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Anxiety: A philosophical guide

Samir Chopra, 2024. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

This book is a readable tour through four main discourses on our human experience of anxiety: the Buddhist, the existentialist, the Freudian and the Marxist. This sounds like the beginning of a joke starting in a bar (or maybe in a falling plane with limited parachutes), but there is not much humour on offer. Samir Chopra's writing comes across as that of an earnest and thoughtful mentor or preacher, much given to a nice turn of phrase, stirring rhetoric and emotional sensitivity.

Chopra's aim is to "provide a philosophical guide to anxiety," (p7) in part an introduction to the relevant philosophies that "concentrate on the human suffering of anxiety and seek its meaning" (p7) and in part describing "how to use philosophical method of some sort to resolve our suffering of anxiety" (p9). He is not offering speedy self-help, however: he makes clear that the book will not alleviate the reader's anxieties. Rather, his hope is that philosophy "can offer understanding, and thus a displacement and possibly a dissolution of the problem: what appears to be a problem is no longer one because in the process of reinterpreting it, we have changed its identity and nature" (p11). While the human condition is such that we will always be anxious, he says, he offers that we do not have to be anxious about being anxious.

Chopra's starting point is his own experience of his parents' deaths when he was twelve and twenty-six, which "infected my life with a persistent dread" (p19). Given that he is promoting a philosophical resolution of anxiety, his medical and demonic metaphors of the impact of their deaths and his own anxiety are interesting – infected, fever, viruses, cursed. He recalls his own therapy and some of the ways in which he then interpreted his anxiety as "constitutive of my being" (p25) and the world around him as "quicksand built on quicksand" (p29). He turned to philosophy as a way of relieving melancholy and anxiety. However, despite a philosophical career, he acknowledges that anxiety has not gone away but that he has accepted it as "vital component of my ever-evolving self" (p34).

The rest of the book expands on the lessons he has drawn from his philosophical exploration. First up is Buddhism, as a treatment for dissatisfaction and suffering, read as acute anxiety and existential discomfort. In this tradition, anxiety arises from delusions about the possibility permanence, of satisfying desire and of an enduring self. As such, anxiety can be alleviated or even

eliminated through the “long and tedious” (p49) road of studying our own consciousness through regular practices of mindfulness and meditation.

Next comes by far the longest section, on existential ideas, indicating his own philosophical preferences. After briefly introducing us to Jean-Paul Sartre’s ideas of freedom and bad faith, Chopra delves more deeply into the work of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Tillich and Heidegger. In contrast to the possibility of any Buddhist enlightenment and relief from anxiety, the existentialists show us that anxiety is baked into our human being: through our living life falsely according to others (Nietzsche), our freedom to choose amid uncertainty (Kierkegaard), awareness of our own death (Tillich) and a combo meal of all of the above (Heidegger).

Chopra’s third philosophical guiding light is psychoanalysis, where he sticks to Freud’s theories without referring to any of his successors or variants. He explains that Freud, always looking for the next best idea, changed his mind over time. Freudian anxiety started off as “dammed up libidinal energy” (p111) resulting from biological problems or social norms. Then it became an internecine conflict of ego, superego and id, an arms race of mental repression. Finally, Freud decided it was a repeated anticipation of early primitive losses and helplessness such as birth and maternal separation.

Lastly, having dealt with metaphysical, ontological and bio-psychological interpretations of anxiety, Chopra turns briefly to the social and political. He recounts Marcuse’s critique of Sartre’s abstraction of anxiety – a particular historical feature of capitalism – into an existential given. He also touches on Marx’s idea of alienation from our work, our world and ourselves, as a situation that engenders anxiety.

In conclusion, Chopra’s view leads him to believe that anxiety is inevitable, and acceptance is the only viable path to a less anxious and more self-aware life than would be ours otherwise, as well as a path to compassion for others. As part of this acceptance, he recommends a couple of spiritual practices, from traditions in both East and West, that will provide some support, including practising attention to the present moment, and attention to the larger world of beauty and complexity around. In doing so, he seems to miss out on a third practice of attention to others, as an expression of the compassion he touches on.

Chopra seems to be hedging his bets in this book. Early on, confusingly, he puts an egg in every basket:

...anxiety is part biological dysfunction, though the causal link between biology and anxiety remains unclear and unspecified; it is partly a function of our natural and built environments, of the primacy of nurture versus nature; it may indicate an acute spiritual crisis for the believer, a failure to come to terms with faith and the demands of existence; it may be an indicator

of a riven and disunified mind haunted by its past; it may be the symptom of an oppressive, alienating culture and society; it may be the very nature of human consciousness.

(p2)

Yes, it could indeed be all or some of these things to all or anyone. It could also be none of these things. Offered at the outset of the book, this attempt at some kind of compressed abstract view across the topic seems obscure, to the point of saying little. If nothing else, it is unclear how to parse a sentence that starts with anxiety as a dysfunction and ends with it as the very nature of our minds.

Later, he acknowledges that anxiety reminds us that we are complex beings “not easily resolved into the atoms of our favourite theories” (p3). Indeed, nothing is resolved in this book, though Chopra seems to favour the existential position (that to be anxious is to be human) relative to the other three approaches which he offers less room.

The book is a helpful introduction to many readers, written as it is in a fluent and non-academic style, albeit perhaps a little repetitive at times. He is right to deny the reader, from the outset, any hope of self-help by reading it. However, for a newcomer to these philosophies, he will take their understanding of anxiety beyond the possibilities of pathology and medication into other realms they can choose to explore further.

Andrew Miller

The Child as Natural Phenomenologist: Primal and primary experience in Merleau-Ponty's psychology

2013. Talia Welsh. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

I am going to cheat a little with words in this review. I am calm and confident with why and how I am going to cheat. In summer 2023, I was discussing word counts with the reviews editor and suggested that this new-fangled artificial intelligence could help her, so why not do a review with it. Then I quickly swallowed my words, as why would I let somebody else take the glory for an idea? I wanted to use ChatGTP with this book as I had read it in May, not written the review and wanted to get it over with. So, I write this in the shadow of the 2023 conference keynote which promoted the idea that ChatGTP could be helpful for my work, and in this area, there is potentially a benefit to my professional productivity.

Let me give you some background. In setting up ChatGTP I logged in with my professional Google account, on the basis that it may know more about me than if I created a new profile linked to nothing. I also gave it this overview of me: