

# Anguish and Anxiety

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1. There is a set of fundamental affective states, attendance to which has been thought to reveal important truths about our existence: and, arguably, none of those states is as revealing about the human predicament as what is denoted by the term “anguish”.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of anguish has become something of a hallmark for the existentialist tradition, often taken to signify some sort a life-changing experience, whose unique character forces upon the subject the acknowledgement of the undeniability of a certain aspect of the human way of being. My concern in this paper is with understanding whether and how the Sartrean view of affectivity may illuminate the phenomenon of anguish. Since anguish makes a strong appearance in the very first chapter of Part 1 of *Being and Nothingness*, it might well be expected that the related discussion may throw considerable light to the ontological grounds of a range of phenomena which occupy current psychology and psychopathology. However, those phenomena are not usually addressed in relation to anguish; instead, the term employed for characterizing such phenomena – both within and outside the existentialist tradition – is that of *anxiety*.<sup>2</sup> It might be thought that this is a mere terminological accident; at most, it might indicate a difference in use, due to the contingencies of academic conventions, rather than some substantial distinction that is allegedly highlighted by the employment of the two terms.

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, S. (1844), Heidegger (1927), Sartre (1943).

<sup>2</sup> Stanghellini et al. (2019b).

In one sense, an appeal to the contingencies that favour the choice of one term over the other is not out of place, since it is precisely such a contingency – how the German word *Angst* found its way in the French philosophical vocabulary in the early 1940's – that partly explains the use of *angoisse*, instead of *anxiete* in Sartre's work. In another sense, though, the issue is hard to resolve; since anguish and anxiety carry different connotations, it is worth asking what might ground one's preference for the one term over the other. We need, I think, to explore how exactly the concept of anguish relates to the concept of anxiety.

In the following section I present some considerations from the semantic history of the two terms, which show why their difference is not as sharp as one might expect. This leads me to adopt, for the sake of the argument, a practical distinction, referring to what Sartre is talking about as cases of anguish, and to what most contemporary researchers explore as cases of anxiety. However, that gives rise to the next issue: how is the Sartrean conception of phenomena of anguish connected, if at all, to what we currently refer to as phenomena of anxiety? It seems obvious that the two types of phenomena are not unrelated – after all, one of the most cited reasons why many psychopathologists invoke Sartrean ideas is how helpful those ideas appear to be in the process of diagnosing certain cases of anxiety. Is anguish the foundational phenomenon exemplified by a variety of anxiety experiences? Or, is it just a sub-type of anxiety, which is the main category, and which may include some rather peculiar affective phenomena, such as the one presented by existentialist thinkers?

I shall offer some considerations which bear upon the interpretation of this dilemma. My analysis will indicate that the Sartrean approach pushes us in the direction of holding on to two affective species; one is anguish (including central cases of anxiety), and the other is fear. Thus, if we endorse a Sartrean perspective, the relevant phenomena seem to fall into two main categories, one concerning a specific way of standing towards oneself (in anguish or in anxiety), the other concerning objects or events which pose a threat to oneself (in fear).

Nevertheless, my remarks do not present a neat resolution of the above issues; rather, they constitute mere fragments of a dialectic that might hopefully prove illuminating in our search for the exact relation between anguish and anxiety.

2. How is “anguish” related to “anxiety”? Answering that question should help us with our inquiry into the reasons why Sartre has chosen the former term over the latter, or, to be accurate, why he opted for *angoisse* over *anxiete*, which as a matter of fact is the French word through which “anxiety” and its cognates enter the European vernacular.<sup>3</sup>

An obvious move in answering that question is to do a bit of lexicographical research into the etymology of the two terms. However, the results of such a research do not furnish us with a neat taxonomy of senses. Take for instance a classic text on passions, such as *De natura hominis* (written by Nemessius of Syria in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD), whose medieval editions contributed to the introduction of the relevant terminology into modern philosophy. When the treatise is translated for the first time into Latin in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Greek term *agonia*, which in Nemessius denotes “a helpless fear of failure”, is rendered as *fatigatio* by Alfonso of Salerno, and simply as *agonia* by Burgundio of Pisa, while the term *anxietas* is used by Burgundio for *achthos*, which in Nemessius denotes the type of *afflictio* or *tristia* that “renders one speechless”.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the term *angustia*, which is at the root of contemporary *anguish*, and thus might be expected to have more literary or spiritual overtones, is instead encountered in *Pantegni*, the medical oriented classification of emotional phenomena based on their physiological antecedents, behavioral consequences, and health-related implications – hence

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lopez-Ibor and Zappino (2019, p. 476).

<sup>4</sup> Knuutila (2004): 233; Nemesius of Emesa (1917) chs 18-21, (1975) chs 17-20.

the emphasis on the bodily profile of *angustia*, that includes a constriction of the throat or the chest that inhibits, or sets specific obstacles, to agency.<sup>5</sup>

Both *angustia* and *anxietas* carry some of the meanings conveyed by the Greek verbs *anchw* (to press tightly, to pull the knot, to suffocate), and *agoniw* (to engage in battle, to compete, to struggle). Perhaps what is shared by all those different terms is a pair of features that are commonly taken to characterize phenomena of both anguish and anxiety: a choking sensation, and a battle with something.

A crucial dimension of the Sartrean *angoisse*, is that it denotes a phenomenon in which, the one I am in battle with, and the one who is pressing the knot, are actually none other than myself. That seems initially to set Sartrean anguish apart from anxiety, as the latter is understood by many contemporary researchers. Nowadays anxiety is commonly interpreted as a response to what is perceived as the non-clearly identified (uncertain, unknown, or uncanny) threat emanating from an external object (be it the funny noises you hear as you walk in the woods, or tomorrow's encounter with the interview panel). Hence, most contemporary discussions of anxiety see it in correlation to the emotion of fear.<sup>6</sup> It would be instructive, therefore, to consider, first, how anxiety is thought to differ from fear. It will be shown that the difference between the two states becomes clearer, when we invoke certain Sartrean ideas about how anguish differs from fear.

3. The standard way of drawing the distinction between anxiety and fear is in terms of their temporal index, their epistemic status, and their intentional focus.

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<sup>5</sup> Pantegni, *Theorica* IV.1; Knuutila (2004): 215; cf. Loper-Ibor and Zappino (2019): 475.

<sup>6</sup> For a fear-focused overview of current research into cases of anxiety see Carleton (2016).

By differences in their temporal index I mean that fear has been defined as present-oriented while anxiety as future-oriented.<sup>7</sup> That sounds intuitively correct, but it cannot be literally the case, for the reason that fear is a response to what is conceived of as a future or forthcoming harm. If the harm were present, the corresponding state would be pain, and not fear *that* such a pain is in the offing; and the exact same point applies to the fear of losing something we hold dear or valuable. Sartre gives us a clue what that difference might be in his discussion of how one relates to oneself in the future: “a situation that provokes fear, in so far as it threatens to change my life and my being from outside, provokes anguish to the extent to which I mistrust my own reactions to the situation” (1943: 66/64). Hence, it cannot be the dimension of the future as such, that demarcates anguish from fear, but something about the way in which one relates to the future in anguish, which is absent from the case of fear. The same, I think, applies to anxiety, when it is triggered in relation to situations that call for a certain reaction on the part of the agent. One’s doubts about one’s ability, first, to identify the norm that is appropriate to apply in the circumstances, and, secondly, to carry through the task prescribed by that norm, is characteristic of what is labelled as “practical anxiety”.<sup>8</sup> Note that, as currently interpreted by several researchers, practical anxiety concerns mainly some sort of information deficit. It is observed, for instance, that individuals anxious about what to do tend to engage in information gathering aimed at helping them work through the uncertainty they face. That brings us to the next demarcation principle between anxiety and fear, concerning the epistemic status of the two experiences.

The epistemic difference between the two phenomena concerns fear’s relation to what is known and certain, while anxiety is linked to what is generally unknown and uncertain.<sup>9</sup> Granted,

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<sup>7</sup> Mineka (2002), Carleton (2016).

<sup>8</sup> Kurth (2018): 67-83.

<sup>9</sup> Bammer (2008), Fergus (2014), Khawanja (2011).

many cases of fear -- say, out in the street, in the face of an attacking dog, or in your bedroom, in the face of a night-burglar -- come with an overwhelming evidence of your emotional state. There are cases of fear, though, that do not come epistemically packaged -- your foreboding about tomorrow's business meeting, for instance, or your fear of the dark, have a built-in uncertainty about them, since you might not be quite sure what exactly you are going through. Cases of anxiety on the other hand, might come with an acute experience of restlessness or disquietude, that leaves you with no doubt as to what you are currently feeling.

Perhaps, when theorists talk about the certainty or uncertainty of those states, they refer not to a subject's awareness of what goes on in his mind, but to the external target of one's affective state. That brings us to the notion of intentionality, which seems to help us demarcate fear and anxiety when the former is conceived as a emotion and the latter is treated as a mood. Anxiety can indeed be conceived as a mood,<sup>10</sup> yet a closer look at certain psychopathological phenomena indicates that it is far from evident that anxiety is not also -- and, in fact, normally -- an emotion.<sup>11</sup>

Anguish, on the other hand, is standardly treated as a mood, not least because of the context from which the term owes its popularity, namely Heidegger's discussion of *Angst* as a *Stimmung* -- indeed as a *Grundstimmung*, a fundamental mood -- in *Being and Time*.<sup>12</sup> Heideggerian *Angst* was first translated in French as *angoisse*, and that is the probably the main reason why Sartre endorses that particular term in the relevant sections of *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>13</sup> Let us assume, for the sake of the discussion, that anguish is a mood, as opposed to fear, that is an emotion, and let us further accept that the two types of affective states differ

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<sup>10</sup> Barlow et al. (2011).

<sup>11</sup> Kurth (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger (1927) sections 28-30, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Richmond (2018): xlvii.

in terms of intentionality. There are, though, two very different ways of invoking intentionality as a demarcation principle. Traditionally, the idea was that moods differ from standard emotions due to their lack of an intentional dimension.<sup>14</sup> Recently, the distinction is drawn not in terms of the presence or absence of intentionality, but on the particular type of intentional relation that each type of affective state bears to the world.<sup>15</sup> Let us look at how those ideas might apply to the case of anguish.

4. Every mood, be it positive, negative, or neutral, appears to have some significance. That significance is double-headed: a mood indicates something for the life of the person undergoing the experience, while it points at a value laden aspect of the surrounding world. That “pointing at” is a kind of intentionality; and its invocation has explanatory value, because it helps to render the whole experience intelligible.

By correlating the experience with salient aspects of a situation, the intentionality of moods appears to enable our understanding why the person is in the mood that he is, by showing why it is reasonable for a subject, in his circumstances, to be so affected. The standard way to present the intentionality of a mental state is by citing the object at which it is directed. The main candidate for an intentional object that is attributed to moods is the whole world.<sup>16</sup> That proposal appears to do justice to the overwhelming character of many moods, the fact that moods pervade our experience, that they suffuse all aspects of our encounter with reality.

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<sup>14</sup> Searle (1998).

<sup>15</sup> De Sousa (1987), Goldie (2000), DeLancey (2006).

<sup>16</sup> For Solomon, moods “are about the whole of our world” (1976, p. 173), while for Lyons moods are “aimed out at the world” (1980, p. 104); cf. Annette Baier (1990, p. 14). Cf. Hatzimoysis (2017) for a critical assessment of alternative ways of supplying intentional correlates to mood states.

Anguish has been presented as a prominent example of a mood directed at the whole world. In anguish I experience a global suspension of the values that sustain my interaction with other human beings, a suspension resulting from a disengagement with the identity I have constructed, and which appears now unable to help me navigate the normative domain. That is what I would call a neo-Kantian version of how anguish is implicated in one's relation to the whole world.<sup>17</sup> There is also the existentialist version of the same point, that is prevalent in the contemporary analysis of the phenomenon. In anguish the world in which I exist has sunk into insignificance; and the world which is thus disclosed is one in which entities can be freed only in the character of having no involvement.<sup>18</sup>

Those are valuable insights into the phenomenology of mood. However, taken literally, the suggestion that the world is the intentional object of our moods is, in my view, problematic for several reasons, one of which applies to anguish specifically, while some of which concern moods in general.

To begin with, the claim that a certain mood amounts to the experience of the world as devoid of significance, sounds to me more like a description of depression, than of anguish. The sense of disengagement with reality, the failure to discover something worth pursuing, not because something else makes a higher demand on your attention, but because nothing of your projects commands anymore your attention, is more a characteristic of depressive states and their correlatives, than it is of anguish.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> I have in mind not any specific claims made in the Neo-Kantian literature (anxiety is peculiarly absent from Neo-Kantian ethics), but the conceptual outlook presented in Korsgaard's lectures on Self-Constitution (2008), as well as various turns of phrase we find in Moran (2001), and Appiah (2005).

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger (1927) Division 1, Ch. 6.

<sup>19</sup> See Radden (2009) on melancholy, and Ratcliffe (2010) on depression.



We need at this point to draw some distinctions that will help us understand the relevant phenomena. We may distinguish between an associated feature – such as a symptom, which is a typical aspect of the clinical picture of a more pervasive mood – and a coexisting complication, that is an additional mood, or in some cases, an additional mood disorder, that is also present. In clinical practice, the simultaneous presence of mood disorders, goes by the name of ‘comorbidity’: anguish and depression present high comorbidity, that is partly explained by their common negative affects, such as seemingly uncaused tension, chronic worry, and irritability.<sup>20</sup> There are, though, elements of each of those moods which are not shared by the other: depression is characterised by anhedonia – the total absence of genuine pleasure - whereas an anguished subject can display high energy, even when in a fit of that mood. It is important therefore, that when it is claimed that anguish is an intentional state directed at the whole world, that our conception of the world is articulated in a way that captures what is distinctive of that particular mood.

There are, however, some general reasons to be skeptical about the proposal to treat not just anguish, but any mood as intentionally directed to the whole world. First, the proposal employs a notion that is not easy to determine. It is not clear whether we are invited to think of the world as a maximally inclusive situation encompassing all others, or perhaps as an object which has in it everything (except for itself), or as the totality of phenomena linked by a complex network of references to each other.<sup>21</sup> It can be retorted that the proposal requires nothing more than a loose understanding of the term, as employed in ordinary contexts. However, that retort does not really answer our query; it rather shows that the appeal of the proposal trades on the ambiguity of the basic term it employs. Secondly, the proposal makes excessive demands on the representational capacities of ordinary subjects. An affective state that is intentionally

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<sup>20</sup> Boelen (2010), Hogen (2015), Mahoney (2012b).

<sup>21</sup> For some classic alternatives see Quine (1960), Lewis (1986), Divers (2002).

correlated to the whole world would entail an ability to form representations that moves well beyond the perspectival, partial, and limited access to one's immediate environment. Thirdly, even if we manage to sort out the above issues, the suggestion that moods are intentionally directed at the world founders on the problem of distinguishability between kinds of affective states. To be outraged with the whole world is not a mood: it is an intense (in its phenomenal quality) and global (in its intentional content) emotion.<sup>22</sup>

The preceding discussion indicates some of the limitations of the intentionalist approach to moods. The problems of intentionalism do not imply that we should treat moods as a purely internal affair. A mood, just like any other affective phenomenon, is not detached from the world; neither is it a clog of mental machinery, that can be added or subtracted from the rest of one's psychological make-up; rather it is how the whole of oneself is living through a particular situation. By "living through" I mean both conceiving of and responding to a situation.<sup>23</sup>

The notion of a response to a situation is particularly significant for the present discussion, since it appears to mark a point of convergence between the Sartrean approach to affectivity as a kind of conduct,<sup>24</sup> and contemporary approaches to anxiety as a form of behaviour that is set off in the face of an uncertain threat. Is, after all, anxiety the general phenomenon, within which existential anguish might fall?

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Jesse Prinz (2004).

<sup>23</sup> The fact that emotive states constitute, inter alia, a type of *response to* a situation is well brought out in attitudinal approaches to affectivity, such as the one proposed by Deonna and Teroni (2012); for critical discussion see Dokic and Lemaire (2015), Tappolet (2016). Cf. Hatzimoysis (2014b), for the need to retain a clear distinction between *emotional* and *practical* responses to a demanding situation.

<sup>24</sup> Sartre (1940): 199, n. 25.

6. I have been talking about anxiety as if it were a single state. However, there are several phenomena that come under the heading of anxiety, most often defined in their acute form, as types of psychological malfunction. We thus have panic disorder -with or without agoraphobia-<sup>25</sup>, anxieties triggered over specific items - such as heights, injections, or enclosed spaces<sup>26</sup>-, obsessive-compulsive disorders – crucially characterised by the recurrence of intrusive thoughts and repetitive forms of conduct<sup>27</sup>– and posttraumatic stress disorder, with a distressful, yet persistent re-experiencing of aversive events, followed by the agitated response to seemingly unrelated events.<sup>28</sup>

Note that those categories present anxiety through its disorders; in fact, it has become increasingly difficult, esp. in the psychological literature, to think of anxiety as anything but a disorder. The emphasis on the pathological nature of anxiety is one of the factors that matters to therapeutic interventions; the other factor is the delimitation of each anxious experience around a specific stimulus; by focusing, for instance, on your avoidance of elevators, or on your recurrent cancellations of your dental appointment, the therapists may manage -usually through pharmaceutical or behavioural means – to assuage the particular problem.

However, that approach gives rise to some methodological worries; on the one hand, it is not evident that what is treated is anxiety as such, rather than some of its arguably most unpleasant symptoms; on the other hand, it is not clear that the therapists approach the relevant cases as indicative of *anxiety*, rather than as ordinary cases of *fear* – fear of lack of mobility, in the case of elevators, or fear of pain, in the case of dental treatment. Let us grant then, that when successful, the relevant therapy cures a particular fear: that does not entail that it illuminates

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<sup>25</sup> Matthews (1994), Brown (2009), Barlow (2011).

<sup>26</sup> Reiss (1991), Barlow et al. (2011).

<sup>27</sup> Asmundson (2002), Ormel et al. (2004), Banducci (2016).

<sup>28</sup> Boelen (2016), Oglesby et al. (2016).

the nature of anxiety, unless it is already assumed that anxiety is, in some essential respect, no different than fear. As the cases we have examined indicate, that essential respect is their intentionality: anxiety allegedly concerns a situation, an external object, or an event that poses a threat to the agent – exactly like with the emotion of fear. Despite their differences in temporal index and epistemic status, in terms of intentionality anxiety and fear are structurally identical.

If that view were correct, anxiety would have little to do with anguish. If, on the other hand, anguish and anxiety have a similar intentional structure, anxiety cannot be so easily reduced to fear. In my opinion, Sartre's discussion in *Being and Nothingness* can help us address this issue, by showing how the experiences denoted by the terms *anxiety* and *anguish*, differ from the experience of fear.

7. What is distinctive of anxiety cannot be the external event faced by the subject, but how the subject relates to it; that is what is lost in most contemporary accounts of the relevant phenomena – and what is brought to the front in Sartre's discussion of anguish. Admittedly, there are several types of anxiety that cannot be reduced to the particular examples offered in *Being and Nothingness*; however, most types of anxiety share with the Sartrean examples a common intentional structure, to wit that in anxiety --just like in anguish, and in contradistinction to fear-- that of which one feels anxious is, in a certain sense, not some external object or event, but oneself. More precisely, anxiety and anguish involve an awareness that how things will turn out is crucially dependent upon oneself. Hence, one's awareness of a danger of threat is not by itself sufficient to qualify an affective state as a state of anxiety; neither is it sufficient to claim that the danger or the threat is unknown or uncertain – a fear of something unknown or uncertain is still fear -- and after all, as a man of wisdom once put it:

“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown”.<sup>29</sup>

My suggestion is that if we are to think of anxiety as a phenomenon that is genuinely distinct from common and garden varieties of fear, then we may best approach it in the way Sartre analyses anguish.

Consider the anguish experienced during vertigo – what is distinctive of that experience, affectively, what demarcates clearly from a case of fear, is that, strictly speaking, in vertigo one is not afraid of falling over the top balcony, but of throwing oneself over.<sup>30</sup> Consider also the paradox of anguish generated over a past event. In facing the gaming tables today, the gambler who had resolved last week not to touch the cards again, experiences anguish not because he is afraid of what might happen as the night unfolds, nor because he has forgotten the fact of his past decision, but because he fully acknowledges his decision *as* a fact of the past, appealing to which cannot magically and on its own make him stay away from the game. The gambler somehow begs his past decision to come and save him, and anguish is the growing realisation that no past fact as such – not even his own past psychological fact – can resolve his present problem for himself.<sup>31</sup>

Both cases show that “freedom is the source of its own anguish”,<sup>32</sup> and pave the way for Sartre’s celebrated analysis of the ways in which most people cede any personal responsibility, by opting for an identity that would allow them to live as if they were not free.

Anguish and anxiety are affective experiences that have found pride of place in life-changing narratives, marking an irrepeatable moment of conversion into authenticity. However, if we

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<sup>29</sup> H. P. Lovecraft (1927): 255.

<sup>30</sup> Sartre (1943): 66-69.

<sup>31</sup> Sartre (1943): 71-72.

<sup>32</sup> Sartre (1943): 74.

adopt the Sartrean perspective, anxiety, no less than anguish, is significant because of its ordinariness. Consider, thus, what in my view is the most interesting, as well as the least addressed, category in today's clinical taxonomy: The Generalised Anxiety Disorder – what used to be called “Free-Floating Anxiety”. The term refers to chronic, excessive, and uncontrollable worry about a number of apparently disconnected events or activities – such as one's academic performance, or the balance of one's bank account.<sup>33</sup> Symptoms of that disorder include restlessness or feeling on edge; being easily fatigued; difficulty concentrating on your work; irritability; muscle tension; and unsatisfying sleep. Those phenomena remain hard to decipher if one focuses just on external dangers or potential threats, and have thus often been understood as the surface indicators of underlying battles one gives with oneself so as to face up – or to postpone facing up – to the demands of faith, or the inevitability of one's own death, or of the responsibility brought about by one's freedom.

Assessing the soundness of those proposals is far beyond the scope of this paper. So, let me simply conclude with the following remarks concerning two points which are major concern to the Sartrean conception of affective phenomena.

The first concerns Sartre's attempt to understand affectivity as a particular class of conduct.<sup>34</sup> Anxiety no less than anguish, appears counterproductive. In many cases, undergoing such an emotion is not simply unpleasant it is also a source of difficulties in realising a fixed goal; but that is I think its major strategic value for the subject. Anxiety is often a form of affective procrastination, whose function is to disrupt the normal unfolding of the events, thus serving the wish – often irrational – that a foreseeable event be avoided, either because it will not be realised, or because it will, but with oneself being discharged from the task of bring it about,

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<sup>33</sup> Ladouceur (2000), Miranda (2007), Barlow (2011), Dugas (2000).

<sup>34</sup> For a reconstruction of the Sartrean view of emotional conduct see Hatzimoysis (2011), ch. 4.

letting the events, as we say, take their own course, while oneself is somehow – magically<sup>35</sup> - removed from the scene.

The second point concerns the issue of how in anguish one relates to oneself in the future, since, as Sartre puts it: “I am the one who I will be in the mode of not being he”.<sup>36</sup> I suggest that the Sartrean view of this issue can be more aptly expressed with reference to the normative character of personal identity. Each one of us is what one is projecting oneself to be, professionally, socially, sentimentally, in light of one’s own commitments towards both the world at large, and particular others.<sup>37</sup> It is as if I constantly make an appointment with a certain conception of myself at the end of the day. Anguish, if you wish, is the unspoken, unarticulated, worry that I might miss the appointment, not because I was held up, but because I am no longer sure that I really want to meet myself there.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> On the ‘magical’ element of emotional responses in face of unbearable situation, see Richmond (2010), Hatzimoysis (2014a).

<sup>36</sup> Sartre (1943): 70.

<sup>37</sup> Sartre (1943): 75.

<sup>38</sup> I am grateful to audiences at the University of Geneva, the University of Pisa, and the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, where earlier versions of the paper were presented.

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