



Existential Anxiety and The Courage to Be

A Discussion on the Human Possibilities Revealed by Existential
Anxiety and Courage

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What is Anxiety?

Introduction to Existential Anxiety

“To be or not to be, that is the question:

[but] that the dread of something after death,

The undiscovered country from whose bourn

No traveler returns puzzles the will

And makes us rather bear those ills we have

Than fly to others that we know not of?

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.”

- William Shakespeare¹

The opening excerpt from Shakespeare describes a situation in which all human beings are, and that is the confrontation with our finitude, the death, or the absolute unknown of everything. As human beings, we live in the world alive and well; however, our existence is destined to have a limit at the end, about which we have no knowledge about. In other words, for beings, the question of to be or not to be is also the question of how we shall face the abyss of non-being. Tillich characterizes non-being as “the negation of every concept”², which represents the absolute nothingness beyond death. It relates being in a way that “being embraces itself and the nonbeing”³, or that it is part of the being. Non-being belongs to being as an inseparable part

¹ Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. New Folger's ed. New York: Washington Square Press/Pocket Books, 1992.

² Tillich, Paul. 1952. *The Courage to Be*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 34

³ Tillich, 34

of our being-in-the-world. All mortals will die, and that is the ultimate fate in front of which we are all standing. The opening excerpt from Shakespeare helps with understanding this existential limit. The fact that we are all travelers on the path to the undiscovered country where no one ever returns brings us anxieties because the latent awareness of us facing this the limitation of our existence as beings, and especially the totally unknown after-death makes us anxious.

Anxiety is one of the most important emotions incurred by questions about facing the abyss of non-being. It is the main theme brought up by people who are aware of this common phenomenon or collective experience. After all, Tillich defines anxiety as the “state in which a being is aware of its possible nonbeing...the impression of these events on the always latent awareness of our own having to die that produces anxiety”⁴. This is the existential anxiety that Tillich points out in his chapters regarding the ontology of anxiety.

Anxiety is at the core of our existence. All human beings suffer from it. Alastair Hannay says in the preface of *The Concept of Anxiety* that anxiety is “life’s inescapable accompaniment, its constant undertow.”⁵ This universal aspect of human experience has become even more frequently discussed and realized nowadays. Moreover, as Tillich points out, the modern time is the “age of anxiety”. While we have built the strongest weapon ever existed on this planet, the civilization is seemingly at its acme, and have gained the unprecedented economic growth and material prosperity, deep inside there lies the heightened anxiety of our fundamental existence. Gomes in the preface of *The Courage to Be* says, “we work hard and play hard not because we are more industrious or more playful than our ancestors but because we dare not stop lest in the

⁴ Tillich, 35

⁵ Kierkegaard, Søren, 1813-1855. *The Concept of Anxiety : a Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*. Princeton, N.J. :Princeton University Press, 1980.

stillness we are overwhelmed by the sound of our own anxieties and fears."⁶ This statement seems strange because we now have much more ways to entertain ourselves, to labor, to explore, to enjoy all the abundant resources and benefits brought by technologies that our ancestors were not able to access. Yet, the echoes of our deepest anxiety always haunt us. Barrett points out in his *Irrational Man* that, "we do live in an age in which neurotic anxiety has mounted out of all proportion so that even minds inclined to believe that all human problems can be solved by physical techniques begin to label "mental health" as the first of our public problems."⁷ Compared to the time periods when psychological techniques fighting against anxiety were not invented yet, we are seemingly more advanced in the frontline of this battle against anxiety. However, the prevalence of mental illness in this age is ironically reminding us that we focus too much on curing the symptoms of anxiety to forget examining the human situation in a deeper level and finding the authentic courage for us to really be in this world. Kierkegaard reminds us, "the profounder the anxiety, the profounder the people. Only a prosaic stupidity will think of it as a disorder."⁸ Within the midst of this seemingly horrifying anxiety, human beings also acquire access to the possibilities towards opening the gate to a whole new level of experience. In talking about the challenges and possibilities faced by the modern generations, Rollo May writes in his opening chapter of *the Courage to Create* to emphasize the importance to live with sensitivity instead of numbness in this world and participate courageously in the form of a brand new future.

⁶ Tillich, xvii

⁷ Barrett, William, 1913-1992. 1962. *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

⁸ Kierkegaard, 52

As a universal human experience, Eastern thinkers such as Buddhists also engage in deep discussions about anxiety. In the *Four Noble Truths*, Buddha points out the causes of all *dukkha*, or suffering, are the impermanence of our lives, the strong attachment to the non-substantial things and the clinginess of selfness. Our never-ending desire of certainty and attachment to the worldly things and self generates anxiety. In Buddhism's worldview, nothing is groundable and nothing is unchangeable in this world. It is really hard to accept this, and that is why generations of philosophers, theologians, thinkers and scientists try to find something groundable for human beings to stand on. Indeed we have managed to find out the classic law of physics, the seemingly stable mathematical formulas and so on the scientific knowledge that enable us to "master" the world. However, as discussed above, modern people are still "haunted by a gnawing disease that keeps us from enjoying our lives"⁹. No matter what seemingly valid explanation of the world, either it is created by God, or run by mechanical principles found by us, the existential anxiety is still casting shadows upon us. Hence, Buddhism directs us to think directly about the source of our *dukkha*, or suffering, and asks the question, "is the basic problem the nature of this world itself, or our inability to accept it as it is? Or something else?"¹⁰ Loy points out in his *A New Buddhist Path* that in the early societies, the societal structure is relatively stable as people share a collective source of meaning and the system of values. It provides social security knowing that there is something greater than us is taking care of us. However, as we now have lost that collective source of meaning and security and gained freedom of deciding our personal values and personal path by ourselves, it is increasingly anxious to think about who we really are and

⁹ Loy, David. *A New Buddhist Path : Enlightenment, Evolution, and Ethics in the Modern World*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2015.P.9

¹⁰ Loy, 9

what it really means to be human.¹¹ Loy beautifully summarizes this major issue faced by the modern people that “thanks to ever-more powerful technologies, it seems like we can accomplish almost anything we want to do, yet we don’t know what we should want to do. What sort of world do we want to live in? What kind of society should we have? In this fashion too, our collective, as well as individual lack of grounding in anything greater than ourselves, has become a constant source of dukkha—an existential anxiety rooted.”¹²

Hence, in general, this thesis aims to provide a different perspective of seeing anxiety in human life and how the courage to be can help us to transcend ourselves and eventually lead to the deep freedom and inner peace hidden within the anxiety. This is a journey of looking deep inside for the right key to understand our existential anxiety. When we hold onto a negative and refusing attitude towards anxiety, it naturally only brings us confusions, frustration, and even despair, which will lead to the seemingly never-ending suffering. Starting from some Western thinkers such as Paul Tillich, Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Rollo May, this thesis will end with a fresh perspective from the Eastern thinkers, especially from Buddhist thinkers to provide a different way to understand existential anxiety and how can we get along with it. This thesis would like to propose that we can change the perspective into a more positive one, we can see how anxiety opens a whole realm of possibilities to the profounder human nature.

¹¹ Loy, 124

¹² Loy, 124

Existential Anxiety in the Modern Context

Generally, anxiety in our lives can take on many different forms: relationship anxiety, test anxiety, the anxiety of finding a job, the “post-graduation anxiety” and so on. Sometimes these anxieties can transform into the motivation that propels us forward, but most other times anxieties are usually seen as the obstacles stopping us from moving. According to the Mental Health Foundation’s survey in 2014, “alarmingly, almost 1 in 5 people revealed that they feel anxious ‘nearly all of the time’ or ‘a lot of the time’ . More than half of us have noticed that ‘people are more anxious today than they were 5 years ago.’”¹³ A rising number of scholars and commentators have seen our modern age as the “age of anxiety”. This UK-based mental health survey has pointed out that anxiety is the number one mental health issue in the UK. Globally, anxiety is also rising to the surface level and being paid much attention.

For this reason, human beings have been adapting the medical model to see anxiety as an illness to be cured. From the psychological perspective, psychotherapies from different schools of thoughts have been proved to be seemingly effective to help alleviate symptoms of anxiety disorders; from the educational perspective, anxiety is one of the most prevalent psychological disorder among students, especially test anxiety. However, from the philosophical point of view, despite the negative impacts posed by pathological anxieties, the existence of existential anxiety is meaningful and essential to our growth as unique individuals. For example, the psychotherapies offered people a circumstanced sense of their existence to focus on their comforts in the presence and thus limiting the possibilities that anxiety might behold in the future by being indifferent to what may come. Kierkegaard states that anxiety contains possibilities to

¹³ Swift et al., 2014. *Living With Anxiety Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/assets/A-Z/Downloads/Living-with-anxiety-report-MHF-UK-2014.pdf> , 3

access human freedom in nonfinite form, which is beyond what psychotherapies or medications can do to human beings. Kierkegaard has a famous analogy to describe what anxiety is. He pictures a person who is standing on the edge of a cliff, besides the apparent fear of falling over the cliff, the person is also having an irrational impulse of jumping into the abyss. The emotion that arises at that moment is the anxiety, as the dizziness of freedom¹⁴.

To begin with, it is important to understand existential anxiety in the modern context. Why exactly is the modern age the “age of anxiety”? From the historical point of view, before the rise of science or scientific methods and theories, religion was the main explanation for all fundamental questions such as where I was from, where I would go, how I should navigate myself in this life and so on. In other words, God was a relatively stable source of meaning, purpose, and order for people, especially in Western culture. Comparatively, in other civilizations or cultures, people might have Hindu gods, Buddha, and so on religious figures or cultural figures like Confucius who are also serving as similar roles. However, when the stable source of meaning, purpose, and order has been shaken drastically by the modern changes, especially the rapid development of science and technology, modern cynics, who were so eager to reject previous solutions for the problems of meaninglessness, failed to address this problem as well. Facing the cruelty of WWII and seeing the atrocities done by human beings, the immense hollowness in human souls called for the rise of existentialists. In Tillich’s book *The Courage to Be*, he defines existentialism as “the expression of the anxiety of meaninglessness and of the attempt to take this anxiety into the courage to be as oneself.”¹⁵ When confronting this uncertain yet certain fate (the unpredictability of life and the certainty of death) of all human

¹⁴ Swift et al., 12

¹⁵ Tillich, 24

beings, the question of to be or not to be is the one big question for all the human beings.

Regarding this question, Tillich gives out one possible answer, which is the courage to be. It is to have that self-affirmation “in spite of” the seemingly no-way-out-situations. In other words, Tillich is trying to call upon the human capacity to keep moving forward with all the resources one can use to prevail against this constant threat of nonbeing.

Fear and Anxiety

In order to explore how courage can meet anxiety, we need to first clarify the distinction between anxiety and fear. According to the definitions provided by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “Fear, for instance, reveals some region of the world as threatening, some element in it as a threat, and myself as vulnerable. In anxiety, as in fear, I grasp myself as threatened or as vulnerable; but unlike fear, anxiety has no direct object, there is nothing in the world that is threatening. This is because anxiety pulls me altogether out of the circuit of those projects thanks to which things are there for me in meaningful ways; I can no longer “gear into” the world.”¹⁶ First, this definition points out a salient distinction between fear and anxiety, which is the existence of an object. In general, fear is directed towards an object. Biologically, our fear of the predator invokes our “fight or flight” mechanism and thus when we detect a threat, we fear and we either run away or fight against the threat. Either way, this threat exists as something meaningful or something we can grasp. In a way, fear helps us to know the world by distinguishing between dangerous things and harmless things. However, anxiety exists in a different way. Since anxiety has no certain objects, it is an overshadowing feeling or mood that makes us constantly feel vulnerable and yet cannot grasp the source of vulnerability. As Kierkegaard puts it, anxiety is directed towards nothing. It posits us in a weird and uncomfortable position as we are left in a barren plain, unable to see the horizon. Therefore, “I can no longer gear into the world”¹⁷ because the thing that I could use to gear into the world is nothing or non-being in Tillich’s definition.

¹⁶ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Existentialism. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/#FreVal>

¹⁷ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Existentialism. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/#FreVal>

In discussing the concepts of fear and anxiety, Sartre also writes in his *Being and Nothingness* that “fear is fear of beings in the world, whereas anguish (anxiety) is anguish before myself”¹⁸. This claim distinguishes in a slightly different way than above, because Sartre tends to define that the objects of fear are external and the objects of anguish (anxiety) are internal. He further states, “a situation provokes fear if there is a possibility of my life being changed from without; my being provokes anguish(anxiety) to the extent that I distrust myself and my own reactions in that situation”¹⁹. In his example, a soldier will have fear towards the possible bombardment he might undergo, but anxiety will arise when he tries to foresee his conduct when facing the bombardment. Having placed the individual acts in the center of his philosophical arguments, Sartre approaches anxiety from a perspective that focuses on the uncertainty of one not knowing what he or she will be doing. Relating to the example listed above from Sartre’s perspective, when we fail a major test, the fear is our unreflective apprehension of the failure, and the anxiety is the reflective apprehension of ourselves, which manifests in our inner questions like what am I going to do? This perspective is deeply related to Kierkegaard’s thoughts on freedom and anxiety as he claims that anxiety is the possibility of “being able”. As anxiety opens the realm of possibilities, freedom arises in the midst of it. The thesis will further discuss freedom and anxiety in the later passages.

As clearly stated before, fear does have a specific object for us to be “faced, analyzed, attacked or endured”, and Tillich argues that this is when courage would usually be helpful for alleviating that fear. For example, if one fears that he or she is going to fail a major test, one can identify the fear is about that specific test, and therefore one can take actions to be more prepared

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes [New York: Washington Square Press (1992 [1956]), pp. 65-67, 69-70.)

¹⁹ Sartre, 69

for the test such as making review sheets, studying with other classmates and so on. In this situation, one is at least participating in the object of this fear and even acting upon it. For cases like this, courage would be able to “meet every object of fear because it is an object and makes participation possible.” Therefore, when fearing a specific object, we at least have a sense of what we are fearing and we can take actions to courageously conquer the fear step by step. Tillich also points out that “courage can take the fear produced by a definite object into itself, because this object, however frightful it may be, has a side with which it participates in us and we in it. One could say that as long as there is an object of fear, love in the sense of participation can conquer fear.”²⁰

Hence, anxieties would oftentimes strive to be fear and to be specific in life so that we can have the courage to face it. This is because anxiety has no object, or that its object is the “negation of every object”. The translator of Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety* compares the existential anxiety with the general anxiety disorder (GAD) in the preface of this book, and suggests that Kierkegaard’s anxiety is close to GAD in a way that they both do not have a specific mental allergen as in the case of various phobias that have particular targets to be anxious about. The existential anxiety for Kierkegaard is “an indiscriminate anxiety in which anything that comes along causes worry.”²¹ This “general” aspect of existential anxiety thus becomes salient that in Kierkegaard’s analysis it “differs altogether from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite”²².

In continuing the example of taking tests, one can be anxious about taking that test, but in the deeper sense, anxiety is actually not about the test but generated by all the possible situations

²⁰ Tillich, 36

²¹ Kierkegaard, xi

²² Kierkegaard, xi

that might be or might not be related to the test. For example, one can be anxious about that he or she is going to fail the test, but one can also be anxious that tomorrow when one is on the way to the classroom he would forget to bring ID and be rejected by the supervisor; or one would bump into a car accident on the way to take the test; or that one would be over-stressed and die tonight and that he would never be able to take that important test tomorrow. Some of the situations might be a little extreme, but they are all one of the million possibilities that might happen to the person. Anxiety in this sense is a state full of insecurities because we do not know what is going to happen in the future and therefore we are vulnerable when exposed to this open yet dreadful pool of possibilities. The very nature of anxiety pushes it to look for fear, as Tillich articulates “the sting of fear is anxiety, and anxiety strives towards fear.” In searching for a specific fear, anxiety transforms itself into targeting something more concrete and tangible, which is fear. In this sense, “fear and anxiety are both distinguished but not separated”²³ because fear is concrete and anxiety is abstract, and yet anxiety is constantly in search for fear to be able to accommodate with the human beings.

In comparison, anxiety is similar to the Sword of Democritus that is always hanging above our head. Its shadows are ubiquitous in our daily life, often in the forms of fear. This is because, as Tillich said, “it would be impossible for a finite being to stand naked anxiety for a flash of time.”²⁴ Think of dying as an example. Our fears related to death might be sickness, terminal diseases, car accidents and so on. No matter what the event might be, it is an expected event that can be met with courage, or in other words, we can do something about it to some extent, such as using safer vehicles and exercise or eat healthy food. However, the anxiety is

²³ Tillich, 34

²⁴ Tillich, 39

about the absolute “nothingness” that we are going to face when entering the “country where no traveler returns”. Not a slight knowledge do we have about the after-death, and this concrete fact makes us anxious. Tillich says that “the dreams in Hamlet’s soliloquy, “to be or not to be”, which we may have after death and which make cowards of us all are frightful not because of their manifest content but because of their power to symbolize the threat of nothingness”²⁵. Therefore, the naked anxiety rises when we face the absolute reality in its naked form, which is the “eternal death”. When all the distractions and costumes of anxiety are unveiled, it is always the ultimate non-being from which naked anxiety originates. For this naked anxiety, no human being can stand in front of it for a flash of time because it trembles our souls to even think about this abyss. This is exactly why anxiety strives to find specific objects in life and transform itself into fear because courage can meet those concrete fears. Sartre also speaks about the anguish of death as walking down a narrow path that goes along a precipice. The precipice represents the danger of death. As we walk on the path, we can “slip on a stone and fall into the abyss, or the crumbling earth of the path can give way under my steps.”²⁶ Since we do not know when or how these things can happen to me, “I am passive in relation to these possibilities; they come to me from without; in so far as I am also an object in the world, subject to gravitation, they are *my* possibilities.”²⁷ In the passiveness of this human situation, Sartre encourages us to find the activeness within our participation of the world. Even though we are walking dangerously on a path that eventually leads to the abyss of non-being, we can still actively pay attention to the rocks on the road and “push away the threatening situation with all my strength, and [I] project before myself a certain number of future conducts destined to keep the threats of the world at a

²⁵ Tillich, 39

²⁶ Sartre, 66

²⁷ Sartre, 66

distance from me. These conducts are *my* possibilities.”²⁸ Within the possibilities we find our vulnerabilities and expose ourselves to the uncertainty and the existential anxiety posed by non-being, and yet we are also the free individual who can choose to actively participate within these possibilities can create our conduct courageously.

As mentioned above, since non-being is part of our being, and existential anxiety is generated from the encounter of non-being, we cannot eliminate the anxiety. However, Tillich would argue that there is a way for anxiety to be met by our courage to be. In order to do so, Tillich must first analyze anxiety more systematically so that it becomes an ontological concept just as courage. Hence, he presents three types of anxiety from the ontological, spiritual and moral self-affirmations that we are in need, and then comes up with three types of anxiety. The first one is the anxiety of fate and death, the second one is the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness and the third one is the anxiety of guilt and condemnation. The purpose of discussing specific types of existential anxiety is to find out how exactly can courage meet anxiety and to further understand what we can do to strive towards that courage to be. Hence, the different types of anxiety are interrelated and they should also be seen as subsets within a whole concept of existential anxiety.

²⁸ Sartre, 67

Three Types of Existential Anxiety

First of all, the anxiety of fate and death deals with threats that non-being poses specifically on our ontic-affirmation. According to Tillich, this type of self-affirmation is the most basic one rooted in our existence as by nature it is inescapable and universal. As beings with finitude, we are all facing the absolute threat of non-being, as this lies at the core of every being's existence. Tillich argues that this anxiety of death, though not as salient as in the collectivists' society, is still present in a way that overshadows all the other anxieties. Hence, death, as the ultimate fear according to Tillich, "provides context for the seriousness of all fear. That is, death anxiety arises from the realization of human mortality and is the "ultimate" existential concern because death signifies the end of one's own existence in this world."²⁹

Despite being absolute anxiety, the anxiety of death is also related to the anxiety of fate. As a relative threat, the anxiety of fate is originated from the total contingency of our existence. The absolute threat of death makes every anxiety within the anxiety of fate become serious problems because our fate is determined in this way but not on all the other unpredictable ways. For example, we didn't make the choice of being born, which makes it a contingent beginning, and most of the time we don't necessarily have the control over our ending, and therefore our ending moments are also contingent. Moreover, even during the process of moving towards death day by day, this contingency still penetrates into our life. As Tillich articulates it, "contingently we are put into the whole web of causal relations, [and] contingently we are determined by them in every moment and thrown out by them in the last moment"³⁰. However, it is not merely the unpredictability of fate that causes us anxiety, it is the lack of ultimate

²⁹ Scott and Weems. 2013. *Natural Disasters and Existential Concerns: A test of Tillich's Theory of Existential Anxiety*.

³⁰ Tillich, 38

necessity, or in other words, the absurdity, or the irrationality that is embedded in this “impenetrable darkness of fate” that causes us anxiety.

The reality of aging, sickness, natural disaster, and dying is fundamentally irresistible. Freud takes a relatively more positive side on this view and suggests that “this recognition does not have a paralyzing effect, on the contrary, it points the direction for our activity.”³¹ From Freud’s perspective, the activity represents the efforts people make to mitigate our sufferings as much as possible such as natural disaster prevention or medicine. However, this thesis aims to see this activity as acquiring one’s courage to be and achieving self-transcendence eventually.

As has been mentioned before in the passages related to fear and anxiety, anxiety strives to become fear in order to be met by courage. However, in standing face to face with this anxiety of death and fate, the question that should be raised is how we can find the courage that can affirm our existence in spite of these ontic anxieties caused not by the actual events in lives, but by the “default setting” of the human situation. Death stands behind fate, and fate actualizes itself through our anxieties of being left alone, marginalized by social groups, physically hurt, sick, and many other concerns in life.

The second type of anxiety is the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, which threatens our spiritual self-affirmation. According to Tillich’s definition, spiritual self-affirmation has to do with our creativity of living. This creativity is derived from participating in one’s life meaningfully. For example, if a scientist actively and passionately participates in finding the scientific truth in his or her life, this scientist is seen as participating his life creatively because he or she both enjoys the truth and also the process of himself or

³¹ Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. [1st American Ed.] ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1962. P. 37

herself finding it. Through the creative participation, one is fulfilled in one's goal and also actualized in one's actions working towards that goal. However, in being able to achieve so, one presupposed concept has to be established, which is the "ultimate concern". According to Tillich, "the anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings"³². In more plain words, this can be translated into the "why bother" problem aroused by the threat of non-being. Due to the fact that our biological extinction erases all things in our beings away, why does it matter that I strive for a spiritual life in this eventually-disappeared existence? Basically, it raises the fundamental question of the meaning of our existence. Why do we exist? What's it all about? What's our existence for? Those are relatively specific questions that can be asked towards the meaning of existence, which is the spiritual pillar that is supporting our existence. This is deeply correlated with our anxiety of emptiness, Tillich says, because in this type, the anxiety of meaninglessness is absolute due to the threat of non-being and the anxiety of emptiness is relative in regards of the threat of non-being specifically to the contents of spiritual life. In result, the anxiety of emptiness is manifested in the "restless heart" that we possess. This is especially more influential in modern society where the loss of a spiritual center is a salient problem. People chase things that seem to satisfy them, but then quickly turn away for new things because they are getting bored so fast, and this "anxiety of emptiness drives us towards the anxiety of meaninglessness". The real threat, Tillich argues, is the total doubt of everything in life, which turns into the existential despair due to its bleak nature of total skepticism.

³² Tillich, 39

Two potential ways out of this situation are pointed out by Tillich. The first one is to do as much as we can to try and maintain oneself by clinging to affirmations like traditions, certain convictions or even emotional preferences. And if the total doubt is impossible to be removed, one courageously accepts it without surrendering one's convictions. However, the second way is to surrender to a higher being or reality that you can participate in it and gives up the freedom of doubting, which also helps one escape the anxiety of meaninglessness. In this situation, although the meaning is saved through him or her "participating" and "affirmation of one's content in spiritual life", oneself is sacrificed. Due to this sacrifice of self, or the freedom of oneself, this "affirmation" is more of a "fanatical self-assertiveness". In other words, one does not really conquer the anxiety of meaninglessness but simply suppress it through this self-sacrifice and surrendering to the higher being. The real problem with the fanatics is that they cannot endure the dissenters and thus his suppressed anxiety will cause him to also suppress others. Tillich argues that the reason why systems of ideas and values might not be able to provide spiritual centers as effective as before can be that they are either not understood enough in their "original power of expressing the human situation and of answering existential human questions"³³ (as such in the doctrinal symbols of Christianity), or that they lose their meaning because new interpretations and spiritual centers are in need and those old ones cannot satisfy modern people anymore.

Furthermore, the ontic and spiritual self-affirmations are interrelated in a way that a human being must be able to understand and shape reality accordingly to his or her meanings and values. While non-being threatens one's ontic self-affirmation, it poses threats on spiritual

³³ Tillich, 49

self-affirmation too. The death instinct, for example, is, in fact, a spiritual phenomenon although it is to throw away one's ontic existence. Hence, the threats on one's spiritual self-affirmation cause the eventual threats on one's ontic self-affirmation; and if one's ontic self-affirmation is weakened by non-being, the meaninglessness and emptiness will also be generated.

The third type is the anxiety of guilt and condemnation as non-being also threatens man's moral self-affirmation. A man's being is not only given to him. Since he is the possessor of his own being, he is also responsible for it. Even within the "limited freedom" that man possesses, he is asked ethically to fulfill what he should become, the best ethical self he can achieve. However, one is still relatively free to choose the estrangement from the self-actualization. The line between good and evil is blurry, and it is exactly this awareness of the "profound ambiguity" between good and evil brings us guilt³⁴. In making every moral decision, we are either moving forward in actualizing the best self, or we are deviating from the fulfillment that we are supposed to be. This situation permeates every moment of our being and therefore it credits the same complexity to the anxiety of guilt as to the existential anxieties about one's ontic and spiritual self-affirmation. What lies behind this anxiety of guilt is the anxiety of condemnation, which is the total self-rejection that condemns ourselves when encountering our inner despair of "having lost our destiny"³⁵ of self-fulfillment. In sum, "for Tillich, guilt is the relative anxiety that your behavior has not lived up to your standards. Condemnation is the ultimate concern that you or your life has not met certain universal standards."³⁶

From my perspective, I do not necessarily agree with what Tillich suggests in the third type of existential anxiety. Throughout his statement, it is clear that his assumption is that human

³⁴ Tillich, 52

³⁵ Tillich, 53

³⁶ Tillich, 12

beings are naturally responsible for their own lives. This idea is significantly derived from the Christian notion of “Original Sin”. He argues that when one cannot meet the universal standard and be the best moral self-one can be, one is existentially anxious about one’s moral self-affirmation. However, his assumption is not highly convincing in considering the ongoing debate about whether morality is nature or nurture. The moral nativists argue that children do possess the innate moral capacity in contribution to their later deployment of moral rules. Instead, philosophers who support moral objectivism believe in the statement that morality is, in fact, a culturally conditioned response. From my point of view, morality is dynamic and is developed through education, parenting, mass media, governmental propaganda, law enforcement and so on societal actions. For instance, a newborn child does not naturally know what is right and wrong. As children grow up, every ecological system around the children³⁷ is conveying similar sets of values and moral standards. Although sometimes the moral standards in different settings might change accordingly, arguably, morality is highly related to the social construction through children’s interactions with peers, family members, teachers, neighbors and even from policies, laws and so on. Hence, what Tillich calls the anxiety of guilt and condemnation should not be only generated by one’s innate moral default.

Despite my disagreement with the specification of the origins of morality in the third type of anxiety brought by Tillich, undeniably that three types of existential anxieties are deeply interrelated. For example, moral affirmation is an alternative to restore meaning when the spiritual contents fail to do so. The threats to one’s ontic self-affirmation can also cast doubts over one’s moral-self affirmation, which is the “why bother” problem raised in regard of the

³⁷ Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

meaningfulness of moral principles, moral code, or even the moral self-affirmation itself. This problem raises the fundamental question about the meaning and purpose of striving for a good life in this world in facing the threats posed by the non-being.

In making a connection between Tillich and other scholarly work, Freud also speaks about three sufferings in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Freud points out that “superior power of nature, the feebleness of our own bodies, and the inadequacy of the regulations which adjust the mutual relationships of human beings in the family, state and society”³⁸ are three main sources of human sufferings. In his essay, he mainly focuses on arguing how civilization creates an uncomfortable space for human beings and thus we suffer from our social relations with other people. Reflecting back on Tillich’s three types of anxiety, the suffering from nature and mortal body are also indicators of the transient nature of human existence. First, the aging, sickness, fragility, and dyingness of our physical body can be the source of our anxiety of death. Second, the irresistible force of nature that makes our fate unpredictable and our ends determined can be the source of our anxiety of fate, meaninglessness, and emptiness. Scholars in humanistic psychology have analyzed the effects of natural disaster on existential concerns, the researchers found that the natural disaster survivors have clearly more salient existential concerns. Specifically, they found that the anxiety of meaninglessness and guilt are positively correlated with the participants’ suicidal ideation, further proving the connection between Freud’s suffering of nature and Tillich’s existential anxieties.

Finally, Tillich says that the anxiety of condemnation originates from “the ultimate concern that you or your life has not met certain universal standards”³⁹. I would argue that since

³⁸ Freud, 37

³⁹ Scott and Weems, 117

the establishment of universal standards must have originated from the interaction with other people, and how people collectively decide what universal standard of a “good life” or the “best version of yourselves that you can be”, social relations can also be the source of anxiety of guilt and condemnation. Every person lives in a socially knitted web that connects everyone with everyone, and thus no one is entirely alone in this society. This is why we generally feel bad when we do something that defies the moral standards established by the collective entity such as stealing from others or hurt someone else. Therefore, a person who has not been educated in our civilization or a sociopath who never adopts the societal rules or willingly be “bound” by this social web will not genuinely feel bad when they are doing immoral things. Hence, the source of our anxiety of not living up to what our culture or civilization expects us to be is the human suffering of social relations.

Positive Implications of Anxiety

The significance of Existential Anxiety

In The Concept of Anxiety, Kierkegaard speaks about the significance of anxiety using an example of children. The anxiety that children have towards the future is sweet, as he writes in the book. He says, “when we observe children, we find the anxiety more definitely intimated as a seeking after the adventurous, the prodigious, and the mysterious.”⁴⁰ Specifically, he denotes that anxiety should not be seen as a disorder, but a chance to be profounder as a person, the unique being that is consciously aware of the non-being in which all individuals must encounter. The courage to be and existential anxiety are not two separate things that have to go against each other, but instead should be seen as interrelated and interdependent forces that both can lead us towards a profounder self-exploration.

The influences of existential anxiety in adolescents will be a good example. The developmental age of adolescence is when youth are generally equipped with “sufficient cognitive capacity and abstract thinking ability to develop insights into morality.”⁴¹ Also, adolescents are in a period of time when they start to realize the limits of life and need to think about the future much more than when they are at a younger age. Erikson suggests that “adolescence is a critical period in the development of life goals and values as well as in the establishment of a sense of direction and purpose in life.”⁴² This is one example that corresponds to the existential anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness. Moreover, as Berman, Weems, and

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, 51

⁴¹ Berman, Weems and Stickle, 2006, *Existential Anxiety in Adolescents: Prevalence, Structure, Association with Psychological Symptoms and Identity Development*, Journal of Youth and Adolescence, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 303–310
DOI: 10.1007/s10964-006-9032-y

⁴² Berman, Weems and Stickle, 2006

Stickle (2006) investigate the existential anxiety in a sample of 140 adolescents, they point out that existential anxiety is so prevalent that it can actually be considered as a normative phenomenon. This psychological study re-affirms the philosophical opinions in seeing existential anxiety as a core human issue. Furthermore, similar to what Tillich says about neurotic anxiety, this study also suggests that there is a significant correlation between “highly elevated existential anxiety” and the “symptoms of depression and anxiety disorder”⁴³, supporting Tillich’s statement that neurotic anxiety is existential anxiety under special condition.

Amongst all the seemingly negative influences of existential anxiety, the researchers also suggest that “the results are consistent with the idea that worry about finding appropriate life roles, goals, and values may lead to deeper concerns about the meaning of life and death.”⁴⁴ This supports the statement that existential anxiety, while can be negatively impacting our lives when correlates with symptoms of anxiety and depression, it is still the very source where our profound thoughts originate. Without the pain or concern brought by our existential quest, it is hard to push us to think deeply about ourselves, as well as questions about fate, death, meaning, purpose, morality and so on. In other words, the profound reflection brought by the anxiety from thinking about fundamental questions of life can also motivate human beings to grow as free, independent, and profound individuals.

In 2017, a research project investigates the incorporation of digital storytelling, a type of storytelling that utilizes software like iMovie to put images, texts, music, and voice into a short video, into the summer program of a middle school. This program allowed students to work on projects of a variety of topics of their choice, ranging from art to virtual reality, to math and so

⁴³ Berman, Weems and Stickle, 309

⁴⁴ Berman, Weems and Stickle, 309

on. They then created short videos about their experiences. Eva, a 13-year-old Caucasian female student from a Ukraine immigrant family, created an artwork portraying a little girl holding an umbrella under the rainbow rain. She explained to us in the interview that this represented her resistance against the bullying. In her video, she reflected on the process of creating this piece of artwork and also her experience of being verbally abused due to her English accent and immigrant family background. This experience made her strive to always be the best student in the class. She indeed told us in the interview that she was a perfectionist who would be so anxious when taking tests and so upset when failure comes. However, this changed when she was doing artwork and stained the project accidentally. Through telling her story and reflect upon the painful experience, she gained a more positive perception of herself as a strong, resistant individual. Through reflecting on the negative side of life and confronting the existential anxiety, people gain a deeper and more positive perception of themselves.

In the *Brave New World*, the author designs an imaginary world where everyone defaults to be utterly happy at all times. Everyone is assigned to a certain role provided by the government from the first day they are born. Identity crisis and negative emotions do not exist in that world because everyone is conditioned to have a certain identity, a certain personality, and even a certain fate. Individuality is replaced completely by extreme collectivism because the stability of the society is the first priority. Under this circumstance, no one is able to think deeply about one's self, future, and the world. Therefore the existential anxieties are eradicated in an extreme way. Whenever one feels a little bored, one can use a drug called "soma" to make themselves feel absolutely happy again. This book clearly depicts the human situation without any existential concerns or questions. No one asks "dumb" questions like the reasons why we

exist, the meaning and purpose of human existence, and so on, because everyone is happy and satisfied. When a person is happy and satisfied forever, which is unrealistic, one does not ask questions but only accepts what is given to him or her passively. Tillich points out that “the sting of fear is anxiety, and anxiety strives towards fear.”⁴⁵ We are afraid of death, and that is why we are anxious about things like being killed; we are afraid of failure, and that is why we are anxious about test scores. However, if we are consistently and continuously full of this hollow happiness, and be so settled in the situation that we are in, humans will stop existing as unique individuals and instead become replaceable machines. The author uses sarcastic writing to criticize this seemingly ideal place. Whenever one feels slightest negative emotion, one uses a drug called “soma” to make themselves feel absolutely happy again. Therefore, no one asks “dumb” questions like the reasons why we exist, the meaning and purpose of human existence, and so on, because everyone is happy and satisfied. However, when a person is happy and satisfied forever, which is unrealistic, one only passively accepts what is given to him or her.

When fear is eliminated by brainstorm and drug, people are no longer afraid of death. The people in the *Brave New World* are trained and conditioned to be used to death and even appreciate it dumbly as a way to become nutrients to feed the planet again. Then, people lose the ability to be anxious about our fate. They exist in a seemingly comfortable and “never boring” bubble. The shallow happiness is not valuable, because it is established on the fake feelings and emotions created by drugs like “soma”. The deeper and profound happiness is valuable because it is derived from the courageous staring at the abyss of non-being, which trembles us and inspires us to a full human.

⁴⁵ Tillich, 37

Anxieties about our fundamental existence are meaningful regarding how it stings us and wakes us up from the total conformity and the absolute participation of a collective group. The profound thinkers are always generating questions and quest for the ultimate answers about human existence. Even among the 140 adolescent participants in the study, they also reported developing deeper thinking about the meaning of life while having existential anxieties. This further proves that anxieties about death, fate, meaninglessness, emptiness, guilt, and condemnation can actually drive us forward in terms of reflecting on life deeply. The courage to be gained from confronting the existential anxieties is the more profound one in comparison to the shallow existence derived from the everlasting “happiness” from people in the *Brave New World*.

The deep, profound thinking of life helps with our exploration of self-identity too. As mentioned before, if one is happy and satisfied, even this feeling depends on an external drug-like “soma”, one will not have questions about who he or she really is because it is good enough for them already. Unhappiness or the dissatisfaction is always the motivation for one to search for who one is. For example, children born into a happy family where both parents are alive and well won’t have the need to search for real parents because they already had one. Abandoned children who are adopted will have the question of who their biological parents are forever, even though they might have a relatively happy adoptive family. It is what they believe to lack when compared to other children, and this lack pushes them to search for where they are from and who they really are. Another example can be heterosexual people and homosexual people. For a straight person, he or she is happy and satisfied to date people of the opposite sex, however, it is relatively unhappy and unsatisfied for homosexual people to have “normal”

heterosexual relationship. Therefore the unhappiness pushes them to find out what really makes them happy and satisfy. This search for true happiness is one's quest for one's true identity. This is why *Brave New World* eradicates all individuality because an individual's true identity does not matter in that world and everyone bows down to the needs of the collective society. When individual anxieties are replaced by fake happiness provided by "soma", one is simply a screw in a big social machine, instead of an alive human being with flesh and blood. A famous singer in Taiwan wrote this line of lyrics in his song about life, "cracks in life are where the sun shines". Using Kierkegaard's metaphor, as we fear and tremble in standing on the edge of the abyss of nonbeing, the courage to be is the courageous leap to embrace our fate and affirm ourselves in spite of the no-way-out situation shared universally by all human beings.

Anxiety and Freedom

Anxiety, as in the core of human existence, has pushed existentialists to think deeply about human experience and situation. An inevitable concept that any existential reflector on anxiety will encounter is freedom. Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness* that “it is in anguish (anxiety) that man gets the consciousness of his freedom, or if you prefer, anguish is the mode of being of freedom as the consciousness of being; it is in anguish that freedom is, in its being, in question for itself.”⁴⁶ Within the midst of anxiety, freedom arises when one realizes that one is in a vulnerable position and constantly being threatened by non-being because in this unknown situation possibilities also come to existence. In the example of *Brave New World*, people are not anxious, desperate or in general have any negative feelings toward their lives because their freedom is taken away. By completely surrendering themselves into the collectivity, each individual loses their “selves” and therefore free of anxiety for life. However, later when the main character entered into this “utopian society”, he feels uncomfortable and anxious about his situation. In the midst of this painful reflection he acquires freedom, and also because of his freedom, he suffers from this existential anxiety. The relationship between freedom and anxiety seems to be a cycle here as one leads to another, and thus they are interdependent in this way.

This intricate and interrelated relationship between anxiety and freedom is the key to understand the human position in the face of existential anxiety. Within freedom, we gain access to our potentials of choosing to become who we are and even transcending ourselves. In other words, the courage to be is made possible because of the freedom that enables us to make individual choices. At the same time, choice brings us responsibility, which engenders anxiety as

⁴⁶ Sartre, 67

we will not have any idea what consequences our choices might lead to. For example, when we choose to go to grad school after we graduate as undergraduate students, we do not know whether we are going to do well in a completely new environment. We might be afraid that this choice leads to a consequence that is not in our favor. This situation comes up whenever we make a choice because by making choices we are then directing our lives to a different direction than before. Although life itself is already unknown, each time we make a choice, it is inevitable that we would contemplate over the possible outcomes of our choices and therefore the anxiety is inevitable too. What if I choose to love my partner and yet he or she does not actually love me back? What if I choose to express my feelings to my friends and they do not understand me? Each choice comes with possibilities that might fail us, and yet each choice also brings us new chances to create a different future. By exposing ourselves to the pool of possibilities, the anxiety caused by the “what if” is inescapable because we are exposing our vulnerabilities.

In the previous paragraphs about fear and anxiety, Sartre was briefly introduced in terms of his perspective in how one can be choosing to actively participate in one’s possibilities and therefore become an active agent instead of a passive person who only takes in all the possibilities from without. Being able to choose is an indicator of human freedom, and in achieving this freedom we must encounter anxiety. When we realize that we are actually free to choose, the potential future results from our choices provide not only possibilities but also anxiety of facing those possibilities. Only when one encounters anxiety one can truly reflect on one’s nature. Who am I in the face of the ultimate non-being? Who am I becoming? What am I going to do? This is like the feeling of skydiving by yourself and yet having no idea of where to land. Sartre raises these questions in his *Being and Nothingness* to point out that “anxiety is the

reflective apprehension of the self”⁴⁷. He uses an example of a man who suddenly loses a great part of his wealth. At first, the man will have the intense fear of being poor, but then gradually the anxiety will arise. “He will experience anguish (anxiety) in a moment later when nervously wringing his hands. He exclaims to himself, “What am I going to do? But what am I going to do?”⁴⁸. At the exact moment that this man starts to cry out what he is going to do, the anxiety of uncertainty has replaced the definite fear. This man is forced to confront himself because now he realizes that the steering wheel is still in his hands. He is free to do something, and yet the question of what this thing might be brings him the anxiety.

In the formation of Sartre’s point of view, one can see that Kierkegaard has a great influence on his standpoints regarding individual situations. In discussing this matter, Kierkegaard uses the famous story at the beginning of the Bible to illustrate his concept of anxiety. Adam, as the first human created by God, was innocent in his primitive state living in the Garden of Eden. In his innocence, he also possesses this ignorance about the difference between good and evil. When God prohibits him to eat the apple and says that he will die if he does so, Adam starts to realize his freedom of “being able” to eat the apple or not eat the apple. This freedom of “being able to” begets anxiety in him. Kierkegaard writes, “the prohibition makes him anxious because it awakens in him freedom’s possibility. What innocence let slip as the nothing of anxiety now enters him, and here again, it is a nothing - the anxious possibility of being able”⁴⁹. Adam now stands in the position held by the man in Sartre’s example because now his self-awareness has awakened and he realizes his freedom of “being able”. This brings anxious possibilities of unknown future awaiting in front of him.

⁴⁷ Sartre, 69

⁴⁸ Sartre, 65

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, 54

What separates us from the beasts, according to Kierkegaard, is our spirits. Or in other words, the possibilities that only self-awakened human beings have access to. He talks about three states of our spirits in *the Concept of Anxiety*. When the spirit is fully awake, it will be conscious of its individuality, separateness and difference from others, or in other words, it will be conscious of its freedom. When fully asleep, human beings are in the state of innocence like what Adam originally is. The children also possess this state of innocence too as they are not self-consciously aware of their actions as moving forward and actualizing their possibilities. For example, when children go on and explore the world, they are carrying a “sweet anxiety” as Kierkegaard would describe because they naturally adventurous and want to see what possibilities are out there. However, at this point, their anxiety is without specific contents.

The state of a fully awaken spirit is the ideal state that we constantly strive for but can never fully reach. However, we are not fully asleep either since we are indeed different from the beasts. Therefore, we are stuck in the dreaming state of spirit. “Dreaming, spirit projects its own activity, yet this actuality is nothing”⁵⁰. The actuality of the spirits refers to the awaken state of spirit where freedom is fully actualized. However, the dreaming state is a state in which the difference between my “self” and my “other” are is not entirely embraced by my spirit. In other words, the objects of anxiety in this dreaming state of spirit is an “intimated nothing”.

This nothingness begets anxiety. Kierkegaard claims that since the object of anxiety is nothing, it distinguishes anxiety from fear as fear refers to something definite. Tillich also speaks about this distinction and shares with Kierkegaard’s perspective that anxiety does not have a specific object, and this is why human beings cannot stand in front of the naked anxiety for a

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, 50

flash of time. While Tillich takes this concept of nothingness more in the aspect of the non-being as a total unknownness of death, Kierkegaard takes this concept in a way that more relates to our experiential daily lives.

For Kierkegaard in the *Concept of Anxiety*, he suggests that anxiety is a mixed feeling of ambivalence when we encounter “the freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility”⁵¹. It is when we realize that there is possibility for our freedom of having possibilities that we experience both joy and pain. Our pleasure is for the fact that we can be free, but our repugnance is that we can never fully embrace the freedom. In the midst of this ambivalence we encounter anxiety. For example, imagine we are positioned in a plain field with no boundaries at all. We can never see the limit of this field and we are just left alone. On the one hand, one is now free to do whatever he or she wants to do. On the other hand, one cannot stand with getting along with one’s self in such an extreme way.

For Kierkegaard, anxiety is when human nature thrives from the innocent animal nature that we all originally possess like Adam does. It is an indicator of our individual uniqueness because beasts cannot have anxiety as they do not have spirits. In Kierkegaard’s account, anxiety is so essential to our humanity that we have to depend on it to come to a synthesis between our physical and psychological selves, which is the spirit. Reflecting back on Adam’s story, the key for him to transcend from his innocent state of being is the prohibition set by God. God asks Adam to not eat the apple that can help people distinguish evil and good, and thus awakening his knowledge of freedom. For example, if God never forbids Adam to eat the apple, Adam will not have the knowledge of what he is able to do. However, Kierkegaard argues, that as soon as

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, 51

Adam is prohibited, “it makes him anxious because it awakens in him that freedom’s possibility”

⁵².

Sartre also speaks about the anxiety and the possibility of freedom. He describes the scene where a person is walking through a narrow path on a cliff nearby the abyss. The abyss presents itself as death or nonbeing in this scene, and each step that I make might lead me into that absolute despair once and for all. He writes, “I can slip on a stone and fall into the abyss; the crumbling earth of the path can give way under my steps.”⁵³Hence, on the one hand, “I am passive in relation to these possibilities”⁵⁴because they are all present to me and I can only take in the possibility of these possibilities. In this case, I am passive. However, on the other hand, Sartre believes that we also have the freedom to act and our conducts will be our possibilities. In doing so, we are transforming the passive possibilities that life might dawn upon us into active possibilities that we are able to have certain control over. Sartre articulates in his *Being and Nothingness* that “I realize myself as pushing away the threatening situation with all my strength, and I project before myself a certain number of future conducts destined to) keep the threats of the world at a distance from me. These conducts are *my* possibilities”⁵⁵. According to Sartre, human beings can choose to be active in confronting the unknown future, and therefore holding the future in our hands as we act actively. Freedom, according to both Sartre and Kierkegaard, is both the cause of anxiety and the chance for self-transcendence.

⁵² Kierkegaard, 54

⁵³ Sartre, 65

⁵⁴ Sartre, 65

⁵⁵ Sartre, 66

Anxiety, Freedom and Creativity

In the previous section the relationship between freedom and anxiety is discussed, and this section is going to progressively discuss how creativity relates to freedom and anxiety. As presented before, according to Kierkegaard, anxiety arises when humans are confronted, or becoming self-aware of with their freedom, or in other words, their possibilities. “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom that emerges when spirit wants to posit the synthesis, and freedom now looks down into its own possibility and then grabs hold of finiteness to support itself”⁵⁶. This well-known line from Kierkegaard portrays precisely how freedom relates to our existential anxiety. The spirit refers to our unique feature as human beings, which is our possibilities⁵⁷. As we are free to strive towards each possible possibility, which is when “spirit wants to posit the synthesis”⁵⁸, it is a process of us getting anxious to try and grasp something finite or something certain in order to feel secure and groundable. This is the source of our anxiety whenever a possibility is being actualized. However, this process is not only free, but also innately creative as each moment forward is new and unknown for us.

“Kierkegaard sees man as the creature who is continually beckoned by possibility, who conceives of possibility, visualizes it, and by creative activity carries it into actuality”⁵⁹. This process of continuously actualizing our possibilities is similar as the movements of a dolphin. Imaging the ocean as the pool of possibilities positioned in front of us, and we are the dolphins who constantly jump out of the ocean surface and dive into the water again in order to move forward. Every time we choose a direction and then dive in, there then arises another pool of

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, xi

⁵⁷ May, Rollo. *The Meaning of Anxiety*. PhD diss., Columbia University, 1950. Ronald Press. 38.

⁵⁸ May, 32

⁵⁹ May, 32

possibilities. We make our directive decisions with great amount of anxiety but also immense courage and actualize our possibility in our creative activities when moving forward. One example in life is when we start to write, the blank sheet of paper is the pool of possibilities positioned in front of us. It is the ocean surface that we struggle to figure out where to dive in. Then, once we start to type out the first word, we are starting to actualize one possibility out of countless possibilities in this pool. This is why it is always hard to take the first step, write the first word, paint the first stroke and so on because the anxiety chokes us in the throat when we are confronted with our freedom and potential creative contents that haven't been realized yet. As we have no way of knowing whether our choices will lead us towards a better self or a worse one, we are thus constantly in the anxiety of not knowing who or what we are becoming.

The anxiety and creativity relates in another way too. May points out in his *The Meaning of Anxiety* that creating is essentially a way of continuously destroying the old self and creating a new self . “It always involves destroying the status quo, destroying old patterns with oneself, progressively destroying what one has clung to from childhood on, and creating new and original forms and ways of living.”⁶⁰ The action of actualizing one possibility out of a pool of possibilities means denying or even negating other possibilities at that very moment, and thus it is innately aggressive as one is leaving other possibilities behind. Imagining a great pianist who is sitting right in front of his or her piano and ready to compose something, he or she is facing a dreaded unknown future moment that he or she has to create. There is tremendous anxiety rising in this pianist's mind because by pressing any key on the piano, he or she is killing the possibilities of other sounds coming up. When you know that you play one sound, you cannot play another. You

⁶⁰ May, 39

know that you have to abandon some possibilities. The sense of "possibilities that are not forever open to me". I would not know if that is something I would like to keep or abandon. I would never know if that possibility that is abandoned could be something I really want. May suggests that "the more creative the person, he held, the more anxiety and guilt are potentially present"⁶¹. According to Kierkegaard, the guilt feeling originates from the anxiety of actualizing the possibility as we are always killing other possibilities by choosing one. Hence, it takes tremendous courage to move forward with determination and the creative affirmation of ourselves.

However, this anxiety has its positive implications too, which are to push ourselves to reflect on individual responsibilities and creativity in the participation of forming a new future. Rollo May writes, "because it is possible to create - creating one's self, willing to be one's self, as well as creating in all the innumerable daily activities - one has anxiety"⁶². Freedom is the base of creativity, and anxiety has an interrelated relationship with freedom. These three things are so interwoven that we cannot separate them with one another when discussing the topic of existential anxiety. According to Sartre, man is the sum of all his actions. We become who we are by the things that we do. This is a deeply creative process that is embedded in each and every second of our lives. Each moment we are participating in the activities of creating oneself, as Rollo May would put it, because each moment of doing is also creating what one's self is becoming. Based on the previous story of Adam that shows anxiety arises when human develops one's self-awareness and realizes the freedom that one beholds, Kierkegaard holds that one's true vocation is to will to be oneself, and this will is "a creative decisiveness, based centrally on

⁶¹ May, 39

⁶² May, 32.

expanding self-awareness.”⁶³ For example, when I choose to start writing this thesis, the process of writing, as well as the contents that are written, are becoming part of myself because that is what I am doing or creating gradually. Because each moment is relatively new to the previous self, any future activity that we are engaging in is part of this immense process of self-creation. Furthermore, the things or ideas created by us carries a part of ourselves and live on even after our biological death. To some extent, this is how human beings can “outlive” death or live beyond death.

The *Brave New World* describes a society where human freedom of making choices are deprived completely. Even though people do not suffer from the anxiety of taking the responsibility for individual choices, they also lose the access of one’s true nature. The courage to be that these people possess are therefore not authentic courage acquired by individual transcendence but instead a “fake” one that is given by a centralized authority. In a famous metaphor of anxiety by Kierkegaard, he says that anxiety is like a school. On the negative side, this has to involve one facing directly with the cruel facts of our contingent existence, such as the death and the fate, meaninglessness and nothingness, and guilt and condemnation listed by Tillich before. However, on the positive side, “in such confronting of anxiety the individual is educated to faith, or inward certitude. Then one has the courage to renounce anxiety without any anxiety, which only faith is capable of - not that it annihilates anxiety, but remaining ever young, it is continually developing itself out of the death throe of anxiety”⁶⁴. From this statement, what Kierkegaard is trying to say is actually similar to what Tillich is proposing in *the Courage to Be*. On the one hand, we can choose to see anxiety as a problem, just as what today’s medical model

⁶³ May, 35

⁶⁴ May, 44-45; Kierkegaard, 142 & 104

would stand for. In this way, anxiety is an obstacle to our well-being and happiness. It is so frustrating when you try to move away or eliminate this obstacle because it is at the core of our existence. Anxiety is part of our being. Hence, what Kierkegaard, Sartre, Tillich and May propose is another way of courageously confront anxiety as the stepping stone of accessing our deeper nature and opening up our possibilities as human beings.

The Courage to Be

The Ontology of Courage

Courage has long been an important concept in philosophers' discussions. From the military perspective, courage is in a strictly aristocratic sense to nobly withstand pain and death.

⁶⁵The best representatives of this type of courage are literary examples like the Greek hero Achilles, who show great strength in their "resolve of mind"⁶⁶. Spartans understood this courage as the "civic courage" to fight in the battleground under the noble causes⁶⁷. For example, in a battle with a noble cause like fighting for freedom, the warriors that show great strength in fighting without the fear of being killed or making other sacrifices are deemed as courageous people. Aristotle also emphasized this aristocratic characteristic of courage by saying that the fundamental motive for courage is the nobility of the cause. In other words, the courageous will that goes against pain, suffer and death is derived from the judgment that "it is noble to do so and base not to do so"⁶⁸. The government of a collective society like in the contemporary China loves to propaganda patriots who courageously made the sacrifice to the noble career of the communist revolution. This "civic courage" is always accompanied by heroic stories.

Thomas Aquinas extends the doctrine of courage to be subjected to wisdom. He calls courage by the name of fortitude. It is basically the "strength of the mind, capable of conquering whatever threatens the attainment of the highest good."⁶⁹ The intellectual knowledge of the highest good, which is reasonable and rational, guides the courage to participate in the creative

⁶⁵ Tillich, 4

⁶⁶ W Thomas Schmid, *The Socratic Conception of Courage*, History of Philosophy Quarterly 2 (April 1985): 113.

⁶⁷ Schmid, 113

⁶⁸ Tillich, 4

⁶⁹ Tillich, 7

process of wisdom. Aquinas' explanation of courage restricts itself as a virtue that reveals itself only when one obeys the commands of reason and carry out the intentions of the mind, either to sacrifice oneself for the greater good like the martyrs or to religiously unite with Christian values such as faith, hope, and love.

Stoics have another way of defining courage. They correlated courage and wisdom in another way that is different from how Thomas Aquinas sees courage as a subordinate to the wisdom. Courage, from the Stoic perspective, is the “participation in the divine power of reason, transcending the realm of passions and anxieties.”⁷⁰ Reasons for Stoics are also the Logos, which represented the “meaningful structure of reality as a whole and of the human mind in particular”⁷¹. Essentially, what Stoics propose as the courage to be is to hold on to the affirmation of our rational nature as human beings and not be disturbed by desires and fears. This type of courage requires us to be “undisturbed by fears and unspoiled by pleasures, we shall be afraid neither of death nor of the gods (fate)”⁷². Therefore, fate and death are not considered as sources of the existential anxiety but as a positive motivation to achieve in Stoic philosophy.

Furthermore, the Stoics have a profound understanding of anxiety as fearing the fear. Stoics interpret the fear of death to be originated from the fear itself and not the source, death. For instance, the cognitive treatment for a patient suffering from the Panic Attack is to have the patient learn not to “fear the fear”. Those patients suffer from the sudden and extreme panic, and their anxiety is originated from fearing the fear of having a panic attack. As Epictetus says, “for it is not death or hardship that is a fearful thing, but the fear of death and hardship.”⁷³ Hence,

⁷⁰ Tillich, 13

⁷¹ Tillich, 12

⁷² Tillich, 15

⁷³ Tillich, 13

Stoics propose to take off the frightful masks of our anxieties and confront it in the ontological level, which is to courageously affirm our Logos. Roger Jeff Cunningham presents an example of his friend who suffered from AIDS but strived to achieve his dream of singing from the Stephen Sondheim songbook several months before he died. Cunningham says that “he was not avoiding life because he was about to die; he embraced life and achieved his life’s dream”⁷⁴. This friend of his showed the great courage confronting the death because he actively participates in the creation of his life and the actualization of himself knowing his end will come soon. However, if he fears the fear of death, this feeling will haunt him down and make him a coward bending his knees in front of the gods (fate). From the Stoic point of view, those who avoid life and give up on living courageously and creatively lack the courage to be.

This participation to the universal Logos as a way to affirm our essential being, though touching upon the ontological nature of the courage to be, has its limits in confronting the anxiety of guilt and condemnation because Stoics pursue the utter control of their lives and strive to not do anything wrong. However, it does have influences on its notion of transcending beyond the religious “God” and affirm ourselves in an even broader notion, which is the “God above God.” This impacts Tillich’s later analysis of the courage to be and the transcending becoming beyond the notion of religious God.

Spinoza supports the ontological nature of the courage to be by stating that we should not see courage as something besides others, but as the “essential act of everything that participates in being, namely self-affirmation.”⁷⁵ He further extends the definition of courage to be to something that is deeply interrelated with one’s being. Spinoza introduces “endeavor” as an

⁷⁴ Roger Jeff Cunningham, 2017, *The courage to create Rollo May: The courage to be Paul Tillich*. Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Vol. 47 No.1

⁷⁵ Tillich, 20

important concept to understand how human beings naturally “strive for” becoming what we are, in other words, our actual essence. However, it is important to note that the act of self-affirmation is not a selfish act, but instead, it should include “both the right self-love and the right love of others”⁷⁶. To further illustrate, Cunningham provides an example of a mother who is devoted in her child so much that she is willing to sacrifice everything for the child for her children to not be on welfare and able to go to college. Cunningham tells the mother that in order to do so she has to be off welfare and in college first. This reminds me of the typical Asian parents who sacrifice their time, efforts, money and opportunities for children’s development, especially education. In a famous place called “Mao Tan Chang” High School, every student was there to study 24/7 for the college entrance exam or “Gao Kao”. Since this is decisive for children’s educational future, many parents give up their career and move to the town near this high school in order to take care of their children. Although the parents deem this sacrifice as necessary, this is also controversial because as Cunningham says, “sacrificing your possibilities is not empowering your child.”⁷⁷ The balance between self-love and the love of others is crucial for affirming oneself.

Moreover, what Spinoza proposes is also that the courageous self-affirmation is not an isolated act, which should be done alone, but a socially collaborative act that is originated from the participation of something bigger than ourselves only. Spinoza uses the “universal or divine act of self-affirmation” as the originating power of every individual act, and Tillich extends this concept to be the courage to be oneself and the courage of participation. These two interrelated concepts will be discussed further in the late passages.

⁷⁶ Tillich, 22

⁷⁷ Cunningham, 80

When Spinoza refers the participation to the divine or universal act of self-affirmation, it is important to note that it does not refer to the submissive life of succumbing to the God of religions anything alike. As Nietzsche points out in his philosophy of life, “the good life is the courageous life”⁷⁸. In his definition of a courageous life, the submissive self is excluded explicitly due to its nature of not facing the risk through oneself. If one is submitting oneself to a bigger shield like the religious God, or any collective organization in general, one is giving oneself up in order to avoid the potential painfulness caused by confronting the existential anxieties. As Tillich notes, this side of Nietzsche makes him an existentialist because he also possesses “the courage to look into the abyss of non-being in the complete loneliness of him who accepts the message that “God is dead”. ”⁷⁹ In sum, this courage towards life, an internal drive of pushing oneself to achieve self-actualization, is affirmed by multiple schools of thought to be the essential courage in our being.

Another type of courage is the courage of endurance, and the literary example is Odysseus. Through his journey home, Odysseus has shown great courage in resisting the pain and the misfortune in general. It represents the inner strength of the long-lasting resistance of people. In this case, courage is not a virtue exclusive to the warriors but a personal characteristic like the “ironness of heart”.⁸⁰ Progressively, in Plato’s *Laches*, courage is defined as “a kind of endurance of the soul”⁸¹. According to Socrates, courage, as a virtue, is knowledge. Thus it is not ethical because it limits the access to courage to the group of people who can have the knowledge about it. Socrates admitted the fact that they have failed in the discovery of courage.

⁷⁸ Tillich, 29

⁷⁹ Tillich, 30

⁸⁰ Schmid, 113

⁸¹ Schmid, 113

However, this failure to examine courage as other virtues reveals the ontological nature of courage, which is also deeply embedded in human existence. Tillich argues that “an understanding of courage presupposes an understanding of man and of his world, its structures and values. Only he who knows this knows what to affirm and what to negate”⁸². One’s courage shows this person’s worldview, value systems, and belief systems. After all, courage is to affirm one’s essential nature of a being. As contemporary existential therapist Rollo May also suggests, courage reflects how people act in response to the human condition⁸³. May states that “courage is the capacity to keep moving ahead of in spite of the misery and despair that may be associated with the movement”⁸⁴. This similar account can be found in Tillich’s book, as his central point regarding courage is to see it as a self-affirmation of being in spite of all the threats posed by the non-being. In supporting this statement, Ungersma also provides an existential definition of courage in saying that it is how an individual can utilize all the resources that he or she has to “prevail against the constant threat of non-being”⁸⁵. It is important to see courage, not just a moral virtue, but rather an ontological concept enrooted in our existence.

Rollo May articulates the definition of courage in the face of modern time well in his book *The Courage to Create*. In facing the unknown future, the “no man’s land” that no predecessors have been to, we shall choose to confront it courageously and affirm ourselves in spite of this despair and anxiety generated by the future nothingness. According to May, the courage to be is also not the absence of despair, but an active force to move forward in spite of

⁸² Tillich, 2

⁸³ Frew, J., & Spiegler, M. D. (Eds.). (2013). *Contemporary psychotherapies for a diverse world (1st rev. ed.)*. New York, NY, US: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

⁸⁴ Frew and Spiegler, 144

⁸⁵ Frew and Spiegler, 144

the despair⁸⁶. The ontological courage to be implies the possibility of us transcending beyond our fears and anxieties of our existence. May articulates it as “[the courage of] facing one’s anxiety and rising above it”⁸⁷.

It is important to note that both May and Tillich argue that courage is not a virtue, as Tillich points out that Socrates fails to categorize courage as a virtue like fidelity. Instead, courage is the foundation of all virtues or the hidden drive that enables those virtues to help one actualize oneself. Courage is the essential self-affirmation that accepts and embraces oneself no matter what situation one is in. May says, “without courage, our love pales into mere dependency. Without courage, our fidelity becomes conformism.”⁸⁸ The ontological nature of courage is revealed through its essential role in helping us to authentically actualize ourselves. Essentially, it is deeply embedded in our human nature and it is derived from our own being. Courage is not something external to us that we have to retrieve in order to use it as a means to confront existential anxiety. Instead, it is already there in our nature and we just need to allow it to rise to the surface and help us face the anxiety and rise above it.

⁸⁶ Cunningham, 83

⁸⁷ Cunningham, 83

⁸⁸ May, Rollo. 1975. *The Courage to Create*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Courage in its social and individual aspects

From the discussion about the courage above, we can identify several key concepts for specifying the courage to be. “Self-affirmation”, “active participation”, “in spite of” and so on gradually reveal themselves as we strive for defining the courage to be. However, the specific question also arises when examining them in a closer distance. So, how do we understand self-affirmation? Tillich points out that the subject of this affirmation must be. “the individual self which participates the world”⁸⁹. This emphasis on the self-centeredness does not equal to selfishness, because it represents a more profound understanding and acceptance of oneself as the self. This centered self is an individual, free, autonomous and self-determining self. In other words, Tillich illustrates it as the “courage to be as oneself”⁹⁰. It does not carry any moral or ethical value in affirming oneself, because it is so natural and so central in one’s being as a human.

However important this individualization is, the self is also a self as it is placed in the setting of a world or a bigger “something”. The moment we are born, we cannot be absolutely disentangled with others, because of the act of being born predicates our initial relation to someone else, like our mother in this case. Individualization and participation are interrelated in a way that an individual cannot be what he or her is only as individuals. The “participation” aspect of human nature is enrooted in our existence too. Tillich articulates it by saying , “the self is self only because it has a world, a structured universe, to which it belongs and from which it is separated at the same time”⁹¹. May also speaks about this intricate relationship of both being a part and being an individual. He refers to a psychoanalyst named Otto Rank, who proposes the

⁸⁹ Tillich, 86

⁹⁰ Tillich, 87

⁹¹ Tillich, 88

concepts of “life fear” and “death fear”⁹². Life fear is the fear of one’s total separation from the rest of the world and sinking in complete loneliness by him or herself. This fear manifests itself when someone is in desperate need for dependency and afraid of taking the step to actualizing oneself independently. Rank even brings gender factors into the explanation of this fear as women tend to devote herself to a relationship so much that herself is lost in relation. My grandmother is an example who devotes her whole life into the family and is terrified when my grandfather asks for a divorce because she has gradually lost the ability to live independently and autonomously as herself. In this example, my grandfather manifests the “death fear”, which is to be afraid of being bound to the family relationship too much and not to risk losing himself. He strives for self-preservation in a way that he asks for the divorce when he cannot tolerate the relational bond my grandmother asks for anymore. According to May, human beings often oscillate between these two types of fears, which corresponds to Tillich’s argument that human beings struggle between individualization and participation.

Though similar, Tillich’s definition of participation is slightly different from the perspective of Otto Rank. For Tillich, participation is taking a part of something bigger than oneself, such as a political movement. In participating such a movement, one is enjoining the group and become a part of this group’s identity. For instance, as a cisgender female identified as lesbian, when I join the march against the homophobic hate crime, I shared part of my identity as supporting the LGBTQA+ community with all of the people who participated in the march. However, there still remained other parts of our identities that were exclusively our own, such as my identity as an international student from China and so on. Hence, to illustrate further Tillich’s

⁹² May, 18-19

point, it is important to note that when we are part of something bigger than us, we are both a part of that something and separate from that thing. Tillich suggests, “the self itself as a participant in the power of a group, of a movement, of essences, of the power of being as such”⁹³. Hence, in Tillich’s theory, one affirms oneself through affirming oneself as a participant in something bigger than him or her as an individual.

Moreover, Tillich does also point out the danger of losing the individual self in the process of participating in the bigger group. For example, one’s individual self does not reveal in the ancient civilization that adopted feudalism. One participates into the group activity and can only actualize oneself as a part of the group. This also applies to the collectivist society where people have to live by one common standard and sharing assigned identities such as workers, farmers, administrators and so on. One example can be what Plato describes as the ideal societal structure in his *Republic*. As each person is designated to adopt certain roles, and be ruled by the philosophical king, everyone is totally bound with the identity assigned by the greater societal structure. According to Tillich, the courage to be cannot derive from the group because a group is never an individual. A group can have a predominant figure like a king as an authority figure, who poses his or her will upon the group members. In this “we-self”, the “I-self”, or the ego-self of individuals are merely characteristics that consist of this collective self. Therefore a collective identity cannot count as an individual self-identity. The courage to need to be a quality of individual selves.

However, what Tillich really wants to grasp here is an intricate relation between the courage to be as a part of a group and the courage to be as oneself. Courage to be as a part is the

⁹³ Tillich, 89

fundamental courage to be because one has to exist and thrive in the universal existence of all the other human beings. However, the courage to be as oneself is also necessary for preserving one's individual self. The relationship of balancing out between these two courageous options can be seen as a circle of yin and yang. In ancient Chinese philosophy, yang is a positive energy that represents man or masculinity, and yin is a feminine force that represents elusiveness, gentleness and so on. Connecting to the courage to be oneself and the courage to be as a part, yang is more similar to the traits possessed by the courage to be oneself, which is a highly active, positive, and positing oneself as an independent individual. While yin is more like the courage to be as a part to passively participate in a collective identity. As yin and yang are interrelated and interchangeable, they also represent the relationship between the courage to be oneself and the courage to be as a part. Just as how the ancient Chinese philosophers believe in the Dao of “Zhong Yong”, which means the perfect harmonious balance between yin and yang, Tillich suggests that it is unwise to go to either extreme end of the courage to be. The total embrace of the courage of participation will lose the insight of existential anxiety as an individual. And the absolute courage of individualization will also lose the side where they can see how human's potentials can be actualized in participating in a greater being.

Courage and anxiety

So, how do these two types of courage to be can meet the three types of existential anxieties mentioned before? In possessing the courage to be as oneself, Tillich points out that “the anxiety of fate is conquered by the self-affirmation of the individual as an infinitely significant microcosmic representation of the universe”⁹⁴. As one develops the courage to be as oneself, one is able to stand the despair and the anxiety of his or her fate because one can now stand the naked anxiety due to one’s partial unification with the universe. One is not as a lonely individual, but also part of the bigger universe. Moreover, this “enthusiasm for the universe, in knowing as well as in creating, also answers the question of doubt and meaninglessness”⁹⁵. As one is enjoining the universe and blending him or herself into a part of the universe, one is affirmed by this genuine enthusiasm for both the universe and the person’s centered self. Furthermore, at this point, the anxiety of guilt and condemnation is also removed because the moral and ethical values do not matter anymore. The moral standards, ethical principles, the right, the wrong, the heaven and the hell. As Tillich says, “everything is done to deprive them of their seriousness. The courage of self-affirmation will not be shaken by the anxiety of guilt and condemnation”⁹⁶ anymore.

As mentioned before, non-being is the negation of every concept, and therefore we lose everything in facing non-being. In other words, the threats are for us to lose not only our individual self and also our participatory self or the social self, because we cannot participate either in the abyss of non-being. Therefore, Tillich states that “self-affirmation as a part requires courage as much as does self-affirmation as oneself. It is *one* courage which takes a double threat

⁹⁴ Tillich, 120

⁹⁵ Tillich, 121

⁹⁶ Tillich, 121

of nonbeing into itself”⁹⁷. Therefore, this *one* courage to be, necessarily, needs to be both the courage to be as oneself and the courage to be as a part. Tillich puts it as the courage to accept the acceptance, which is transcending individual self and the participatory self and yet also the combination of the two. Before we delve into that ultimate courage to be, it is important to take another deeper look at the existential anxiety and how it really manifests itself in human life.

The three types of anxiety are existential because they are embedded in one’s being, just as how non-being is included in one’s being. The permeability of these anxieties might not be as salient in one’s daily life, and yet its latent meaning is a reminder of our finitude. The awareness of realizing our extreme finitude to affirm ourselves in facing all our existential anxieties is despair. Under this circumstance, one may suggest that suicide is an option to relieve ourselves from the despair. However, although one might escape the anxiety of fate and death through killing oneself, one cannot escape the anxiety of guilt and condemnation in doing so. Through suicide, one is not affirming one’s ontic self-affirmation, instead, one is conducting ontic self-negation. The courage to suicide is nothing close to the courage to be, instead, it is the courage not to be. Even in Stoic philosophy, only those who have conquered life and affirmed themselves in both life and death deserve to choose freely between life and death. For those who choose suicide as ways to escape due to the overwhelming fear is contradictory to how Stoics define the courage to be. Clarifying this concept is helpful in explaining what courage to be really is and what possible ways to acquire it would be.

Tillich offers two alternatives in facing existential anxiety, either to turn itself into something that can be met by courage, or get dragged by the abyss of non-being and turn itself

⁹⁷ Tillich, 89

into despair. This situation is similar to the “fight or flight” reflexes. Either we use the courage to be to include anxiety, or we escape into neurosis by avoiding the extreme situation of despair. After all, “neurosis is the way of avoiding nonbeing by avoiding being.”⁹⁸ In building the “imaginary world”, one establishes the castle of defense to shield oneself from the threats of non-being, therefore limiting one’s self-affirmation to a fixed and narrow one.

In the modern context, as “twentieth-century man has lost a meaningful world and a self which lives in meanings out of a spiritual center”⁹⁹, men strive to face the threats of the anxiety of meaninglessness by taking despair into oneself as part of one’s courage to be. This is the alternative provided by Tillich in terms of confronting our existential anxiety. He believes that in the modern context, the anxiety of meaninglessness is the most salient one among the three types of existential anxiety. To face this, Tillich suggests that we need to take this threat of meaninglessness into our self-affirmation and to embrace it to be the creative force of our self-actualization. Even there is no way out of the desperate situation of facing the abyss of non-being, humans can still strive for saving as much humanity as we can by taking the courageous act of acknowledging the fact that there is indeed no exit. It is unwise for us to either retrieve to the shield of a collective community instead of confronting the existential anxiety or to be exposed to the naked anxiety all alone.

⁹⁸ Tillich, 66

⁹⁹ Tillich, 140

The Possibility of Self-transcendence

Courage and Creativity

In the section regarding the ontology of courage, Tillich has made the argument that “courage is the universal and essential affirmation of our being”¹⁰⁰, thus setting the stage for the argument that courage is being itself trying to affirm itself. Then, Tillich also says that “the ground of everything is not a dead identity without movement and becoming; it is living creativity. Creatively it is the pattern of the self-affirmation of every finite being and the source of the courage to be affirms itself, eternally conquering its own nonbeing.”¹⁰¹ Freedom enables us to courageously make the choice of actualizing our possibilities in a creative way. By creatively affirming itself continuously, we make our lives thrive. Courage is ontological because it is being itself trying to affirm itself. Then, being is creating because it constantly seeks out a way to create itself. Each moment it is constantly engaged in the process of self-creation. Hence, courage is creation too. Whenever we create meaning for ourselves or give ourselves something is deemed worthy to fight for, we are thriving as no other beings do. The creation of meanings is then beyond the survival or reproductive needs but in a new dimension of self-affirmation. Therefore, freedom, creativity, and courage are so interwoven together through the thread of anxiety. Anxiety is interdependent with freedom as anxiety is both the precondition and the accompaniment of freedom. This can be seen in the example of *Brand New World* where people without human freedom do not feel anxious at all. Then, anxiety is connecting freedom to creativity as the level of creativity is positively correlated with the level of anxiety. Last but not

¹⁰⁰ Tillich, 3

¹⁰¹ Tillich, 34

least, as courage is defined as the ontological and creative self-affirmation of being in spite of the threats of non-being, it is connected with both freedom and creativity in this way.

The relationship between courage and creativity is first brought up by Rollo May in his book *The Courage to Create*. May is one of Tillich's students and therefore he inherits many Tillich's thoughts regarding courage and anxiety but also expands on his own terms. May raises that in the current "age of limbo", which means an age of uncertainty that is swaying between the edge of the cliff and the abyss, it is important for people to embody our ontological courage and participate in the formation of a brand new future. Under the threats of climate change, nuclear weapon, and so many other existential crises that human beings are facing nowadays, May wants to call upon the courage to "preserve our sensitivity, awareness, and responsibility in the face of radical change"¹⁰². To creatively participate in the future is to take a leap into the unknown, and taking this leap definitely requires courage.

Not only in the aspect of social participation, but the courage to create is also revealing itself more in the artistic domain. In the previous section of anxiety, freedom, and creativity, we have made the argument that each time a certain possibility is actualized, the possibility of actualizing other possibilities is abandoned. The process of moving forward in the pool of possibilities thus also generates a feeling of guilt. On the one hand, we have no idea what we are becoming and what we are creating by engaging in a certain series of possibilities. The possibility of our result might not turn into the best result we can have or become makes us anxious. On the other hand, May also points out that creativity is the human's battle towards the non-being. He articulates this idea beautifully, saying that "creativity is a yearning for

¹⁰² May, 12

immortality”¹⁰³. As human beings with a certain level of self-awareness, we know that we are going to die and we know that we must have the courage to face death. Hence, creativity is born out of this battle against our finitude. As we are well-aware of our death, we are always striving for creating something that can outlive our limited life. May says that “creativity is not merely the innocent spontaneity of our youth and childhood; it must also be married to the passion of the adult human being, which is a passion to live beyond our death.”¹⁰⁴ Therefore, courage and creativity are always interdependent of one another. Creativity needs the courage to actualize the possibilities, and courage needs creativity to help with its self-affirmation that confronts the threats of non-being. Together, courage and creativity fight the battle for human eternity. The examples can be found across any culture, artistic genre, and any creative activities in general.

Artists produce artwork that they wish can be remembered and last forever; writers write books that can become part of themselves that live even after they die; musicians produce music can outlive their own short lives... all creative human beings are engaged in activities that can pass on parts of themselves, which can possibly outlive their short lives. In the movie *Coco*, the character mentions that in Mexican culture there are three levels of death. The first one is when someone is biologically dead; the second one is when one is being erased from the social world by ceremonies like funerals, and the third one is when someone is being entirely forgotten. This might be one explanation of why humans build things to remember the people who were gone such as tombs and monuments.

As creativity is a battle against our non-being, it is then understandable why people strive so hard for not being forgotten and trying to leave something behind. Whether it is a choice of

¹⁰³ May, 31

¹⁰⁴ May, 31

leaving one's genetic inheritance through offspring, or leaving ideas and thoughts through writings or leaving a work of art to the world, human beings are in general wanting to leave a mark that almost says "I have been here and I have created something". Hence, human creativity is a doorway to open something that can outlive us, or can live beyond one's death.

Among all kinds of creative human activities, May places the highest value on the work done by the artists, calling them the rebels and the "bearers of the human being's age-old capacity to be insurgent."¹⁰⁵ According to May, in order to fight the battle against death, one needs a great amount of courage and the highest intensity of emotions, and he calls this intense emotion "rage". I felt connected to this kind of rage when I lost my grandfather at the age of five. For a child like me back then, I not only felt sadness but also felt anger, immense anger of realizing the fact that something took my grandfather away. I also felt betrayed because it never occurred to me that my grandfather who loved me dearly would leave me behind. It was a mixed feeling of both sadness and anger. Later when I grew older, the feeling of helplessness then started to kick in when I reflected back on his death. This feeling of rage against non-being, or death, is particularly valuable when it comes to explaining how we courageously embrace non-being through creativity. In Dylan Thomas's poem, he creatively projects his rage towards the death of his father into his poem:

*Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light...*

Then, he ends the poem with:

*And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night,*

¹⁰⁵ May, 32

*Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*¹⁰⁶

When I saw this poem for the first time, I wrote it down on my notebook and could not sleep until I read these lines again and again and again. It echoed with the child in me who was subjectively taking in the experience of encountering this death of intimate others. May suggests that this is not a rational experience but a rather subjective and personal experience of realizing that the death is closer than ever but embracing the rage to confront it. This is the source of our courage that affirms our being in spite of the threats of non-being. This rage also leads us towards rebellion as we are not satisfied with what the non-being has dawned upon us. This rebellion is the creative courage that enables us to participate in the formation of a new world structure. May puts it beautifully and says that “there is a profound joy in the realization that we are helping to form the structure of the new world..this is creative courage, however minor or fortuitous our creations may be.”¹⁰⁷Hence, instead of seeing anger as a negative emotion that we always need to keep it in check, May provides a new perspective of seeing this anger as helping with human creativity. Anger, or rage, usually happens when we think we can do something to confront a seemingly desperate situation. This is our attitude of confronting the death that we will not let it be the end of everything and that we can and will do something active instead of being helpless and waiting passively. The creative rage is the force that enables us to transform the anger into something constructive, which helps us rise above the threats of non-being. In the opposite side, the uncreative rage might be the force that drags us down into the passive despair.

Connecting back to the section that discusses the difference between fear and anxiety, we can see how Tillich points out that the reason why courage can meet fear is that fear is directed

¹⁰⁶ May, 32-33

¹⁰⁷ May, 35

towards a definite object and courage can thus meeting it by making plans and taking actions step by step. However, in confronting death and fate, one often feels anxious and helpless because it seems to be an unavoidable and uncontrollable end with no way out. Hence, under this kind of circumstance, courage, as an ontological concept in human nature, has to be brought to the surface to engage in the self-affirmation “in spite of” the threats imposed by the non-being. It is originated from our rage towards death that in believing that we still have something to do and we are not going to give up and passively wait for death. It is the deep drive of our drive to create and to authentically exist. We will not gently go into the good night, and we will do whatever we can to transcend that human finitude courageously.

Indeed, the courage to do something can take on many different forms in our real life. Someone might say that one can be courageously choosing to give up on life and escape from the existential anxiety by whatever method of distraction that is available out there. However, I would argue that the courage to be is the courage to actively participate in creative activities and deeply accept the world as it is. The courage to avoid confronting our existential anxieties will then be an act of fake courage to be. The question then, is how is this courage to be, or the courage to create, as May would put it, can actually alleviate our existential anxiety but also transcend above ourselves? In the next section, I am going to introduce Buddhists’ thoughts to complete this quest of existential anxiety and the courage to be as it will provide a fresh perspective to the discussion.

Courage and Transcendence

One thing that I notice in the thought patterns of the four Western existentialists mentioned in this thesis is that all of them tend to perceive human beings from a self-centered perspective. Starting from Kierkegaard, who wants to engrave “the individual” in his tombstone, the tone is set to put the individual in the very upfront. He believes that the existential anxiety rises when one’s self-awareness starts to expand as Adam does in the Bible story. As for Sartre, he suggests that anxiety comes from the awareness of individual possibilities and the question of “what am I going to do?”. In this situation, “I” is always in the frontline of confronting the existential anxiety. “I” have to be courageous; “I” have to find a way to affirm oneself; “I” have to be the one who is responsible; “I” have to creatively actualize my possibilities and so on. This emphasis on the self is persistent throughout my readings of these existentialists. On the one hand, it is definitely essential for one to really immerse in this reflective dialogue with oneself in order to even pull oneself out from all the distractions in the modern world and engage in this deep dive of human nature. On the other hand, the clinginess of selfness might not be the best way to get along with our existential anxiety. Loy points out that by clinging onto the dualistic view of the world, the answer to the question of how to deal with death is always going to end in two polarized solutions, which are “[either] devaluing this world by trying to end rebirth into it, or attempting to make the best of our lives within it as it is (or as it seems to be).”¹⁰⁸ Essentially, what Buddhism tries to warn us about are the seemingly definitive solutions provided by the Western tradition, which are eternalism and annihilation. “Eternalism is the view that the self

¹⁰⁸ Loy, 39

survives death. Annihilationism is the opposite view, that the self is destroyed at death.”¹⁰⁹ We can find traces of eternalism in religious texts that believe the “selves”, or the “spirits” of human beings will go somewhere after death accordingly. As for annihilation, one can either fall into the total nihilism by accepting this view or trying to make the best out of one’s lives since the person believes that everyone only lives once. The trendy slogan “you only live once”, or more famously known as “YOLO”, derives out of this worldview. While admittedly every kind of worldview has its own truth in it, Buddhism offers “a third possibility: we can “wake up” by realizing something usually unnoticed about the nature of this world, right here and now, and integrate that realization into our daily lives.”¹¹⁰ This “waking up”, or what Buddhists would call as “the enlightenment”, is to realize that there might not have to be a separate relationship between oneself and the world that one is “in”.

In taking a closer look at the two polarized solutions to our anxiety of death and fate, we can see that it is always “I” versus the “world”, and the self either is going to be destroyed or not destroyed when the biological death happens. However, the third possibility provided by the Buddhists points out that we can actually have “a transformative realization that the world as we usually experience it (including the way that I usually experience myself) is neither real nor unreal but a psychological and social construction that can be deconstructed and reconstructed, which is what happens when one follows the Buddhist path.”¹¹¹ This view then leaves the self-centered worldview behind and enters into a different dimension of seeing everything, including the originally separate relationship between the world and the “I”. It then takes the whole reality into the active construction that we are continuously engaged in. When we think

¹⁰⁹ Loy, 39

¹¹⁰ Loy, 39

¹¹¹ Loy, 40

we are perceiving things in the external world, we are actually at least partially constructing what we are perceiving. This theory is also backed up by a Western philosopher Immanuel Kant by saying that “the mind does not simply receive sense-impressions from the outside; using its own innate categories—which include time, space, and causality—it organizes those sense-impressions into the world we are familiar with”¹¹². Because this happens preconsciously, we usually take the result for granted, as “just the way things are.”¹¹³ Taking a step further when this theory applies to the perception of oneself, it is important to see that both the notion of “oneself” and the notion of the “external world” can be a construction derived from our mind. In adopting this perspective, we are enabled to realize the possibility that we do not have to hold onto our “selves” so tightly that makes us separate from the world. Religions tend to engage in the active discussions about the afterlife, and that usually falls into the polarized solution of externalism. However, what Buddhists would call upon is a deeper focus on the present moment, and to “experiencing here-and-now in a different way: dwelling in what is sometimes called an *eternal present*.”¹¹⁴

So, what does this realization do to us and why is it important to be discussed about? Loy presents an Eastern-tradition-based worldview from Buddhism in his *A New Buddhist Path*, stating that we are not the lonely individuals trying to grasp onto something groundable, while in this universe nothing is groundable as everything changes from moment to moment, but we are so interconnected with each other and with the universe that the universe actualizes itself through us. This view is based on the precondition that human beings are not self-existent. As our arguments above have stated, there is no substantial self as most Western thinkers would believe.

¹¹² Loy, 40

¹¹³ Loy, 40

¹¹⁴ Loy, 57

In the dualistic view, everything is separated between “I” and the others, and it is always a battle between the inside and the outside world. This separate view of oneself might be because of many human issues in modern society. As we put ourselves, which means our needs and wants, in the center of our actions, we are allowing ourselves to do more damage to other species that we do not identify with. Even within the human species, we also differentiate ourselves with others through factors like skin color, gender, sexuality and so on. The conflicts caused by the self-centered perspective are revealing themselves across the globe. Hence, what Loy proposes that for Buddhists, “what is important.. is that one transcends the usual dualism between an alienated and anxious sense of self that is separate from but trapped within an external, objectified world.”¹¹⁵ When we are stuck in a dualistic view that separates us from the rest of the universe, it is natural for us to feel lonely and self-centered.

Then, how does this worldview contribute to our understanding of courage and existential anxiety? In the chapter of *Creatures that Create*, Loy states that when we let go of our ego-centered perspective and dualistic view of the world, we achieve the state of mind that can be synchronized with the pulse of the universe. On the one hand, we are creatures that are no different than others in this world as we are no more than an experiment of the biosphere. However, on the other hand, we are also the ways in which the universe actualizes itself. This view might be hard to accept when dwelling in a dualistic worldview, however, when we put down our ego-centered perspective, we can realize how deeply everything in this universe is interconnected. The universe itself does not mean anything by itself, however, even though we human beings know that it is meaningless by its nature, we still courageously create meanings

¹¹⁵ Loy, 60

for the universe. Hence, in joining the non-dualistic view, we open up another realm of possibilities as we are becoming one with the universe. As Loy states, “if biological and cultural evolution is different aspects of the same creative process, humans are better understood as the means whereby the whole cosmos creates, for we are not self-sufficient causes.”¹¹⁶ Hence, in one’s true awakening, one comes to realize that there is no fixed external “self-nature” that one needs to be awakened into. That would be dualistic. Instead, one is awakening to what one already is. “Just simply realizing what you have always been... your nature —your no-self-nature, right here and now, — is no different from the no-self nature of the cosmic process.”¹¹⁷

This view then extends to the discussion of human creativity. Usually, we consider human beings are creating things on our own. It is always that “I” have to create something external and “I” have to do something creative. However, by adopting the non-dualistic view of Buddhism and the no-self nature of human beings, we can come to another understanding that the universe is actualizing itself through us or through our creative activities. However, this incessant creative process of the universe can never be understood from an external perspective. It has to be understood by us because we are this process. The fact that we can *know* this process proves that we *are* it.¹¹⁸ The musicians compose music, the painters paint on the canvas, the scientists invent things, and I am writing this thesis. All the creative processes of human beings shine through the cosmic creative process. As Brian Swimme beautifully puts it, “the universe shivers with wonder in the depth of the human.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Loy, 96

¹¹⁷ Loy, 89

¹¹⁸ Loy, 90

¹¹⁹ Loy, 90

Many great creators have similar experiences with the source of their inspirations. A famous Taiwanese singer and songwriter who has written hundreds of songs said that he was always chased by inspirations even in his dreams; Stravinsky said that “I heard, and I wrote what I heard. I am the vessel through which *The Rite of Spring* passed.”¹²⁰ Taking off the human ego that believes our creation comes entirely from oneself, we are looking at the possibility that the source of human creativity is originated from something much deeper and profounder than our usual sense of the self.¹²¹

Among all kinds of creations that human beings developed, one thing that we are always trying to create for the whole species to survive is meaning. Objectively speaking, the universe is essentially meaningless by itself. It does not generate meanings for human beings by itself. The randomness of evolution incurs the orientation that directs us to the abyss of meaninglessness and the view that we are no better than the evolutionary accidents can easily bring us immense existential anxiety of meaninglessness and nothingness. However, this view derives from the dualistic view that the universe and us are separate. Indeed, the universe does not mean anything by itself. However, as we are the universe and we are meaning makers, the universe then becomes meaningful because of us. Loy summarizes the view and says that “to ask whether the universe itself is objectively meaningful or meaningless is to miss the point — as if the universe were outside us, or simply there without us. When we do not erase ourselves from the picture, we can see that we are meaning-makers, the beings by which the universe introduces a new scale of meaning and value.”¹²²

¹²⁰ Loy, 96

¹²¹ Loy, 97

¹²² Loy, 100

Even though this whole new perspective adapted from Buddhism can help with the anxious sense of individual self trying to grasp onto something groundable in the world, it still takes immense courage to let go of our ego-centered perspective and embrace this new pool of possibilities in our nature. Fortunately, as Tillich has argued, courage as an ontological concept is already there in human nature. Hence, I argue that we need to embrace our ontological courage to be and immerse ourselves in this universally creative affirmation of ourselves. As we are with the universe each and every moment, we have to courageously accept our possibilities to transcend above the threats imposed by the non-being. The courage to be then is the courage to deeply accept our inner drive to exist and create, as well as allowing oneself to do so. It is the courage of letting go of the ego-centered perspective and transcending into the creative affirmation of the universe. It is essentially “to Bravely let go on the edge of the cliff. Throw yourself into the abyss with decision and courage.”¹²³ As Tillich has pointed out that non-being and being are so intertwined with each other when we courageously affirm the non-being, we are also affirming our being. Then, by throwing ourselves into the abyss of non-being and realizing that we are the creative self-conscious reflection of the universe, we are transcending beyond our usual sense of human possibilities and entering into the possibilities of the cosmos.

Throughout the thesis, as we start by looking at the Western existentialists, we raise the existential question regarding the latent existential anxiety in our lives. As the Western existentialists have certain answers in their framework, the thesis then provides a fresh perspective that is combined with Buddhists’ thoughts to present that the courage to be is a deep acceptance to the threats of non-being and our creative possibilities as human beings. In

¹²³ Loy, 59

switching perspectives from seeing anxiety as a negative illness that needs to be avoided or shut away, to seeing anxiety as having certain positive implications such as enabling our quest for profounder human nature and self-reflection, we have then opened up the discussions about freedom and creativity. Then, by exploring the triangle relationship between anxiety, freedom, and creativity, we introduced the ontological concept of courage to see its connections with those three concepts. As courage to be has risen to be key access to us embracing our creative possibilities and confront the threats of non-being, we then shifted our perspective to Buddhism thinkers and stated that courage to be is essentially the courage to let go of our ego-centered perspective that sees us as lonely individuals who are anxious about what to do in our lives, and deeply accept us as the means of how the universe creatively actualizes itself. We, as the meaning makers of our lives, are also the meaning makers of the whole universe. In joining this grand view of seeing life, human beings, and the cosmos, the anxious feeling of self can be comforted. As Loy says, “To realize that the activity of your own mind is another expression of the cosmic creative process is to find yourself truly at home in the universe.”¹²⁴

Finally, the thesis calls upon the courage of modern people to care, to participate, to actively engage in the creative formation of our new society from moment to moment. The thesis wants to point out that in the face of many modern existential crises, we should not shut ourselves away from those possibilities to look deep into our existence. Instead, we need to confront the anxiety and courageously accept it and eventually rise above it. Indeed, the scientific discovery of modern time has shown us that life is meaningless as we exist due to the indifferent law of physics and genetic evolutions that are full of randomness. However, we need

¹²⁴ Loy, 90

to have the courage to affirm our meaningfulness and say that “we are beyond reductionism: life, agency, meaning, value, and even consciousness and morality almost certainly arose naturally, and the evolution of the biosphere, economy, and human nature are stunningly creative often in ways that cannot be foretold... In this partial lawlessness is not an abyss, but unparalleled freedom, unparalleled creativity.”¹²⁵ To appreciate the darkness of an abyss, to confront the fear of death, and to dive into the unparalleled opportunities and possibilities needs courage to be. This is the courage to create, to exist, to deeply accept the meaninglessness of the universe but rise above it by creatively affirming it through ourselves. There is beauty in anxiety, and there is always chance for us to extract the positivity from our existential anxiety. No more running away from the human possibilities, and let us courageously embrace our existential anxiety.

¹²⁵ Loy, 84

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