The Phenomenology of Kierkegaardian Anxiety: A Norm for Spiritual Experience

There is a powerful theory running through Kierkegaardian thought that anxiety is a catalyst for spiritual experience.¹ Unfortunately, Kierkegaard is known at times to be excessively vague with some of his concepts. And while his concept of anxiety is right, it is also notoriously vague.² Further, some of his psychology is somewhat outdated. However, I believe that with some work, a more concrete account is available. I propose that when we bring cognitive science and phenomenology to bear on Kierkegaardian Anxiety (which I will define further shortly), we find ourselves with a concrete human capacity responsible for divine encounter. My proposal is therefore threefold. First, I will show how Kierkegaardian anxiety is a point of communication between God and man. Second, I will show that Kierkegaardian anxiety is a justified emotion. Third, I will show Kierkegaardian anxiety to be a properly functioning cognitive capacity. I will then contrast my proposal with the received view of anxiety in both modern psychology and religion. In light of this contrast is a call to change the way we think and teach about anxiety.

Anxiety in the Kierkegaardian Corpus

To make clear Kierkegaard’s notoriously difficult concept of anxiety, it is important to understand four background concepts in Kierkegaardian thought. First, note that Kierkegaard holds to a trichotomous view of personhood: the body and the soul are synthesized, or united, by the spirit.³ Spirit catalyzes the relationship between body and soul. Second, Kierkegaard makes an important distinction between actuality and possibility. This distinction, and especially Kierkegaard’s concept of possibility, is crucially important to what follows throughout. For Kierkegaard, drawing on Mark 10:27,⁴ God precisely is that for whom all things are possible. When God offers a person a new life, for example, God is offering such a person a new set of possibilities. Possibility is therefore a characteristic of God.⁵ Third, possibility is also that which constitutes freedom in the human self,⁶ and it is spirit which apprehends possibility. And so Kierkegaard can say that possibility is as
important to the self as oxygen is to breathing. And fourth, anxiety differs from fear in that fear involves actuality, while anxiety involves possibility. Or in other words, fear involves a known object, while anxiety involves the unknown.

With these concepts in mind, I am now in a position to state my central interpretation of Kierkegaard’s theory of anxiety. Following psychologist Rhett Smith’s insightful interpretation of Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaardian Anxiety* is a point of contact between (A) one’s current life-orientation, and (B) a divine re-orientation. We might consider (A) as, minimally, those aspects of life which one reasonably expects to continue in the future. We ought to consider (B) as God’s calling a person to some new life, in which some aspects of (A) are no longer present. One’s current orientation (A) contains some “range of choices,” or possibilities. One’s possibilities in this state may be limited. Keeping in mind that spirit perceives possibility, in Orientation (A), Kierkegaard characterizes such a person’s spirit as “sleeping.” Spirit is essentially inactive in such a state of limited possibilities.

God, however, presents a new orientation (B) for such a person – the Christian idea of a “calling.” This increases the range of choices, or possibilities, in that person’s life, both in quantity and significance. This change arouses the spirit from sleep into a wakeful state. This in turn arouses anxiety: the perception of possibility. It is in this sense that Kierkegaard can say that anxiety expresses the perfection of human nature – one is essentially perceiving a divine calling.

Attempts to ignore, cure, cope, resist, or conquer these new divine possibilities are, of course, only attempts to ignore, cure, cope, resist, or conquer God. This is clearly the wrong course of action. I stress here a change in the way we deal with at least some forms of anxiety. Kierkegaard’s course of action is to listen to such anxiety, which, when done, naturally beckons us to introspection and examination of life. In allowing this process to naturally unfold, anxiety will search out the soul like a surgeon, removing everything finite and petty, leading us to God’s will. When properly done, a person will discern both a divine re-orientation, and as anxiety does its job, a dissipation of anxiety.
It is in this way that anxiety is “absolutely instructive,” and exceedingly important that a person understands his or her anxiety.

Let me summarize the ideas in this section in more concrete terms. I may find myself “stuck” in some particular life-orientation (A) in which my range of life-possibilities has diminished. God may call me to re-orient my life (B), increasing my range of life-possibilities. To the extent that I remain in (A), my life-path will come into contact with God’s path for my life (B). This arouses a sleeping spirit into a wakeful state, which arouses anxiety: freedom’s possibility. This is Kierkegaardian Anxiety. He who experiences this anxiety reflects the perfection of spirit. Attempts to ignore, cure, cope, resist, or conquer such anxiety (a divine re-orientation) are only attempts to ignore, cure, cope, resist, or conquer God. Attention to this anxiety naturally leads a person inward, toward introspection and examination of one’s life. So doing will allow a person to recognize God’s calling to a new life, and to the extent this is realized and enacted, anxiety proportionately dissipates.

The Phenomenology of Kierkegaardian Anxiety

While there is much to be gained from Kierkegaard’s thoughts on anxiety, there is much that also needs to be expanded and corrected. For example, great advances have been made in genetics, neuroscience, and psychology since Kierkegaard wrote. We are now aware of many different forms of anxiety than was Kierkegaard. Therefore, it will no longer do to merely cast anxiety tout court as a divine calling. We must distinguish which form(s) of anxiety qualify as “Kierkegaardian” from the many other forms of anxiety of which we are now aware. It would make little sense, for example, to say that arachnophobia, a recurrent, unjustified anxiety over spiders, is the result of a divine calling. However, I suggest that modern developments in cognitive science, neuroscience, and phenomenology will give us a clearer account of the sort of anxiety on which we ought to set our sights. We must dig deep into the phenomenology of anxiety to properly understand, and apply Kierkegaard’s powerful account. This will take us into the ontology of emotions, the epistemology
of emotions, the volition of emotions, and the cognitive aspects of emotions. I suggest this study will make an even more powerful, and more concrete account of Kierkegaardian anxiety.

**Ontology.** Kierkegaard’s account is in agreement with much of modern neuroscience and psychology, in that anxiety is some sort of emotion. However, it is now common to distinguish differing forms of anxiety, such as separation anxiety, social anxiety, specific phobias, selective mutism, generalized anxiety, panic attacks, substance anxiety, and objectless, or “free-floating” anxiety. So how are we to know when some form of anxiety is the result of a divine calling?

It will be helpful at this point to note that emotions may have causes which differ from their objects. For example, I may experience fright as I am awakened by a strange noise during the night, concluding perhaps that an intruder has broken into the house. The cause of my fright is the strange noise, yet the object of my fright is an intruder. This fits nicely with a similar cause/object distinction in Kierkegaardian anxiety, in that the cause of Kierkegaardian anxiety is “possibility”, while the object of such anxiety is a particular divine calling.

Therefore, those forms of anxiety which lack a known object fit what we have learned from Kierkegaard. Anxiety in which “no obvious cue or trigger” is present, or anxiety which “occurs from out of the blue”, potentially qualify as Kierkegaardian anxiety. This would include “objectless anxiety” or “free-floating anxiety”, anxiety attacks, and generalized anxiety. Again, these forms of anxiety could be evidence of the perception of “possibility” (the cause of the anxiety), when the particular calling (the object of the anxiety) is unknown. We must therefore dig deeper into these forms of anxious phenomena to see if, and how, they qualify.

**Epistemology.** We have been speaking of Kierkegaardian anxiety as that in which a person perceives possibility (the cause of anxiety) yet does not yet know the particular calling God has in mind (the object of anxiety). Latent in Kierkegaardian anxiety are two epistemological states of affairs. First, there is knowledge (the object of anxiety) for the anxious person to gain. Second, it is
possible for one to be epistemically justified in such anxiety. Both points are lost in modern psychology and religion, yet interestingly, what we now know of emotions and epistemology complements Kierkegaardian anxiety quite well.

What follows is a crucial point in our discussion. Emotions are generally understood to be tied both to our beliefs, and to the justification for our beliefs. It is in this way that one can be said to be justified or unjustified in experiencing a particular emotion. Suppose, for example, that while hiking with a friend, we come upon a snake just a couple feet away from me. Due to my false belief that the snake is poisonous, and therefore a threat to my life, I experience extreme fear. Yet when my friend informs me that this is a mere garter snake which poses no threat to our lives, my fear subsides. Thus, my initial emotion, fear, was tied to a false belief, namely, that the snake in front of me posed a threat to my life. The dissipation of my fear is tied to my new belief, that the snake in front of me posed no threat to my life. When I correct my belief, and my emotion likewise changes, my emotion is said to be “sensitive to reason”.  

Emotional sensitivity to reason is also normative. If I remain excessively fearful of the garter snake, for example, then my emotional response of fear is not properly sensitive to reason, and therefore, it is a non-normative emotion (and possibly disordered, but more on this later). It is at this point that one may appropriately tell me, “You ought not to be afraid.” This is not a call for me to merely change my emotional response of fear directly to some other emotional state, but rather, to update my beliefs in hopes that my emotion will change accordingly.

Let us now see how Emotional Sensitivity to Reason applies to Kierkegaardian Anxiety. Contemporary psychology generally prescribes that anxiety without a known object is irrational, or unjustified, and possibly a disorder. Such anxiety would be said to be “insensitive” to what one knows and believes. However, we have seen that when God calls a person to a new life, a person perceives the new possibilities of such a calling, without yet knowing what the calling is (the object). On
Kierkegaardian anxiety, a person could experience anxiety, lack knowledge of the anxiety’s object, yet be both rational and justified in his or her anxiety. In other words, there is a difference between ontological inexistence and epistemological inexistence of the object of anxiety. As we will see later, modern psychology seems not to make this distinction. Just because one does not know the object of their anxiety does not necessarily mean there exists no object. It merely means that, for one perceiving Kierkegaardian anxiety, it becomes incumbent on that person to seek out anxiety’s object (his or her calling). Kierkegaard is right to prescribe introspection for such an occasion: it becomes incumbent on a person with such anxiety to discern the life God is calling him/her to. Kierkegaard rightly gives us an epistemological prescription.

*Volition.* While we have thus seen that our emotions are tied to our beliefs, many of our emotions are also known to be tied to our volition, or, our capacity to will or desire something. Our volition then typically acts as a motivator to action. Fear of bodily harm, for example, is tied to a desire to avoid bodily harm. Such a desire then furnishes a motive to some action — to move in such a way as to avoid a snake while hiking, for example.

In light of the volitional aspects of emotion, I suggest there are at least two purposes for Kierkegaardian anxiety: (1) to stimulate a person to gain knowledge of the object of their anxiety (their calling), and (2) to stimulate a person to act on their new knowledge. As these two purposes of anxiety are fulfilled, a person’s anxiety will proportionately dissipate (to the extent that one’s emotions are generally sensitive to reason). Just as my fear subsided as my false belief of the poisonous snake was revised, so ought Kierkegaardian anxiety to subside as I gain knowledge of my calling, and as I act upon that calling. Kierkegaardian anxiety thus acts like a chemical catalyst, in that such anxiety spurs us to proactively gain knowledge, and to proactively act on that knowledge. It may be that, for some people, lack of such a catalyst would result in less-fulfilled (or completely unfulfilled) callings.
One final note on the above two sub-sections. Given that Kierkegaardian anxiety is an emotion which helps us realize and fulfill our callings, we should see the importance of cultivating our emotions. This ought especially to be a wake-up call for those who tend to suppress their emotional capacities (male westerners notoriously fill this demographic), as suppressing our emotions could result in suppressing our callings.

_Cognition, Part 1._ Thus far, we have seen how our emotions are bound with our beliefs and our volition. We have seen how this elucidates Kierkegaard’s view of anxiety, in which the emotion of anxiety is a catalyst for gaining knowledge, and for acting upon that knowledge. I now want to suggest that, in line with a growing body of literature, emotions are bound with cognition. I want to show not just that Kierkegaardian anxiety has cognitive features, but I want to go a little further and suggest that these features are _normatively_ cognitive. Or in other words, Kierkegaardian anxiety is a _properly functioning cognitive capacity_, rather than a malfunction, disorder, or privation of some other cognitive capacity. But what do I mean by a ‘properly functioning cognitive capacity?’

To begin answering this question, we must first discern what counts as a cognitive capacity. Unfortunately, this is a very elusive project in itself. Yet, we need some sort of acceptable definition in order to see whether Kierkegaardian anxiety might fit in human cognition. In order to make this important point then, I shall spend the remainder of this section, “Cognition, Part 1”, offering my own, working definition of what seems to me a reasonable account what constitutes a _properly functioning cognitive capacity_. Included in this sub-section is an explanation of how I think we can come to such a definition, but those less interested in whether or not my definition is robust enough may skip to the next section, _Cognition, Part 2_, in which I apply my definition to Kierkegaardian anxiety.

The Aristotelian/Aquinian view of the “capacities of the soul,” or the “cognitive faculties” is a favored view among theologians, likely including Kierkegaard. Interestingly, this view finds a rough equivalent in cognitive science. I will therefore focus this section on cognition as found
partially in the branch of cognitive science, and partially as found in phenomenology. The reason for this is three-fold. First, cognitive science most closely represents the Aristotelian/Aquinian psychology most theologians have implicitly in mind. Second, it has more agreed-upon components than most other philosophies of cognition. And third, as we will see, phenomenology serves as a nice bridge for the obvious gaps left in cognitive science.

As I will argue that anxiety is tied to the cognitive capacity of perception, let us note some very brief features of perception. First, cognitive science makes a good distinction between sensation and perception. Sensation is an organism’s sensory response to an external or internal stimulus. There are variously considered at least thirteen sensory receptors, and roughly twenty senses. As a sensory receptor responds to a stimulus, the body initiates sensory transduction via neural pathways to the brain. Here, very roughly speaking, is where perception begins.

Perception, then, is the identification, organization, and interpretation of sensory transduction. It is perception which transforms the sound waves from violin strings into the subjective percept of music. But how exactly do these percepts arise? Here the cognitive sciences will typically offer cognitive systems, or “Cognitive Processes” for such mental interpretation, such as attention, memory, judgment, reason, intuition, creativity, and so forth. On most views of cognition, vision for example, is difficult to identify discretely, and therefore is considered a “process,” or “system.”

In cognitive science, most explanations of what exactly qualifies as a cognitive process include at least (1) the transformation of sensory reception into information, (2) the use of such information for meaningful conscious experience, and (3) the universality of such percepts. These helpful distinctions of cognitive processes will be our first three features of what a properly functioning cognitive capacity ought to include.
Unfortunately, most views in cognitive science take a purely physical approach to cognition, and consider only those senses for which there is a physically identified receptor. This ends up running contrary not only to most theologies, but perhaps even common sense. Hunger and thirst, for example, are clearly authentic, physical sensations, yet it is difficult to identify the discrete sensory receptors responsible for such sensations. The same can be said for our perception of time. Cognitive science will therefore often ignore such experiences. This is where I suggest a phenomenological, subjective account of what it is like to experience some sensation or perception is necessary. Aristotle, for example, famously argued that the eye is only truly an eye when a perceiver “sees” with it. An eye without the subjective experience of sight is only an eye ‘homonymously’; that is, only in the way that an eye in a painting, or a statue, is an “eye”. Fortunately, such a phenomenological account of perception is most congenial with Kierkegaardian thought.

For Kierkegaard, “inwardness,” or subjectivity, is where the eternal is found in man. After all, God is not an object to be studied but a subject with whom to relate, and such relation requires subjective experience. William James concurred, finding “objective” study ultimately a lifeless, detached study of subjective experience. Or as Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggested, once we consider the objective – those things external to us – we immediately lose contact with internal, perceptual experience. Ironically then, a purely physical, objective approach to cognition runs the risk of blinding us to much of cognition. Regarding what a properly functioning cognitive capacity ought to afford, then, let us add: (4) a properly functioning cognitive capacity should afford first-person, subjective “feel.”

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we ought to consider a teleological, or purposeful view of cognitive capacities, for four reasons. First, teleology is paradigmatic of the Aristotelian/Aquinian paradigm in which Kierkegaard wrote. Second, Aristotelianism pervades biology, and thus, to a large extent, cognitive science. This provides a nice bridge between the
classical ‘capacities of the soul’ and modern cognitive science. Third, a functionalist philosophy of perception, arguably the dominant philosophy of perception today, likewise presumes a purpose-laden view of cognitive functions. But finally, the theist especially presumes the telos, or purpose, of his or her God-given cognition. Let us then add feature (5) to our definition: a properly functioning cognitive capacity ought to be teleological, or purposeful. It ought to afford some consistent purpose or goal in its function. When considering whether we ought to view some psychological phenomenon as a bona fide, properly functioning cognitive capacity, as distinguished from the malfunction of some other capacity, we have the following definition. A properly functioning cognitive capacity ought to:

(1) Transform sensory reception into Percepts (perceptive information).
(2) Afford the use of percepts as meaningful conscious experience.
(3) Be universal, or “inter-subjective.”
(4) Afford first-person, subjective feel.
(5) Afford some consistent purpose or goal.

In light of this definition then, let us consider the perception of thirst, which as we saw, cognitive science typically does not consider. A person perceives that they are thirsty (1). Such a person uses this information meaningfully to seek out water (2). The sensation of thirst is a universal perception (3), and we all know what it is like to feel thirst (4). The purpose of the perception of thirst is to inform the perceiver of the need for water (5). As the perception of thirst meets our definition well, it therefore seems to be a properly functioning cognitive capacity. Both hunger and the perception of time also fit these qualifications, regardless of the difficulty of identifying their physical receptors. The trick now is to ensure our working definition is not so broad as to include unwanted phenomenon, such as hallucinations, from our purview of properly functioning cognitive capacities.
Considering that hallucinations are percepts of the external world, yet with no external stimuli, we want to say that hallucinations are not the result of a properly functioning cognitive capacity, but rather the disorder, malfunction, or privation of some other capacity. How then does Percept $H$, the resultant perception during hallucination, fare under our working definition? Percept $H$ presents to a person, say, a visual phenomenon which does not exist in external space (1). Though a notable human experience, such a phenomenon is not universal (3). Subjects are able to report a particular feel of their hallucinatory experiences (4). Percept $H$ does not seem to afford meaningful information (2), or serve a consistent purpose (5). While (1), (3), and (4) meet, they are weaker than in the perceptual cases of hunger, thirst, or time. However, hallucinations demonstrably fail qualifications (2) and (5). The information perceived during hallucination is not representative of external reality, and often, is detrimental to the experiencer. Based on our definition then, a hallucination ought indeed to be considered a disorder, malfunction, or privation of some other cognitive capacity. It seems thus far that our working definition is not so broad as to include unwanted perceptions.

_Cognition, Part 2._ Let us now see how Kierkegaardian anxiety fares on our definition of a cognitive capacity. To recap, when I refer to a properly functioning cognitive capacity, I am referring to that which:

1. Transforms sensory reception into Percepts (perceptive information).
2. Affords the use of percepts as meaningful conscious experience.
3. Is universal, or “inter-subjective.”
4. Affords first-person, subjective feel.
5. Affords some consistent purpose or goal.

Recall again the thesis that Kierkegaard anxiety is the result of the perception of new life-possibilities that accompany a calling. In the context of cognition, I suggest that Kierkegaardian anxiety serves as an indicator, in a similar way that the percept of pain serves as an indicator, to
attend to some stimulus. The cognition of Kierkegaard anxiety however is an indication of a divine re-orientation of one’s life. Failure to heed the re-orientation leads back to the indicator of Kierkegaard anxiety. With this in mind, let us see then how Person A, properly perceiving Kierkegaard anxiety (KA), fares under our working definition:

(1) Person A is presented with Percept KA in the form of anxiety in which the object is not yet known.
(2) Person A uses Percept KA as an indicator to reflect upon and examine his or her current life-orientation, ultimately gaining knowledge of his or her calling. Needed life-changes are identified, which, when applied, dissipate Percept KA.
(3) Objectless anxiety is a well-known human experience.
(4) Percept KA affords identifiable first-person, subjective experience in the form of heightened sense-modalities, natural tendency toward introspection and subjectivity, and personal experience with God.
(5) Percept KA affords the purpose of recognizing a divine calling, and acting upon that calling.

Based on this working definition of cognition then, Percept KA shows itself as one of the most meaningful and important of our cognitive capacities. But for our present purposes, most crucial is simply the understanding that Kierkegaardian anxiety is a proper form of cognition, similar to the cognition of joy, pain, hunger, or thirst. Once again, this is my own offer of what seems to me a reasonable definition of cognition. I have developed this definition primarily due to a lack of other reasonable definitions, and I remain eagerly open to better definitions. However, if my definition of cognition is roughly correct, then we have identified a concrete, cognitive capacity of human nature which is directly responsible for the percept of spiritual experience.

*The Received View of Anxiety in Christianity*

Let us briefly take stock of where we are. We have seen that Kierkegaardian anxiety is the meeting point between a person’s current life-orientation, and a divine re-orientation. It is a properly
functioning cognitive capacity for perceiving new life-possibilities attached to God’s calling for a person. That perception gives rise to the justified emotion of anxiety, which pushes a person to discover their particular calling, and act upon that calling. Such cognition naturally beckons us toward introspection, toward the subjective, which, for Kierkegaard, naturally beckons us toward the eternal. When a person rightly understands Kierkegaardian anxiety, it leads to a greater life re-orientation, the dissipation of anxiety, a reconstitution of faith, and, I suggest, an increased perception of God’s activity in one’s life. Thus Kierkegaard says that he who rightly understands anxiety has learned the ultimate and has become absolutely educated. Kierkegaardian anxiety is then a meeting point between the heart (emotions) and the mind (beliefs).

But this is certainly not the modern view of anxiety in Christianity. Rarely is anxiety spoken of in the church in positive terms. We are typically told that anxiety stems from a lack of faith and unbelief, is a failure to trust God, and is even the root of many sins. Indeed, Jesus Himself tells us not to be anxious (Mt. 6:28-29); Paul tells us not to be anxious about anything (Phil 4:6-7); Solomon tells us to banish anxiety from our hearts (Ecc. 11:10), and so on.

To be clear, I do not want to propose a view that runs contrary to scripture or the weight of Christian consensus. Rather, I suggest that Kierkegaardian anxiety is simply not in view in the above scripture or historic Christian teachings of anxiety. That this must be the case is clear in light of Jesus’s experience of anxiety in the Garden of Gethsemane, the great distress of his coming baptism in Luke 12:50, and so forth.

Obviously, we need to be careful of how we speak of anxiety in order to avoid ascribing to Jesus lack of faith, unbelief, failure to trust God, or worse, sin. And again, those forms of non-Kierkegaardian anxiety may indeed be the result of lack of trust, unbelief, and even sin. But the sort of anxiety under discussion here clearly differs. I want therefore to suggest that when Kierkegaardian anxiety is conceived of as a justified emotion, then it is obviously not the result of a lack of trust,
unbelief, or sin. It is the result of a divine calling. And when we speak of Kierkegaardian anxiety as a properly functioning cognitive capacity, then Kierkegaardian anxiety is no more a lack of faith, unbelief, or a sin than is the proper cognition of pain. The emotional capacity of joy and the cognitive perception of pain are, like Kierkegaardian anxiety, simply functional parts of our human constitution.

When the theological purpose regarding anxiety becomes curing, coping, or conquering anxiety, the point is missed in many ways. First recall feature (5) of a properly functioning cognitive capacity, which regards the purpose of a capacity. The purpose, or teleological end, of Kierkegaardian anxiety is not anxiety itself. Rather, it is God. Therefore attempts to cure, cope, or conquer anxiety are focused completely on the wrong subject, and further, can lead to a division, or scattering of self. If God has in mind a new life for a person (a divine-reorientation), yet that person is not attending to the indicator of Kierkegaardian anxiety, that person remains occupied with his or her current life-orientation. Let us briefly observe where this leads.

In Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, we learn that “busy-ness” is nothing more than “divided-ness,” or “scattered-ness.” Or in other words, to be busy is to be focused on a manifold of things, of which God is not foremost. This is the antithesis of “whole-ness.” Contrarily, Kierkegaard suggests that he who is occupied with God is whole, un-divided, un-scattered. Yet such a person, in proper occupation with God, is then able to occupy himself with a manifold of things, and perform a variety of actions, without becoming “busy.”

Attempts to cure, cope, or conquer anxiety focus one’s attention completely on the wrong subject. Such improperly-placed focus therefore leads to a clear divided-ness, or scattered-ness, in which such a person is not whole. Indeed, in this case, a person can become “lost”. And to the extent that this person does not attend to their anxiety properly, anxiety can compound on anxiety, which can lead to sinful behavior. Substance dependency and anxiety, for example, are highly
comorbid (co-occurrent). But I suggest this is no different than the sinful behavior that might arise from the improper treatment of, say, the proper occurrence of physical or emotional pain. The problem lies not with the stimulus of pain, but with the improper treatment of it.

The virtuous response in Kierkegaardian anxiety is not necessarily to label such a state as a lack of faith, unbelief, failure to trust God, or sin, but rather to allow the anxiety to perform its function: help perfect a person into the person God is calling him to be. This leads a person from a divided-self to a whole-self. But secondly, we tread on dangerous theological ground when we consider that curing, coping, or conquering Kierkegaardian anxiety potentially equates to curing, coping with, or conquering a divine calling. The virtuous response in Kierkegaardian anxiety is to discern a divine calling and act upon it.

Let me make one final appeal for a much needed change in theological studies. Both Kierkegaard and his “leap of faith” are commonly criticized for being fideistic. J.L. Mackie, for example, makes the common claim that not only is Kierkegaard a fideist, but that his “leap of faith” constitutes “a sort of intellectual Russian roulette.” Mackie is certainly not alone in his analysis of Kierkegaard here; on the contrary, his analysis is only too common. I hope that, from what I have shown so far, this is anything but the case.

The person experiencing Kierkegaardian anxiety has been offered new life by God; her spirit is brought into a wakeful state. She stands at the boundary of her current life, looking into a deep abyss of new possibilities, and experiences the “dizziness of freedom.” For Kierkegaard, she who recoils will become lost. And it is at this point that if anxiety decreases, it is because sin has increased. But she who leans into God’s calling leaps into the abyss of possibility. She has gained everything; the purpose for her life becomes realized. This is the meaning of Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith”, which has become so grossly distorted and caricaturized.
The received view of both modern psychology and modern theology is that persistent, objectless anxiety is a disorder. Recall that Kierkegaardian anxiety is bound up with emotions, volition, and cognition. There seem to be two ways in which anxiety could properly be said to be disordered. The first regards the emotions: if anxiety persists despite a lack of warrant, or despite knowing anxiety’s object, then it could be an unjustified emotion, and to the extent that it recurs, could be properly characterized as a disordered emotion. The second regards cognition: if anxiety fails our definition of a properly functioning cognitive process, then it could be characterized as a disorder of some other cognitive capacity. Let us review these two possibilities and how they relate to Kierkegaardian anxiety.

**Emotional disorder.** Regarding emotion, if anxiety recurrently persists despite a *known lack of warrant*, one may be said to have an anxiety-related disorder. If one persistently fears spiders, for example, despite knowing the innocuous nature of each spider one encounters, then one could be said to have a phobia. But note that a *known lack of warrant* is precisely opposed to Kierkegaardian anxiety, as a phobia such as arachnophobia involves actuality – the object, a spider, is actual and known. In Kierkegaardian anxiety however, one experiences anxiety *prior* to knowing the object. One is spurred to discover the object. Kierkegaardian anxiety does not fit this version of emotional disorder.

Conversely, one could be said to have an anxiety-related disorder if anxiety recurrently persists despite a *known object* of the anxiety. Genetic-related anxiety disorders may fit this category, as there may truly be no object arousing a person’s anxiety other than a certain brain chemistry. In this case, such a person *knows* the object of their anxiety, yet the anxiety does not subside. We ought to characterize such anxiety as *ontologically inexisten* with regards to its perceptive object, in that there is no external object which is justifiably arousing such a person’s anxiety. This, however, is once
again quite different than Kierkegaardian anxiety, which we ought to characterize as *epistemically nonexistent* with regards to its perceptive object. In this case, there *does* exist an object, namely, a person’s calling, yet one simply does not yet *know* what the calling entails. Those accounts of anxiety disorders that do not make either of the above distinctions may inadvertently be denying any room for Kierkegaardian anxiety, and therefore, for God.

*Cognitive disorder.* Regarding cognition, recall feature (2) of a properly functioning cognitive capacity: A Percept ought to afford meaningful experience, and feature (5) A Percept ought to afford a purpose, or goal. It seems that many psychological accounts make claims of anxiety similar to hallucination, in that both fail criterion (2) and/or (5), that they misinterpret reality, afford no purpose, and are thus disorder rather than a properly functioning cognitive capacity.

Now, in the case of many types of anxiety, such as substance dependency, PTSD, separation anxiety, specific phobias, and so forth, these indeed will fail our definition of a properly functioning cognitive capacity. But I suggest, on the other hand, that anxiety of the Kierkegaardian sort can provide possibly the most meaningful and purposeful information of all our cognitive capacities, and therefore *is* a properly functioning cognitive capacity. Or in other words, the only reason a psychologist would fail Kierkegaardian anxiety from qualifications (2) and (5) and characterize such anxiety as a disorder, is simply if *God is excluded from the psychologist’s purview.* The modern psychologist may suggest the patient with Kierkegaardian anxiety has two options: fight or flight. But when God is re-introduced into psychology we see a qualitative change in the patient’s options: recoil in horror from God’s calling, or lean into God’s calling in faith.

We have already seen that, when God is considered as reality, Kierkegaardian anxiety passes all five criteria. What results from the proper functioning of Kierkegaardian anxiety is no less than a realized calling, and a new life aligned with God’s will. The problem is therefore not with anxiety: the problem is the exclusion of God from psychology. This, I believe, is partially how Kierkegaard
could say (pardon his forthrightness) that only a prosaic stupidity will maintain anxiety as a disorder.  

It is also generally asserted in psychology that when anxiety disrupts a person’s daily functioning, it is called an anxiety disorder. There are two items of note here. First note that the irruption of God into a stagnated life ought to be disrupting. Hardly a Biblical account will be found in which God enters a person’s life without disrupting it. However, when a person has not rightly understood his or her anxiety, and anxiety has become so disruptive that he cannot do the work necessary for perceiving the purpose behind his or her anxiety, then the general recommendations of psychology or psychiatry should properly follow. But again, even in such a scenario, the end goal of such a person’s state is not simply to abate their anxiety. The goal is to bring such a person back to a functional state in which they can work toward discerning the life God has in mind for them.

Let me reiterate that there are indeed many forms of anxiety that are disorders of other capacities. But I suggest that some of these disorders are simply the consequences of an improper understanding and improper treatment of Kierkegaardian anxiety. To explain why, let us begin by looking at the sense-perception of pain. The proper cognitive capacity of the perception of pain exists for the purpose of informing an organism of some dangerous stimulus. Absent of nociceptors (pain sensory receptors), I may stand too close to the fireside and come to find my skin severely burned. The perception of pain alerts me to some stimulus which needs attention. Note that the object of pain here is not pain itself: it will not do to merely add another layer of clothing over my skin in order to abate the pain. The fire, and my proximity to it, ought to be the object of my perception. Or if while hiking I am injured by a wild bear, the bear ought to be the object of my perception, not the pain of my scratch. So just as an improper response to the perception of pain can lead to other problems, so it is with anxiety. An improper response to the perception of Kierkegaardian anxiety can lead to obsession, depression, further anxiety attacks, and so forth. But
the cognitive perception of Kierkegaardian anxiety, I suggest, is no more a disorder than is the
cognitive perception of pain.

Now some might object to my thesis by pointing out that genetics may, in part or in whole,
account for a person’s anxiety. For example, I know of not a single person on my mother’s side of
the family (including myself) who does not have at least one, if not all, of either panic attacks,
generalized anxiety, obsessive compulsion, or depression. But note that, on my proposed model, this
says no more than that certain cognitive capacities are more or less pronounced in different family
lines. Imagination and creativity may be more pronounced in one family line; moral apprehension
may be more pronounced in another family line. But on my model, these are simply the cognitive
capacities that God predominantly uses in relation with such persons. Anxiety may be more
pronounced in my mother’s side of the family. Anxiety therefore may also be the predominant
cognitive capacity God uses to direct those in my mother’s side of the family. So while genetics
might account for certain cognitive features, it does not present any problem for my thesis.

**Conclusion**

Let me conclude by observing the positive impact of this model. First, philosophical,
psychological, and theological literature on anxiety as potentially positive is almost exclusively limited
to Kierkegaard. This, I suggest, needs to change. Second, we have identified a bona fide, concrete
cognitive capacity for spiritual experience. But finally, and most importantly, is a call to change the
way we think and teach about anxiety. At the very least, this model ought to give us pause when
charging a person with psychological disorder, or a character flaw, or lack of faith, or worse, sin.

In this life, one can no more avoid anxiety than pain. Rather, Kierkegaardian anxiety is a
justified emotion, and a cognitive capacity which God can use in a person’s life to save and
transform him. Kierkegaardian anxiety is not something to be cured, coped with, or conquered, but
rather, a way to be educated into faith. Whoever has done so rightly has gained eternity, and, rather than recoiling at the tune of anxiety, will dance when anxiety strikes up the music.  

1 I draw largely in this paper from Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety*. I am also highly indebted to psychologist Rhett Smith’s insights on both anxiety and Kierkegaard, especially as found in his *The Anxious Christian* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2011).


3 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, p. 43. Note that such a trichotomy is not a necessary condition of my following proposal, but rather is simply the position Kierkegaard held.  

4 “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.” Mark 10:27 (ESV).  

5 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, p. 91.  

6 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, p. 44.  


9 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, p. 41. Note Kierkegaard is not using “sleeping” pejoratively here. On the contrary, Kierkegaard suggests this is precisely Adam’s pre-fall state (p. 44).  


11 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, p. 72. Even for Kierkegaard, however, there is innocent anxiety, anxiety over sin, objective anxiety, and subjective anxiety. As we will see later, not all forms of anxiety are representative of perfection.

12 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, p. 159.


16 DSM 5, p. 209.

17 DSM 5, *ibid*.


20 Bennett and Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, p. 222.


22 See especially Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Reid, John Locke, William James, William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and in general, those theologians with Aristotelian leanings, as the “capacities of the soul” originated with Aristotle.


24 Thanks partially to Jerry Fodor’s “modules” in his *Modularity of Mind*. Faculty psychology may also find a sort of analogue in functionalism, though the ideas are in some ways dissimilar.

25 Even though many theologians would likely reject the computational model of perception implicit in cognitive science.
Photoreceptors, Baroreceptors, Chemoreceptors, Infrared Receptors, Ultraviolet Receptors, Electoreceptors, Hydroreceptors, Magnetoreceptors, Mechanoreceptors, Nociceptors, Osmoreceptors, Proprioceptors, and Thermoreceptors. As combinations of these receptors give rise to what we call the “senses,” we see there are far more than the received view of the ‘five senses.’ For more, see Bennet L. Schwartz and John H. Krantz, Sensation and Perception (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 2016).

For example, the Exteroceptive senses of touch, sight, smell, hearing, taste, and direction; the Interoceptive senses of balance, pain, hunger, thirst; and the Mental senses of time, self, reason, morality, intuition, imagination, emotion, empathy, memory, and aesthetics.


Schwartz and Krantz, Sensation and Perception, p. 5.

Russell Revlin, Cognition, p. 17.

“Indeed, some have even argued that hunger and thirst should be counted as senses. We leave them out, as they deal strictly with internal states that are not directly linked to specific receptors.” Bennett and Krantz, Sensation and Perception, p. 4.

Kierkegaard was, interestingly, indebted to Aristotle for much of his philosophy. See Jon Stewart and Katalin Nun, Kierkegaard and the Greek World: Tome II: Aristotle and Other Greek Authors (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010) for an interesting account of how Kierkegaard developed some of his philosophy within a semi-Aristotelian framework.

Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, p. 151.


Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 82.

See for example the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing), pp. 87-88.

Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, p. 151.

Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, p. 155.


John Piper, ibid.

John Piper, ibid., p. 35.


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J.P. Smith and S.W. Book, (2008). Anxiety and Substance Use Disorders: A Review. The Psychiatric Times, 25(10), 19–23. Anecdotally speaking, it is striking how many recovering alcoholics have reported to me the phenomenology of Kierkegaardian anxiety, in which objectless anxiety appeared, it was suppressed with alcohol (or other substances), anxiety compounded on anxiety, which led to sinful behavior, which began a vicious cycle. Only when they properly attended to their anxiety, listened to God, and enacted their calling did the anxiety subside, along with their substance dependency.


J.L. Mackie, ibid.
54 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, p. 159.
57 DSM 5, p. 208.