

Heidegger's *Angst* and apocalyptic anxiety

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Abstract

In this article I distinguish between the existential anxiety evoked by a confrontation with human finitude and what I call *Apocalyptic anxiety* signaling the end of human civilization itself. The end of civilization would terminate the historical process that gives meaning to individual existence. Apocalyptic anxiety announces the collapse of all meaningfulness, a possibility so horrifying that it commonly leads to evasion of its source.

For Heidegger (1927), existential anxiety (*Angst*) is phenomenologically very distinct from fear. Unlike fear, *Angst* is not about a dangerous entity. Instead it is about human existence as such, specifically its finitude. When one is anxious, everyday ways of fleeing from finitude have broken down, and one is confronted with the inevitability of death—nothingness—as inherent to existence. Existentially, we are “always already” dying, and the *Angst* that discloses death's inevitability takes the form of alienation from others and uncanniness—a sense of not being at home in the everyday world.

In a recent blog post (Stolorow, 2013) examining the motivations underlying the pervasive evasion of the catastrophic consequences of climate change, I included this personal vignette: “More than three decades ago I took my young son to a planetarium show at the New York Museum of Natural History. During that show it was predicted that a billion years from now the sun will become a “red giant” that will engulf and destroy our entire solar system. This prospect filled me with intense horror.”

Why would a catastrophe predicted to occur in a billion years evoke horror in me? It is tempting to regard the horror I felt as a form of existential anxiety. This could not be the case, however, since my individual existence would be long-gone by the time of the red giant. The sun's becoming an engulfing red giant represents not just the destruction of individual human beings but of human civilization itself; and the destruction of human civilization would also terminate the historical process—the sense of human history stretching along from the distant past to an open future—through which we make sense out of our individual existences (Scheffler, 2013). I want to call the horror that announces such a possibility *Apocalyptic anxiety*. Apocalyptic anxiety anticipates the collapse of all

meaningfulness. And it is from Apocalyptic anxiety that we turn away when we deny the extreme perils of climate change.

The meaningfulness of many of our current activities and involvements depends upon our being able to perceive them as contributing to human history. Developmental theorist Erik Erikson (1950) claimed famously that a central developmental task of adulthood is what he calls *generativity*—caring for the well-being of future generations. But the future destruction of human civilization and termination of the historical process eliminates the possibility of such generativity, thereby rendering much of our activity and involvements meaningless. The red giant is an ominous symbol of the impending disappearance of meaning and its replacement by pervasive apathy and *ennui*.

In recent times my psychoanalytic thinking has been focused significantly on the phenomenon of emotional trauma. Correspondingly, this focus has included reflection on the nature of therapeutic comportment. I have been moving toward an active, relationally engaged form of therapeutic comportment that I call *emotional dwelling* (Stolorow & Atwood, 2018). In dwelling, one does not merely seek to understand the other's emotional pain from the other's perspective. One does that, but much more. In dwelling, one leans into the other's emotional pain and participates in it, perhaps with aid of one's own analogous experiences of pain. I have found that this active, engaged, participatory comportment is especially important in the therapeutic approach to emotional trauma (Stolorow, 2007, 2011). The language that one uses to address another's experience of emotional trauma meets the trauma head-on, articulating the unbearable and the unendurable, saying the unsayable, unmitigated by any efforts to soothe, comfort, encourage, or reassure—such efforts invariably being experienced by the other as a shunning or turning away from his or her traumatized state.

Apocalyptic anxiety and the horror it entails are highly traumatic states that motivate evasion of their source. Hence the pervasive turning away from the terrifying dangers to humanity posed by climate change. Such turning away only perpetuates the dangers and shields them from ameliorative action. This is where the practice of emotional dwelling by all of us could be of great help. If we could embrace one another as “siblings in the same darkness” (Stolorow, 2007, p.47), our shared Apocalyptic anxiety could become more tolerable and less prone to evasion. Such bonds of sharing and the

diminution of evasion would revitalize and open up more space for generativity—for caring for future generations and for the planet that would be their home.

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