



RILEY PATERSON

Re: What is Anxiety?

PATERSON

We asked Riley Paterson simply 'What is anxiety?'

I appreciate these kinds of questions. I posed the issue to Jason at work and we came up with several seeds to begin with.

Anxiety is fundamentally a temporal phenomena. It is the condition of a being that looks towards its future. More specifically, a being that feels out of control, or out of touch with, ignorant of, its ultimate fate or even its normal trajectory. It is a specific form of anticipation.

What else?

There are certain people who would lead me to believe... *cough* *Heidegger* *cough*... that anxiety is a uniquely modern condition. One that relates to the triumph of a 'technological' mode of being in which human beings perceive themselves as manipulators of nature. Descartes' hope was that science would make

humans 'like masters and possessors of nature'. This task, however, had unintended consequences, of nihilism and a related kind of anxiety.

There is also a potential theological element to all of this. [Philip K.] Dick is definitely getting at these things. The Cartesian desire to be masters and possessors of nature was certainly related to the human capacity to conceptualize a God. If we believe (which I do) that the ability to think God is an extension of the perspectival capacities that allow me to imagine your mind, then we can think of modern anxiety and nihilism as a kind of letting loose of this perspectival capacity. Because if we believe in a God, or Gods, then our capacity for 'zooming out' to the God's eye view is bounded in mystery. We know that we cannot think as Gods think. But if we seek to become Gods, if we reject the idea that there are Gods, if we insist that it is now the nebula's eye view, rather than the God's eye view, then our technological speculation, our ability to place ourselves outside of ourselves and the world is potentially boundless, and we are thus left 'floating in the void'.

I think anxiety has something to do with all this. With temporality and anticipation. With dashed attempts at control. With sublimated theological anxieties that are uniquely modern. I'm not sure.

On a practical level, anxiety is also just a difficult experience of feeling out of control and worried about the future.

I conclude with two quotations. One from Heidegger, one from Leo Strauss.

Heidegger in “What are Poets For?”:

“...human willing too can be in the mode of self-assertion only by forcing everything under its dominion from the start, even before it can survey it. To such a willing, everything beforehand and thus subsequently, turns irresistibly into material for self-assertive production. The earth and its atmosphere become raw material. Man becomes human material, which is disposed of with a view to proposed goals. The unconditioned establishment of the unconditional self-assertion by which the world is purposefully made over according to the frame of mind of man’s command is a process that emerges from the hidden nature of technology. Only in modern times does this nature begin to unfold as a destiny of the truth of all beings as a whole; until now, its scattered appearances and attempts had remained incorporated within the embracing structure of

the realm of culture and civilization.”

Leo Strauss in concluding “What is Political Philosophy?”:

“Modern thought reaches its culmination, its highest self-consciousness, in the most radical historicism, i.e., in explicitly condemning to oblivion the notion of eternity. For oblivion of eternity, or, in other words, estrangement from man’s deepest desire and therewith from the primary issues, is the price which modern man had to pay, from the very beginning, for attempting to be absolutely sovereign, to become the master and owner of nature, to conquer chance.”

Strauss was deeply concerned with the theological implications of modern thought. It is somewhere that my thought is turning, and something that Dick is helping with.

I hope you don’t mind the thought dump. I enjoy the provocative question, and I enjoy being able to sit down for 15 minutes and just babble back.

See you soon,
Riley