

## HEIDEGGER'S ANXIETY VERSUS LACAN'S ANXIETY

Kirsten Hyltdgaard

Anxiety is not without an object. In psychoanalysis double negations are always of special interest. Lacan does not say: anxiety has an object. Lacan insists on expressing the point about the *object a* through a double negation. He also turns the traditional philosophical way of presenting the question of the object upside down. Anxiety is a recurring theme in philosophy. There are two aims behind this paper: first, to discuss both differences and similarities between Heidegger and Lacan, and second, to point out two different presentations of anxiety in Lacan and among Lacanians. On the one hand, there is the definition that smacks of Sartre, i.e. the anxious apprehension of the Other's lack, of 'what I am to the Other?', 'what does the Other want?' On the other hand, there is – I shall claim – the original point in the way psychoanalysis presents the question of anxiety, which is distinct from any variation on 'existential philosophy', namely, that the object of anxiety is the imminence, the threatening proximity of the object. In other words, it is not the Other's lack but the Other's lack of lack that provokes anxiety.

In Heidegger's §40 in *Being and Time*, "The basic state-of-mind of anxiety as a distinctive way in which Dasein is disclosed"<sup>1</sup>, the four concepts of *anxiety*, *freedom*, *authenticity*, and the *uncanny*, the "*unheimlich*" (literally the "unhomelike") are presented on pages 232-233. These concepts are interrelated in Heidegger. In Lacan's seminar on *Anxiety*<sup>2</sup> the concept of anxiety is presented in connection with the concept of the *uncanny*. Lacan does not speak about freedom in connection with anxiety; in fact, Lacan speaks rarely, if ever, about freedom. 'Forced choice' seems to be the only option in psychoanalysis. However, a few basic points about the concept of *freedom* shall be presented in the following since freedom in Heidegger does indeed have to do with 'choice' of oneself, albeit not a choice of the deliberative will. Freedom is not a question of voluntarism, i.e. the free choice between alternatives. This may turn out to be relevant for psychoanalysis, and therefore the concept of freedom cannot easily be dismissed from a psychoanalytic horizon.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger does not use the philosophical concept of the *subject*. This is no doubt in order to avoid presenting the question of man's way of being as something associated with the philosophy of consciousness and the subject as the subject of cognition. Man is rather "there" [da] in the world, and *Dasein* is the concept of man's way of being.<sup>3</sup> The *world* is a framework of everything there is; everything is and is understood because it refers to everything else. The world as a framework is a "context of involvements" [*Bewandtniszusammenhang*]. Man's way of being is to understand the world as a whole – we cannot *not* understand the world. The question of understanding is not a question of a conscious and reflective subject outside the world, surveying the world, but a question of a being that is *thrown* into the world [*Geworfenheit*]. This means first and foremost that man's way of being is not to grow out of a natural, biological, ethnic soil, which again implies the "*Unheimlichkeit*", the unhomeliness. *Dasein* is in fact at home in the world, but being at home is not primary.

The confident, conventional understanding of the world, this "*Bewandtniszusammenhang*", is not original. Original is rather the fundamental not being at home. And this is what anxiety is all about, this fundamental not being at home. Anxiety questions the very framework of what is. And this is where freedom comes into it. The framework is not fixed, it is not preordained or indisputable; nothing is 'necessarily the case'. According to Heidegger the way we are "disclosed" or open to the world (and we cannot *not* be disclosed or open to the world) is by the "state-of-mind" [*Befindlichkeit*], the sentiment of how one is or the sentiment of the situation – fearful, depressed, cheerful, mellow, whichever mood one may be in. The state-of-mind or the sentiment is not another concept of *feeling*. The sentiment comes neither from the inside (the mind) nor from the outside (the world) and the sentiment should not be understood in connection with the traditional psychological distinctions between cognition, will and feeling. The sentiment is how the world is disclosed to this *Dasein* and the way *Dasein* is open to the world.

Anxiety is the most fundamental sentiment of all because it discloses the world as a world of "possibility". *Dasein*'s way of being is a being of the possible. Any interpretation of the world is necessarily just one interpretation among other possible interpretations. Authenticity [*Eigenlichkeit*] is a "modification" of the conventional way of understanding and being in the world. "*Authentic Being-one's Self* does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the "they"; it is rather an *existentiell* modification of the "they" – of the "they" as an *essential existentielle*."<sup>4</sup> The "they" [Das Mann] is equivalent to Lacan's "Other", it is those Others who "are not *definite* Others. On the contrary, any Other can represent them. What is decisive is just that inconspicuous domination by Others which has already been taken over unawares from *Dasein* as

Being-with.”<sup>5</sup> Authenticity is not a *state* of mind, it is a *modification*. You cannot *be* in a state of authenticity. The authentic shows itself as a break, a rupture from, a modification of the conventional.

Heidegger has no concept of the subject that resembles a sovereign subject with a free will; indeed, nothing is further from Heidegger. But he constantly avoids any reversed idea of absolute determinism or necessity. Heidegger's concept of freedom is beyond the correlative concepts of free will and determinism. *Dasein's* way of being is freedom because the world as a meaningful framework is not a prefixed, natural, predetermined framework of meaning, but a world of the possible. *Dasein* is indeed thrown into a world, i.e. its conditions of possibilities are not a question of choice, but this world does not determine *Dasein's* way of being. We know this from the psychoanalytic point that no occurrence is in itself traumatic. The traumatic effect is not a question of whether a third party can 'understand', i.e. identify with the experience as traumatic. From a third party's hermeneutic, empathetic viewpoint the occurrence may even seem trivial, i.e. the impact of the occurrence makes no sense. The occurrence has to be interpreted in order to become traumatic, and interpretation is not a question of hermeneutic understanding of whether the fact that the occurrence is traumatic makes sense, but is rather a question of the *signifier*. The occurrence has to *not* be able to be integrated in a framework of signifiers in order to become traumatic.

The notions of authenticity and freedom are connected to anxiety in the sense that anxiety draws *Dasein* out of any confident, secure notion of predetermined necessity. Anxiety throws *Dasein* back onto itself, *Dasein* loses the reference to an Other, i.e., concepts like tradition, culture, and history concerning the questions of 'who am I' and 'how shall I live my life'. Freedom is about *loss*, loss of conventional meaning.<sup>6</sup> "They" lose their grip on *Dasein*. This is not an argument for solipsism; on the contrary, anxiety throws *Dasein* back on the fact that *Dasein* is in a world with others [*Mitsein*] - a world *Dasein* interprets but where it has lost any reference to preordained authority to provide it with the right understanding of the world. This provokes anxiety.

It also has to do with truth. Heidegger does not mention his concept of truth exactly in this connection, but truth to Heidegger is not a question of a statement being in correspondence with facts but with the way the world is revealed to this *Dasein*. The truth of anxiety is that it reveals the world to *Dasein* as a world of the possible.

Heidegger has been presented briefly above. Now we turn to Lacan.

In order to distance himself from the classical Kierkegaardian distinction between fear and anxiety Lacan does not directly contradict the point about anxiety not having an object by stating: yes, it does in fact have an object. Rather, he insists, as mentioned above, that anxiety is not without an object. Why is the double negation a more appropriate way of describing the problem? Everybody knows that the *object a* is a rather strange object. It is not like the imaginary objects that we deal with in the philosophy of cognition and perception. We can doubt whether the imaginary objects of cognition, reality and perception exist at all, whether they are not simply hallucinations. We know that we are on safe ground when we wonder whether we are hallucinating. This was Descartes' argument: when in doubt, you are certain about being.

Now, what kind of object is the *object a*? Traditionally, i.e. in philosophy, an object is defined as correlative with a subject, the subject of cognition, the phenomenological subject of intentional acts, and the subject of perception. The *object* in philosophy is defined as something that stands against you as literally stated in the German word "*Gegenstand*". The object is external to the subject. As Lacan points out, to use the term *object* about this small *a* is to make metaphorical use of the word *object*.<sup>7</sup> But is it a good metaphor? He also claims that the objectivity of the object has nothing to do with the *object a*. The *object a* is external to any possible definition of objectivity. The object of anxiety is what undermines any idea of the subject of cognition, what undermines any safe understanding of a subject of consciousness at a safe distance from and confronted with a world of objects.

Here it is important to stress the point about double negation.<sup>8</sup> When using double negation you do not claim that you know what kind of object you are dealing with. It is beyond a question of cognition, of knowledge. Cognition concerns knowable objects. When saying that it is not without an object you do not claim that you know what kind of object it is. The *object a* transcends any possible knowledge. As Jacques-Alain Miller points out in his text "Constituted Anxiety, Constitutive Anxiety"<sup>9</sup> the reason why we must use negations in this connection is because we do not have an object first and then its loss; "the object *a* forms, as such, from its very loss."

Lacan turns the problem of the object upside down. As always in Lacan you have to begin with the Other. In the beginning was the Other. In this connection the *object a* is not correlative with a subject but first and foremost a question of the *Other's* object, and it is a question of what kind of object the subject is to the Other. This is the kind of anxiety that smacks of Sartre's famous description of the anxious apprehension of the Other's gaze. The perspective is turned upside down compared to any traditional theory of cognition. It is a question of the Other's object both in the sense of 'me' possibly being an object to the Other and the question of what the Other's object is. Apparently

this produces anxiety. But why? Why is it not just a pleasure, a thrill? Or repulsive? Why does it produce anxiety?

There seem to be at least two different interpretations of anxiety in Lacan or as presented by Lacanians. There is also a second definition or description – and this second description seems to be the original psychoanalytical point concerning anxiety – namely that anxiety arises when the Other is *not* lacking. It is the lack of lack that produces anxiety. But is this not the exact opposite definition of anxiety arising when the question of what the Other desires is indeterminable?

In the following a distinction will be made between the two definitions of anxiety by calling the first ‘anxiety light’ and the second ‘anxiety’. ‘Anxiety light’ is the anxiety provoked by the question of the Other’s lack. This is the ‘doubtful’ interpretation, the question of what kind of object ‘I’ am to the Other, and what is the Other’s object. The anxiety light is the one that is hardly distinguishable from that of Sartre’s. But there is also the anxiety of terrifying certainty, the terrifying experience of the non-lacking Other irrupting into your world. This kind of anxiety is the original psychoanalytic contribution to the theme of anxiety.

Lacan claims<sup>10</sup> that it is not the nostalgia for the lost object that provokes anxiety. It is thus not loss as Freud claims, but the imminence, the threatening proximity of the object. It is everything that announces or lets us catch a glimpse of the possibility of returning to the womb, the most homely of everything. As Freud pointed out, what is uncanny is the most homely, the home. And therefore one of the standard examples of what may provoke anxiety is the female genitals, Freud claims in his famous text on the uncanny.

According to Lacan, however, in order to prevent anxiety from arising a certain whole or emptiness (“Vide”) of the demand must be preserved.<sup>11</sup> There has to be room for anxious apprehension, the light anxiety, in order for true anxiety not to arise. It is when the “vide” – the emptiness – is covered up that anxiety arises. It is when the Other is not lacking that anxiety arises. It is the lack of lack that overwhelms.

Anxiety overwhelms.<sup>12</sup> It cannot be expected, anticipated. Expectation and anticipation presuppose a framework within which the dreaded, what is feared, can occur. Anxiety overwhelms when something happens that was already there, as distinct from the expected, which is absent, whose future presence is dreaded, *feared*. Anxiety occurs when something appears that was already there, something which is far too close, too close to home. Lacan suggests the metaphor “host”, but he immediately states his reservations with regard to this possibility. The metaphor is not quite adequate as the host is someone who is expected to be there. Lacan refers to the host as the “hostile *amadoue*”<sup>13</sup>, which can be understood as the hostile fawning on someone. What immediately springs to mind is John Cleese as Basil in *Fawlty Towers* who, by showing how he in a split second can shift from flattery to abuse, shows the inherent link between the two. There can be anxious apprehension or expectation – light anxiety – when a host or anyone else flatters you. You become alert because there is a framework within which you can anticipate a direct act of hostility. However, the ‘what is already there’ is what is closest to home (*Heim/unheimlich*) and is something you cannot guard yourself against. In one sense it is the host, while in another sense it is not. This is where Freud and Lacan differ from Heidegger.

What “*Heim*” (home) is and what “*Geheimnis*” (the secret) is has never passed by the framework of recognition. It remains “*unheimlich*”, less uninhabitable than uninhabited. Anxiety occurs when the “*heimlich*” occurs in the framework.<sup>14</sup>

But there is also a similarity between Heidegger and Lacan because anxiety is the presentiment, less in the sense of expectation or premonition than in the sense of pre-sentiment, literally, what comes before any sentiment. This is similar to Heidegger for whom anxiety is a “*Grundbefindlichkeit*”, a “basic” sentiment; it is also a ‘pre’-sentiment. To reiterate the difference between Heidegger and Lacan consists in the fact that in Heidegger you do not find the horrifying certainty of the Other’s presence, the Other’s lack of lack.

Anxiety is beyond doubt. It is pre-doubtful. It is not hesitation or doubt, anxiety is rather the cause of doubt. Doubt is there to fight anxiety, especially by the innumerable ways of neurotic bluffing, the obsessive neurotic invention of reasons for avoiding obtaining what they claim they want, hesitating and doubting as if they will live forever, as if they have all the time in the world. What doubt keeps at a safe distance is the terrifying certainty of anxiety. So anxiety is not without an object in different sense than the object of anxious apprehension, where the object is prepared for and structured by the network of signifiers.

Lacan speaks of anxiety being the very “cut”<sup>15</sup>, the cut without which the presence of signifiers would be unthinkable. And this refers to the problem of the “*trait unaire*”, this very special signifier which points towards the way the symbolic is structured. And this brings us back to Heidegger, for whom anxiety also revealed the question of how the world is structured.

Presented at the Diagonal in Copenhagen, 2005

---

1. Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1962. *Sein und Zeit* "Die Grundbefindlichkeit der Angst als eine ausgezeichnete Erschlossenheit des Daseins", Max Niemeyer Verlag Tübingen, 1984) especially p. 188
2. *Le Séminaire Livre X. L'angoisse*, Seuil, Paris 2004
3. To be more precise: "Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity – the inquirer – transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question is an entity's mode of *Being*; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about – namely, Being. This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term "*Dasein*". *Being and Time* p. 27.
4. *Being and Time*, p. 168. Heidegger's italics.
5. *Ibid.* p. 164.
6. For another presentation of the concept of freedom which brakes out of the ancient dispute between proponents of free will versus determinism, see my article "The Subject as an Ill-timed Accident: Lacan, Sartre, and Aristotle" in *Jacques Lacan. Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory. Volume 1. Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London/New York 2002
7. *Le Séminaire Livre X. L'angoisse* p. 102.
8. *Ibid.* p. 105.
9. NLS-MSGASER number 104, 04/12/04
10. *Ibid.* p. 67
11. *Ibid.* p. 80
12. *Ibid.* p. 91
13. *Ibid.* p. 91
14. *Ibid.* p. 92
15. *Ibid.* p. 92

Copyright © by the Author. This text from the website of the London Society of the New Lacanian School, at <http://www.londonsociety-nls.org.uk>. Permission to circulate material from this site must be sought from the LSNLS. All rights reserved. Please include this portion of the text in any printed version of this paper.