

Ontological Vertigo: a natural state

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Abstract: Doubt and uncertainty are treated as rather abnormal in society. Disturbing states of being, for example anxiety, impostor syndrome, guilt, and confusion, are common phenomena, yet viewed as something to address with psychology, overcome with virtues, or solve with goals and preoccupations to be a good person in decent mental health. If ontological vertigo is understood as a natural state of the human position between the finite and the infinite, the logical conclusion is that human existence is disorienting and uncomfortable. This study looks at the common modes of seeking groundedness: place, status, identity, vocation, potency, meaning, and essence. Existential positions are explored for endorsements of the state of anxiety. Lastly, the authors make an argument for considering ontological vertigo as a natural state instead of seeking false senses of stability.

Key-words: anxiety; anguish; ontological; Existentialism;

Introduction

Zeus was adamant that Prometheus not make humans smart enough to challenge the gods. But Prometheus disobeyed and gave human beings the gift of literal fire, to build houses and cook food, and figurative fire, the fire of the tongue—language—to build society, communicate arguments, write books, and create, which is the work of the divine (Mitchell, 1987; Cook, 2021). And so the human beings are stuck in tension,

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in between the animal nature and divine nature. Limited by the finite, with ideas of the infinite. Restricted by basic needs of survival, but a desire to reach for something beyond themselves. Aware of impending death, with aspirations to leave a legacy.

Yet doubt and uncertainty are treated as rather abnormal in society. Disturbing states of being, for example anxiety, impostor syndrome, guilt, and confusion, are common phenomena, yet viewed as something to address with psychology, overcome with virtues, or solve with goals and preoccupations to be a good person in decent mental health. An evaluation is made, the individual addresses or suppresses, and moves on to more pleasant or fulfilling activities. Despite empirical evidence to the contrary, society perpetuates the message that much of life is spent in happiness or at least pursuing and maximizing happiness. The state of ennui, dread, or even quiet contemplation is rather avoided, lest one reaches towards the infinite only to discover there is nothing there, while considering and embracing the abyss is an activity reserved for philosophers.

Vertigo refers in the medical world to a specific disoriented dizziness within the sensation of motion, spinning, off balance, or lack of groundedness. Studies that look at the psychological correlations or symptoms of vertigo suggest the possibility of a connection between physical symptoms and psychological distress (Loewenberg, 1947; Nozawa, et al., 1998; Eckhardt-Henn, 2013; Feuerecker, et al. 2015). The DSM-5 includes psychological distress associated with physical distress under the term Somatic Symptom Disorder as a recognized diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While this diagnosis informs the use of the term, the greater application of the anxiety from a lack of groundedness is of interest to this article. Instead of its psychological and medical sense, the concept here is treated as a state of groundlessness or general uncertainty. This is experienced not only by divers who lose the surface direction, astronauts who are only tethered to humanity by a cord, or the climber who for a moment is untethered to the cliff.

This state of discomfort from lack of grounding can be generally applicable to the human condition. As part of the animal kingdom, humans are finite: limited by death, time, their environment, their circumstances, their energy, and fate. Yet there is something of the divine: the desire to reach for the infinite, accomplish greatness, create a legacy, leave something or someone to carry on their name, or accumulate power.

Humans, uniquely among the animal kingdom, wonder what meaning there is in the world and seek to explore the universe to understand. Limited from grasping the absolute, yet possessing a desire to try.

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Literature

Some thinkers have critiqued the traditional perspectives on modes of grounding human beings seek. Founder of existential and phenomenological psychotherapy Ludwig Binswanger believed that individuals have freedom, complexity, and ability to exist transcendent of what roles and meaning are external to the self (Foucault & Binswanger, 1930). In *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Laing, 1960), psychiatrist R. D. Laing argues that some psychological conditions are rather a result of the tension of identities, a dissonance of what is seen and what one is, calling this ontological insecurity. Deleuze and Guattari (1980) offer the concept of refrain similar to Plato's forms, in contrast to efforts of grounding, as capable of evolving, yet maintaining unity of self (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; Acid Horizon, 2022). Contemporary anti-establishment movements such as Plan C see the natural state of anxiety and efforts to alleviate it as being employed by society for conformity and support to condone current social institutions (Plan C, 2014). The activity of philosophy has been considered by some as the radical act of rebellion against assumptions, institutions, rules, and desires for contentment (Camus, 1983; Acid Horizon, 2023). There is clearly a sense in philosophical, psychological, and counter-establishment studies that this anxiety exists and different perspectives of it have the potential for varying results.

Modes of Grounding

Space is one of the most fundamental ways one finds orientation. The first introduction to another includes where one is from as if it is a passcode of understanding the person. There is an assumption of returning at least annually for holidays and family. One longs to belong, to walk the

streets often walked, to call places by what they were a few decades ago, to be recognized. This belonging comes with familiarity with the cracks, intimacy by experience, acceptance since everyone grew up together, attachment by default, and possession by claim. The Greeks called anyone not from Greece barbarians because their strange languages sounded like “barbarian”, while the words, the customs, the habits, and the experiences easily reveal where one belongs. The locals know one’s name, the food and drink taste as memory recalls, the bed is cozy, and nothing more is needed to create comfort.

For Kierkegaard, the soul is defined by a number of synthetic relationships that must remain in balance or else be in despair. The reality and physicality of human existence must be balanced with the ideality and the ephemeral. Kierkegaard makes the point explicitly in *Sickness unto Death* that the despair of necessity is to lack possibility. To remain too focused on what is at the expense of what could be is an imbalance; it is despair. Where someone is is such an overemphasis. To focus on that is at the expense of the could be is proof one is too attached to a place, whether specific like Greece or general like Earth (Kierkegaard, 1998).

Identity is the next basic mode of grounding, including knowledge and recognition. The sweetest sound one can hear is their own name. It is a great insult for someone to forget. The identity that comes with the name includes the experience, persona, interactions, connections, and accomplishments cultivated over years. There are associations and rankings dense with meaning inherent in identities: he is a baker, she is a lawyer, he is her brother, she is my professor, he is a fraud and criminal, she is a feminist. One clings to these identities as a source of security and uses them as shortcuts to know others and know themselves. When there is a crisis of identity, the titles are in need of resolution. The disorientation causes anxiety until a new identity can be established. When one is confident of their identities, they are rather content. One wants to know what will be their epitaph, even if it might change.

Nietzsche says in *Zarathustra* that a life well-lived is one in which a self-concept is established over time. Life is a journey. In “The Wanderer” *Zarathustra* talks about the mountains he scales—metaphorical challenges—and concludes famously “ultimately, one encounters only oneself” (Nietzsche, 2010b). Each person is not given an identity, but earns

it over time. Their present choices become a part of their past and are then an unchanging part of who they are.

For Sartre, each person is a collection of their past actions, but also their freedom towards the future. The gambler is both the product of his history of bad choices, but also the possibility for freedom in the future. Just as it is bad faith for the gambler to ignore his history and say something like “it is OK for me to gamble in this one instance because I am ultimately a free person who can make the choice to stop in a responsible way”, it is similarly bad faith to ignore freedom all together. Sartre gives an example of a serial child abuser who says “it is not my fault I prey on children; this is who I am!” as a defense. Both the gambler and the pedophile have the wrong way of constructing their identity around bad faith (Sartre, 1992). The gambler forgets his past; the pedophile dwells on it.

Status is important for the individual because he wants to know his place in the world. His history of activities are revealed in status, accomplishments and titles, with a clear outlook for future statuses, with goals yet to accomplish. One rather bases their potential happiness on the wishful thinking that they will be happy once they achieve x. This potential offers comfort when there is a lack of happiness: pursuit is the excuse for dissatisfaction in the present. There is always a next goal, a comparison to what others have, a disorientation in an infinite world of choices for statuses to pursue. Status is a veiled way of measuring worth in a world where meaning is not clearly defined. One measures worth against their own values and the subjective view of others’ worth in comparison. The game is arbitrary, since the world does not reveal its meaning, no one knows what is needed to win or accomplish to reach satisfaction. The Greeks were recommended to “know thyself”, which includes one’s own limitations: one is not divine. Those who challenge the gods, fight their fate, or try to increase their status in mythology stories are often taught a damaging and ironic lesson that leaves them worse off.

In Soren Kierkegaard’s Concept of Anxiety, he presents a state of anxiety as man’s natural reaction to the reality of his own sinful nature (Kierkegaard, 1980). The great lesson of Christianity, he believes, is that Jesus was sent to Earth to live and die to redeem humanity’s original sin. It was Adam’s first sin that marked the qualitative shift in mankind, giving the status of sinner. Human beings were redeemed by virtue of the sacrifice

of Jesus. But while that sacrifice erased the ledger, troublingly, the nature of sin remained. Temptation persists redemption. Human beings are in a state of perpetual despair, even if it only manifests at those moments of anxiety when the realization occurs that, while past sins have been forgiven, one is sure to sin again. Human beings are guilty by nature as well as deed (Kierkegaard, 1980).

Vocation, its etymology meaning a calling, is something to occupy oneself with in order to serve and be served some sense of meaning. To be called towards a goal implies that there is some difference, some meaning, some accomplishment in this life that can satisfy aimlessness. Not a career for survival, but a mission towards some greater purpose. One may doubt there is meaning in the world, a divinity exists and guides with intention, and they can live in the freedom Sartre ascribes to each individual. Even so, it is easier to live with the belief that what they do can and will make a difference in this world. There is something in the idea of legacy, to leave something in this world that will retain significance for many generations, that is both base, since animals and plants prioritize reproduction, and divine, since the legends of Julius Caesar and his Rome, William Shakespeare and his plays, Beethoven and his symphonies, are larger than life. Vocation grasps for the infinite.

Just as Kierkegaard says that remaining grounded at the expense of the finite is despair, so too, does he say that grasping for the infinite risks losing oneself. “Infinitudes’ despair is to lack finitude” (Kierkegaard, 1998), or the grounded sense of existence that is an essential part of the human experience. Kierkegaard invokes the famous example of Cesare Borgia whose personal motto “Caesar or nothing” was full of ambition and history. The comparison and goal Cesare gave himself to live up to the first Caesar was rather unobtainable. For this reason, it led to the despair of someone who nonetheless has a profound effect on the history and culture of his day (Kierkegaard, 1998). For Sartre, this kind of grasping for infinity would be transcendence without immanence, eternity without facticity. Put more simply, it is bad faith. To dwell on the infinite possibility of actions leads to anguish (Sartre, 1992). As Voltaire (1770) puts it: “don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good”. One can let one’s vocation shape them without defining them.

The this-ness of a thing is the essence—what it is distilled and without unnecessary characteristics. But human beings are complex, and

efforts to label themselves creates anxiety because of the sense of permanence and exclusion a concept can contain. When individuals define, they set boundaries, they say what is not just as much as what is. For the greedy, this is constraining work. For the confused, this is unsettling. For the thinker, this can be cause for joy, since naming is just as playful, testing, and agile as it is defining. Children just exist, free from the worry of how restraining a job title, a relationship, or a belief system can be. Adults, on the contrary, concern themselves with a desire to know who they are, and anxiety when the essence is in flux.

When one looks to the external to define oneself, through titles, star signs, or personality types, they put themselves in a state that Sartre recognizes as bad faith. Once they adopt one persona, like Sartre's famous example of the café waiter who plays up the mannerisms and acts in a way as a waiter ought to act, they play at being rather than actually being the thing they mean to be. There is a difference between being a waiter and playing at being a waiter. When one lets social expectations, even self-imposed, dictate one's own behavior and choices, this is bad faith (Sartre, 1992).

An individual is a mix of immanence and transcendence, of facticity and freedom, of being-in-itself and being-for-itself according to Kierkegaard. When one over relies on one term of these dyads, the resulting imbalance is a lie they tell themselves and may even believe. In *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard discusses the imbalance in the syntheses in the human being that make up various kinds of despair: infinitude balanced with finitude, possibility balanced with necessity, and so on. When one latches onto one of these out of convenience or the lure of stability, they necessarily devalue the opposing term. They are not one or the other as much as they are both, and while this might not be as satisfying, it is probably more true (Kierkegaard, 1998).

In order to achieve, define, and matter, humans seek power: both their potential capacity and their realized potency. Human beings are the species among the animals who have the ability and desire to be greater than what came before, reach for greatness, and leave a legacy: potential for great creation or destruction. There are legendary names who are discussed because they founded countries, borders, or wars; invented or discovered life changing scientific advancements; wrote books or music that reveal human emotions, conditions, and desires; sent humanity to

space; or built something that affects everyday life. These names are discussed for generations. One is aware of their potential, and carries it with them every time they decide whether to get out of bed in the morning. Therefore, the weight of this potential can psychologically be a curse as much as a blessing. It serves as a drive, a source of ambition, but also as a cause for dissatisfaction, where goals are rather unreachable, intangible, and unrealized in the individual's lifetime. There is a comparison to those individuals of legend, with a desire to do something that similarly has significance for centuries. Even more so, there is a comparison to one's ideal self: the expectations, values, and goals one wishes to fulfill.

Despair does not mean unhappiness. One can be wholly happy with one's life while still sensing there is something wrong with being itself. In Jean-Paul Sartre's most famous work, *Being and Nothingness*, he talks about nothingness as a worm in the heart of being (Sartre, 1992). For Sartre, everything that is implies what is not. In creating a life for oneself, an individual, in so doing, annihilates their unrealized possibilities. Everyone is, therefore, a mass murder of their potential future selves. When someone chooses to go to college for philosophy, they are destroying worlds in which they study mathematics or psychology or never go to college at all. In being a conscious, free actor, everyone has tremendous power. With that freedom, Sartre says, comes responsibility. As each person creates the world in which they live by destroying all others, they have the ability to realize that the world is wholly theirs. If one is unhappy with that world, there is no one to blame but themselves, as that world's creator. Even in the best possible world, the sense of ownership and responsibility one can have is immense (Sartre, 1992).

Most of all, humans seek meaning for a sense of orientation. The history of humanity is a history of meaning seeking beings. Mythological stories exist to explain the place of humanity between the gods and the animals, the difference between good and bad, what human beings should do with their lives, and aspects of how the world works in order to make sense of existence. Post scientific revolution and research based methods to understand the world, there are still questions left unanswered. Human beings write stories and believe doctrines in order to avoid facing the abyss, to exist with grounding, to ignore the anxiety that life could be meaningless.

In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus puts the question another way when he says the primary and fundamental philosophical question one can ask is whether one should commit suicide. Having some sense of meaning would be one possible reason to answer Camus' question in negation. If one has something to live for, they have a reason to live. The question everyone posits regarding the meaning of life is therefore an appeal for their continued existence, to fabricate a sense of meaning to quell the voice of doubt (Camus, 1983). Camus calls this impulse human beings have to create meaning where there ought to be none a "philosophical suicide." He understands why other existential authors do it; the precipice can truly be terrifying. In "On the Three Metamorphoses" Nietzsche walks through the three transformations of one's soul—from the camel laden with the burdens of others, to the lion who must fight and ultimately slay the dragon of expectations and finally to the child who, in the aftermath of this destruction must build something new, possible with only the creativity that a child has. It is no wonder that Nietzsche has the sacred-yes-saying of creation following the destruction of the dragon of traditional social meaning (Nietzsche, 2010b). The story otherwise seems incomplete. Kierkegaard, too, after presenting the idea of never ending despair gives the "leap of faith" as the answer when logic can only take one so far (Kierkegaard, 1980). Understanding is not condoning, however, and Camus disagrees with both the method and the result that replace the dizziness at the precipice with some other palliative but ultimately false meaning.

Existential Perspective

The existential tradition has long held that anxiety is the natural response to an individual recognizing their own freedom. Writers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus have different names for the phenomenon, yet all recognize its universality. What is anxiety in Kierkegaard becomes anguish in Sartre. It is the dizziness that Nietzsche describes or Camus' feeling of the absurd. While most of the Existentialists address this anxiety as a problem for which there is cause to seek a solution, their positions can inform this study.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, discusses the moment an individual stands on a cliff face as a revealing metaphor for being in a

general sense. So long as there is meaning in human lives supplied from external sources, individuals are spared from the meaninglessness of existence. There comes a time, though, when individuals realize that those things that give them meaning, those social institutions—family, religion, society—that purport to say what it means to be human, are no more in a position to offer meaning than any other institution. That realization is both freeing and terrifying. The guard rail at the edge of the cliff has been removed with this realization and individuals are free to jump. Of course, if they jump, they have no one to blame but themselves; there is no external appeal. This is the tension between freedom and the accompanying responsibility each person has. Sartre goes on to call the stultifying effect of newfound freedom anguish (Sartre, 1992).

The realization that every action has such profound significance is enough to cause anyone pause. For Nietzsche, this realization of the newfound significance of actions can have the opposite effect. In “The Heaviest Burden” he details the two reactions an individual can have to hearing the news for the first time of the power of one’s actions (Nietzsche, 2010a). Specifically, he asks how one would respond if they heard that they were to live their life over and over again. Would they gnash their teeth and throw themselves on the ground at the thought of this torment, or would they take this news as an affirmation of the choices they make? If one lives a free and meaningful life, there is no greater joy than the eternal return (Nietzsche, 2010a).

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* book three, Nietzsche includes the now famous story of “The Vision and the Riddle,” where Zarathustra is confronted in a dream by the spirit of gravity (Nietzsche, 2010b). The spirit of gravity is sitting on Zarathustra’s shoulder as he climbs the mountain and tries to cause doubt in his quest. In order to rid himself of this burden, Zarathustra calls upon his courage. It is courage, Zarathustra says, that is necessary to defeat the spirit of gravity—that which holds him down—but also to confront the dizziness that is essential to the human condition: “Courage also slays dizziness at the abyss; and where do human beings not stand at the abyss?” (Nietzsche, 2010b).

The step up to the cliff is not the last step. Once the guardrails of meaning that the eternal supplies to life are stripped away, most of the Existentialists consider it each individual’s responsibility to create something in their place to give meaning to an otherwise meaningless

world. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre treat the anxiety of ontological vertigo as a problem, unpleasant, temporary, and worthy and capable of being solved. What if, instead, this anxiety is considered natural, with feeble yet successful attempts to ignore it the peculiar occupation of humanity?

Confronting the Vertigo

Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, takes issue with the idea that dizziness can be solved at all (Camus, 1983). His absurdist thought, while sharing the first steps of realization and destruction with Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre, is different in the response to despair. The Existentialists tear down the false edifices of meaning created by society, yet fall into a trap when they try to find resolution. Exceptionally, Camus avoids the temptation to find grounding and instead seeks to live in the absurd (Camus, 1983). The hero of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is the absurd hero. Condemned to roll his rock up a mountain for all eternity, Sisyphus has the best claim for being engaged in a life devoid of meaning (Camus, 1983). However, everyone is living a similarly meaningless life—meaning is not possible. Each of the modes previously discussed seeks groundedness, where there is no ground. Any sense of stability is false, where the human being is taking part in some degree of bad faith when playing along with the game. The search for grounding is vanity, as the ground is false.

What is clear, if ontological vertigo represents the human condition, is that philosophy is a natural and essential activity for living authentically. The work of philosophy is to acknowledge the ontological vertigo, to confront that there is no ground, and to explore options of how to respond to this discovery. The response is not to redefine one's life or purpose unless living disingenuously is acceptable, but rather to confront the absurdity of existence. When standing at the precipice, there are three choices: throw oneself off, turn away from the cliff, or dance. Dancing at the edge of the cliff requires the most courage. Philosophers are the fiddlers of the music, the choreographers of new steps, and the leaders of the dance, inviting others to join.

Note: This article is based in part on the previously published article *Ontological Vertigo* (Cook, 2022).

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