Using Luther to Understand Heidegger on Anxiety

§ 1: Anxiety in the everyday, pre-philosophical sense

Anxiety of the kind exhibited by Luther and meant by Heidegger is an extreme form of anxiety in the everyday sense. For ordinary language has its own version of the distinction Heidegger makes between fear or dread (Furcht) on the one hand and anxiety on the other. Both are obviously forms of care about (Sorge um) something of significance to one. But in fear or dread one anticipates harm: I fear or dread the stranger who has just broken into my house because I perceive this person as willing and able to injure me.\(^1\) By contrast, when in everyday, pre-philosophical contexts we speak of anxiety, we often, if not always mean something different. When anxious about the crucial exam coming up, the once-in-a-lifetime Olympic contest in which I will soon participate, these objective matters of fact are obviously not significant to me in the sense of threatening bodily harm. Rather, they are significant in the sense of constituting overriding goods in satisfying or realising which I have placed my sense of self-worth. I do not suffer distress in the face of impending harm, but rather in anticipation of failure and inadequacy. Anxiety in the everyday sense is the experience, or rather, the anticipation of experience, of oneself as grossly inadequate, relative to some requirement perceived to follow from something one has embraced as what one overridingly ought and wants to be.

This character of everyday anxiety as the anticipated experience of inadequacy, relative to a requirement set by one’s sense of self-worth, explains an important difference between it and fear or dread. In the latter, the abilities and capacities of something other than me come into view: I fear or dread the house breaker because I perceive this other as able to harm me.\(^{11}\) By contrast, my everyday anxiety about the forthcoming exam throws only my own abilities into relief. But precisely because the requirement with which one is confronted derives from a standard or value rather than a threat, moreover, a standard or value in fulfilling which one has placed one’s sense of worth, anxiety does more than throw a few abilities into relief. It primarily brings
one’s whole self into view. So anxiety, even in the everyday sense, is the most visceral awareness of oneself as oneself. We see here why Heidegger says that anxiety individualises (vereinzelt).iii

§ 2: Martin Luther’s Anxiety

Luther’s principal theological contribution, the one which initiates the Reformation and constitutes to this day the principal difference between Catholicism and Protestantism, concerns the salvation of the soul. His views on this issue emerged out of deep personal crisis and despair. Initially, he thought that one was entitled to salvation insofar as one was earnestly engaged in a struggle to suppress and eradicate temptation to sin, so that as far as possible one’s works would be good, one’s motives pure.iv But this raised the issue of how one could ever be certain that one’s putative good works and intentions actually were good. One can, after all, misjudge external circumstances, thereby engendering evil through one’s deeds, however well-intentioned they may be. Similarly, one can misjudge internal circumstances, as when one deceives oneself about the motives engendering the most outwardly commendable of behaviours.

Luther’s own attempts to achieve salvation in accordance with this conception of it taught him that the task, thus conceived, was impossible since he could never achieve the certainty required. He fell into a state of deep depression – until, through intensive study of Holy Scripture in the original languages, he concluded that Church teaching had got it wrong about what God required for salvation, that is, about what salvation is. After much reflection on it, the real meaning of Romans 1.17 disclosed itself to him.v Properly understood, this passage said that God required the just not to live in accordance with faith, but rather from out of it [aus dem Glauben leben]. In other words, those who are saved are not those who successfully regulate their behaviour and motives in accordance with the dictates of faith, but those for whom faith is the foundation of their lives.vi For conceptual reasons, salvation cannot be earnt, but only granted. Believers had therefore only to conduct their lives from out of an abiding
faith in the love displayed towards them by God, hence the mercy and grace which He had always already granted them.\textsuperscript{vii} Luther had never in fact had the epistemic burden which so tortured him.\textsuperscript{viii}

The state in which Luther found himself prior to insight into what God really required of him is, I believe, the key to identifying what Heidegger understands by anxiety.\textsuperscript{ix} Firstly, Luther finds himself in a state of at least anticipating the visceral experience of his own unworthiness, his \textit{Nichtigkeit} or nothingness,\textsuperscript{x} relative to the requirement which he believes to have been set by what he overridingly ought and wants to be, namely, a good servant of God. So Luther is suffering from anxiety in the ordinary sense. Yet his situation is also more extreme. A feature constitutive of Luther’s despair is not only recognition of the impossibility of measuring up to a requirement set by his sense of self-worth – what Heidegger calls his \textit{ownmost} ability-to-be-in-the-world. Luther’s despair is intensified by his occasionally catching himself thinking that the requirement to purge sin entailed by his conception of self-worth is extreme, in fact so extreme \textit{as to be illegitimate}.

This situation never occurs in the case of everyday anxiety, as when one is anxious about an impending exam. In such cases, however inadequate one may feel, relative to the requirement placed upon one, there are always relatively clear, historically and conventionally derived criteria which set boundaries to what one has to do in order to be able legitimately to claim that the requirement has been fulfilled. But the task of purging sin from one’s motives and behaviour lacks such criteria and for this reason Luther finds himself, much against his will, feeling cheated, even enraged by his situation: How could a loving God ask something of him which, as soon as he thinks he has accomplished it, immediately withdraws behind a veil of doubt as to whether it is what it seems to be? Might not the Devil, having usurped the voice of God, now be enticing him into the sin of doubt? At this point, Luther famously throws the inkpot against the wall – only then to ask himself, “What if this is not the Devil? Then what I have just done exposes me as the worst kind of apostate.” In the end, he throws
himself on his bed and refuses to rise from it for fear of sinning – until he realises that refusal to engage with the world is itself rebellion against God, hence sin.

Luther’s despair has nothing to do with mere fear of Hell. Nor indeed is Luther directly concerned merely with the impossibility of realising the requirement placed upon him by what he has placed his sense of self-worth in, namely, being a good servant of God. Anxiety in the everyday sense is still there, of course, but an extra layer has been added: Luther despairs primarily about the existential incoherence into which he had been led by the doubts assailing his faith – what Luther calls his Anfechtungen. His despair lies primarily in the emerging conviction that for all actions A, he could never be certain whether he should do A or not do A – and yet he felt he had to choose.

This sense of existential incoherence brought with it an unwanted scepticism not just concerning religious fact but also concerning religious understanding. If experience of the impossibility of God’s task caused Luther to waver in his conviction that God existed, this sense of existential incoherence made his very understanding of God brittle. Luther understood his very being, as the individual he ought and wanted to be, as a matter of acting in the world out of submission to God’s will. But now the very idea of God, hence of his very own being, was threatening to become incomprehensible to him.

The transition from anxiety in the ordinary sense to that extreme form in which existential incoherence is anticipated has an important consequence. The individual things of this world lose that overarching point – what Heidegger calls their worumwillen, their for-the-sake-of-which – in the light of which overarching point they can be experienced as serviceable for this, detrimental to that, an opportunity for such and such, an obstacle to this and that, and so on. In other words, perceptual experience of the everyday kind, which guides everyday behaviour through its provision of motives for regulating behaviour in the light of the context, had ceased to deliver these motives. More correctly, while these motives are in a sense still there,
they only intimate how one should act *had these motives not been rendered nugatory in their motivating force*. For Luther no longer experiences the things of this world as *actually* motivating for him. In consequence, not just his own individual self, but the world as *such* comes into view as *nichtig*, that is, as a domain of vanities in which he is no longer at home. As Heidegger puts it, the world has become *unheimlich*, that is, uncanny, but literally, unhomely since *Heim* is the German word for home.

§ 3: The Formal Structure of Anxiety and the Role of Anxiety in *Sein und Zeit*

The case of Luther permits us to extract the following general account of what Heidegger means by anxiety. Like anxiety in the everyday sense in which one might be anxious about an impending exam, it involves anticipation of being confronted with inadequacy relative to some requirement set by a standard or value in which one has placed one’s sense of worth. In everyday anxiety, however, criteria exist for determining when one has or has not measured up. Indeed, the existence of such criteria is precisely the everydayness of this form of anxiety since these criteria reflect the character of the task evoking anxiety as a *conventional* one. But in the non-everyday variety with which Heidegger is concerned these criteria do not (by definition) exist. As a result, one suffers radical epistemic uncertainty as to when one has done enough to ensure a legitimate claim to fulfilment of the requirement. This then yields a dilemma: either one endures existential incoherence of the kind exemplified by Luther until luck or genius grants that *transformative insight* which releases one from anxiety. Or one decides that one cannot take anxiety seriously: surely, one will say, something has gone wrong in the considerations which led to anxiety, even if one cannot put one’s finger on what. It is therefore quite reasonable to fall back upon the behavioural roles, regularities and expectations constitutive of everyday life.

This latter, very reasonable, indeed very Catholic response brings us to what Heidegger calls *das Verfallen an das Man* – falling into line with the One. Luther’s single-minded pursuit of sinlessness smacks of unhinged obsession, indeed his violent
mood swings hint at manic-depression.\textsuperscript{xii} By all ordinary, everyday standards, his sense of looming existential incoherence is unreasonable. Surely, one will say, God could never have meant us to take the struggle against sin so seriously that we render ourselves unable to act at all, that is, undermine our very ability-to-be-in-the-world. Heidegger is therefore right to say that a tendency to flee from anxiety by falling back into line with the One is inherent to the very structure of anxiety. Crucially, flight and falling are thus inherent because they are a perfectly rational response to anxiety.\textsuperscript{xiii}

At this point, we can accomplish the two goals mentioned previously of (1) fleshing out the formal structure Heidegger attributes to anxiety; and (2) explicating just how the discussion of anxiety fits into the overall argument of \textit{Sein und Zeit}. With regard to the first goal: as we have seen, in anxiety \textit{what} one is anxious \textit{about} (\textit{das Wovor}) is thrown ability-to-be-in-the-world while \textit{what} one is anxious \textit{for} (\textit{das Worum}) is ability-to-be-in-the-world, in particular, one’s true (\textit{eigentliches}) or ownmost (\textit{eigenstes}) ability-to-be-in-the-world.\textsuperscript{xiv} Thrown ability-to-be-the-world is simply the capacity to get about the world, hence to conform to the various behavioural roles, regularities and expectations constitutive of everyday life. By contrast, true or ownmost ability-to-be-in-the-world is an individual’s own conception of what it overridingly ought and wants to be. Anxiety of the extreme kind in which Heidegger is interested arises as anticipatory awareness of a situation in which the former can be realised only \textit{at the expense of} the latter. Successfully getting about the world undermines being what one overridingly ought and wants to be in the world. Conversely, steadfastly adhering to what one overridingly ought and wants to be prevents one from being in and of the world at all. And one is anxious about each one of these terms for the sake of the other. Heidegger should not indeed have said that in anxiety the about-which and for-which are identical. They are not so much identical as interchangeable; anxiety is not so much reflexive as symmetrical.

With regard to the second goal: implicit in Heidegger’s discussion of anxiety there is a transcendental argument which one can reconstruct by going back to the thought
that nothing could count as a self were it unable to mediate context-sensitively the demands of its different roles with one another and with reality. The self must be able to prioritise its roles, indeed to apply them context-sensitively, that is, determine when it is time to stop acting out one role and to begin acting out another, or even to cast all roles aside, as, for example, would be required should some catastrophic event interrupt the normal flow of everyday life.

Now such context-sensitive application of role is not itself a role. How, then, are we to understand it? Roles like being an academic, being an environmentalist or being a parent, are governed by notions of what it is to be good at, or proficient in, them. So the process of mediating these roles with one another and with reality cannot itself be governed by a notion of good in the sense of proficiency. What is needed is a notion of comporting oneself well across the diverse roles and contexts in which one finds oneself – well in the sense of optimally, that is, in such a way that one’s coherence and identity as the particular individual one is is preserved across time.

If, however, this is so, then the self which wields this notion in the process of such mediation must indeed be more than a one-self (man-selbst). In particular, it must be able to act out of a sense of what it ought and wants to be, just as the individual it is. It must have a sense of who it is, with its own conception of self-worth, not just a sense of what it is, whether lecturer, environmentalist, parent, or even servant of God. The character of the self as a locus of social roles thus presupposes its character as regulating its movement through diverse roles according to what might be called, in an Aristotelian vein, a conception of the life good for it. Note that here the adjective ‘good’ does not mean proficient. Rather it means optimal – optimal in the sense of anxiety-free reflective equilibrium, what Aristotle might call sophrosyne, between one’s thrown and one’s ownmost being-in-the-world. Clearly, if one has the good fortune to exist in such a condition, then one may fairly claim to exhibit selfhood in its optimal, hence truest form. One is truly, one is ‘authentically’, a self. At this point,
we see why ‘authentic’ is such a clumsy translation of eigentlich: it fails utterly to capture the strictly formal character of Heidegger’s notion of Eigentlichkeit.

But Heidegger appeals to anxiety in order to intimate something more than this, something rather less Aristotelian. That own sense of worth which shows the self to be always more than a one-self (man-selbst) is, by definition, independent of those conventional criteria which fix the limits of epistemic responsibility for ensuring one has done enough to measure up. So to recognise that the self is never just a locus, hence never a mere bundle, of social roles is implicitly to recognise that the self is inherently open to the possibility of extreme, irrational anxiety. Not only is the one-self (man-selbst) a merely a partial concept of self; it and the reasonableness which it embodies exist in internal relation to their opposite number, extreme anxiety in all its irrationality, this because anxiety is always a real possibility for the one-self. Nor is this a blemish. Luther, after all, did come out the other end of irrational anxiety, with a novel solution which subsequently transformed everyday life. Anxiety thus testifies, as a structural possibility of selfhood, to an essential creativity inherent in the self through which it transforms across time both itself and the patterns of everyday life relative to which its anxiety counts at a time as irrational.

References


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This perception does, of course, presuppose a comparison between my abilities and those of the stranger; I recognise that he is, say, stronger or better armed, and no doubt more brutal than I. To this extent, my perception indirectly implicates my own abilities and capacities. Even so, in fear or dread I and my abilities are not at issue, are not what my fear or dread are fear or dread in the face of.

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See Sein und Zeit, § 40, H 187 (232).

Augustinus provides a model for this conception of what entitles one to salvation. In line with this conception Augustinus at one point reports how he had managed to suppress his lusts during the day but was having problems suppressing them at night.

As Luther famously reports in the Preface to Volume I of the Wittenberger Gesamtausgabe of his Latin texts – see Beutel 2006, pp.60-61.

The relevant passage from Luther’s magnificent translation of the Bible is the following: “Denn darin wird offenbart die Gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt, welche kommt aus Glauben in Glauben; wie denn geschrieben steht (Hab 2,4): «Der Gerechte wird aus dem Glauben leben.»” This was the germ of the Protestant Reformation. In the Catholic Jerusalem Bible (Popular Edition), with which the Catholic Church sought to provide the general English-speaking laity with a modern, easy-to-read translation of Holy Scripture, this passage is rendered as follows: “… since this is what reveals the justice of God to us: it shows how faith leads to faith, or as scripture says: The upright man finds life through faith.” (p.197) In the Vulgate Bible, which was the standard version of the Bible for Roman Catholics for over one and a half millenia, the passage reads, “Justitia enim Dei in eo revelatur ex fide in fidem; sicut scriptum est: Justus autem ex fide vivit.”

This is not to say, of course, that the gift of grace could not be lost, in particular, through unfaithfulness.

It is this insight which enables Luther to say of his previous efforts to secure salvation that he had “lost hold of Christ the Savior and Comforter and made of him a stock-master and hangman over my poor soul.” (Kittelson 1986, p.79)

Even though Luther himself never distinguished the state he found himself from fear, hence did not understand it as anxiety in contradiction to fear; this is precisely
why it is important for Heidegger to point out in a footnote the failure of thinkers like Augustine and Luther to distinguish between anxiety and fear.

x Note that *Nichtigkeit* is sometimes used to translate the Latin *vanitas*, i.e., vanity.

xi There is a similarity here to Bellarmine’s response to Galileo and his telescope, for which the optical theory capable of legitimating it did not yet exist. Yet had the reasonable Bellarmine prevailed, the scientific revolution might not have come about.

xii Erik Erikson found repressed homosexuality in Luther’s self-destructive obsession with sinlessness. But then, Erikson found repressed homosexuality everywhere, e.g., in Beethoven’s troubled relation to his adopted nephew Karl.

xiii Just this enables our account of anxiety to avoid the fate suffered by the kind of interpretation Dreyfus and many others give. They fail to interpret anxiety in a way which makes falling a *rational* response to it. And so they are forced to construe falling as a contingent psychological inclination which Heidegger has illicitly smuggled into the picture out of elitist hostility to mass society.

xiv See § 41, H 187.

xv There is no role of applying roles, anymore than there is a rule for applying rules.