ECO-ANXIETY: AN EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

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LAY ABSTRACT

The key goal of this research project is to reinterpret eco-anxiety, a mood of uneasiness about our current ecological crisis, from an existential perspective that derives inspiration from accounts of anxiety by philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger. The contribution of this project is to provide a new way of understanding eco-anxiety. My conclusions depart from historical and contemporary understandings of existential anxiety in comparison to the practical anxiety posited by social science literature. A second contribution of this research is to explain why philosophers can and should assist in the work of helping people learn from eco-anxiety, as philosophers can provide the new ideas people need to interpret the current ecological situation and develop themselves toward a more meaningful life, something that is analogous to the historical idea of philosophy as a discipline that cultivates people.

ABSTRACT

The principal claim of this thesis is that anxiety when understood through the lens of philosophical existentialism is a mood of uneasiness that stems from the objectless possibilities, as opposed to real lived possibilities, entailed by the core conditions of our being. These can include anxiety over conditions such as freedom, mortality, identity, and so on. This anxiety has a self-cultivational aspect in that the reflection it motivates provides insight into the self. This self-cultivation of existential anxiety is key to how philosophers can assist those afflicted with the existential form of eco-anxiety, as opposed to the forms of coping offered by social science research that focus on a practical form of eco-anxiety. I show that previous accounts of eco-anxiety point towards a general understanding of existential eco-anxiety that gives a general basic description of what the phenomena is. My contribution is to give a definition of eco-anxiety that, while related to other forms of existential anxiety, accentuates its connection to past historical approaches to existential anxiety and highlights its foundation as a historically instigated phenomenon. While other definitions of eco-anxiety are not without value for understanding the non-pathological anxiety people often feel in the face of ecological crisis, my argument gives a general account that explains what constitutes existential eco-anxiety regardless of its specific manifestations and provides a framework for how philosophers can assist in self-cultivation. The insight gained from these findings is that philosophers can play a role in providing an ecologically friendly interpretation of different values and worldviews on which the anxious may draw to find new ways of living meaningfully in a rapidly changing world.

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Introduction: Why Eco-Anxiety?

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC, predicts that "approximately 3.3 to 3.6 billion people live in contexts that are highly vulnerable to climate change" (IPCC 14), also observing that there has been an increase in "adverse impacts" related to human-induced climate change (ibid., 11).[1] These adverse impacts include "increased heat-related human mortality," "reduced food and water security," with roughly "half of the world's population currently experience[ing] severe water scarcity for at least some part of the year due to climatic and non-climatic drivers" (ibid., 11). There have been increases in hot "extremes including heatwaves" which have "also aggravated air pollution events" (ibid., 13). These adverse impacts will continue to worsen in the near-term, between 2021-2040, as "increased frequency, severity and duration of extreme events will place many terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems at high or very high risks of biodiversity loss" (ibid., 15). One of these adverse impacts is on mental health, with some "mental health challenges" being "associated with increasing temperatures … trauma from weather and climate extreme events … and loss of livelihoods and culture" (ibid., 13). Even regions with notably less vulnerability to climate change, such as North America and Europe, have had increasing adverse mental health impacts (ibid., 12).

The primary focus of this project is the mounting mental health issues that are occurring because of human-induced climate change, particularly on the phenomenon known as eco-anxiety. This can be seen from the fact that the IPCC has noted that many major parts of the world, including North America, have had increasing adverse mental health impacts because of

[1] For an exhaustive and detailed list of these adverse impacts, please refer to David Wallace-Wells' *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming.*

climate change (ibid., 10). A recent systematic review of the research literature on this topic provides a rough description of what constitutes eco-anxiety, with the term being used for a "broad range of negative emotions related to climate change and environmental threats" (Coffey et al. 2). There is an overall characterization of eco-anxiety as being linked to general anxiety – as there is "a negative emotionality characterized by physical symptoms and future-oriented apprehension where eco-anxiety focuses on concerns for climate change" (ibid., 3). The study notes, however, that there are "inconsistencies in the use of the term eco-anxiety" (ibid., 3), and that there is an overall "lack of clarity about the concept of eco-anxiety. For instance, there is a range of terms that overlap or are closely related between anxiety, dread, grief, worry, fear and despair" (ibid., 4). Furthermore, there is also a wide range of negative physical and emotional behaviours associated with eco-anxiety in the current research literature, including:

> being physically sick and experiencing panic attacks, and adverse emotional reactions such as irritability, weakness, sleeplessness, sadness, depression, numbness, helplessness, hopelessness, guilt, frustration or anger, and feeling scared or uncertain. Being in a state of paralysis that manifests as apathy was also highlighted. (ibid., 3)

Fortunately, however, some positive effects were found to be linked to eco-anxiety, including "feelings of hope, empowerment, and connection, particularly when associated with collective action" (ibid., 3).

The findings of this review suggest some preliminary conclusions, namely that there is an escalating mental health situation related to human-induced climate change, and that one of the central phenomena, eco-anxiety, is currently seen as a rather amorphous concept that fits a wide range of possible definitions, conceptualizations, and symptoms. One conceptualization of eco-anxiety, provided by Panu Pihkala, aims to "integrate discussions of existential anxiety and eco-

anxiety" (Death 289). His work attempts to characterize eco-anxiety as related to an existential anxiety of death. This area of focus, namely the link between philosophical existential anxiety and eco-anxiety as interrelated phenomena, is the topic of this research project.

My aim is first to establish a concept of existential philosophical anxiety, by tracing its historical emergence in the work of earlier philosophers, particularly Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, followed by a detailed discussion of the social science literature reviewing the lived experience of eco-anxiety, and its practical view of eco-anxiety. My concluding chapter provides a general definition of existential eco-anxiety in juxtaposition to the practical form offered by the social science literature, with prescriptive conclusions as to how philosophers can help the anxious learn from their eco-anxiety through meaningful reflection.

Chapter One

The Concept of Philosophical Existential Anxiety

Section 1. Anxiety Before Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard is one of the most influential philosophers to discuss the concept of anxiety and is associated strongly with its popularization in philosophy. There are, however, two distinct historical narratives regarding Kierkegaard that detail the influences and inspirations that brought him to his understanding of anxiety. The first, offered by Bettina Bergo, follows Kierkegaard's explicitly philosophical influences, while an alternative historical interpretation offered by Paul Megna views Kierkegaard not as the *ex-nihilo* innovator of our concept of anxiety, but rather as "a modern practitioner of a deep-historical, dread-based ascetism" (1285).

Bettina Bergo views Kierkegaard's primary exploration of anxiety, or *angest* in Danish, as written in the "shadow" of his other works, including *Either/Or* ("Dialectics" 136). *Either/Or* was written over a "feverish three months (October 25, 1841, to February 2, 1842), while attending Schelling's lectures on *positive* philosophy, that is, of revelation" (ibid., 136). He eventually also wrote *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (1843), which was followed by *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* (1843), before finally writing *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) (ibid., 137). Bergo writes that this text "translates Schelling's categories and system into psychological and 'dogmatic' terms", and that Kierkegaard's pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis "seized

Schelling's universal longing, *Sehnsucht*, and set it into the psychological experience of the mythic Adam and Eve" (ibid., 138). What is apparent from Bergo's comments is that Kierkegaard, at least from a philosophical perspective, was importantly influenced by Schelling.

In contrast, however, Paul Megna argues that Kierkegaard inherited a Judeo-Christian "ascetic tradition built around the ethical goal of living better through dread", and that such ascetic practices were about individuals cultivating and analyzing "anxiety to achieve authenticity" (1286). He argues that the existence of "confession manuals, allegorical poems, dramas and polemics suggest that medieval England was home to a host of interacting, overlapping, and at times competing dread-based 'emotional communities'" (ibid., 1286), and that Kierkegaard "approaches Christianity with a mixture of dread and desire reminiscent of so many Middle English devotional texts" (ibid., 1295). These devotional texts were "designed to solicit a certain kind of dread" from the audience (ibid., 1286). The aim of these works, however, was not to simply elicit fear, but also to impart "to their audience an elaborate ascetic program for distinguishing between the bad and good fears, eschewing the former and espousing the latter" (ibid., 1286).

In Judeo-Christian theology, there is a mandate toward "dreadful asceticism" (ibid., 1287), as Megna cites numerous scriptural passages that not only demand fear of the Lord as "stark imperatives (Lev. 25.17; Deut. 10.12-20; Josh. 24.14)", but also points to passages that "align dread of God with spiritual ideals like obedience and wisdom (Prov. 1.7, 9.10; Ecclus. 1.16-20)" (1287). Medieval Christian thinkers "considered fear of the Lord one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit" (ibid., 1287), and even crafted taxonomies of dread that identified up to six different forms of it (ibid., 1288). For instance, John Wycliffe's taxonomy includes "worldly dread" of punishments for bad behavior, "manly dread" of punishments for speaking the truth,

"kindly dread" of punishments for loving God, "bondsman's dread" as fear of God's "ability to take all that he has given", and "beginning dread" as fear of God, "partly for his ability to punish and partly out of love" (ibid., 1288). All these forms of dread are seen as diminished forms of the perfect "child-like dread", which is "fear of God only out of reverent love" (ibid., 1288). The essential point is that "medieval devotees often considered chaste or childlike dread and love not mutually exclusive or contradictory emotions but two equally important components of an ideal emotional posture toward God" (ibid., 1288).

Megna provides other examples of this medieval tradition of dread, including Julian of Norwich, before linking this tradition to Kierkegaard (ibid., 1295). He writes that by "promoting educative anxiety and criticizing demonic and spiritless evasions of it, Kierkegaard's book on anxiety carries on a long ascetic tradition of casting dread as an essential engine for cultivating ethical behavior – better living through dread" (ibid., 1296). What is noteworthy is that the tradition of anxiety that is inherited from Kierkegaard is remarkably reminiscent of medieval traditions of religious dread. Such traditions viewed dread not as a harmful phenomenon but as an essential component of everyday life that deepened one's religious character. This *educative* and *cultivational* understanding of supposedly negative phenomena like anxiety or dread is a key component of Kierkegaard's understanding of anxiety which influences Heidegger's understanding as well. While the religious character of these views dissipates as anxiety is secularized by later thinkers like Heidegger, the core view that these phenomena are fundamentally cultivational and serve an edifying purpose is retained from these medieval religious traditions and proves foundational for application to eco-anxiety. Megna's narrative, as opposed to Bergo's, provides illuminating historical connections regarding the central concept of self-cultivation that will be more important later.

Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Writing

Before turning to a detailed summary of Kierkegaard's account of anxiety, I want to discuss the role of pseudonymity in Kierkegaard's works. It is well-known that Kierkegaard's philosophical works were published under pseudonyms and that these pseudonyms are critical to understanding Kierkegaard's method of indirect communication. By creating an aesthetic distance between himself and his works it becomes "the task of the reader to choose for oneself, to decide, to exist – which means to actualize the ideal, to convert these idealities into the currency of existence, to make the leap" (Caputo, "Kierkegaard" 73). Each pseudonym has a "psychology and individuality of his own" (ibid., 69), and the reader responds to that character and makes an existential decision about what to interpret from the works in question. This is important for approaching his works, as it makes the reader more than a disinterested observer of the text, obliging readers to become dynamic interlocutors who interact with the text and make personal decisions regarding its interpretation.

This pseudonymity is no different when it comes to *The Concept of Anxiety*, as it is written by Vigilius Haufniensis, which means "watchman of Copenhagen" (Kierkegaard 221). His account of anxiety uses the same approach of indirect communication and open interpretation. Unfortunately, however, some later readers did not always respect this aesthetic distance that Kierkegaard cultivated. For instance, John D. Caputo laments that "Kierkegaard's fame rests on the fact that his most famous readers, like Heidegger, simply ignored his wishes" and that readers should cite his pseudonyms, not him ("Kierkegaard" 69). He maintains that had these philosophers, including "Heidegger, Camus or Sartre", been asked about the nature of the pseudonymous authorship "they very likely would have replied that it was just a literary conceit" (ibid., 70). As a result, it seems that the original intention of the pseudonymous authorship,

namely, to cultivate indirect communication and personal hermeneutics in reading Kierkegaard's work, was often lost.

The reason this is notable is that I too attribute the arguments I discuss to Kierkegaard rather than the various pseudonymous authors, although I acknowledge such an approach misses a key quality of Kierkegaard's writings that invites the reader into an indirect communicative relationship with the text.

Section 2. Kierkegaard and Anxiety

Kierkegaard's account of anxiety is primarily founded upon the existential consequences of freedom, its relation to divinity, and an emotional understanding of anxiety as 'dizziness' (Kierkegaard 61). In conceptualizing anxiety, however, Kierkegaard also draws heavily on Hegelian terminology and concepts, including conceiving the individual as a "synthesis of the psychical and physical aspects of existence by spirit" (Magurshak 170). Every individual is a mixture of psychological and physical aspects that finds expression in the spirit, which to Kierkegaard represents the "capacity for free self-determination" (ibid., 170). *The Concept of Anxiety* also interprets anxiety in relation to the Biblical story of original sin, wherein Adam and Eve brought about hereditary sin, a state of unavoidable sin against God all humans inherit, because of their transgression through their consumption of the forbidden fruit that gives knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:1-24).

All these components are essential to understanding how Kierkegaard approaches anxiety, as anxiety is the result of our capacity for freedom, our spirit, which plays a pivotal role in our relationship with the divine. The state of anxiety is an inherited one not only by our structure as beings but also due to the conceptual understanding we have of the world, in this

case, of *prohibitions*. Like Adam and his transgression, we are capable of transgressing against prohibitions and thus are susceptible to the same anxiety as he experienced. With these elements provisionally introduced, we can explain Kierkegaard's account of philosophical anxiety.

For Kierkegaard, a human being is a "synthesis of the psychical and the physical; however, a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third. This third is spirit" (Kierkegaard 43). Spirit can be understood here as the "reflective interaction" (Bergo, "Dialectics" 141) between our psychological and physical characteristics that result in the aforementioned "capacity for free self-determination" (Magurshak 170). In other words, we all comprise certain psychological and physical characteristics such as desires, thoughts, opinions, views, physical and sexual needs, and so on. When this synthesis between the psychological and physical is reflected upon and understood, we arrive at a capacity for freedom and can *choose* how to exist. As Magurshak writes, to exist "is to be constantly in the process of realizing or failing to realize this task; and if a person succeeds, he is truly himself, that is, lucidly aware of all aspects of his mental-physical-spiritual existence, and living as the free, responsible self-disclosure of all that he is" (170). We are beings who choose our existence, choose even our choices, and take up existing as a task. Our freedom, when translated into choice, becomes an expression of ourselves. This of course seems to presuppose the notion that humans possess free will, something that would involve an entirely different philosophical debate that cannot be pursued here. We can, however, agree with such an analysis along an experiential line which "contains at least in schematic form a phenomenological description of many essential aspects of existence" (ibid., 171).

It is this capacity for self-determination and free expression, however, that introduces anxiety. Kierkegaard states that "anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the

spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself" (61). The "spirit projects its own actuality, but this actuality is nothing, and innocence always sees this nothing outside itself" (ibid., 41). In essence, then, anxiety is the result of the capacity for free self-determination, to be able to choose oneself. But since this capacity points only to possibilities, it is not an actuality. When one is anxious, it is an objectless anxiety about nothing, as nothing is "understood as the nonactual, the possible whose actualization lies in the future" (Magurshak 173). Magurshak concludes that anxiety "in its essential moments, is the fundamental mode of affective self-awareness in which a person discovers the possibility of his free self-determination and its existential possibilities" (ibid., 173). Anxiety is a personal phenomenon of discomfort that arises out of the possibilities that are presented to oneself because of one's capacity for self-determination. We can choose, and this ability in and of itself introduces anxiety.

This anxiety is *not*, however, simply the consequence of morality. Anxiety does not arise from the notion that there are right or wrong choices, or the possibility of sin as understood by Christian thinkers. The "object of anxiety is a nothing" (Kierkegaard 77), and "freedom does not presuppose itself, yet it cannot have an origin. Sin presents the perplexity of being that into which one leaps or falls, but freely so" (Bergo, "Dialectics" 142). As Bergo writes, anxious "freedom and sensuous guilt are *virtual* because, as lived transitional states, they carry within themselves the evolution of consciousness toward freedom – albeit a freedom increasingly burdened by understanding and responsibility" (ibid., 150). For instance, how can sin enter the world if, presented with the choice to sin, Adam did not recognize the possibility of immorality? Is not the concept of sin necessary to recognize sin initially? He was ordered not to partake of the fruit, but without knowledge of good and evil, he could not understand *what* made the action

evil. As Kierkegaard asks, “Adam has not really understood this word, for how could he understand the difference between good and evil when this distinction would follow as a consequence of the fruit” (44)? Sin, then, and right or wrong should not be understood as instigating anxiety, but rather as arising in tandem with it. Adam and Eve “become who they are as sinners by ‘realizing’ sinfulness, which was ‘there’ all along as their fundamental possibility” (Bergo, “Dialectics” 143). Anxiety can be intensified by the possibilities of good and evil, but good and evil are possibilities of the freedom that anxiety represents, and thus our freedom to self-actualize is the fundamental grounding of anxiety and sin.

Another critical point that follows from the insight that anxiety arises in tandem with morality is that anxiety serves an educational purpose from Kierkegaard’s perspective. Magurshak states that “anxiety saves through faith by educating through possibility”, and as a result “makes possible an emergence in complete self-realization” (177). Kierkegaard states that anxiety is “an adventure that every human being must go through – to learn to be anxious in order that he may not perish either by never having been in anxiety or by succumbing in anxiety” (155). Thus, anxiety has either a favorable outcome in educating those who suffer from it, or they may lapse into a form of despair, as “whoever is educated by possibility is exposed to danger, not that of getting into bad company and going astray in various ways as are those educated by the finite, but the danger of a fall, namely, suicide” (ibid., 159). We can interpret this statement as poetic or figurative, however, and view such a fall not as suicide, but rather as anxiety possibly causing a form of self-destruction, such as a person becoming burdened with anxiety to such a degree that they are unable to properly care for themselves and their responsibilities.

But in contrast to such a fate anxiety may stimulate education and faith, as anxiety "enters into [one's] soul and searches out everything and anxiously torments everything finite and petty out of him, and then it leads him where he wants to go" (Kierkegaard 159). Magurshak states that Kierkegaard "is suggesting that when a person confronts his possibilities, especially those that pertain to his mortality and vulnerability, he separates finite, petty possibilities from those that are truly his own" (174). That is, "possibility is absolutely educative" when it is fully confronted, as the anxiety of possibility can eliminate trivial and petty pursuits that are not fully fulfilling to an individual. Instead, anxiety is meant to help an individual become "liberated through faith" (ibid., 173), for "in order that an individual may thus be educated absolutely and infinitely by the possibility, he must be honest toward possibility and have faith", with faith being "the inner certainty that anticipates infinity" (Kierkegaard 157). Anxiety is understood as helping one move beyond the trivial finite concerns of everyday life towards more important religious matters such as the infinite, in this case, the Judeo-Christian God. Anxiety, then, is educative in that it brings one closer to divinity, since "the right way to be anxious is as a preamble to a leap of faith into the Christian belief that God is love" (Megna 1296). Anxiety turns one towards matters of deeper existential concern, which for Kierkegaard as a religious writer meant a fundamental belief and faith in God.

But our response to anxiety can also be unproductive and evasive. For Kierkegaard, there is demonic anxiety, that is, "anxiety about the good. It perceives the good as threatening" (Magurshak 182). The good, accordingly, "signifies the restoration of freedom, redemption, salvation, or whatever one would call it" (Kierkegaard 119). Instead of embracing the good that freedom offers, one who has demonic anxiety instead "flees from the responsibility of self-determination and anxiously suppresses it one way or another. He thereby chooses an unfree way

of life characterized by anxiety about the good", which in this case is freedom (Magurshak 182). One suffers demonic anxiety when one is "evading and repressing one's capacity for complete self-realization" (ibid., 182), as it is "unfreedom that wants to close itself off" (Kierkegaard 123). This means that there is an approach to anxiety that is unproductive and harmful, as the individual who suffers from demonic anxiety attempts to evade the educational power of anxiety that helps one to fully realize themselves. Demonic anxiety acts as a barrier to the full realization of one's choices, as one is essentially paralyzed in such a way that one does not want to participate in the full range of freedom that one's existence entails. It is anxiety about the possible goodness that is offered by freedom, and instead, those afflicted by it make passive, "self-evasive and repressive" choices that lack "existential integrity and continuity" (Magurshak 183). Demonic anxiety is "*the contentless, the boring*" (Kierkegaard 132), because it results in no *real* or fulfilling decision regarding one's existence. Instead, one reverts to a passive, thoughtless, drifting form of life, acting in opposition to the good presented by freedom.

The final aspect to highlight regarding Kierkegaard's conception of anxiety is its temporality, since, as Kierkegaard says, "freedom, the possible is the future, and the future is for time the possible" (91). Kierkegaard understands humans not only to be a synthesis of psychical and physical characteristics but also of "*the temporal and the eternal*" (85). For Kierkegaard, "self-determinative existence" is what "gives existence the endurance of commitment rather than mere persistence in time" (Magurshak 179). We exist as temporal beings because we make choices and commitments that persist through time, beyond the moments of day-to-day life, as a "person is genuinely temporal when he lives toward the future, and in doing so, he achieves existential integrity" (ibid., 180). Since possibilities exist as a possible future, those who suffer anxiety are facing the possibilities of their own being. For in anxiety "a person realizes, often

prereflectively and predeliberatively, that he has potential, that he has a future to be freely determined" (Magurshak 179). Thus, "the possible corresponds exactly to the future" (Kierkegaard 91), and as a result, we are beings with possibilities that are interwoven with the future on a fundamental level. When I feel anxiety about a decision to *be* made, it concerns not a decision that has happened yet but rather one that lies in the future, fundamentally casting me into my future. This is the temporal aspect of Kierkegaard's account of anxiety.

In conclusion we can summarize Kierkegaard's conception of anxiety as a disorientating phenomenon of dizziness in relation to the freedom encountered in view of one's own future. Reflection on this anxiety will result in either a despairing attitude that flees from the anxiety or in what Kierkegaard considers to be a proper orientation towards the divine. This anxiety is not a matter of good and evil choices, however, but of the very possibilities inherent in everyday existence. Kierkegaardian anxiety is not simply fretting over matters of right and wrong but rather is a result of our existence being intertwined with the very idea of freedom. We are free to make many different choices and are constantly inundated with the possibilities for self-determination. The anxiety Kierkegaard thematizes is fundamentally about choosing to be, about *whom* we choose to be, which may lead one to despair about the prospect of such a mission or to find some mode of existence that is authentic and fulfilling.

Section 3. Heidegger and Anxiety

It is well established that Martin Heidegger took inspiration from Kierkegaard's approach to anxiety and even that the relationship between the two "hardly needs further investigation", as the "existential analysis of *Being and Time* owes much to Kierkegaard" and Heidegger, "in the three by now famous footnotes that he accords the Danish thinker in that work, generously

acknowledges the debt" (Magurshak 167). Magurshak and Caputo, however, have argued that such a debt is considerably larger than Heidegger acknowledged. Regardless, Heidegger can be seen as a successor to Kierkegaard who, under his influence, provided a new and different account of anxiety. Heidegger's account shifts entirely away from religion, offering a secularized and ontological account of anxiety that revolves around *Being* as opposed to God. To understand Heidegger's account of anxiety the concept of Dasein will have to be explained, after which I turn to his understanding of anxiety, authenticity, and everydayness.

Dasein, according to Heidegger, can be understood as the interpretative perspective that humans possess due to their self-consciousness. We are the only species that reflects on our own existence, or as Heidegger puts it, the "*essence* [*"Wesen"*] *of Dasein lies in its existence* [*Existenz*]" (*Being and Time* 41). We are beings that have "possible ways for it to be, and only this", which is the essence of our existence in that we are fundamentally possibilities (ibid., 41). This means that Dasein is a classification of what it means to be human in terms of the essential fact that we are beings of possibility. He says that Dasein "is a being that does not simply occur among other beings. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its being this being is concerned *about* its very being" (ibid., 11). Caputo explains that Dasein is not simply a material presence but specifically a "having-to-be-the-there", and that Dasein's being "is *in each case mine*, the being that I am uniquely called to be" (*Hermeneutics* 45). This means that Dasein is about being present in a self-aware perspective, a unique and individual presence that is particular to the being that inhabits that perspective. As Caputo states, "no one else can do my *existing* for me" (ibid., 45). Caputo understands Heidegger's Dasein as a conceptual expression of what it means to be a human:

> [Dasein's] Being is a possibility for Being – whether that means the possibility of becoming a Christian, an artist, a teacher, a social worker, or whatever possibility is held out before our freedom. These particular possibilities Heidegger called 'existentiell' inflections of the general or fundamental 'existential' structure of our Being. (ibid., 47)

As a result, we can see that Dasein is the label that Heidegger gives to the unique perspective inhabited by humans as self-reflective beings of possibility.

Anxiety arises when Dasein becomes consciously and emotionally aware of the nothingness of future possibility, which makes anxiety "anxiety in the face of … [sic.], but not in the face of this or that thing" (Heidegger, "Metaphysics" 102). Heidegger distinguishes anxiety as being "basically different from fear", as fear is the result of one becoming "afraid in the face of this or that particular being that threatens us in this or that particular respect" (ibid., 102). Heidegger further illuminates this through the concept of attunement which he explains as "ontically what is most familiar and an everyday kind of thing: mood, being in a mood" (*Being and Time* 130). He distinguishes between fear as a mood directed towards "something encountered within the world" (ibid., 136), as opposed to the mood of anxiety, which "does not have the character of a definite harmfulness which concerns what is threatened with a definite regard to a particular factical potentiality for being" (ibid., 180).

Like Kierkegaard, Heidegger thinks that there is no object to such anxiety; instead, the "indeterminateness of that in the face of which and for which we become anxious is no mere lack of determination but rather the essential impossibility of determining it" ("Metaphysics", 103). This means that anxiety arises because we are unable to fully grasp the nothingness of future possibilities and determine it. But what is this *nothing*? In Heidegger's lecture *What is Metaphysics?* he appears to argue that this "nothing" is a nonbeing that cannot be grasped but is

nonetheless posited together in any understanding of *something* as existing, since, as Heidegger explains, "existence in its essence relates itself to beings – those which it is not and that which it is – it emerges as such existence in each from the nothing already revealed" (ibid., 105). In *Being and Time* he says that "the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself involved in anxiety initially finds expression: the nothing and nowhere" (182). In other words, the nothing serves as a condition on the possibility of understanding existence itself, as only by positing the nothing can one understand the positing of something, that is, of a being, any being.

This argument may seem odd. It seems absurd to suppose that the average person would be anxious over the philosophical concept of nonbeing, which seems too detached from ordinary existence to be of concern. That seems different from Kierkegaard's notion of anxiety, which concerns the nothing of freedom and the possibilities inherent in it. But we can see similarities as Heidegger states that anxiety "reveals in Dasein its *being toward* its ownmost potentiality of being, that is, *being free for* the freedom of choosing and grasping itself" (ibid., 182). Dasein is thus "anxious in the face of its thrown being-in-the-world and, as Kierkegaard said, about its potentiality for being" (Magurshak 174). Essentially, Dasein, the being we ourselves are, is anxious due to the potential choices we can make while being-in-the-world, that is, existing, which aligns with Kierkegaard's account.

There is, however, another possibility that individuals deal with, namely the nothing of death. Heidegger notes that the end of being-in-the-world is death. "This end, belonging to the potentiality-of-being, that is, to existence, limits and defines the possible totality of Dasein" (*Being and Time* 244). This is where the ontological notion of nonbeing becomes connected with concrete ordinary existence. When a person "experiences himself as a thrown potentiality-for-being, he finds himself not only as possibly self-determinative, but also as possibly and

inevitably *dead*, that is, mortal" (Magurshak 175). Thus, the nothing that Dasein is anxious about is both the possibility of freedom and the possibility of death, which can be interpreted as the ontological nothing. This anxiety "affectively discloses death as a person's most proper, individualizing, unsurpassable, certain, and yet temporally indefinite possibility" (ibid., 175). Death and the freedom of existence are things we cannot escape from. Heidegger states that "death is always my own" (*Being and Time* 404), and thus the "existing individual stands alone before death ('being-unto-death'), before the black depths of no-more-being-there" (Caputo, *Hermeneutics* 51). If it is impossible to have someone else do our existing for us, then no "*one can take the other's dying away from him*" (*Being and Time* 231). Death is the final certain possibility of our being, one that is unavoidable as the negation of our being ultimately leads to the ontological nothing. But the event of death itself, *is* a possibility, not a mere necessity, as it is different from any other death due to it being one's own death. Thus, we can see Heidegger's account not as a movement away from Kierkegaard's but rather as a conceptual addition and even secularization that adds to his anxiety of freedom an additional possibility of anxiety toward death, as he argues that being-toward-death "is essentially anxiety" (ibid., 254).

Another key similarity is that Heidegger's account also includes a temporalizing and self-cultivational element. Heidegger states in *Being and Time* that the "existential analytic of Dasein […] begins with the 'concretion' of factically thrown existence in order to reveal temporality as what makes such existence primordially possible" (413). This means that temporality is a *necessary* component of Dasein's existence. Caputo illuminates this further by stating that:

> Dasein understands its being temporally, not merely as a being in time, but as a being whose Being it is to temporalize (towards the future, from out of the past, in the

> moment). If we could treat the noun 'time' as a verb, we could say that Dasein understands its being as time-ing, temporalizing (Zeitigung). (*Hermeneutics* 52)

Thus, our Dasein is a being that is temporal in the sense that its existence is fundamentally interwoven with and understood through time. As Caputo states, "I project upon the possibilities that I have inherited; the range of the future is fixed within parameters set by the past" (ibid., 52). Dasein is also a being that "has understood itself and will understand itself in terms of possibilities" (*Being and Time* 141). Yet temporality has "revealed itself" as the ground "of factical Dasein with regard to its possibilities of authentic and inauthentic existing" (ibid., 413). Dasein exists as a being with a past that determines the possibilities of the future, but these possibilities remain open to our choices and we can in essence project ourselves into the future, which as previously noted with Kierkegaard leads to anxiety.

Authenticity and everydayness *may* be considered the self-cultivational element in Heidegger's account, despite his statement to the contrary. Authenticity is understood in relation to the everydayness of Dasein, which as Caputo writes,

> exerts a kind of suction on Dasein which draws it in, and Dasein tends to 'fall' into this world, lured by the ease of accepting the 'public interpretation' of itself. That is the interpretation of the world contained in what 'they' say and think and do, where everything is immediately understood, a matter of common obvious sense, and nothing needs to be questioned. Dasein in its average everydayness is no self in particular, no one self. The they-self is not my own self; indeed, at bottom, it is no self at all, a condition Heidegger calls 'inauthenticity'; a word that in German literally means not-my-own-ness (Uneigentlichkeit). (Hermeneutics 47)

Heidegger's so-called inauthentic everydayness is the public interpretation of one's existence. It involves no deep questioning, existential anxiety, or rumination on one's possibilities. He states that this "being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of being of 'the others' in such a way that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, disappear more and more" (*Being and Time* 123). Thus, an inauthentic existence is one that busies itself with the mundane activities of everyday existence. It is an existence that is submerged in the everyday interpretation of life given by the world and society around it. When one is too busy with employment, social life, and leisure activities to reflect on the deepest layer of one's own possibilities, when the very nature of the possibilities of one's being, both freedom and death, are hidden from one behind the wall of the ordinary day: that is when one is inauthentic. This is how averageness is maintained, as "the they maintains itself factically on the averageness of what belongs to it, what it does and does not consider valid, and what it grants or denies success" (ibid., 123).

To be authentic, then, is to recognize one's ownmost possibilities of being. Caputo lists two criteria found in Heidegger for determining an authentic self-interpretation, namely that one must bring "Dasein into view" by not confining oneself in the "day-to-day being-in-the-world" but rather by embracing "the whole of life, from birth to *death*", thereby, temporalizing oneself and recognizing the fundamental temporal character of being a being that is structured by the past and projected into the future (*Hermeneutics* 50). The second criterion is that Dasein

> must come back from its falling fascination with the world to its authentic self. To take Dasein as a whole is to see that, over and beyond its day-to-day possibilities, what ultimately lies ahead for Dasein, its uttermost potentiality-for-being, is death. Hovering in

> the background, like a spectre, the ultimate being-possible of Dasein is the possibility of no more possibility, no-more-being-there, the possibility of impossibility. (ibid., 50-51)

By confronting the prospect of death, Caputo says, "the scales of everydayness drop from our eyes, the authentic being of Dasein is disclosed and Dasein resolves upon its ownmost proper way to be" (ibid., 51). We see then that one becomes authentic by recognizing and incorporating the past and future into one's interpretation of one's life and then confronting the absolute certainty of future nothingness. Death, as the haunting ontological nothing, results in anxiety, but this anxiety is in turn cultivational in that it allows one to make *personally* fulfilling and meaningful decisions regarding one's own life. By recognizing the possibilities inherent to personal freedom, including the ultimate possibility of death, one transcends the everyday interpretation of existence and can come to one's own personal understanding of one's existence. Heidegger states that the "self of everyday Dasein is the *they-self*, which we distinguish from the *authentic self*, that is, the self which has explicitly grasped itself. As the they-self, Dasein is *dispersed* in the they and must first find itself" (*Being and Time* 125). This dispersion caused by average everydayness is dispelled by the possibility of death as a reminder of one's possibilities as Dasein.

A problem with Caputo's approach is that it has a prescriptive understanding of authenticity and inauthenticity, with authenticity the seemingly higher or more preferred state of being. This is *not* something Heidegger intended, as he states quite clearly that "the inauthenticity of Dasein does not signify a 'lesser' being or a 'lower' degree of being. Rather, inauthenticity can determine Dasein even in its fullest concretion, when it is busy, excited, interested, and capable of pleasure" (ibid., 42). We see, then that there is no hierarchical relation between the two, and that authenticity is not intended to be elevated above inauthenticity as the

superior form of existence. Heidegger is arguably not giving a prescriptive account of existence but rather just describing the *phenomenon* of existence. His account can be seen as merely descriptive, not prescriptive in the way Kierkegaard's account is. As a religious writer, Kierkegaard arguably intended that the resolution of anxiety through a proper relation to God *was* a genuinely preferred outcome. As can be understood from Heidegger's account, we *all* live an inauthentic existence from time to time. Every one of us becomes embroiled in our day-to-day lives, and as Heidegger said, such involvement can bring exciting, interesting, and pleasurable outcomes that make for a happier life. To be permanently attuned to one's anxiety and the possibility of death is presumably impossible.

So why does there seem to be an elevation or at least a prescriptive element to the idea of authenticity? Why is there at least some vague notion that being authentic is the higher and more worthy state of being? There are two answers to this question that I argue both play a role in such an intuition. The first and simpler answer is that this is merely the result of ingrained cultural attitudes and societal expectations about life. Western liberal democracy highlights freedom and personal expression as fundamental values, both politically and socially, which in turn naturally exalts the concept of authenticity. As a result, we could be uncritically importing liberal values into Heidegger's work.[1]

A different answer, however, is that Heidegger has imported an underlying prescriptive component from prior accounts of anxiety. As was discussed previously, there has been a clear religious tradition regarding dread, a conceptual precursor to Kierkegaard's idea of anxiety, as an

[1] It is prudent to note that Heidegger's political affiliation is itself controversial. It has been established that Heidegger was a National Socialist, although there is disagreement as to what extent his political commitments and philosophy are interrelated. For an introduction to this discussion, please refer to Brian Singer's review "The 'Heidegger Affair': Philosophy, Politics, and the 'Political'".

educative and cultivational phenomenon that helps one achieve a more fulfilling relationship with God. This element of self-cultivation as a tradition recurs in Kierkegaard, as anxiety is a pathway to intensifying one's relation to divinity. Negative emotions like dread are cultivational and in a sense helpful to achieving a preferred religious consciousness for an individual. Heidegger certainly succeeded in secularizing this concept, but it seems he imported the religious assumption that negative emotions, when properly reflected upon and incorporated, can be a vehicle of self-development and thus are genuinely preferable.

In summary, Heidegger, like Kierkegaard, posits that anxiety stems from an encounter with an objectless nothing, in his case, death, which he understands as "*the ownmost, nonrelational, certain, and, as such, indefinite and insuperable possibility of Dasein"* (ibid., 248). This anxiety dispels the everyday interpretation of life and opens the individual to authenticity, to making decisions that acknowledge the imminent possibility of death (ibid., 255). Such authenticity has a temporalizing character, as the "'before' and the 'ahead of' indicate the future that first makes possible in general the fact that Dasein can be in such a way that it is concerned *about* its potentiality of being" (ibid., 313). This authenticity and the disclosing potential of anxiety helps individuals learn about themselves and can assist in a form of self-realization, fostering a more meaningful life. While it is not always preferable to be in such a state, it would be wise to cultivate authenticity as a path toward a fulfilling life. Of course, one cannot always be authentic and constantly anxious, and everyday inauthenticity is also necessary, but authenticity can be seen as the more preferred state.

Section 4. Contemporary Definitions and Approaches

Now that Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's accounts of anxiety have been introduced, it is time for a brief look at contemporary approaches to existential anxiety. I will eventually provide a new account that attempts to rectify certain flaws in recent approaches while incorporating important details from Kierkegaard and Heidegger. In the years following their work, numerous accounts of existential anxiety appeared but they tended to focus on a single side of the phenomenon, such as death, freedom, meaning, or identity. Consider for instance a model of existential anxiety found in "Memento Mori: Understanding Existential Anxiety through the Existential Pathway Model" by David E. Reed II, Rachel E. Williamson, and Robert E. Wickham.

In their list (figure 1), anxiety is split into multiple different existential domains, implying that existential anxiety can arise in a variety of different spheres of human existence. For instance, there is anxiety about death, anxiety about the meaning of life, anxiety about freedom and self-realization, and so on. This model attempts to unify the post-Heidegger-Kierkegaard thesis that existential anxiety is not something that is only limited to uneasy feelings about death and freedom, as it applies to other spheres of life.

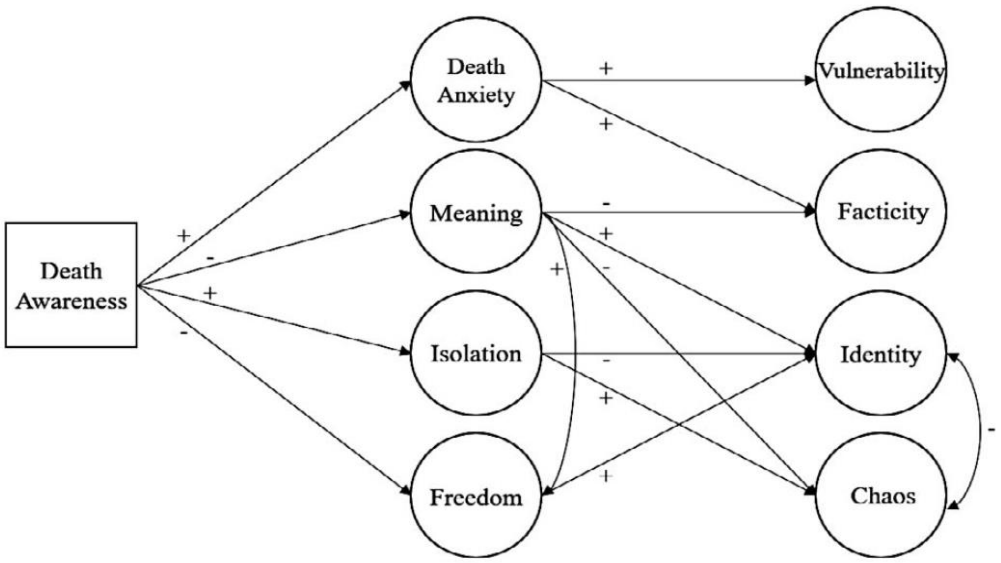
TABLE 1 Existential domains, their existential pathways, and their prominent theorists

Existential domain	Characterization	Existential pathway	Prominent theorist(s)
Death	Anxiety of nonexistence	Death awareness results in anxiety related to nonexistence	Frankl (1959/2006), Yalom (1980), Tillich (1952/1962), Glas (2003), Terror Management theorists
Meaning	Existence has no purpose or significance	Death awareness results in anxiety related to finding purpose in existence	Frankl (1959/2006), Yalom (1980), Tillich (1952/1962), Glas (2003), Terror Management theorists
Isolation	Awareness that death is ultimately faced alone and one is alone in their experiences	Death awareness results in the anxiety of a fundamental aloneness	Yalom (1980), Glas (2003), Pinel et al. (2017); Terror Management theorists
Freedom	Tension between self-actualization and the life being led	Death awareness results in anxiety related to self-actualization, potentially due to a sense of meaninglessness	Yalom (1980), Terror Management theorists, Tillich's (1952/1962), Glas' (2003)
Vulnerability	Awareness that death may happen at any moment	Death awareness results in anxiety related to nonexistence, evoking anxiety that death may happen at any moment	Glas (2003)
Facticity	Disgust with oneself and/or the world	Death awareness results in anxiety related to nonexistence or meaninglessness, evoking disgust with oneself and/or the world	Glas (2003)
Identity	Anxiety related to a coherent sense of self and aspiring to be separate from others	Death awareness results in meaninglessness, existential isolation, or anxiety related to freedom, evoking anxiety related to self-coherence and aspirations of distinctness from others	Glas (2003), Terror Management theorists
Chaos	Anxiety related to an inability to sustain consistent perceptual boundaries	Death awareness results in anxiety related to meaninglessness, existential isolation, and/or identity, resulting in anxiety related to difficulties sustaining perceptual boundaries	Glas (2003)

(figure 1, Reed et al. 15)

This article aims to argue for a central connecting element to anxiety, as each of these domains is in some way traced back to death awareness. This is different from death anxiety, as death anxiety is the "uneasiness surrounding one's nonexistence", which "constitutes a core element of existential anxiety, as does the pursuit of *meaning* and purpose" (Reed et al. 15). Death awareness, however, can be understood as simply the psychological awareness of one's mortality, not necessarily an anxious response to such awareness. This existential pathway model was introduced "as a way to illustrate a more coherent and comprehensive definition of existential anxiety, as well as a mechanism to understand the associated cognitions, emotions, behaviors, and motivations" (ibid., 16). These existential pathways "describe specific links

connecting death awareness to the subjective experience of existential anxiety and can represent either direct or indirect pathways" (ibid., 16). We can summarize such an approach as essentially trying to trace all the many existential anxieties of life back to death awareness, even if such a route is no more than indirectly connected to such an awareness (figure 2).



(figure 2 from Reed et al. 16)

This approach is intriguing, since it establishes a foundation for all the varieties of existential anxiety, which is a conceptually ambitious reduction. There are, however, some issues that I think limit the viability of this approach. The first is that not all existential anxiety is organized solely around an individual's own circumstances. For instance, Bergo cites Emmanuel Levinas's view that anxiety can be oriented around other individuals, as there are others whom "we do not 'recognize' as being-of-ourselves," a non-recognition that "phenomenalizes as an affect – *anxiety*, as a dynamic and intersubjective emotion, or still more intensely, as a persistent passion" ("Introduction" 30-31), it is an "*anxiety of intersubjectivity*, an anxiety born of our intersubjective connection" ("Emmanuel" 431). In this case, anxiety arises concerning other people, as Levinas "displaces the otherness of death in Heidegger onto the other *person*" (ibid.,

416). The model offered by Reed and his co-authors does not capture such anxiety in its existential pathways, as it is unclear how my awareness of my death precipitates existential anxiety regarding others.

The second issue is that, as we have learned from Heidegger and Kierkegaard, death and freedom, while deeply interrelated, are not foundational to each other. While both can be understood as a nothing that precipitates anxiety, the movement that precipitates anxiety is in completely reversed directions. Kierkegaard is concerned with the movement from nothing to actuality, as freedom with its possibilities is actualized through the agent's consciously willed action. Possibility moves into actuality. Meanwhile, Heidegger is concerned with movement in the opposite direction, namely, from actuality to nothing. We live life and eventually we reach our own most possibility of death, which dissolves actuality into ontological nonbeing. Thus, when one is anxious about freedom it is not necessarily because of being aware of death but can be due to the consequences that freedom entails. Likewise, freedom does not necessitate anxiety about death, as such anxiety is not necessarily about the possibilities and choices that can determine how one dies, but rather because of the reality of non-existence. Reed et al. attempt to distinguish between death awareness and death anxiety, but being aware of death, of becoming nothing, does not explain the anxiety of *becoming something*. Essentially, the issue is that attempting to make death awareness a foundation for freedom-based anxiety appears contrary to what makes it what it uniquely is and eliminates subtleties among interrelated phenomena by subsuming them under a single concept.

The final criticism I want to advance against the argument of Reed et al. is that this approach is convoluted and inflexible. Emphasizing systematically interconnected pathways, while helpful in illuminating connections among certain types of existential anxiety, becomes

convoluted when the connections need to be explained in sufficient detail to understand *why* and *how* they are related. This requires a step back from explaining and defining existential anxiety. Instead of giving a novel definition that can explain differing accounts of existential anxiety, it becomes mired in the difficulty of conceptualizing numerous connections to justify the model in and of itself. This makes things harder, not easier. This model is also problematically inflexible. If any new phenomena arise that can be interpreted as a form of existential anxiety, such as the eco-anxiety that will soon be our focus, the authors will have both to explain the phenomenon as related to death awareness and explain its relation to the other forms of existential anxiety. This makes the model inflexible in that familiar instances of anxiety are not easily incorporated, but rather require substantial conceptual work to find their place in the model. Overall, while the approach of Reed et al. is ambitious and even promising, it has shortcomings that make it hard to prefer over the classic philosophical approach.

Such an approach appears in Susan Iacovou's paper "What is the Difference Between Existential Anxiety and So-Called Neurotic Anxiety?" By defining existential anxiety and "comparing and contrasting it to neurotic anxiety, with reference to normal anxiety, without which, the picture would be incomplete" (Iacovou 356), the result is what she calls The Integrated Anxiety Model (IAM) (ibid., 360). Iacovou appreciates that anxiety as a concept suffers from a "quagmire of confusing definitions, contradictory explanations and bewildering etiologies" (356). The meaning of anxiety is split among differing camps with entirely different methodologies and approaches, as for instance the approach offered by "doctors/psychotherapists who follow the medical model […] and existential philosophers and practitioners who use a phenomenological approach" (ibid., 357). Acknowledging these problems, Iacovou attempts to

provide a robust working definition of existential anxiety, while specifically contrasting it with differing definitions of neurotic anxiety and normal anxiety.

Iacovou defines existential anxiety, with inspiration from van Deurzen, as "the 'inevitable unease or malaise' (van Deurzen, 2002, p. 34) that comes from awareness of yourself, your freedom and the finitude of human existence" (358). That is, one feels uncertain and ill at ease due to awareness of the fact one exists, can die, and can choose. Existential anxiety is "universal and unavoidable" (ibid., 360). This is like the previously considered definitions of existential anxiety and attempts to subsume some of their chief points into a robust definition.

In contrast to existential anxiety, Iacovou defines neurotic anxiety as the "anxiety that manifests when we try to evade existential givens, or when we are overwhelmed by them. It is our attempt to detoxify and replace existential anxiety" (359). This anxiety is a result of our trying to avoid confronting existential anxiety, arising much like Kierkegaard's anxiety about anxiety, and potentially leading to "the creation of resistances and defenses designed to help the individual avoid the original anxiety" (ibid., 361). As a result, this neurotic anxiety "leads to stagnation, rigidity and restriction in the individual's life" (ibid.). In other words, neurotic anxiety is anxiety in the face of anxiety. It is anxiety arising from the confrontation with anxiety and its causes, leading to a pathological avoidance of what makes one anxious.

Finally, Iacovou defines normal anxiety as exactly what most people think anxiety is, namely, a "response to everyday life events, such as starting a new job, being threatened by a stranger, or getting lost on the way to an important meeting" (359). She states that this normal anxiety "occurs when the person reacts appropriately and proportionally to the events of everyday life" (ibid., 359). It is not directly stated in the article, however, what exactly this response *feels* like. We can probably assume that normal anxiety is a stronger and intensified

uneasiness than existential anxiety. Should the individual be "unable to confront the experience constructively" (ibid.), it can become neurotic anxiety.

In conclusion, Iacovou attempts to combat the "negative implications in responding to anxiety as purely neurotic, including the focus on symptoms, and the implication that these are part of a pathological problem that needs to be cured" (360). Not all anxieties are pathological and require some sort of cure, but Iacovou recognizes the self-cultivational element that anxiety can play, as it would be a mistake not "to appreciate the power it has to invigorate, inspire, and teach" (ibid.). By providing definitions that work together in an integrated anxiety model, Iacovou can differentiate and relate various forms of anxiety and explain how they can affect an individual. Iacovou states that a therapeutic practitioner's purpose "is not to collude with the client in evading life by avoiding its unpalatable realities, but rather to help them to embrace anxiety, learn from it and thrive with it despite them" (362).

The problem with this definition is that while it integrates multiple facets of existential anxiety, it cannot readily incorporate new or different forms of anxiety and has even less range than the account of Reed et al. While existential anxiety does stem from an awareness of a self as a self, we need to know more than that for the phenomenon to be fully understood. We require an account that acknowledges the range of the existential pathway model but retains the simplicity of the classic definitional approach.

Section 5. A New Account

A new account of anxiety that learns from prior definitions and analyses is in order then, at the very least as a working definition that can account for eco-anxiety as a modern expression of existential anxiety. Some essential characteristics of existential anxiety have been well-

established by the arguments we have already considered. First, existential anxiety is experienced as a feeling of disquiet or ill-ease, which has an unsettling emotional impact on the afflicted. Secondly, existential anxiety results, as can be seen from the accounts by Heidegger and Kierkegaard, from *unavoidable* and *fundamental* conditions of our lives. We cannot ignore things like freedom or mortality since they are a fundamental component of human life and the way we interpret ourselves and our place in the world. We can also say that this anxiety is a result of *conscious* mental life reflecting on itself and is not an instinctual or unconscious response to experience. Finally, this anxiety is *objectless*: it is not oriented towards something present in the lived world but is rather oriented towards objectless and merely virtual realities that form the phenomenological structure of human experience, especially concerning the future, giving it a temporal character. There is additionally the notion that existential anxiety is cultivational, meaning that it can be utilized to educate oneself and help navigate the world, though it is perhaps debatable whether this cultivational aspect is truly intrinsic to anxiety as it may more properly belong to one's *response* to anxiety.

With these elements in place, we can detail a new account of anxiety, one that is inspired by and derived from Heidegger and Kierkegaard. My definition of existential anxiety is as follows: *Existential anxiety is a phenomenon wherein one experiences mental states of uneasiness over the objectless possibilities entailed by core conditions of our being qua being*. On this account, anxiety is an experience of unease and disquiet over our lives. That much has already been established. The implication of the new definition, however, is that this anxiety is a result of objectless possibilities entailed by the core conditions of our being *qua* being, which requires more explanation.

The notion of objectless possibilities, which I take from Kierkegaard and Heidegger, is simply that there are possibilities that are available to us in the future that are not oriented around an actual object. These possibilities stem from core conditions of what it is to be a type of being like we are. Mortality and freedom are inevitable conditions of our being, as previously established, but these conditions also include other existential sources of anxiety such as identity, meaning regarding one's life, and so on. It is critical to note that my transition towards focusing on conditions of being is a way of highlighting the existential root of this anxiety in our structures of existence, but also to help rework the confusing language Heidegger uses regarding death. His notion that death is a possibility has led to disagreement over what exactly he meant by using the word possibility, whether he was altogether wrong to use it (Edwards) or had a very particular sense of being in mind when he did (Blattner). My position is to recognize that mortality is a condition of being, much like freedom, that entails the objectless possibility of death. Mortality, like freedom, is a necessary condition of who we are as beings, there is no avoiding choices or death. Viewing death as an objectless possibility, however, is to recognize that death is something that *may* happen stemming from that condition of mortality. Death is an ever-present possibility because of our condition as mortal beings.

Regardless, instead of reducing everything to death and freedom, my definition attempts to be more adaptable and robust by incorporating the full range of existential possibilities. What ties these different possibilities together is both their unavoidability and temporal forwardness. Mortality and freedom are unavoidable conditions of our being, as one must die, and one must choose during life. The second unifying characteristic, temporality, is due to the critical understanding here that we are beings that exist *towards* possibilities. Freedom is a temporal condition in that it looks towards future possibilities, much as mortality is a condition in that

death is an open possibility of our being. There is a *viewing forward* that unifies these different anxieties despite their apparent difference, as summarized by Heidegger's statement that "Dasein is always already ahead of itself" (*Being and Time* 301).

To maintain the *existential* quality of existential anxiety it is paramount to recognize that these myriad anxieties stem from a reflexive existence. They arise because we exist and the core conditions that form this structure of existence will always entail such anxieties. Hence, the final portion of this definition focuses on these conditions of our being as its being. While Heidegger and Kierkegaard would have taken for granted that this structure of existence was unique to humanity, we will leave the question of what other species could have these structures undecided, as that would have to be determined by those specializing in animal consciousness. For now, the final portion of the definition is added to make this fact of *our* existence at least clear.

Death can serve as an example here to illustrate the account fully, whilst also helping clarify some differences between my account and Heidegger's. I have already made it clear that death as a possibility was something unclear in Heidegger's work, and thus have opted to focus more on the condition of mortality, which also more easily connects to the notion of freedom. Mortality is a condition of our being *qua* being, in that we are beings that will eventually die. Mortality entails the objectless possibilities of death in that I can die from any manner of open possibilities around me, and like freedom, is a necessary and temporal condition of my life. This leads to mental states of uneasiness over the possibilities of death ahead of me, much, in the same way, freedom is an anxiety that stems from viewing future objectless possibilities of choice. Some beliefs attempt to cope with the reality of death itself by positing an afterlife, but

whether such beliefs are a reaction to the existential anxiety I have described here is beyond the purview of my work.

Something that this account imports from Heidegger and Kierkegaard is an understanding of humanity as self-reflective and meaning-seeking. It is intuitively understandable that we as humans are self-reflexive beings that understand ourselves as *beings*, and that we, as a result, recognize the conditions that comprise who we are. In turn, these conditions open possibilities, which leads to the anxieties we had discussed prior. This is not limited to just mortality and freedom, however, as other conditions of our being, such as the fact we have a persistent understanding of self-identity, can open other avenues of possibilities and thus different forms of existential anxiety. Existential anxiety can therefore be an anxiety about meaning, and these anxieties all carry an interrelated character in that one can precipitate another. Freedom can, for instance, open anxiety about the possibilities for my self-identity, mortality can instigate anxiety about the limited possibilities of freedom before my eventual death, and so on.

A possible objection to my definition is that there are objectless anxieties that could fit such an account but would not normally be considered forms of existential anxiety. For instance, what about social anxiety? Imagine a case in which one feels unease or disquiet over a certain social occasion, such as having to give a public presentation on one's schoolwork. It is a commonplace example of such anxiety and seems to fit my account. The anxiety could be construed as unease or disquiet and may even be the result of objectless possibilities, that is, indefinite and merely possible social expectations. And one will certainly have to interact with other people in life, that is something unavoidable. But how could this be a form of existential anxiety?

However, this objection fails because social anxiety does not fully meet the requirements of my definition. We cannot conceive of these instances of anxiety as being objectless possibilities, as they are concerned with definite practical outcomes. When one has anxiety over a social encounter one is anxious over the pragmatic outcomes concerning other objective beings. I am concerned with my well-being about the encounter, unlike the case of existential anxiety, which is not oriented towards pragmatic circumstances as its basis. When I am anxious about giving a presentation, I am anxious about that presentation to others because they are all objectively present in my lived world and the event will have pragmatic outcomes for my being. By contrast, when I am anxious about freedom or mortality, I am anxious about something that cannot be pointed to, that cannot be expressly understood as something objective and lived.

There are two further responses that can be supplied against my rebuttal here. The first is that social anxiety can be vague and not so specific as I have described it here. For instance, I could have a vague social anxiety about the opinions of others, about whether they like me or not. This is a vague anxiety that *appears* objectless. I would argue, however, that this anxiety is still objective, as the emotion is toward vague objectively present beings. This is a matter of distance, if one were to be in closer contact with these objects of anxiety, that is the other people in question, that anxiety would find its object become much clearer and less vague because of proximity.

The second response to my rebuttal is where this leaves death, as clearly, death is something that has a definitive practical outcome. But as was reiterated previously, mortality as a condition is what brings about the possibility of non-possibility, which is what in turn entails anxiety. When one has an emotional reaction to a genuine object that could bring about death, for example, the presence of a weapon or the moment before a potentially fatal accident occurs, that

is not anxiety, but rather fear, an entirely different species of emotion. Heidegger would agree with this reading, as he states that what we are afraid of "is always something encountered within the world, either with the kind of being of something at hand or something objectively present or Dasein-with" (*Being and Time* 136). Even further, he describes fear of this type as being unique in that "only a being which is concerned in its being about that being can be afraid", as it "discloses this being in its jeopardization" (ibid., 137). In other words, Heidegger's fear is the emotion that deals with the practical outcomes of a dangerous situation, not anxiety as I have described it. It becomes more akin to anxiety, however, when that dangerous situation or object is at a temporal or geographical distance, where it starts to become pragmatic anxiety.

The difference between pragmatic anxiety and existential anxiety is twofold, in that pragmatic anxiety is an anxiety oriented towards material objects and is concerned with practical outcomes concerning one's well-being. We can then understand pragmatic anxiety as the more everyday understanding of what the term anxiety means. We should be careful, however, to recognize that this is not fear, despite Heidegger's usage of the word, as fear is an intense emotion wherein the concern for one's well-being is far more immediate and local. This distinction between pragmatic anxiety and existential anxiety is important to recognize to understand the boundaries between the two phenomena.

We have seen that anxiety plays a role in helping one cultivate oneself and orient toward an authentic form of existence. How does this fit into my proposed definition? The answer begins by acknowledging that anxiety indicates when one ought to reflect on their personal choices and sense of self. Anxiety cultivates us because it helps us acknowledge deep existential facts about our lives and thus enables more profound reflection on *what to do* about those facts. Anxiety thus instigates profound reflection but where that deeper reflection leads is entirely

particular to one's perspective and circumstances. The existential anxiety I contend with will have a different outcome for my unique sense of self as opposed to those of the philosophers and religious figures that came before me by virtue of me being a different person in different circumstances from them, even if I use their work to help orient myself. This is what is meant by the term self-cultivation, namely, the idea that anxiety can be used toward an inner change in my perspective toward something that is more personally fulfilling and meaningful.

To expand on this further, I borrow from Christopher Gowans understanding of self-cultivation. He draws on Greek, Indian, and Chinese traditions to find a unified understanding of what self-cultivation means in an ancient philosophical context. He notes that cultivation "concerns a kind of training, based on purported knowledge, that human beings undertake to guide living things in what is thought to be a valuable direction" (Gowans 3). The being in this case to be cultivated is the self, the individual in and of themselves. He states that self-cultivation philosophies can be "fruitfully interpreted as explicitly or implicitly promoting a cultivation of the self, where the cultivation often takes the form of contesting, sometimes in radical ways, *everyday conceptions of the self*" (ibid., 4; emphasis added). These philosophies are different form other self-cultivation programs in that "it involves philosophy in some important way – for example, by urging people to attain wisdom through learning a philosophy or engaging in philosophical activity" (ibid., 5).

This fits the account of self-cultivation I have outlined as the philosophies that describe existential anxiety and its purpose include details as to how it can be used towards cultivating oneself in a valuable direction. While it would be interesting to see how this aligns with Gowans exploration of ancient Western and Eastern philosophies, that is beyond our scope here. What is important to note is that anxiety, by its nature, challenges our everyday conceptions and signals

to us when to engage in the philosophical reflection necessary to lead ourselves in a meaningful direction. Thus, existential anxiety is a signal to engage in the philosophical activity of meaningful self-reflection to cultivate oneself.

There is also the reverse outcome, however, when one's response to existential anxiety becomes unproductive or unhealthy. As previously established with Kierkegaard, one can, instead of resolving anxiety through self-fulfillment, end up becoming overwhelmed by it to the point of despair or attempt to avoid it as much as possible. Both outcomes are detrimental to personal development. The key, then, is to maintain a balance between the two and attempt to utilize anxiety in such a way as to orient oneself towards more fulfilling life choices. One should do one's best to confront anxiety, but also be aware of when it can become overwhelming and detrimental to one's self-realization.

Section 6. Conclusion

We have to this point summarized a portion of religious and philosophical history with a focus on Heidegger and Kierkegaard, the point of which was to derive a new account of existential anxiety, one that attempts to incorporate many of the key insights found in later, often more clinically oriented accounts. With Kierkegaard, it was his psychological insight into the role anxiety plays in our development, and with Heidegger, it was his insistence on the hermeneutics of being as the existential basis of anxiety. Combining their contributions in my new account is a way of retaining their insights whilst also updating their account and decoupling existential anxiety from Kierkegaard's religious commitment and Heidegger's purely descriptive approach.

Defining existential anxiety as the unease one feels regarding the objectless possibilities that stem from core conditions of our being qua being provides a robust account that can be applied to understand the contemporary phenomenon of eco-anxiety, as well as providing a way to support those afflicted by it. Before turning to that wider exploration, however, there is the necessity of detailing the social science surrounding eco-anxiety and the findings of empirical research to fully understand its impact as well as the form of anxiety that the social science literature is concerned with.

Chapter Two

The Social Science of Eco-Anxiety

Section 1. Contemporary Scientific Definitions of Eco-Anxiety

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the scientific literature regarding eco-anxiety. My concern is primarily to detail the data that has accrued rather recently, as eco-anxiety research is a relatively new and emerging field that is still in need of more study (Coffey et al. 5). The research explores numerous areas of eco-anxiety and its effect on people, including demographic studies regarding how many people are affected, the symptoms and effects, the correlation between eco-anxiety and political behavior, as well as eco-anxiety in relation to other eco-emotions, such as eco-anger (Stanley et al.). My goal is to review the literature to help understand eco-anxiety as an empirical pragmatic phenomenon and the problems it poses for those affected by it. I will be able to detail a pragmatic form of eco-anxiety from the findings of the literature, which I will in turn use to help distinguish the different species of eco-anxiety in the next chapter. I will also, however, be able to evaluate the literature and its proposals, and where philosophy, departing away from social science, can help expand our understanding of eco-anxiety. However, the first thing to understand is how contemporary scientific approaches define eco-anxiety.

A systematic review of the eco-anxiety literature uncovers numerous definitions, including “a chronic fear of environmental doom”, “mental distress or anxiety associated with worsening environmental conditions”, and “anxiety experienced in response to the ecological crisis” (Coffey et al. 1). Panu Pikhala recognizes that anxiety has a general definition already among scholars, as “related to a threat about which there is significant uncertainty” (“Anxiety” 2). This general definition, however, still gives way to “many differences in opinion and vocabulary”, as anxiety can also refer to an “emotion, closely related to fear and worry, which is generated by encountering problematic uncertainty or troubling situations” (ibid., 2). When these variations are applied to eco-anxiety we find even more possible definitions and approaches to understanding it. For instance, eco-anxiety can be understood “as related to uncomfortable changes in the social order of things” (ibid., 5), or as a perceived threat “to the existence of humans and societies” (ibid., 6). It can also capture “a deeply felt questioning and angst as related to ‘ultimate concerns’, or ‘life’s givens’” concerning the ecological crisis (ibid., 6). Finally, there is the notion that there can be “hidden—repressed or suppressed—forms of such anxiety”, or even a pathological eco-anxiety that “should be differentiated from ‘healthy’ eco-anxiety”, although he cautions that “eco-anxiety should not be pathologized” (ibid., 8).

Overall, we see that eco-anxiety is not easily defined in the current scientific literature. Another systematic review of this literature states that “the lack of a standardized definition of eco-anxiety has led to a high variability of eco-anxiety definitions and measurement tools used” (Boluda-Verdú et al 13), and that “the establishment of a common definition is urgently needed” (ibid., 15). There is additionally an argument that numerous other emotions related to the climate crisis, such as hopelessness, anger, and grief also merit consideration as separate eco-emotions worthy of study (Clayton 2). Therefore, eco-anxiety research does *not* have a single primary

definition within the field that captures all the ways of understanding and engaging with eco-anxiety.

The best approach is to recognize that two key features unify most of the definitions of eco-anxiety found in the research literature for what researchers are speaking about. The first feature is that eco-anxiety is *about* the ecological crisis, that is, the anxiety is oriented towards the outcomes of a specific unfolding historical event. This does not just mean climate change, however, but can also include other manifestations of the larger ecological crisis, such as ecosystem destruction. However, the recent increase in eco-anxiety strongly correlates with the unfolding of climate change, making it a primary instigator. The second feature is that eco-anxiety *feels* like anxiety in the everyday sense of the term. Eco-anxiety occurs when someone experiences uncomfortable feelings of distress over a perceived threat both to their well-being and the well-being of their world. These two features typify eco-anxiety and recur from study to study and align with my understanding of pragmatic anxiety. Many of these studies center around those who are concerned with the practical consequences of the ecological crisis and thus are exhibiting anxiety that has a material basis to it. But there is also the presence of a separate and distinct form of eco-anxiety that has existential characteristics. It is the failure to fully distinguish between these two forms of anxiety that causes the literature to be unclear, a mistake that will be rectified in chapter three. The next question, for now, concerns *who* feels eco-anxiety and *what* happens when they experience it.

Section 2. The Eco-Anxious

Eco-anxiety is a particularly widespread phenomenon, found in virtually every demographic group. For instance, a recent study of Australians' responses to climate change

found that every age group is affected by eco-anxiety (Patrick et al. 8), although it was also found that:

> one in five Australian young adults may be experiencing significant mental health impacts because of anxiety related to climate change, with tangible impacts on cognitive and functional impairment affecting their work, family, and social life. (ibid., 8-9)

The demographic group most at risk from eco-anxiety may therefore be younger adults, a result that is "largely consistent with previous research" (ibid., 7). This conclusion is unsurprising. Younger people will have a stronger sense of pragmatic eco-anxiety because they are the ones to bear the worst manifestations of the ecological crisis as time passes.

A critical implication of this demographic research is that even though young adults are primarily the ones at risk of eco-anxiety, one must consider that their eco-anxiety is only a fragment of a larger problem regarding the current precarious nature of everyday life due to the recent pandemic, economic recession, and increasing economic inequality. Young adults are suffering from a host of different anxieties about the future, with some being of a limited nature and others verging on the catastrophic, such as eco-anxiety. Their anxieties concern more than just the ecological crisis.

Finally, something that is a recurring issue with the current ecological crisis is that the consequences of it are unfairly distributed to especially vulnerable groups. Eco-anxiety continues this trend, as "findings suggested that specific vulnerable groups, including young people, Indigenous groups, and those connected to the natural world are most impacted by eco-anxiety" (Coffey et al. 4). Thus, we can see that the youth and those most reliant on the natural world are at the most risk of being impacted by eco-anxiety.

Section 3. The Effects of Eco-Anxiety

Eco-anxiety, as we have understood it thus far, is a distressing emotional reaction to the perceived harm our species is perpetrating against our natural environment, whether locally or globally, which in turn leads to harmful effects for humans. The effects of eco-anxiety, however, go beyond this emotional reaction and can have numerous implications for a person's health, as well as complex relations to other emotions, people's identity, and their socio-political beliefs.

For instance, a scientific review of studies reveals negative physical behaviors that can arise in association with climate change anxiety, "such as being physically sick and experiencing panic attacks, and adverse emotional reactions such as irritability, weakness, sleeplessness, sadness, depression, numbness, helplessness, hopelessness, guilt, frustration or anger, and feeling scared or uncertain" (Coffey et al. 3). Thus, eco-anxiety can spiral into further negative emotions, which may correlate with impairment of everyday functioning, with "tangible impacts on cognitive and functional impairment affecting their work, family, and social life" (Patrick et al. 9). These researchers arrived at this conclusion by surveying young adults for "clinically relevant symptoms such as unhealthy rumination and functional impairment relating to work, social and family life" (ibid., 3). Cognitive impairment was understood to be related to "sleep, concentration, rumination and crying", while functional impairment relates to "socialization and work" (ibid., 3). This survey finds empirical evidence that eco-anxiety can impact many different spheres of everyday life. That can include people's identity and their relation to society and the ecological crisis itself.

For instance, a study of eco-anger, which is anger and frustration about the ecological crisis, found "that more intense experiences of frustration and anger in relation to climate change are associated with greater attempts to take personal actions to address the issue" (Stanley et al.

3), while eco-anxiety "predicts *lower* collective action, or disengagement with the pro-climate movement" (ibid., 4). Thus, a person suffering from eco-anxiety will predictably be less involved with collective action. The thing to note here, however, is that apparently eco-anxiety *alone* is the cause of disengagement from ecological action. Another study found:

> sizable associations of worry about global warming with positive ('determined') as well as angry emotions, a pro-ecological worldview, values and behaviour, and the presence of a 'green' self-identity strongly supported the thesis that habitual worry about global warming can be a constructive response. (Verplanken et al. 8)

This is an interesting result, as a key finding of the study was "the positive association of determined emotions and worry" (ibid). Thus, eco-anxiety is correlated with other emotions such as eco-anger, which can in turn lead to a more ecologically focused worldview and socio-political orientation. Eco-anxiety, then, is detrimental on its own due to its draining nature, leading to less engaged youth when it comes to resolving the crisis. But when it is expressed together with other more determinate emotions, such as eco-anger, it can instead lead to positive changes in an individual's life, including motivating political action.

A global study that highlights the socio-political implications of eco-anxiety, particularly in relation to climate change, found the same result as others but on a global scale, indicating that "children and young people in countries around the world report climate anxiety and other distressing emotions and thoughts about climate change that impact their daily lives" (Hickman et al. 870). The study also found that this distress "was associated with beliefs about inadequate governmental response and feelings of betrayal" (ibid). The study concluded that distress over climate change "appears to be greater when young people believe that government response is inadequate, which leads us to argue that the failure of governments to adequately reduce,

prevent, or mitigate climate change is contributing to psychological distress, moral injury, and injustice" (ibid., 871). Thus, eco-anxiety can be made worse when an individual does not believe that state agencies are doing enough to combat the ecological crisis. This evidence is worrying since it implies that should people be less inclined to engage in collective action due to eco-anxiety, and then, in turn, start to believe that their government is failing to act on climate change, it can create a spiraling effect of worsening distress. This survey "shows that large numbers of young people globally regard governments as failing to acknowledge or act on the crisis in a coherent, urgent way, or respond to their alarm" (ibid., 871), and thus shows that eco-anxiety has a deep correlation with certain socio-political beliefs and stances.

In conclusion, we see that eco-anxiety instigates difficult feelings, including "a wide range of painful, complex emotions (sad, afraid, angry, powerless, helpless, guilty, ashamed, despair, hurt, grief, and depressed)" (ibid., 870). It also correlates with a negative impact on the functioning of those afflicted in their everyday lives, and when not translated into eco-anger can also signal disengagement with collective pro-ecological activities. These issues become intensified by beliefs about the role of governments in resolving the ecological crisis, as youth's disillusionment with state agencies can intensify eco-anxiety. As a result, eco-anxiety is a troubling issue that adversely affects a vulnerable portion of the population, namely the youth who are going to inherit the ecological crisis.

Section 4. Proposed Solutions

It is important to remember that these studies do not view eco-anxiety as a pathological malady or form of disease but rather as an intensified and altered variety of normal anxiety. That means the solutions they propose are not oriented toward clinical diagnosis and treatment but

rather focus on helping those afflicted productively handle their eco-anxiety, usually by developing appropriate coping skills. This shows that eco-anxiety is not treated as a serious disorder or disease but rather as a rational response to a situation that can be debilitating. One would not normally describe a person who is reasonably anxious as being diseased or unhealthy, and the same logic extends to eco-anxiety. Nonetheless, that anxiety still needs to be coped with. There is also advice on how socio-political institutions can assist in helping individuals handle eco-anxiety or prevent its occurrence in the first place. Proposed solutions typically constitute policy advice for governments in addition to individual coping methods, which I either take directly from the literature or derive from it.

As previously mentioned, eco-anxiety is made worse by perceived government inaction on the ecological crisis, as the "realities of climate change alongside governmental failures to act are chronic, long-term, and potentially inescapable stressors" (Hickman et al. 871). Current narratives "risk individualising the so-called problem of climate anxiety, with suggestions that the best response is for the individual to take action" (ibid., 871). In other words, eco-anxiety is intensified by the burden of responsibility being placed firmly on the individual, as opposed to resting with those holding political power. Hickman states that their results

> suggest that such action needs to particularly be taken by those in power. To protect the mental health and wellbeing of young people, those in power can act to reduce stress and distress by recognising, understanding, and validating the fears and pain of young people, acknowledging their rights, and placing them at the centre of policy making. (ibid)

What this means is that for there to be a reduction in eco-anxiety, governments need to take productive and forward-thinking action on the ecological crisis to genuinely show that the concerns of the next generation are being taken into consideration. Such advice would tackle the

source of the anxiety, the ecological crisis, and relieve sources of stress that fuel it, the primary one being the perception of government inaction. It is possible to view this as the best solution available to handle pragmatic eco-anxiety, as, somewhat bluntly, there would be no eco-anxiety if there was no ecological crisis to be anxious over. The type of eco-anxiety that is being described here is pragmatic anxiety over a future threat. Remove that threat and the anxiety, with all its impairing effects, would dissipate on their account. Despite the obviousness of this advice, governments have, and will likely continue, to fail to respond to the ecological crisis, which makes it important to find other ways to assist the afflicted. Some research

> highlights the need for the mental health sector to re-orientate mental health practice towards the recognition and treatment of mental health issues stemming from climate-related anxiety such as pre-trauma care, if it is to address the current needs of those affected. (Patrick et al. 13)

That is, there needs to be a shift within mental health care to recognize and treat cases of eco-anxiety. To that end

> [the] public health sector must create awareness of the mental health impacts of the climate crisis and disseminate evidence-based messaging on self-care, coping, help seeking and the mental health benefits of empowerment through participation in climate action. (ibid)

There is, then, the alternative that public health institutions might take it upon themselves to create awareness and provide coping methods to assist those afflicted with eco-anxiety. These institutions would have to become proactive in determining the best methods of dealing with eco-anxiety and disseminate their results among mental-health care professionals. It is important to note that this “mental health crisis” is “disproportionately affecting younger people” (ibid),

and thus the messaging and methods must be mindful of this specific demographic in their outreach.

Finally, it is important "not to pathologize these symptoms or suggest that this is a problem related to individual responses and inadequate coping" (ibid), with pathologizing understood here as labeling eco-anxiety as a disease-like disorder that requires clinical treatment. It is important to view the condition as one within the normal bounds of human psychology that may require special coping skills, as opposed to being an abnormal occurrence that requires clinical intervention. The reason that pathologizing these symptoms would be a mistake is that eco-anxiety should be considered "a normal, and potentially adaptive, response to a real threat" (ibid). Practical eco-anxiety as it is detailed in the social science literature is, in other words, a reasonable response to a genuine practical threat. But it is a response that can be overwhelming for some to cope with. Pathologizing eco-anxiety brings a risk of dismissing the educative possibility of the phenomena, as I will later show. It also contains a certain political risk of stigmatizing a group as having an unhealthy worry about a real threat to their future. It is also important to note that eco-anxiety advocates should not blame individuals for lacking the proper coping skills to handle it.

But that does not mean eco-anxiety cannot "become pathological or undermine a person's mental or physical life. Rather, the point is that these (near) clinical forms of eco-anxiety are not representative of the emotion as it is typically experienced" (Kurth and Pikhala 3). These authors further highlight this distinction when they state that eco-anxiety

> is not unique: *All* emotions, as features of personality, will exhibit individual differences in how/when they manifest themselves. In a similar vein, one's life experiences can affect how intensely one experiences a given emotion. For some this will result in a tendency to

> experience problematic or clinical forms of certain emotions (e.g., anger that gives rise to "explosive anger episodes," happiness that tends to mania, sadness that brings depression). But for most of us, most of the time, emotional life is not like this. What is needed, then, is a model of eco-anxiety that is oriented, not toward its pathological manifestations, but the phenomenon as a whole. (ibid., 4)

There is thus the possibility of eco-anxiety becoming pathological, that is, more disease-like and problematic, but we are concerned with the usual range of the phenomenon and not its worst extremes. Pathology then, at least in the argument of some scholars, is a matter of intensity and effect, not something to be applied to the phenomenon wholesale. There is still the need for coping methods, however, as eco-anxiety can still prove to be a problematic emotion, just like anger or grief, but one that when coped with serves a purpose.

And there are specific types of coping methods that public health authorities can advise. Eco-anxiety is something that requires individual coping skills in everyday life as well as to help those afflicted better understand *what* their anxiety means to them. It is important to note that distressing worries about the environment can be handled with positive consequences through so-called meaning-focused coping, "which refers to strategies to generate positive feelings and reappraisals related to sources of stress" (Verplanken et al. 8).

Meaning-focused coping helps people "draw on their beliefs, values, and existential goals to sustain well-being. This form of coping includes strategies such as positive reappraisal, which is about acknowledging the stressor but still being able to reverse one's perspective" (Ojala 226). This meaning-focused coping draws on an individual's perspective to reinterpret eco-anxiety in a way that constructively fits into that perspective. Ojala states that this form of coping, "where people do not deny the climate problem but are able to activate positive emotions that can help

them to bear the worry associated with the awareness of this threat, could be beneficial for both engagement and well-being" (227). She compares this type of coping with:

> (1) emotion-focused strategies, where the goal is to get rid of negative emotions evoked by a stressor, through for instance avoidance, distancing, and denial-like strategies; and (2) problem-focused strategies, where one concentrates on ways to solve the problem, such as searching for information about what one can do. (ibid., 226)

Emotion-focused strategies tend to avoid the issue that instigates anxiety, while problem-focused strategies try to solve it. Her comparison between these three forms of coping, especially in application to children, showed that meaning-focused coping is the most beneficial.

Ojala's study found that problem-focused coping and meaning-focused coping "were positively related to environmental efficacy, pro-environmental behavior, optimism concerning climate change, and a sense of purpose" (229). The more that children used problem-focused coping, however, "the more likely it was that they also experienced more negative affect" (ibid), which is understood as "anxious and depressive feelings" (ibid., 228). By contrast, children who used meaning-focused coping were "less likely to experience negative affect and more likely to experience life satisfaction and general positive affect" (ibid., 229). Meanwhile, coping strategies that disregarded the danger of climate change were "negatively related to environmental efficacy and pro-environmental behavior. However, the more the children used this coping strategy, the less likely they were to feel a high degree of depressive and anxious feelings (general negative affect)" (ibid). In sum, there are benefits to each of these coping methods but de-emphasizing the danger climate change poses is not a promising one. It poses a significant risk to our shared collective future, and it is unconstructive to utilize a coping method that shifts individuals away from pro-environmental behavior even if it is linked to less negative feelings of anxiety and

depression. Denying or downplaying the problem, while it may be comforting, inevitably makes the situation worse, especially for future generations that inherit the issue.

The specific strategies associated with meaning-focused coping that Ojala is concerned with could still use some further explanation. Susan Folkman, writing in 1997 on the experiences of partners of men with AIDS, found a "co-occurrence of positive and negative psychological states throughout enduring and profoundly stressful circumstances", which "challenges us to consider a model of coping that takes positive states into account" (1207). Folkman found four types of positive coping mechanisms, namely, "positive reappraisal, goal-directed problem-focused coping, spiritual beliefs and practices, and the infusion of ordinary events with positive meaning", all of which had an underlying theme of "searching for and finding positive meaning" (1212). These four strategies contribute to the positive coping that concerns Ojala in her study of ecological distress and individual coping methods.

Folkman's positive reappraisal refers to "cognitive strategies for reframing a situation to see it in a positive light" (1212). This strategy is simple and common enough, as almost everyone is familiar with the notion that any difficulty in life can be reinterpreted with a more positive appraisal. For instance, one can always view distressing situations as representative of one's character or helping one better realize a personal value. Folkman states that "positive reappraisal was significantly and independently associated with positive affect", and that appraising a "stressful situation in a positive light is a strategy that can be used throughout a stressful encounter – at its inception as well as at its conclusion" (ibid). In the context of eco-anxiety, then, we can consider ecological threats as developmentally helpful when it comes to how we organize ourselves politically. The situation, when viewed positively, represents a chance to make our socioeconomic systems sustainable and ethical when it comes to the treatment of

others and the environment. Ecological degradation can therefore be a unifying, positive situation that motivates cooperation and positive change in collaboration across the global community.

The next strategy, problem-focused coping, has already been described. Some detail that can be added is that during this study of caregiving it was found that goals "that are realistic one week may not be so the next" (Folkman 1213). It was determined that "despite the largely uncontrollable nature of AIDS-related caregiving and bereavement, people are able to identify realistic, attainable goals by focusing on specific, proximal tasks or problems related to caregiving or bereavement" (ibid). This type of problem-focused coping "most probably contributed to positive psychological states by allowing participants to experience some personal control and sense of accomplishment" (ibid), and this same principle can be applied to the case of eco-anxiety. Engaging in both collective and individual action to counteract the environmental crisis could prove beneficial in lessening the distress experienced by those with eco-anxiety. This can be done through direct political action such as protesting, voting, and participating in community organizations, or the goals can be smaller and related to personal matters, such as switching to more energy-efficient technologies in one's home or using public transportation rather than a personal vehicle.

Another coping strategy used during times of stress is to draw on personal spiritual beliefs and practices. It appears that "under conditions of chronic and severe stress, spirituality and religiosity facilitate positive reappraisals of the difficult situation, and these reappraisals in turn help support positive psychological states" (ibid., 1214). Folkman found that participants who "reported spiritual beliefs and experiences in their bereavement narratives used more positive reappraisal and problem-focused coping in dealing with a bereavement-related stressful

event than did participants who did not report spiritual phenomena" (ibid). Personal spiritual values thus play an important role in coping with distress provided, of course, that a person can understand. For instance, one can view the protection of the environment as protecting God's creation, or one can soothe oneself by praying for the environment. These types of religious and spiritual attitudes can assist in combatting the distress of the ecological crisis.

The final strategy mentioned in Folkman's study is to infuse "ordinary events with positive meaning" (1215). These events "spanned a wide range of activities including going to movies, giving a party, going on a trip, or being with a group" (ibid). What made these events meaningful were feelings of connection and care, a "sense of achievement and self-esteem, and having an opportunity to be distracted from everyday cares" (ibid). Since no less than half of "the positive meaningful events" were planned, that suggests "that caregivers recognized the need for a psychological boost and deliberately created opportunities for them" (ibid). What is clear from this study is that mundane events can be "turned into positive events that participants not only appreciated at the time, but also stored in their memories" (ibid). This coping strategy can turn completely ordinary events into sources of positive emotions. This strategy is also one that is intuitively understandable, as it is common to want to find positive meaning in everyday events when under the strain of distressing anxiety. It is then a matter of reinforcing this familiar coping strategy by supporting it when it does occur.

All these strategies share a common theme, namely "searching for and finding positive meaning" (ibid), which is seen by positive "reappraisal, problem-focused coping, spiritual beliefs and practices, and infusing ordinary events with positive meaning [which] all involve the activation of beliefs, values, or goals that help define the positive significance of events" (ibid).

At this point, it is confirmed that distress can be abated by reinterpreting one's emotions and events of daily life in terms of personally meaningful values and beliefs. What is key to note, then, is that *personal meaning* plays a significant role in coping with distressful circumstances, and this type of coping can assist someone in pragmatically resolving the issues causing the distress by helping reenergize the mental resources necessary for problem-solving better than purely focusing on the problem itself.

In conclusion, we see that several solutions have been prescribed in the literature regarding eco-anxiety. It has been derived that the first line of defense in preventing eco-anxiety is for governments to act (and be seen acting) to combat the ecological crisis. If there were no ecological crisis, then there would be no ecological anxiety. Since, however, that is not proving to be realistic or effective in the short term, and with trust in governments dwindling amongst younger populations, it could become the responsibility of public health agencies to spread awareness regarding the issue and the best individual coping methods to assist the afflicted, including assisting the afflicted in problem-solving and collective political action on climate issues. But Ojala's evidence reveals that meaning-focused coping is the superior option, with more positive outcomes for both environmental engagement and pro-environmental behavior. The set of coping methods that Ojala cites from Folkman are organized around one theme, "searching for and finding positive meaning" (1215), as such behavior is helpful not only in coping with distress in one's life but also in helping reenergize the psychological resources necessary for problem-solving.

Section 5. Evaluation of the Literature and Philosophy's Role

I posited in the last chapter that there is a pragmatic form of anxiety that is different from existential anxiety, as there are instances of anxiety that are emotional reactions to the presence of objects that present a potential threat to a person's well-being. This objective anxiety characterizes some of the accounts detailed in this chapter, as the social science literature is focused on the emotional reaction of those who are worried about the potential outcomes of the ecological crisis on their well-being.

The issue here, however, is that it leaves an entire dimension of the phenomena of eco-anxiety unaccounted for. While the research provides an excellent understanding of practical eco-anxiety and its symptoms, it leaves some questions remaining. For instance, it was clear from the research that meaning-focused coping was one of, if not the, best coping method for dealing with this anxiety. However, there was no answer given as to what exactly occurs when the same meaningful values and practices associated with this coping are under threat due to the ecological crisis. For instance, there was research done in Nunatsiavut, Canada regarding how the local Inuit population of Rigolet was handling the changing climate. The research emphasized that "the land surrounding the community is profoundly important, and the resulting connection and sense of place experienced by participants was reported to be deeply and intimately cultural, spiritual, and corporeal, and founded on long ancestral connections to the region" (Cunsolo Willox et al. 542). As the climate changes, however, their traditional way of life and means of sustenance are subject to negative change. For the Inuit in this study, "the land around the community is rapidly changing, leading residents to report climate- and environmental-induced feelings of sadness, fear, anxiety, depression, anger, and distress." (ibid., 545). The researchers conclude that these "localized changes to a sense of place, combined with

the subsequent disruption to hunting, trapping, foraging, fishing, and traveling to cabins, impact the mental and emotional health and well-being of individuals and communities" (ibid).

The threat that ecological degradation poses to the traditional values of the Inuit community highlights a different aspect of eco-anxiety that diverges from the scientific literature. In this instance, it is not just that there are pragmatic concerns in the changing environment, but also socio-cultural ones wherein the type of practices that the Inuit would typically rely on for meaning-focused coping are becoming unreliable or unavailable due to the changing environmental conditions. This is where the demarcation between pragmatic eco-anxiety and existential eco-anxiety will be drawn, as existential eco-anxiety will focus on objectless concerns, including the identity and culture in the Inuit example, but also other existential concerns including, for instance, death.

There are also some political issues, however, regarding the proposals offered or insinuated by the research literature. The first is that the solutions offered are particularly paternalistic, as they tend towards viewing the government as the principal institutional force in resolving climate change and its related mental health effects.[1] These proposed solutions carry a possibly undemocratic character in arguing for an extension of government power in taking care of the psychological well-being of communities, as opposed to providing the adequate means for communities to empower themselves towards resolving these issues.

The second issue is like the first in that it places sole responsibility for resolving the ecological crisis on state actors, instead of arguing for the alternative possibility of democratic modes of engagement for citizens themselves to be active on this issue. For instance, we saw the correlation between government inaction and negative ecological emotions, but the resolution

[1] With particular thanks to Dr. Johannes Steizinger for these insights.

that governments need to act is a simplistic conclusion from that. Instead, it can be argued that alternatives to state action on climate change that are founded on the principle of democratic communal participation could be a better solution in not only resolving the ecological crisis but also giving a sense of empowerment back to those who feel powerless.

We can conclude that there are two roles that philosophy can play in the dialogue regarding eco-anxiety. The first, and the one of primary concern here, is demarcating eco-anxiety in its existential form. As we will see from the works of other philosophers on the topic, eco-anxiety can take a different form from what has been detailed in this literature, and it is important to help clarify what can make eco-anxiety go beyond practical concerns. The second concern, one which is beyond the purview of this work, is that philosophers can evaluate the proposals of the literature when it comes to socio-political recommendations. There needs to be an interdisciplinary dialogue for these two reasons, as eco-anxiety is a phenomenon that requires further clarification beyond the practical, and any political proposals stemming from the literature ought to be subject to philosophical scrutiny.

Section 6. Conclusion

Eco-anxiety, as detailed in the scientific literature, is a distressing emotional reaction – typically felt by the younger global population – to the unfolding ecological crisis. It can have deteriorating effects on a person's overall well-being and is a problem of growing concern among mental health professionals. The solutions that were proposed include increased mental health awareness, the development of coping skills, and government action on ecological issues. This is what typifies the current state of the scientific literature, as most studies and reviews tend to reiterate these trends of thought.

What was not covered in detail were the existential concerns that come with the ecological crisis. While there is an undercurrent of such matters seen in some areas of the research, such as in meaning-focused coping and the difficulties of the Inuit people of Rigolet, the overall focus of the literature has been primarily on a pragmatic form of anxiety, leaving the existential form of eco-anxiety to be somewhat hidden. This is a limitation of the literature I am concerned with, as I maintain that we do not understand the full depth of the phenomenon of eco-anxiety unless we recognize that it has an existential dimension. This other facet of eco-anxiety is necessary to understand to get a fuller picture of what is happening when someone suffers from anxiety over the ecological crisis. The same distinction between practical object anxiety and existential objectless anxiety can be made in the case of eco-anxiety and can help illuminate different aspects of the phenomenon that go beyond the purview of the scientific literature. There are already philosophers engaged in this work, which I will cover in the next chapter, but I will also offer my own definition that differentiates the two types of eco-anxiety and provides a general framework for understanding eco-anxiety in its existential dimension.

Chapter Three

Synthesis and a New Definition of Eco-Anxiety

Section 1. Prior Existential Approaches to Eco-Anxiety

This final chapter will detail some of the current philosophical approaches to eco-anxiety influenced by existentialist thought before offering a different version that attempts to unite them under a common account and provide a clearer depiction of eco-anxiety from a philosophical point of view. Synthesizing the conclusions of the previous two chapters, we see that existential anxiety has a general form, that it is distinguishable from a practical form of anxiety, and that the scientific literature has not provided a clear view of how eco-anxiety can be divided into the two. My next task is to establish how eco-anxiety can be interpreted in terms of existential anxiety in contrast to pragmatic anxiety. It will also be necessary to help show how existential eco-anxiety is unique in that it interweaves many different existential anxieties under one phenomenon.

First, I shall survey philosophical approaches to eco-anxiety that are already present in the literature. The most noteworthy is the work done by Panu Pikhala and Tim Christion Meyers, both of whom have contributed to analyzing and understanding eco-anxiety as fundamentally existential. Pikhala approaches this work in the context of liberation theology and focuses on the anxiety of death, while Christion Meyers focuses on the identity insecurity induced by rapidly deteriorating environmental conditions. Both approaches are useful for understanding how

climate change can induce anxiety, and I will argue that both belong to a singular form of eco-anxiety.

Pikhala proposes that eco-anxiety "can be best understood by characterizing it both as existential anxiety and as related to practical situations" ("Theology" 185). He also views existential anxiety "as essential to eco-anxiety" (ibid., 186). He draws on Paul Tillich's model of existential anxiety, which differentiates three varieties of anxiety, namely, anxiety about "fate and death", "emptiness and meaninglessness", and about "guilt and condemnation" (ibid). He notes that Tillich "thought that death anxiety is a kind of basic anxiety which has connections to all other anxieties" (ibid) and cites research showing "that the ecological crisis often reminds people of death or the possibility of death, which can cause people to utilise primitive defences against such messages and situations" (ibid., 187). Pikhala approaches the ecological crisis through this lens of death anxiety:

> death and the environment are connected on this deep level in two ways. First, there is the universal task of dealing with death as part of growing up, developing a healthy self-awareness, and developing a healthy relationship with the world around oneself. But, second, in the era of the environmental crisis, nature and the environment becomes linked with concrete death-producing or threatening matters. ("Death" 289)

Pikhala is concerned with eco-anxiety as psychologically very similar to anxiety about death, which he elucidates with an example from Shierry Nicholsen, who uses concepts from psychology to characterize the relationship between environmental problems, death, and existential matters. Specifically, she uses Robert Jay Lifton's concept of symbolic immortality, which delineates "various ways in which people seek visible symbols that would allow them to feel that their lives will continue to have meaning even after they themselves are dead" (ibid.,

289-90). These forms include “biological … symbols, especially offspring”, creative, the efforts “to seek lasting importance through a legacy in work or arts”, or what he calls the “theological form,” though noting that Lifton finds that “fewer and fewer people seek symbolic immortality through traditional religions” (ibid., 290). The final source of symbolic immortality is the natural world itself, as “people find relief through believing that at least the natural world will continue living” (ibid).

This is where death anxiety and eco-anxiety correlate, as people “feel that all of the forms of symbolic immortality are under threat, which easily results in hopelessness” (ibid). Eco-anxiety in this interpretation is an existential anxiety about the destruction of important symbolic forms of human permanence. An issue like climate change, being a global threat to the future of the human enterprise, negates these forms of symbolism. In a world where the climate is devastated, there is the hopeless possibility that no permanent marker of our species will continue to exist. Pikhala concludes that the “threats to the existing social order mean that symbolic immortality in the form of legacy of work, or creative work, is threatened. And even the continuity of the natural world itself seems to be under threat” (ibid).

Pikhala’s solution to this collapse of symbolic immortality is a renewed theological approach. He argues that because “of the connections between death and eco-anxiety, any work that helps people to better grapple with mortality helps in environmental efforts” (ibid). He finds that the challenges of handling eco-anxiety is a special one for “religious communities and leaders, including Christian congregations and theologians. Questions related to the meaning of life and mortality are at the core of faith issues, and religious communities have lots of expertise in processing them” (ibid). He concludes that there “is a need for revival of ancient Christian wisdom about the art of dying” (ibid., 291) and aims to provide a model theology of eco-anxiety

"as contextual theology done by people who are affected by the anguish" ("Theology" 182). His approach primarily concerns helping those afflicted by eco-anxiety to deal with their mortality by drawing on eco-theology.

He describes many different methods of assisting someone who is confronting their mortality. He notes that other theories of loss and grief can be applied to environmental themes and that one should take them all into account in connection with the ecological crisis. Another method he proposes is the organization of education and peer groups by religious leaders to discuss eco-anxiety and related ecological themes, as within these groups "people shape each other; there is education and interaction" ("Death" 291). He also refers to the work of Clinebell, Macy, Brown, and others who "have explicitly used death meditation in relation to these themes" (ibid). Essentially these practices are rituals designed to confront mortality, such as imagining one's death "by focusing on the perspective of the future generations", or by focusing on the "mortality of another being, at the same time evoking consideration of one's own mortality" (ibid., 292). In contrast to this, he also offers the insight that "natural settings are often soothing for many kinds of sorrow and loss, and they may help in grappling with mortality" (ibid). He recommends going outside, holding activities outdoors, and visiting special places that are designed "for encountering eco-anxiety and related themes" (ibid).

He especially recommends rituals and worship, as there "is a need to develop new kinds of rituals in order to process eco-anxiety, death, and environmental damage", giving the example of organizing rituals for dead animals (ibid). Another possibility is art, where he sees "numerous possibilities for organizing community art on relevant themes or including art-based methods as part of, say, peer group work on eco-anxiety in congregations" (ibid). Finally, he states that the "practice of mental and spiritual skills is important" (ibid). He recommends that the ancient art of

"*memento mori* (or *carpe diem*) should be complemented by at least two new skills: the 'skill of seeing two levels' and the skill of realizing the seasons of the soul" (ibid). What he means by referring to "seasons of the souls" is that the "natural world has seasons and so does the human mind", which implies that we must engage in "active practice where we keep in mind that it is natural that we have various feelings and emotions" (ibid). The skill of seeing two levels, on the other hand, is therapeutic for those who do not see "the various dimensions of our situation", and thus become overwhelmed (ibid). Developing this skill requires "that we consciously, on a regular basis, focus our attention on both the good and the bad" (ibid). Overall, then, we see that Pikhala offers a variety of salves to soothe eco-anxiety, all with a religious focus.

Pikhala's approach uses Christian environmental theology, ecotheology (or ecological theology), to help those suffering from eco-anxiety positively manage their distress. Since religious communities have dealt with questions of existential meaning and profound loss in the past, he views these communities, including their leaders and scholars, as specially prepared to handle the existential dimension of eco-anxiety, and all his proposals maintain this perspective. His goal is to utilize "various philosophies of hope which seek a kind of middle way between optimism and pessimism", because, he says, framing "the situation simply as a threat or a possibility does not work, for it is neither credible (for most people) nor realistic. Communication must do justice to the amount of losses that have taken place and the grief that people experience" ("Eco-Anxiety" 563-64). He highlights the importance of those he describes as "realist theologians", whose insights "are most appealing to those who share the key ideals of Christian theology, but they do also have a wider appeal" (ibid., 564). He mentions specific theologians, including Paul Tillich, Daniel Day Williams, and Joseph Sittler, who, he says, "had

a realistic, even tragic, view of history, but still they emphasized hope" (ibid., 564). Thus, the type of theology he draws on is meant to be realistic yet still helpful to the eco-anxious.

An issue with Pikhala's work, however, is that it only illuminates one aspect of eco-anxiety. While his focus on death is insightful, it ends up being reductionist in not providing an account that typifies what existential eco-anxiety is in broader strokes. He provides an approach that details only one part of a much larger scheme of what eco-anxiety is, which while admittedly helpful, does not provide a core foundation of the phenomenon in question.

A second objection is that his religious orientation is arguably limiting and possibly misleading. While his argument that religious communities have rich moral traditions to draw on is a sound one, these traditions can only work if people *believe* in them. This is unhelpful for skeptics or those who have reservations about religious traditions and who would be unlikely to seek help from these communities. Religious leaders can, of course, tend to their congregations, but it would be better to arrive at a secular understanding of eco-anxiety with solutions that apply to a wide range of communities. Ecological destruction and its concomitant anxiety are an interdisciplinary issue, and a secular account would better suit the problem.

Tim Christion Myers's work argues, in contrast to Pikhala, that "climate change is received primarily as an existential threat that shuts down ethical reflection", and that this existential threat is not a physical danger but "a threat to the structures of meaning that constitute community or intersubjective identity" (Myers 55). Climate change poses a threat by "calling into question our most basic assumptions about how we ought to live, how we ought to relate to others and to nature going into the future, the *continuity of social existence* is threatened at a collective level" (ibid). Myer applies this point primarily to climate denial, which he views as

explicitly linked to existential anxiety (ibid., 63), but I focus on the relation to the problem of anxiety. He refers to the Husserlian concept of the 'lifeworld' which is a term that:

> denotes the 'pre-given' world people perceive in common to the extent that they have a shared history. It is also the experiential content we share with others to help us make sense of things as properly situated. Ultimately, however, it is the 'horizon' of all possible experience, the shared medium informing a basic culture's relationship to the world of its experience. It is because of the lifeworld that things appear self-evident or obvious, as opposed to the products of interpretation. This, for Husserl, is what enables subjects to communicate and live together in a world of real things, but things that are meaningfully articulated according to historical institutions, present concerns, and future projects. (ibid., 60)

The lifeworld provides an epistemological baseline for understanding how people interpret the world around them in a shared cultural setting. The lifeworld preemptively shapes how we understand ourselves, our society, and the world, operating as an intuitive interpretive foundation of meaningfulness. Lifeworlds are important for "enabling people to make sense of things in meaningful ways, their lifeworld affords them the identity and security necessary to live with purpose and confidence" (ibid). When these lifeworlds are disrupted, trouble can arise.

Myers uses examples from everyday activities that can become problematic with climate change. He states that "when particular things like hammers or cars break, we can simply fix them or get new ones. *Specific* problems at this foreground level can be *handled consciously by the individual*" (ibid., 61). But "what happens when the hammer works fine, but using it to *add on to the house* becomes an issue because a larger house – requiring more energy to heat – will increase carbon emissions" (ibid)? And "what happens when the car works but *the everyday act*

of driving becomes an issue because it contributes to climate change" (ibid)? Myers concludes that these "more general problems *cannot* be handled by individuals alone because here it is the *lifeworld practices we share with others* that are questionable – not the *particular* things that stand out against this larger background" (ibid). As he explains:

> [Since] the normative implications of climate change challenge our most basic background assumptions, we cannot simply treat this deeply systemic issue as a problem to be handled consciously and deliberately, if only people had sufficient knowledge and will-power. Unlike broken hammers and cars, we don't simply become conscious of existential problems affecting the lifeworld in order to fix them. Instead, as Heidegger explains, we become insecure and anxious – often without knowing why or even noticing. (ibid)

We see, then, that climate anxiety is an insecurity not about mortality but about the very underlying structure of epistemological and moral commitments that comprise the foundation of contemporary human society. This includes all aspects of everyday life because every activity we engage in is instigated by our lifeworld's structure. For instance, activities such as employment, sustenance, and recreation, while highly general, can be seen as linked to climate-changing emissions and other environmental harms. When we drive to work, use electronic entertainment, or simply purchase food, our actions can have damaging effects on the environment through the emissions necessary to make these activities possible in the first place. But people continue to pursue these activities because they are part of how they *make sense of the world in relation to each other*, something that Heidegger would understand as the everyday activities of our being. One goes to work, watches TV, and eats supermarket food because that is how we go about our

existence in a world such as ours, but an issue arises when those very activities become problematic, which can lead to anxious insecurity.

Myers argues that if "these implications do indeed threaten the continuity of life by disrupting lifeworld integrity, the anxiety that signals this existential insecurity isn't something we can cope with by ourselves" (ibid., 61-62). Indeed, "because the lifeworld is intersubjective, problems that affect it cannot be addressed in direct unmediated ways" (ibid., 62). Therefore, since climate change is "an intersubjective issue to the extent that it uproots existential assumptions shared in common", then "any viable ethical responses to it must likewise be intersubjective" (ibid). He concludes that "[b]ottom-up community dialogue, rather than the top-down monologue issued by experts and politicians, is the appropriate response to a problem like this. Dialogue is not a substitute for action. It's the wisest path to it" (ibid). This is a similar conclusion to the critiques offered in the last chapter that advocated moving away from such paternalistic approaches.

Myers asserts that anxiety "can paralyze our ability to comport ourselves with integrity, think creatively and consistently, and act with purpose in anticipation of future possibilities" (ibid., 63). As we have seen from the social science research, it can have far more mental health impacts than this, and thus it is clear that resolving lifeworld anxiety is a key step towards positively handling climate anxiety. He highlights that for Heidegger there are two responses to this type of anxiety, the first "can be described as *reactive*, the second as *responsive*" (ibid). He describes the reactive approach "as a willful clinging to the social norms that brought lifeworld (ontological) security in the past", and thus it is a "defensive reaction defined by its attempt to keep one's world intact by any means" (ibid). He uses the example of "traditions that place all faith in some external power like God, the government, the free market, or Gaia to work out our

biggest problems" (ibid). This response is a flight from the existential responsibility of confronting the insecurity arising from a problematic lifeworld, as one instead flees into prior traditions that offer comfort rather than genuine confrontation and reflection.

This contrasts with the authentic response, as once "intuition tells us that the background assumptions we counted on in the past fail to serve us going into the future, the search for a new identity begins with the hope that more secure ways of being in the world can be developed" (ibid., 64). To do this, one must

> step back from the comforting world of social norms in order to see them for what they are – as expressing just one way of life amongst possible others. Once communities develop the ability to learn from their anxiety and ultimately *accept* it – rather than engage in strategies of denial to contain it – people can experience an empowering liberation from fear that allows them to, once again, take a stand in life. This time, however, they address a world that they have, in a sense, owned up to and earned with the insight that meaning is created rather than simply given. (ibid)

The difference between these two responses is "the difference between covering up anxiety via denial and accepting it as a signal that we need to seriously re-evaluate things. Just as pain teaches us what is physically harmful in the world, anxiety should teach us what is existentially harmful about our relationship to it" (ibid., 65). The authentic response, then, is to use the existential responsibility signaled by anxiety to cultivate new, authentic structures of meaning and identity, not individually but rather through "collective projects of meaning-making" (ibid). This approach departs significantly from the other philosophical approaches we have discussed. Myers makes resolving anxiety about one's insecure lifeworld a matter of collaboration and collective responsibility from within the community.

This understanding of lifeworld insecurity is a powerful approach, as it not only explains how people in secure environmental conditions can experience eco-anxiety but also helps illuminate cases such as the Inuit in Rigolet. As I had mentioned, the Inuit are suffering beyond practical concerns of subsistence, as their cultural values and practices are under threat because of a rapidly deteriorating environment. They are suffering from a form of lifeworld insecurity in that the socio-cultural norms that they used to orient themselves in the world are coming under threat. This ended up having a deleterious impact on their mental health as they were unable to engage in meaningful activities that could normally be relied upon to help them cope. Thus, we have found an account that can explain, beyond practical concerns, how the Inuit of Rigolet are suffering from the ecological crisis.

The issue that Meyers suffers, however, is the same as Pikhala. His approach, while insightful, only captures a sliver of the phenomenon under analysis. It tells us something about eco-anxiety and some of what can occur but does not provide a full account of what eco-anxiety is when it is viewed from an existential lens, which is a view that I will provide.

Section 2. A New Account of Eco-Anxiety

I established in the first chapter that there can be a generalized account of what existential anxiety is, as it is possible to trace out the general elements that unify existential anxiety accounts and give a definition that provides a whole picture of what it is. My definition was that *existential anxiety is a phenomenon wherein one experiences mental states of uneasiness over the objectless possibilities entailed by core conditions of our being qua being*. I would argue further that this definition already incorporates the two accounts given by Pikhala and Myers well enough.

For Pikhala, this is seen in the fact that I already detailed why I maintain mortality can be a cause for existential anxiety. The primary difference here is that I rewrote the account to better delineate between practical anxiety over death, and existential anxiety as something that follows from being a being that has mortality as a condition of itself. This rethinking was meant to better align the death-based accounts of other philosophers with other notions of existential anxiety such as identity or freedom. Thus, we can say that Pikhala's approach is modified under my account by adding the caveat that when he refers to existential anxiety over death, he is not referring to necessarily practical anxieties about death but rather the objectless possibility of non-existence entailed by mortality as a condition of who we are. Pikhala is right to focus on death as an area of existential concern when it comes to eco-anxiety. Still, we must be careful to first make sure that this anxiety can be distinguished from practical anxiety, and that we can understand this anxiety under a generalized form that helps connect other interpretations of eco-anxiety.

This brings us back to Meyers, whose usage of the concept of the lifeworld also arguably fits under the definition I have given. The concept of a lifeworld is something that is borrowed from Husserl and has remarkable similarities to arguments made by his student Heidegger (cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time* 9). The concept of a lifeworld is something that fits well into the argument I made that we are reflexive beings, as we are discussing a wide range of values, beliefs, and ideas that comprise the world as it is given to us. Johannes Müller-Salo, writing in the same vein as Meyers in connecting the lifeworld to climate change, summarizes the everyday lifeworld as "the world already and always given to us in a mode of certainty. We possess practical knowledge about it and develop routines to navigate smoothly through it, to master it competently in our everyday life" (332-333), which again is similar to Heidegger's

understanding of the everydayness of being. This concept of the lifeworld fits into the idea that anxiety is over conditions of our being as beings, as a condition of who we are as beings is to be in a lifeworld. But a lifeworld also entails objectless possibilities in that it is capable of change when those given norms come under threats that cause lifeworld insecurity, which Meyers covered extensively. We can see then that his account fits under the generalized form I have given if we modify it with the caveat that lifeworld insecurity can instigate other existential anxieties. Lifeworld insecurity, which becomes anxiety, can cause other anxieties to instigate, such as death anxiety, which I will detail later.

The issue remains, however, as to how my definition relates to eco-anxiety. I have given an account of what existential anxiety is, but it now becomes a question of how exactly it can explain the phenomenon of eco-anxiety in its existential form. What I think is fortunate about this, however, is that all this requires is a simple extension of my already given definition. My account of eco-anxiety is *existential **eco**-anxiety is a phenomenon wherein one experiences mental states of uneasiness over the objectless possibilities entailed by core conditions of our being qua being **and is caused and thematized by the ecological crisis.*** What is captured here is that general existential anxiety and existential eco-anxiety have no difference, except for the fact that eco-anxiety is instigated as a response to a set of changing ecological circumstances and that these circumstances are what endow these anxieties with a specific orientation towards ecological content.

For example, when we looked at death previously, we saw that the condition of mortality can cause existential anxiety by reminding one of the possibilities of their eventual non-existence. I distinguish this from a practical fear of death, wherein an object in the world causes a practical worry about actual death, as opposed to death as an inevitable consequence of a

condition of our being. To reiterate, existential death anxiety is an anxiety about the inevitability of no longer being, and as we saw in Pikhala's work, there are typically forms of symbolic immortality that try to cope with this eventuality.

The question remains, how does this change when it comes to eco-anxiety? Pikhala highlighted a critical notion that the ecological collapse threatens forms of symbolic immortality and triggers existential death anxiety, and thus we can see that the ecological crisis is the instigating historical event that brings about this anxiety. We can then view existential eco-anxiety as both being a result of and flavored by contemporary ecological issues, and in drawing a direct relation between this set of historical circumstances and the existential anxiety in question we find the demarcation between existential anxiety and its ecological variant.

This leads, however, to the next point of consideration. Is eco-anxiety a singular phenomenon or are there multiple different instances of it? Something that is left vague in the literature is a clear answer as to whether eco-anxiety is a singular phenomenon composed of many interlocking anxieties, or if there are multiple variants of eco-anxiety. In other words, is it *eco-anxiety* or *eco-anxieties*? It is intuitive from the definitions I have supplied thus far that these anxieties are separate instances of a basic generalizable form of existential anxiety, and that what differs from instance to instance is what existential concern the anxiety is about. For instance, while anxiety about death from climate change and lifeworld insecurity are different anxieties by virtue of their existential concerns, they can fit under a singular definition of what eco-anxiety is. Thus, there are eco-anxieties, but they all share a similar base form. They do, however, tend to interweave and interact in ways that go beyond singling them out. For instance, the changing of one's lifeworld, such as certain socio-cultural practices, can in turn instigate anxiety about the loss of a form of cultural symbolic immortality. Therefore, while it is still the case that they will

be referred to as existential eco-anxieties, it is prudent to recognize that they interact beyond these singular instances and can become more complex in their relationship with one another. When we take many of these anxieties together, we can understand each of them as forming a constitutive part of our whole relationship to the environment, and each one plays an interconnected role in how we understand ourselves in an ecological framework.

The last point of consideration in this account is the fact that it is a *historical* one. A key feature of the account I have given is that eco-anxiety is in response to the ecological crisis, which is a specific historical moment. There was initially the intuition that eco-anxiety, much like existential anxiety itself, could be viewed as an ahistorical phenomenon. This would mean that an account of eco-anxiety could presumably be applied to any point in history wherein an individual's experiences fit the criteria I had given. But I argue that this would undermine the immensity of the historical moment we are currently in. The reason that eco-anxiety is a phenomenon of particular importance to us is that it is the product of the overwhelming impact humanity has had on the Earth's ecological systems through our collective socio-economic enterprises. This is a singularly unique moment in the history of humanity, and eco-anxiety when properly understood, is a product of the Anthropocene era and ought to be treated as such, something that I will detail further on.

Section 3. Further Expanding the New Account

I have already shown how this definition can account for other approaches to eco-anxiety, but there is the wider question of what we gain in understanding the phenomena under this definition. The first, as I have briefly mentioned, is the demarcation between pragmatic and existential anxiety, which I maintain constitutes a primary focus of this general definition. The

second is that this account recognizes the complex nature of eco-anxiety, as while I had passingly mentioned the interweaving of different eco-anxieties and the historical moment behind them, this account can help us structure how exactly something of that nature occurs. Finally, I will explain how exactly self-cultivation occurs under this framework.

As I established in the first chapter and as we saw in the second, there exists anxiety of a practical nature that can be confusingly mixed with existential anxiety without a clear barrier as to how these two phenomena are different. It is important to recognize that those afflicted with eco-anxiety may present two different forms of anxiety that are oriented toward different facets of the ecological crisis. The more recognizable of the two is the pragmatic anxiety that is oriented toward future *objective* threats. These threats can include imminent ones, including storms, droughts, heat waves, and so on. But some threats are further into the future, and while they may be a reality already for some disadvantaged communities around the world, are yet to happen in the more socio-economically secure places. For instance, threats such as starvation, warfare, and crime can be linked back to the long-term effects of the ecological crisis but are not yet imminent, and yet can cause pragmatic eco-anxiety as the afflicted worry about them as the outcomes of the ecological crisis.

In comparison, existential eco-anxiety does not possess this objectivity. It is concerned, as previously mentioned, with objectless possibilities entailed by core conditions of our being qua being, which means that it is not concerned with practical threats to well-being. As we saw with Pikhala and Myers, it is concerned with things like our mortality and our lifeworld, as opposed to the practical threats posed by the ecological crisis. There are further examples highlighted by Passmore and company in their article “Eco-Anxiety: A Cascade of Fundamental Existential Anxieties”. They too argue that “the chronic, broad sense of eco-anxiety over

degradation of the greater-than-human natural environment is triggering a cascade of fundamental existential anxieties" (Passmore et al. 2). For instance, they argue that identity, a core condition of our being, is under threat because of degrading environments that would normally help shape our identity (ibid., 3-4), something we had already seen in the case of the Inuit of Rigolet. They also mentioned anxiety over death (ibid., 6), the possible dwindling of meaningful experiences with nature (ibid., 5), or how the ecological crisis affects human experiences of freedom (ibid., 7-8).

While it is beyond the scope of this piece to provide an exhaustive summary of these manifestations of eco-anxiety, they share the same characteristics in that they are objectless and result from who we are as beings. This differentiates them from the pragmatic anxiety that is concerned with our material well-being, as these anxieties are concerned with conditions of identity, meaning, freedom, and mortality, all of which are a part of who we are as self-reflexive individuals. The reason this is an important distinction to understand is that these anxieties mean very different things to the afflicted, and properly recognizing the difference can allow one to cope and learn from them.

For example, take wildfire. The evidence regarding climate change suggests that wildfires will become more common in the future (IPCC 9). Suppose that you were someone who was directly experiencing a dangerous wildfire. The fire is posing a direct threat to your well-being, and thus in an instance like this, you would be experiencing legitimate fear for your safety. If, however, the wildfire has only been forecasted, you would then be experiencing anxiety about the upcoming event, which is pragmatic anxiety. If this becomes connected to the larger ecological crisis, it becomes pragmatic eco-anxiety. When it comes to existential eco-anxiety, it becomes less clear how this direct connection can be made. The wildfire can be seen

as the consequence of a problematic lifeworld, or it can change the natural environment in a way that causes anxiety over one's identity concerning the place they inhabit. The wildfire is no longer the object source of the anxiety, but rather the existential characteristics of our being and how they relate to either the instigating or possible consequences of the fire itself become the primary concern.

We can glean some critical lessons from this example then. The first is that pragmatic eco-anxiety needs to be differentiated from normal practical anxiety by understanding that it is connected to a larger objective threat, in this case, the ecological crisis. The second feature to recognize here is that these differing levels of anxiety and fear will require different approaches to cope with them. For instance, the anxiety over an imminent storm would require a problem-focused solution in preparing for the storm, whilst the existential worries regarding this example would require the self-cultivation I previously mentioned, which I will detail later. We can recognize, however, that existential eco-anxiety is different from pragmatic anxiety in the lack of a material object. But we also can recognize that numerous forms of this existential eco-anxiety can interplay in a situation of this nature.

> Bruno Latour provides a further example of existential eco-anxiety in *After Lockdown*:
>
> Now I feel like I have to make an effort and haul along at my back a long trail of CO_2, that won't let me buy a plane ticket and take off, and that now hampers my every movement, to the point where I hardly dare tap at my keyboard for fear of causing ice to melt somewhere far away […] as soon as I try to fill my trolly, the uneasiness intensifies: this cup of coffee is ruining a patch of the tropics; that tee-shirt is sending a child into poverty in Bangladesh; from the rare steak I was eating with relish emanates puffs of methane that are further accelerating the climate crisis. (3)

What we see in this example is Latour suffering from the knowledge that his current lifeworld practices are creating disastrous results for the environment, but also that this further impacts his freedom and self-identity. He has become unable to fully express his being because of the knowledge of the destructive impact humans can have on the environment and one another. Lifeworld insecurity interweaves with other anxieties, and thus eco-anxieties tend to become interrelated.

For instance, much of what Pikhala is concerned about, including the loss of symbolic immortality, is related to lifeworld values and beliefs becoming problematic due to the changing environment. We can no longer rely on the same answers that worked before in instilling a meaningful form of immortality for us as beings, and thus we are sent scrambling for answers. The diminishing environment of the Inuit of Rigolet provides an example as well, as the changing environment impacts their sense of identity related to place and their shared lifeworld practices. This can then turn into anxiety about the possibilities of death and freedom because of ecological degradation. I provided a general definition that allows us to identify relations between eco-anxieties because of their shared general structure, and thus we can clarify the relationships between these disparate eco-anxieties.

This is then what leads back to the concept of self-cultivation. As I had detailed in the first chapter, self-cultivation was understood to be the process of using anxiety as a signal for the development of one's perspective toward new and more meaningful answers. Self-cultivation is the process of using philosophy to inculcate new values, beliefs, and ideas that comprise an individual's view of themselves and the world. While for Kierkegaard anxiety was meant to lead to divinity, and for Heidegger it was – arguably – authenticity, existential eco-anxieties are resolved usually by a more ecologically centric worldview or by re-examining one's perspective

under the new findings of scientific ecology. In essence, existential eco-anxieties are a signal that one needs to reformulate their perspective to the new ecological setting that one finds oneself in.

This is the purpose that existential eco-anxiety serves. As was detailed previously, existential anxiety is a signal and starting point for future philosophical reflection based on the insecurity of past interpretations of specific reflexive conditions of the self. The shift here, however, is that such anxiety is instigated by a particular historical event and is thematized by unique characteristics according to this origin. It requires a similar solution, a rethinking through philosophical reflection of the past interpretations of the self, but instead now takes an ecological dimension because of its basis in the ecological crisis. The shift, then, is that the philosophical reflection instigated by this situation requires the eco-anxious to engage in *ecological* philosophical reflection. The self-development advertised as authenticity by Heidegger, or as a path to divinity for Kierkegaard, is now about shifting one's interpretation of the self and world towards the ecological. This is exemplified by Pikhala's favor towards ecotheology as a response to existential eco-anxiety. Myers' writing also agrees with this conception of self-cultivation, as he states that "authentically responding to it [anxiety] is the difference between covering up anxiety via denial and accepting it as a signal that we need to seriously re-evaluate things. Just as pain teaches us what is physically harmful in the world, anxiety should teach us what is existentially harmful about our relationship to it" (Myers 65). Thus, self-cultivation in this instance is philosophical reflection on many different manifestations of eco-anxiety, all of which constitute the relationship between us and the environment.

Despair under this account would take either two forms. The first is that someone could be overwhelmed by the existential eco-anxiety to the point of paralysis. A common motif throughout the eco-anxiety literature is the notion that eco-anxiety can stifle action through its

overwhelming nature, and in this case, it would prevent someone from conducting the self-cultivation required to successfully grow from their eco-anxiety. The second form of despair, anxiety *about* anxiety, takes the form of denial. Instead of confronting the implications of one's existential eco-anxiety, one could instead opt to deny the instigating circumstances altogether and attempt to avoid having to deal with the situation.

Overwhelming despair requires active dialogue and a sense of hope to counteract. Offering new philosophical alternatives is a way to counteract the sense of paralysis inflicted by an overwhelming anxiety, as by offering feasible pathways to new perspectives one can be given a sense of hope that the anxiety can be resolved. As for denial, however, that topic is well beyond our scope here, as there is a far wider literature concerned with ecological denial. For now, we can conclude that in some cases denial is a method of avoiding existential eco-anxiety.

But we must also avoid accidentally mischaracterizing self-cultivational conclusions that could be mistaken for despair of a sort. For instance, Roger Scranton offers an explicitly Buddhist conclusion to climate change:

> If the bad news we must confront is that we're all gonna die, then the wisdom that might help us deal with that news arises from the realization that it was going to happen anyway. This self, this existence, this "I" was always already dying, always already dead, always already passing from moment to moment in the flux of consciousness, matter, and energy, nothing more than breath. And if I can understand my very own self as impermanent, transient, and insubstantial, how much more insubstantial is a civilization, a "way of life," a set of habits and structures and prejudices built and believed in and sustained by oh so many insubstantial selves? Breathe in, breathe out. Watch it come. Watch it go. (Scranton)

We can view this as a meaningful and reflective response to the ecological crisis. Scranton turns the notion that climate change is an irreversible calamity into an insightful interpretation of the human condition by drawing on the tradition of Buddhism. He utilizes his anxiety to self-cultivate by drawing on an ancient wisdom tradition, which is identical to Gowan's account. There is the dissenting opinion, however, that Scranton's response is a form of despair in itself (cf. Malm 133-161), considering it expounds a form of defeatism that runs counter to theorists who argue that positive political action is not just the way to combat the ecological crisis, but also existential eco-anxiety.

Devin Guthrie, writing in an article wryly entitled "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Eco-Apocalypse: An Existential Approach to Accepting Eco-Anxiety", comes to a similar conclusion as Scranton. He states that "eventually, the heat death of the universe would have erased any indication humans ever existed. People's end, individual and collective, was always inevitable. If people can accept their individual deaths and the heat death of the universe, it is not so hard to imagine accepting eco-apocalypse" (215; see also Bringhurst and Zwicky), and that this acceptance "is the door through which new meaning waits" (216). For Guthrie, accepting eco-apocalypse *is* the gateway towards new meaning and thus is a self-cultivational act, although such an acceptance of ecological collapse can appear to be a form of defeatism to others, he concludes with a more hopeful statement that although "there is a cause to grieve for a lost future, there is also cause to work for a better present. Humanity is dying, and so it must decide how to live" (218).

Whilst under my account Scranton's and Guthrie's responses still fit, the notion that there is a specific correct way to self-cultivate will be discussed later. For now, we can conclude that

there are forms of self-cultivation that, whilst exhibiting answers that are mistaken for forms of despair, are considerate self-cultivation responses of their own.

Section 4. Objections and Considerations

There are other points to consider before we can consider the account fully detailed. There are some key questions and considerations that intuitively arise at first, including the possibility of similar forms of anxiety historically, the alternative of using Myer's account, the lack of *specificity* when it comes to *what to do*, and the problem of resource distribution regarding the ecological crisis.

I had argued that existential eco-anxiety, as opposed to normal existential anxiety, is a historical product of the Anthropocene era. It arises due to contemporary socio-economic practices causing widespread environmental changes beyond what is considered normal. But this is not the first time that wider human society has been threatened with possible annihilation and the sense of impending doom that comes with that threat. For instance, during the height of the Cold War, there was a concept known as Nuclear Anxiety, which was anxiety regarding the "expectation of a world/nuclear war and evaluation of the general and personal consequences of a world/nuclear war" (Smith 558). There was a clear reason to be anxious since if "nuclear war erupt[s], the United States, the Soviet Union, and other nuclear powers have enough destructive capacity to kill hundreds of millions and end modern civilization and perhaps, from nuclear winter or from radioactive poisoning, to annihilate all human life" (ibid., 557).

The report concluded that "nuclear anxiety does not appear to be a raging neurosis" as expectations of "nuclear war and worries over nuclear arms generally follow the fever chart of international crises and have not shown any long-term, secular growth" (ibid., 561). There was

still, however, "a decided and monotonic tend" regarding nuclear survival "with the public's evaluation of the consequence of nuclear war becoming more pessimistic over time" (ibid.). Nuclear anxiety flared up whenever international politics reminded people of the possibility, but the only stable trend was regarding the actual outcome of that possibility. Regardless of the findings, this concept does share similarities with eco-anxiety, as people shared a fear of possible doom that is akin to the practical form of eco-anxiety.

This concept of nuclear anxiety also shares some similarities with existential eco-anxiety, at least in the manifestation offered by Pikhala. The threat of nuclear war *does* threaten the same forms of symbolic immortality that Pikhala was concerned with, and the threat of death would usher in anxieties about mortality. I would still argue, however, that eco-anxiety is a unique phenomenon that *does not* have a historical precedent. While nuclear anxiety shares similarities, the historical moment of the environmental crisis is different, as the prevailing modernist attitude of exploitation towards nature has been diminished by ecological findings. The past interpretations of nature being a passive background for the human enterprise, which has dominated much of Western history, are now undone by the emergence of the environment as a dynamic agent that reacts to our collective decisions. As Latour states in *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*:

> Humans have always modified their environment, of course, but the term designated only their surroundings, that which, precisely, encircled them. They remained the central figures, only modifying the decor of their dramas around the edges.
>
> Today, the decor, the wings, the background, the whole building have come on stage and are competing with the actors for the principal role. This changes all the scripts, suggests

> other endings. Humans are no longer the only actors, even though they still see themselves entrusted with a role that is much too important for them. (43)

Therefore, the Anthropocene era, as it has been called by some ecological scholars, is an important shift in human history. We are moving into a different period wherein nature plays a decisive role and must be considered in any endeavor we undertake. As a result, this leads to a resurgence of existential anxiety, as the conditions of our self-reflexive beings open objectless possibilities because of this historical change. In other words, it is up to individuals to reconsider their prior perspectives because of the historical circumstances of the Anthropocene.

We can consider existential eco-anxiety a historical, and unique, phenomenon. It is the product of a specific set of historical circumstances that changes how humans ought to view themselves individually and collectively in relation to the environment. This is a situation that lacks a clear historical precedent, as nuclear anxiety was a situation where human political actors were posing a significant threat to the collective species because of ideological commitments, whilst eco-anxiety is concerned about the changing environment and the failure of past interpretations of the self and society considering the Anthropocene era. Lifton summarizes this by stating that "we needn't start a war or make use of nuclear weapons. We needn't do anything—other than what we are already doing—to endanger the future of our species" (Lifton 3). Devin Guthrie agrees with Lifton, concluding that "people feel they have more agency over nuclear apocalypse than eco-apocalypse" and argues that even "if the average person can do nothing to prevent missiles flying, a person still chooses whether or not to press Launch" (213). It is this critical distinction in terms of human agency that differentiates nuclear anxiety and eco-anxiety as different phenomena.

Related to this idea of the Anthropocene is the objection that lifeworld insecurity can serve as the definitive account of eco-anxiety. I described the lifeworld account as being powerful, as it can explain much of what is occurring when we are discussing existential eco-anxiety. The notion that the environment is emerging as a dynamic actor in response to human activity is a key part of why the lifeworld is becoming insecure, as prior interpretations of the environment under our lifeworld took it as a passive background. The lifeworld structures we depended upon for shared meaning have become disoriented by a shifting environmental dynamic, and as a result, prior shared understandings of identity, freedom, mortality, and self now need to be reinterpreted under an Anthropocene lens, and thus our lifeworld must be rethought because of our collective changing relationship with the environment. Therefore, could we not consider lifeworld insecurity *just as* the root and explanation of what existential eco-anxiety is, as opposed to my answer?

I have two responses to this consideration. The first is that existential anxiety is an *individual* phenomenon, and lifeworld insecurity is a *collective* issue that then becomes translated into an existential anxiety. The breakdown of a lifeworld is when "the *continuity of social existence* is threatened at a collective level" (Myers 55). It is when the "*lifeworld practices that we share with others*" become questionable that we encounter lifeworld insecurity (ibid., 61). But to say it is the foundation of all existential eco-anxiety would be problematic in that existential eco-anxiety can occur without lifeworld insecurity. For instance, mortality being a concern for people regarding climate change does not necessitate that the shared structures of social existence are threatened but is rather a consequence of the fact that climate change instigates reflection on that condition of our being. Lifeworld insecurity can serve as an

explanation as to why some existential anxieties occur along with the insecurity, but that does not necessitate that it is fundamental to an understanding of it as an individual phenomenon.

The second reply is that there is disagreement as to whether lifeworld insecurity is common here in the West. Johannes Müller-Salo, who also adopts the lifeworld approach, argues that "the climate crisis does not yet affect our everyday lifeworlds in relevant ways" (333), and argues further that climate change-related experiences "first, depend on a high degree of awareness that only a minority of Western citizens possesses. Second, these experiences are no disturbances of our everyday lifeworlds, they do not interrupt our routines, prevent us from doing the things we normally do etc." (333n15). We are, as of writing, still embroiled in many of our day-to-day activities in ways that do not accurately reflect the notion that our lifeworld is threatened. We are, as Heidegger would put it, still mostly our everyday inauthentic selves. Thus, the type of existential eco-anxiety that would be common here would not necessarily be of the type that Myers is concerned with since lifeworld insecurity is arguably still not a common enough issue.

The next objection deals with not only existential eco-anxiety as I have described it, but with the social science literature's proposals that were offered in the last chapter. We have a limited number of resources and time to deal with the environmental crisis, and there are many fruitful avenues we could pursue, including assisting those countries that are already suffering from the worst effects. We could also focus on redistributing emissions, including cutting down on luxury emissions of those polluters who are affected the least by the environmental crisis (cf. Shue, Malm 90-92). Acting and doing something positive about the environmental crisis would diminish anxiety. Therefore, why should we focus our resources and time on an issue such as anxiety when we are at a critical juncture where such things are precious?

But I would argue that such an objection misunderstands the situation. Understanding and acting upon eco-anxiety, both in its existential and pragmatic forms, *is* a method of dealing with the environmental crisis. When we use certain forms of practical anxiety coping, such as problem-solving or meaning-focused, these approaches are attempts to improve the collective situation and focus on the positive elements of how this situation enables us to engage in meaningful activities. When it comes to existential eco-anxiety, it is through the process of self-cultivation, by engaging with the objectless possibilities precipitated by the environmental crisis, that one not only resolves their anxiety but also provides a framework from which future environmental activity can start. That is to say, the process by which we deal with anxiety in these cases becomes just the same as positively reacting to the environmental catastrophe. When we are inspired to rethink our prior perspectives from existential eco-anxiety, we are doing the foundational theoretical work that serves as the justification for later environmental activity. When someone argues that we ought to cut down on luxury emissions, for whatever reason they choose, they are engaging in the same work that resolves existential eco-anxiety by giving answers to questions entailed by it, such as what to do in a situation such as ours. It would be a mistake to ignore anxiety as an extraneous phenomenon, but rather we ought to recognize it as a part of the process of resolving environmental issues in the Anthropocene. Existential eco-anxiety, in the account I have given, is the beginning of the process of creating the ecological perspectives necessary to prevent the worst effects of the current ecological downward spiral.

This leads straight into another critical objection, however, as this work has been undertaken by philosophers, theologians, and other academics who have been involved in ecological work for a while. We did not need eco-anxiety as I have described it to conduct this work. This work is also the material upon which we can reflect to resolve existential eco-anxiety

as well. Thus, why is existential eco-anxiety such a concern when we have already been conducting the work that resolves it for a while? Why do we need it as a signal for self-cultivation?

We must recognize in this situation, however, that the work undertaken by the intellectual vanguard is *not* reflective of the wider popular consciousness. While it is certain that the Western intelligentsia has conducted decades of work in ecological thought, the public sphere will not necessarily reflect this. The phenomenon of existential eco-anxiety shows that individual perspectives must be rethought considering new ecological insights, but to simply say that this work has already been done is a misunderstanding of the situation. Philosophers, theologians, and other academics must play an *active* role in advancing alternative perspectives to resolve existential eco-anxiety, which is an involved dialectical process. Myers argues that a bottom-up "community dialogue, rather than the top-down monologue issued by experts and politicians, is the appropriate response", a conclusion I share (Myers 62). Whilst we do have plenty of material to pull from, it is a matter of actively using that material in a way that reshapes the perspectives that make up our wider populace.

This leads to the final objection regarding my account, as I have left the particulars of self-cultivation vague. Is there a specific answer to posit in this situation? I have made it clear that drawing on ecological insights is necessary to resolve a case of existential eco-anxiety. Still, the particulars are determined on a case-by-case basis. I do not carry the same conclusion as other philosophers, particularly Kierkegaard or Pikhala, in that a case of existential anxiety ought to have a particular outcome. They have a disposition toward understanding existential anxiety as a tool for connecting to divinity. I, however, leave it in the hands of the individual to determine, based on their circumstances, how to reflect upon existential eco-anxiety.

I have been concerned with describing the phenomena, demarcating it, and providing a framework for understanding how a resolution is to be carried out. I think it would be, however, improper to argue for what I necessarily think the answer is when it comes to existential eco-anxiety. It can be ecological theology, a rethought political ideology, or an artistic or moral standpoint that helps someone grow from their case of existential eco-anxiety. But it would be misguided to assume that there is one answer that all eco-anxious individuals ought to adopt. Rather, it is up to them to individually incorporate ecological insights into their perspective to cope with existential anxiety. That is a task that is left to everyone according to their circumstances. While academics, particularly philosophers, ought to be involved in this process, it must be done in a democratic way that prevents a paternalistic approach from being adopted, which avoids the pitfalls of the solutions proposed in the last chapter. Academics, while the intellectual vanguard, should help foster a democratic community that allows for the flourishing of new ecological perspectives, as opposed to authoritatively dictating ideological commitments for others to adopt. While the last chapter discussed the reliance on governments in solving eco-anxiety, we cannot just replace the governments with intellectuals, and instead ought to focus on creating a society that can allow for individuals to democratically collaborate towards new ecological perspectives through an involved dialogue.

Section 5. Conclusion

Existential eco-anxiety, as I have described it, is uneasiness over the objectless possibilities entailed by core conditions of our being because of the ongoing ecological crisis and is flavored by those ecological concerns. It is a historically situated phenomenon and a response to new insights regarding the relationship between humans and their environment. While there

are eco-anxiety accounts that attempt to focus on a particular aspect of eco-anxiety, as seen from Pikhala and Myers, the more general view I offer is that existential eco-anxiety is a phenomenon like existential anxiety discussed by past philosophers, with the distinguishing characteristic that it is caused by a set of surrounding circumstances that are unique to our point in history.

Regardless, however, the solution becomes something different from the coping methods offered in the last chapter concerning the social science literature. Self-cultivation, a term that has a historical precedent with other philosophies, is the notion that this phenomenon of anxiety can be interpreted as a starting point to rethink one's individual perspective regarding the shifting environmental circumstances and to integrate these new ecological insights into their everyday worldview. I have left the particulars up to the discretion of those afflicted, but I provide an account that describes and demarcates the phenomena in enough detail to give a starting point to understanding and growing from it.

The benefit of this account is that it gives us a definition of what eco-anxiety is in a basic generalizable structure. While other philosophers have been concerned with providing manifestations of eco-anxiety, I provide an account that gives a basic model of what it is. This model is also derived from past historical accounts of existential anxiety as its basis. This general form of existential eco-anxiety is important as it allows us to differentiate between the pragmatic eco-anxiety popular within the social science literature and existential eco-anxiety literature that attempts to capture something different altogether.

In conclusion, we can see that existential eco-anxiety requires the involvement of intellectuals in helping others rethink their perspectives. We have decades of environmental work to pull from, but we ought to use that work actively to help those afflicted with existential eco-anxiety. Rethinking the frameworks that make up an individual's perspective of themselves

and the world is a critical task toward providing new ways of relating to the environment in such a way as to prevent further ecological catastrophes. It is then the place of philosophers, and other intellectuals, to engage in the ancient practice of active dialogue with those who need guidance in finding a new way of being in the world.

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