses the structure of existence as a field of possibilities. A comparison of these two conceptions of anxiety shows that Kierkegaard's analysis is oriented toward the problem of the emergence of freedom within an ethical-religious dimension, whereas Heidegger's analysis serves the phenomenological disclosure of the structure of Being. Although there is a conceptual affinity between them, their theoretical aims and methodological orientations diverge significantly. This paper aims, through a comparative analysis of the concept of anxiety, to clarify these two distinct paths of understanding existence and their philosophical significance.

## 1. Introduction

As a distinctive mode of existential experience, anxiety (Angst) has, since the modern period, gradually become a crucial point of entry for understanding the human condition in philosophical reflection. Anxiety does not refer to fear directed toward a specific object; rather, through its objectlessness, diffuseness, and ineffability, it detaches the individual from dependence on established structures of meaning, thereby confronting one with one's own possibilities and finitude. In this sense, anxiety is no longer regarded merely as a psychological state or emotional response, but assumes a philosophical significance in disclosing the structure of human existence. It is precisely through their systematic analyses of anxiety that Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger elevate this experience into a key concept for understanding freedom, responsibility, and modes of being. In Kierkegaard's thought, anxiety is intimately related to the emergence of freedom. Through his conceptual construction of Adam's fall, he seeks to demonstrate how the human being, when

faced with the possibility inherent in freedom, comes to experience anxiety, and how this anxiety functions as the precondition for the transition from a state of innocence to one of sin. Anxiety here is not a negative emotion, but a mediating experience that reveals the tension within freedom, marking the inevitable inner instability of the individual when confronted with possibility. By contrast, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger's analysis of anxiety departs from ethical and theological contexts, defining it as a mood without an object and assigning it a clear ontological status. Anxiety disengages Dasein from its immersion in everydayness, compelling it to confront its own thrownness, finitude, and being-toward-death, thereby disclosing the structure of existence as a field of possibilities.

Although there is a conceptual affinity between the two thinkers in their analyses of anxiety, their theoretical aims and methodological orientations differ significantly. Kierkegaard is concerned with how the individual becomes itself within freedom and thereby assumes responsibility; Heidegger, by contrast, employs a phenomenological description of anxiety to reveal the fundamental structure of Dasein's mode of being. A comparative examination of these two conceptions of anxiety not only clarifies the differences in meaning that the concept assumes within distinct philosophical contexts, but also deepens our understanding of the roles played by freedom, possibility, and finitude in different paths of interpreting human existence. This paper takes the concept of anxiety as its central focus and offers a comparative analysis of the relevant thought of Kierkegaard and Heidegger. It first outlines Kierkegaard's fundamental account of anxiety and its role in the emergence of freedom and sin; it then examines Heidegger's ontological analysis of anxiety in *Being and Time*; finally, by comparing the differences in their conceptual functions and theoretical orientations, it seeks to illuminate their respective philosophical understandings of human existence.

## 2. Kierkegaard's Conception of Anxiety

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Søren Kierkegaard employs a method akin to "experimental psychology" to distinguish the forms of anxiety experienced by the individual at different stages of existence. His use of the term can be broadly divided into two levels: "one is the anxiety of sin established by the individual through a qualitative leap; the other is the anxiety that enters the world along with sin, and, as each individual posits sin, this anxiety correspondingly enters the world quantitatively." [1] The former concerns the foundational role of anxiety in the genesis of individual existence, while the latter points to anxiety as a continuing structure of the universal human condition. In this sense, anxiety is both individual and, in a certain respect, universal.

To understand the origin of anxiety, one must return to Kierkegaard's conception of the human being. In his view, the human is not merely a natural entity, but a synthesis of necessity and possibility, finitude and infinitude—a relation he calls "spirit." Before spirit becomes self-conscious, the human exists in what Kierkegaard terms a state of "innocence." In this state, sin has not yet emerged, and there appears to be a surface harmony and tranquility between the individual, the self, and the world. Yet this tranquility is not simple repose; it is accompanied by an ineffable "nothing." As Kierkegaard writes: "In this state there is peace and repose, but there is also something else... namely, 'nothing.' What effect does nothing have? It gives rise to anxiety. This is the profound secret of innocence: that it is at the same time anxiety." [2] It follows that anxiety does not arise only after sin; rather, it is latent within the very structure of the human as spirit and constitutes the inner tension of the state of innocence. Thus, the most primordial form of anxiety is not fear of a specific object, but an indeterminate and as yet unformed existential experience. Even before one clearly apprehends the future, possibility, and freedom, anxiety is already present in the form of "nothing." In this sense, anxiety constitutes a pre-structural condition of human existence: it is not a

psychological reaction triggered by external stimuli, but a premonition of possibility within spirit prior to its full self-awareness.

Kierkegaard provides a classical illustration of this structure through the conceptual model of Adam's fall. Adam's fall does not arise from temptation or ignorance, but occurs within the possibility opened up by the prohibition. The prohibition does not impart knowledge of good and evil; rather, it first makes Adam aware of his freedom as the capacity to "be able to transgress." What Adam experiences before the forbidden fruit is precisely an objectless anxiety: he is at once drawn toward the future, possibility, and freedom indicated by the fruit, and restrained by the divine prohibition. Within this tension, anxiety appears as a kind of "dizziness." It is neither sin itself nor fear of consequences, but a threshold state prior to the actualization of freedom. As has been noted in related scholarship, "anxiety makes possibility possible, and thereby makes freedom actual; for without possibility there is no freedom." [3] In this sense, anxiety has a clear ontological status: it constitutes the condition for the unfolding of the future, possibility, and freedom. To fall into anxiety is to be caught in the tension between anticipation and resistance to possibility, a tension that can ultimately be resolved only through a "qualitative leap." Like Adam, the individual is inevitably compelled to make a decision within anxiety, thereby transforming "what can be" into "what is." It is in this leap that sin comes into being, and the self is simultaneously constituted. At the most primordial level, therefore, without anxiety there would be no self; nor could the human exist as a being that freely acts in relation to its future possibilities.

This line of thought is further deepened in Kierkegaard's later reflections on the self and despair, especially in *The Sickness unto Death*. There, the self is defined as a relation that relates itself to itself and to the power that established it. When the self attempts to ground itself solely in itself, it inevitably falls into despair, which is often accompanied by a persistent anxiety. At this stage, anxiety is no longer merely the dizziness preceding the realization of freedom, but becomes the inner tension arising from the self's failure to achieve unity. Only when the self, while acknowledging its finitude, grounds itself in the "power that established it" can anxiety be transformed rather than eliminated. Thus, in Kierkegaard's sense, anxiety is neither a purely psychological phenomenon nor a merely negative state to be overcome. It is a fundamental mode of existence—the necessary path through which the self comes into being between freedom and finitude. It is precisely through anxiety that the human being moves from mere natural existence to existence as spirit, and thereby advances toward the full realization of the self.

### 3. Heidegger's Conception of Anxiety

For Martin Heidegger, Dasein is a distinctive kind of being. Its distinctiveness lies in the fact that it not only exists in the world but is also capable of questioning its own being. The mode of being of Dasein is not fixed; rather, it is a possibility—always oriented toward the future, unfinished, and constantly unfolding. More importantly, Dasein's existence is inseparable from the world: it exists in the mode of "being-in-the-world," establishing relations with others, its environment, and the totality of beings. However, this priority of Dasein does not mean that it is naturally in a state of disclosing Being. On the contrary, Heidegger emphasizes that Dasein typically evades its own existence. This evasion leads to the concealment rather than the disclosure of Being.

Dasein's everyday mode of being-in-the-world is often described as "falling" (*Verfallen*), which constitutes its inauthentic mode of existence. The essence of falling lies in Dasein's abandonment of an authentic understanding of its own being, as it dissolves into the anonymous "they" (*das Man*). This state appears stable, familiar, and manageable, yet is in fact a form of self-deception. In such a condition, Dasein avoids death and postpones reflection on its own existence, continually deferring the anxiety brought about by being-toward-death. To move beyond this fallen state might seem to

require the disclosure of values and personality through positive moral emotions. Heidegger, however, does not follow this moral route; instead, he returns to the analysis of attunement (Befindlichkeit) and employs the mood of anxiety (Angst) to reveal Dasein's most ownmost potentiality-for-being. Heidegger uses the German term Angst, which is here consistently translated as "anxiety." Although some Chinese translations render it as "dread," this variation does not affect its ontological significance; for the sake of consistency with existing scholarship, the term "anxiety (Angst)" is adopted here.

Through anxiety, Heidegger discloses both the thrownness and the falling of Dasein. Anxiety is a way in which we encounter the world: it is not that the world as something present-at-hand makes us anxious; rather, anxiety itself opens up the world and unfolds Dasein's potentiality-for-being. As Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*: "Anxiety brings Dasein back from its absorption in the 'world' and throws it back upon that for which it is anxious—its ownmost potentiality-for-being-in-the-world. Anxiety individualizes Dasein as being-in-the-world. This ownmost being-in-the-world, which understands itself, projects itself essentially upon possibilities. Thus, that about which it is anxious discloses Dasein as a possible being—indeed, as that which can be only from itself, as individualized in its individuation." [4] Everyday anxiety may be reduced to worry, which is always directed toward particular entities that might threaten us. By contrast, profound or genuine anxiety is a "fundamental" and "primordial" attunement. Heidegger states that in anxiety, "it is not this or that entity, nor any entity at all, that is threatening. Rather, all entities as a whole slip away." [5] They do not simply disappear; instead, in anxiety, the totality of beings recedes while pressing upon us. We find ourselves in a state of indeterminacy in which beings withdraw, leaving only this very indeterminacy approaching us. In this way, anxiety reveals nothingness.

Anxiety brings Dasein face to face with its finitude and with the "nothing." This immediate experience pulls us out of the comfort of the everyday "they-self" and makes us aware of our freedom. Through anxiety as a fundamental mood, Heidegger seeks to awaken Dasein from its fallen condition. Anxiety strips away all established meanings, revealing their groundlessness. It is an extreme attunement in which Dasein confronts its own existence, disclosing the meaninglessness that emerges when the totality of beings is suspended. When Dasein experiences anxiety, it no longer relies on familiar frameworks of meaning but is exposed nakedly to its own being. Yet Dasein tends to flee from this experience, recoiling from the confrontation with nothingness. Only by facing death—by existing as being-toward-death—can Dasein overcome this evasion. Being-toward-death means that, in confronting its own finitude, Dasein is compelled to recognize the nullity at the core of its existence. In the anticipation of death, Dasein no longer depends on the network of meanings provided by everyday life, but directly encounters the groundlessness of existence. It thus comes to recognize not only that "I exist, and must exist," but also that "I exist, and must be able to be." Both authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of Dasein's being; underlying both is Dasein's potentiality-for-being. In sum, anxiety confronts us with the nothingness inherent in existence and compels us to face our own choices and freedom. In doing so, anxiety discloses the total structural constitution of Dasein's being.

#### 4. Comparative Analysis of the Concept of Anxiety

Although Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger both take anxiety (Angst) as a central concept, their respective understandings are rooted in different problematics and theoretical contexts. In examining the human condition, Erich Fromm observes that modern individuals, having broken free from the constraints of pre-individualistic society, find that "freedom has brought independence and rationality, but at the same time has made them isolated, anxious, and powerless." [6] Freedom thus appears to be a source of anxiety. On this point, Jean-Paul Sartre

offers a corresponding insight: freedom is given to us as the necessary condition of anguish, and “anxiety is a particular consciousness of freedom.”[7] In general terms, Kierkegaard situates anxiety within a religious–ethical framework, focusing on how the individual becomes itself through freedom; Heidegger, by contrast, analyzes anxiety at the ontological level, using it to disclose the finitude of Dasein and the possibility of authentic existence. Both thinkers closely connect anxiety with freedom, yet their understandings of freedom and the paths toward its realization differ fundamentally.

For Kierkegaard, anxiety originates in the possibility of freedom. As he demonstrates through the conceptual model of Adam’s fall in *The Concept of Anxiety*, anxiety is not fear of a specific object, but the dizziness that arises when one becomes aware that one “can do this or can refrain from doing it.” Anxiety is not sin itself; rather, it is the precondition for the emergence of sin—a mediating state prior to the actualization of freedom. For this very reason, anxiety both expresses human dignity and exposes human fragility. In anxiety, the individual recognizes its own finitude while being unable to escape the responsibility entailed by freedom. This understanding is further developed in *The Sickness unto Death*, where Kierkegaard links anxiety with despair, arguing that the self inevitably falls into tension and suffering in the process of trying to “become itself.” If the self relies solely on itself, it cannot achieve a stable foundation of existence within anxiety; only by grounding itself transparently in the “power that established it”—namely, God—can the self truly become itself. Thus, in Kierkegaard’s sense, “facing anxiety” ultimately points toward an existential transformation realized through faith: the individual, while acknowledging its finitude, entrusts itself to the absolute, thereby overcoming the divided condition brought about by anxiety.

By contrast, Heidegger’s analysis of anxiety in *Being and Time* decisively departs from religious and ethical contexts, granting it a clear ontological significance. Anxiety is defined as a mood without an object; it does not point to any particular threat, but instead deprives Dasein of its reliance on the everyday world as a whole. In anxiety, the familiar and manageable world recedes, giving way to an experience of groundlessness. It is precisely in this experience that Dasein is compelled to confront its thrownness, finitude, and being-toward-death. The liberating significance of anxiety lies in its capacity to pull Dasein out of its fallen immersion in everydayness and to return it to its own possibilities of being. Unlike Kierkegaard, who provides an ultimate grounding of the self through the infinity of God, Heidegger grasps the totality of Dasein’s structure through being-toward-death. Death, as Dasein’s ownmost and non-relational possibility, brings Dasein to an awareness of the finitude of its existence, thereby compelling it to understand itself as a whole. In this sense, anxiety is not a negative state to be eliminated, but a crucial opening toward authentic existence.

Despite their divergent theoretical paths, Kierkegaard and Heidegger converge on one essential point: anxiety is not merely a psychological burden, but a fundamental experience that discloses the condition of human existence. Both reject attempts to evade or conceal anxiety and instead emphasize the necessity of confronting it. Yet the meaning of this “confrontation” differs in each case. For Kierkegaard, faith allows the individual to find existential grounding within finitude; for Heidegger, being-toward-death enables Dasein to assume its own possibilities within finitude. Neither “faith” nor “being-toward-death” constitutes a simple resolution of anxiety; rather, each represents a distinct way of grasping the wholeness of the self.

## 5. Conclusions

Through an analysis of the concept of anxiety in Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, it becomes clear that anxiety is not a contingent psychological state, but an ontological phenomenon with a fundamental disclosive function. In both thinkers, anxiety points to the individual’s direct

experience of its own existential condition at the moment when established meanings collapse and possibilities are opened, thereby revealing the inner tension between freedom and finitude.

For Kierkegaard, anxiety, as the affective manifestation of “nothing,” arises within the state of innocence, prior to the individual’s establishment of itself as spirit. Anxiety is not identical with sin; rather, it provides the condition for the possibility of sin and enables the actualization of freedom. It is precisely in anxiety that the individual becomes aware of its mode of being as a synthesis of possibilities, and, through a “qualitative leap,” enters into the process of self-formation. Although this process ultimately points toward a relation with the Absolute, anxiety itself remains within the structure of the self as the condition of freedom. By contrast, Heidegger situates anxiety within a strictly ontological framework, understanding it as a fundamental attunement that discloses Dasein’s authentic mode of being. Anxiety is not triggered by any particular object; rather, it emerges when beings as a whole withdraw, casting Dasein back from its fallen immersion in the world of the “they” to itself. In anxiety, Dasein confronts “nothing” and the possibility of death, thereby recognizing that, as a finite being, it must assume responsibility for the unfolding of its own existence. Through being-toward-death, the finitude disclosed in anxiety is integrated into the total structure of Dasein.

From a comparative perspective, although both Kierkegaard and Heidegger regard anxiety as a crucial moment leading toward the self or authentic existence, their theoretical orientations diverge significantly. Kierkegaard provides a final resolution of anxiety through a religious relation, whereas Heidegger insists on interpreting the meaning of anxiety within the existential structure of Dasein itself. This difference reflects two distinct paths of understanding existence and demonstrates the multiple theoretical potentials of the concept of anxiety across different philosophical contexts.

In general, for both thinkers, anxiety is not a negative state to be eliminated, but a fundamental condition through which existence is disclosed. It is precisely through anxiety that the individual is compelled to break away from the concealments of everyday life and to confront its own fundamental condition as a free yet finite being.

## References

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