

Night of Philosophy and Ideas

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Anxiety, Anxiety, Anxiety!

Jamieson Webster

Let's face it. All of you have an anxiety disorder. And by virtue of that, you are the worst, most boring, psychoanalytic patients. It's like listening to a blender, or an emergency broadcast signal. I don't mean to offend you. I have anxiety too. It's unbelievably painful and boring. What could be worse than painful and boring!? Admit it! You are bored to death with your anxiety ridden self, with that hamster wheel turning in your head. With your Meditation apps! They help? A bit. Good. Get yourself centred. Clear out your head for 4 hours, do it again, maybe it lasts a little bit longer, a day? Do it again tomorrow. I like meditation, don't get me wrong, but what is it serving as a bulwark against? What is going on with the collective palliative measures for mutual vague indefinable symptoms? Blame the phones. Blame Trump. Xanax crisis for the better off. Opioid crisis for the poor. Let's see if we can get to the bottom of this, just a little.

A patient comes to you complaining of anxiety. They have read everything on the internet about anxiety disorders and the meditation or mindfulness techniques for abating it. They've researched Benzodiazepines and probably have tried their friend's prescription. They've gone through the rounds of herbalists, body workers, stress

massage, breathing techniques, cleanses and journaling. They've even cut out gluten. But what they are seeking in all this is something more. The desire to place terribly real and painful bodily feelings somewhere, grows more and more intense. Is my illness due to biology or circumstance or ancestry? They'll often settle for all three, being better equal opportunists than the mental health ideologues themselves. To what in this panacea does the psychoanalyst respond?

Anxiety has always been one of the greatest threats to the psychic system in Freud who refined his theory of anxiety till the very end of his life. Anxiety isn't merely a negative force; rather, it is a question of a mass, a quantity, to which we must form a relationship. It demands palpable change in a system. Anxiety concerns the liminal aspects of subjectivity, including something in sexuality that highlights the separateness of bodies and makes bearing this separation difficult. Anxious patients love their anxiety and stick close to it, monitor it, greet it like a long-lost friend, especially the kind of friends we keep in order to complain about.

We also happen to live in a time that is deeply invested in the vicissitudes of anxiety, a time of deep insecurity, of paranoia and too much communication, too many non-choices. Together, with the thousand palliative techniques, we are in a closed, almost claustrophobic loop. This loop mirrors the problem of being trapped by anxiety—an anxiety that, in fact, has no outside. This is why it tends towards either claustrophobia on the one hand, or agoraphobia on the other. I take this cultural read incredibly seriously. We live in a time of high anxiety, and many analysts

fear we are facing the breakdown of collective fantasy. Others, it should, be said, celebrate it, even as they worry about the psychic consequences.

Freud said that most cures (meditation apps) follow the lines of mass psychology or collective fantasy in the guise of religion or philosophies of life. They bind anxiety in a collective illusion that covers over the fact of the unconscious (Namaste peace and light). One might even say that collective anxieties *are* our new religion—giving way to all kinds of new rituals like social media. Psychoanalysis wants create new solutions to the fundamental anxieties of living that aren't simply one more 'crooked cure.'

So, when Freud compares classical hysteria (bodily symptoms, forgetting, multiple personality disorder, fuge states, sexual acting out) with anxiety hysteria (what we would think of now as everything that falls under the heading of anxiety disorders and panic), what becomes clear is that there is a true symptom, and anxiety ain't it. Anxiety makes us live in a kind of medial zone of incessant defense and substitution, projection, denial, and wishful thinking, what he eventually calls an unending series of half-measures. This is Freud at the turn of the century.

Freud writes *Inhibitions, Symptoms, Anxiety* in 1926 and portrays two types.

- 1) Hysteric: Repression, Symptom, Denial (socomotization- I don't see what I don't want to see), no-anxiety
- 2) Anxious: Regression, character neurosis (blind to symptoms), phobic defense (turn away from the world) and when it fails, anxiety.

Freud, at this late point, says that we must understand better how defense turned against a piece of the external world leaves the symptom and the personality intact, whereas the cost of the second structure is so much greater. A woman, he says, will be tender to her children—whom she otherwise hates—but not necessarily tender to children in general or as a person. For the person riddled with anxiety, it becomes characterological. They are creatures of reaction-formation rather than having symptomatic reactions to creaturely life. They don't distort a piece of reality that they don't want to see, but rather the whole thing.

That's the general outline of the conundrum of Anxiety, Anxiety, Anxiety. Three psychoanalytic stories.

1) A terrible admission. Freud originally thought the reason we were anxious was because of what he called *Coitus Interruptus* or pulling out. Lacan says this is one of Freud's most brilliant interpretations. Let me explain.

Of all the silly psychoanalytic ideas laid bare for the world to see, perhaps none is as easily derided as the notion that anxiety is a result of *coitus interruptus*—there, a terrible joke, alongside Freud's other early childish theories of sexuality, like the ones involving menstrual cycles and the nose.

Anxiety is being linked to the failure of the sexual. Orgasm, Freud tells us, is the ejection into the outside of the scraps or grains of libido, the

exteriorization of the drive in bodily coitus. Anxiety is these scraps trapped on the inside, unable to enter the stream of thought, or to simply return to the body, caught between here and nowhere. One can begin to see why *coitus interruptus* was an intriguing proposition—an image of the incomplete act, half measures, leaving something cut off mid-stream, like anxiety's in-between.

This half choice erodes one's somatic sexual constitution over time, leading Freud to a tight symptomatic loop: anxiety erupts because of interrupted pleasure and anxiety leads one to interrupt pleasure. Masturbation becomes the hallmark of ruined libidinal potential leading to a weakened constitution, weakened potency, and eventually a disposition to anxiety, pessimism, and low self-confidence. These patients, Freud says, can bring "psychical sexual weakness" on themselves" by spoiling coitus (ibid.).

A fun caveat for you ladies: Freud says one ought to be careful when considering a woman's complaints over anxiety, Freud cautions; more often than not they partnered with anxious men who are making them hysterical. And the more passionate a woman, the more she will react to the decrease in a man's potency, *coitus interruptus*, and fall ill. Freud reflections on anxiety, leads him to levy a surprising indictment at culture:

In the absence of such a solution [innocuous methods of preventing conception and disease], society appears doomed to fall a victim to incurable neuroses, which reduce the enjoyment of life to a minimum, destroy the marriage relation and bring hereditary ruin on the whole coming generation. (1985, 44)

Coitus interruptus is destroying the family, to say nothing of a whole generation to come, as even the lower strata—meaning the less civilized and so less neurotic—Freud says will succumb—a world of hesitant half-orgasming anxious men and more and more hysterical women. This will eventually tip into anxiety! Are we there yet?

2) Leave your appendages on the subway

Freud changes his theory of anxiety later on. It's not *coitus interruptus*, but rather a reaction to loss and separation, feeling of helplessness associated with it that are overwhelming the system. You can breathe a sigh of relief.

How to reduce this helplessness, especially in a world that is making us feel more and more helpless and anxious? This tale of anxiety reveals something about the stakes of an analytic cure. Freud's attempt to clarify the nature of anxiety leads him to consider what is distinct about human relationship to objects.

Let's take a humorous anecdote from Lacan. He asks us to consider the idea of one's arm, which, if it is a symbol of one's will, could become an object under threat. Someone could seize control of it, like when they call you their right-hand man. Or, we could leave it behind on the metro or in our analyst's waiting room, like an ordinary umbrella.

We analysts know what that means. The experience of the hysteric is significant enough to know that this comparison, which affords a

glimpse of the fact that an arm can be forgotten, neither more or less than a mechanical arm, is no forced metaphor. (2014, 217)

What Lacan means to show is that anxiety is not only a question of dismemberment and bodily harm. It is also the recognition of the unconscious—the realization that we are not masters of our own bodies (minds).

Lacan concludes that not controlling one's arm could be reassuring, because if I don't have it, then no one else does either. It is not a question of absolute control, self-mastery, nor being out-of-control and about to be dismembered—a discourse every analyst will recognize immediately in the oscillation of patients' anxiety. All the platitudes concerning letting-go, including those steps involved in giving oneself over to a higher power, file in. These are not wrong. But in their simplicity they miss what is more radical about the unconscious and the sexual relation to the object.

Anxiety arises in an in liminal spaces, in the sensation of oneself as a body with a foreign edge. Action, when based in anxiety, is reduced to controlling the appearance of this Otherness, either in oneself or the other person. Here we get a glimpse of why anxiety must be tied to sexuality. So for Lacan, the meaning of separation is not 'this is my arm and that is yours, my arm does what I want it too,' but instead, something more like, 'who knows whose arms any of these are, all the same, I'm doing just fine, it's not going to come off if my attention lapses.' Separation happens despite the lack of any firm outlines, not because of them. Psychoanalysis does not indulge in a definition of an individual sense of boundaries or

achieved autonomy, but rather what it means to have a relationship with one's unconscious.

Lacan pushes this point even further when he states that separation is the lack of any common satisfaction whatsoever. This is made the most apparent by the idea of *coitus interruptus*, not as the failure to orgasm, but rather as the failure to achieve common satisfaction that only further marks our separation. In an interrupted enjoyment the body feels the other's pulling out or pulling away, before any 'conclusion' is reached—and anxiety erupts. What appears in *coitus interruptus* is the embodiment of separation. This is why it is named as *the* source of anxiety by Freud. Lacan concurs with psychoanalysis supposedly at its worst, uniting, in his unique and paradoxical way, the early and late theory of Freud: "Thanks to Freud, we have this cleaving point in our grasp. This in itself is miraculous" (2014, 168).

3) Last story: There is a Shrimp that Eats Sand.

I'll explain. I'm almost done, I swear.

Lacan's Seminar X was called *Anxiety*. For Lacan we have to go to the edge of this anxiety, rather than stay trapped in its narrow confines and nagging whiny demands. We might find a point of equilibrium if we experience separation in contact with what is absolutely Other. He uses the surreal naturalistic fable of a shrimp that needs to imbibe a grain of sand to establish equilibrium.

The shrimp, he says, needs to take this outside inside. But it has to be the right grain of sand, it has to find this right grain of sand at all

costs—scientists forced them swallow all kinds of things that set them off balance, including grains of metal that allowed the scientists to play with these poor little shrimp using magnets. Strange that evolution can make room for something like this! Some psychoanalysts tried to explain anxiety by the idea of the shock of birth, the separation from the mother's body. Freud didn't buy this because then everyone would be crippled by virtue of being born. Lacan says, let us think of the shrimp, a foreign exterior, not so unlike oxygen, breath, must invading us from the outside.

Separation, then, is an achievement, even when it is a fact. Separation is always the separation of my body and yours. It is up to psychoanalysis, he says, to do an exhaustive study of this frontier.

One more time for the ladies! Women, Lacan claims, are much better at bearing this movement through anxiety. Men—are in much worse shape. Freud marveled at the fact of how well a woman can live with frigidity or sexual failure; whereas for man, impotence often destroys them. Lacan seems to concur with Freud's conclusion that men are more prone to anxiety, which often leads to more hysterical women.

Lacan carries on, for the women, how can we not see that when it comes to life they are lacking nothing—When he says this, he is thinking about the paradigm of gendered anxiety. Men fear losing their penises, and women want one. Lacan twists this ever so slightly. Women are lacking nothing. “The fact is that on this point she has nothing wanting” especially when she wants everything from the position that she holds (*ibid.*, 181). In wanting the Other, let's say the sexual organ of the other for the sake of simplicity, perhaps, he muses, what she wants is for the other to be able to

tolerate their anxiety about losing it, not on the subway, but to her, for a moment. Isn't she looking for a kind of equilibrium in contact with the Other. This is Lacan's affirmative reading of female desire.

Let us recount... so what do we do about Anxiety, Anxiety, Anxiety!

- 1) Coitus interruptus.... THERE IS NO COMMON SATISFACTION. Don't let it deter you
- 2) Leave your arm on the subway... stop feeling scared of losing things, what control did you ever have in the first place
- 3) Imbibe sand like Shrimp and find your equilibrium ... find your grain of sand, take it in from the other, give it away, start over.