



Facing the Abyss: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Reading of Anxiety

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Abstract

At the heart of Hans Urs von Balthasar's oeuvre is his preoccupation with the encounter between finite human freedom and infinite divine freedom. While Balthasar's many interpreters have assayed the meaning and implications of this preoccupation, little attention has been given to his consideration of the experiential dimension of the encounter, especially the psychological implications. This essay will address such implications by relating the experience of the encounter to the particular psychological phenomenon of anxiety. It is my conviction that Balthasar clearly identified a correlation between the increasing presence of existential anxiety in modernity with the failure of modern persons to understand rightly the encounter between God and the person. Balthasar's assessment of the relationship between the encounter and anxiety provides his readers with a stimulating and original reading that complements, indeed completes, the philosophical renderings of anxiety provided by his contemporaries. Since the phenomenon of anxiety has not abated, a retrieval of Balthasar's work on the subject is both warranted and timely.

Keywords

Hans Urs von Balthasar, anxiety, theology and psychology, encounter, ontological difference, existential

I. Introduction

In his 1952 work *Der Christ und die Angst*, Hans Urs von Balthasar argues that the *experience* of the ontological difference, which he understands to be the difference between finite human freedom and infinite divine freedom, is the origin and determination of existential anxiety.¹ It is Balthasar's contention that this experiential

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Der Christ und die Angst* [hereafter abbreviated CA] (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1951); English translation: *The Christian and Anxiety*, trans.

phenomenon can only be rightly understood by means of a theological interpretation. In an original interpretive stroke, Balthasar situates anxiety in its biblical context, that is, by explicating anxiety in terms of a dramatic encounter that unfolds in the Judeo-Christian narrative between God and humanity.² Balthasar's attempt to interpret existential anxiety theologically thus advances, indeed goes beyond, the classic analyses of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Freud.

In this essay, I shall articulate one dimension of Balthasar's thought that has received no attention: namely, his theological elucidation of anxiety that originates with the experience of the ontological difference between finite and infinite freedom. In order to accomplish this task, I shall *first* explicate what Balthasar means by this experience of the ontological difference, which he works out in terms of subjective *limit* and objective *mystery*. *Second*, I shall introduce the impetus for Balthasar's theological response to anxiety. *Third*, I shall present Balthasar's assessment of the classical interpretations of anxiety by Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Freud. This third section will provide the reader with a broader context for understanding why Balthasar distances himself from, and goes beyond, modern philosophical interpretations of anxiety by means of his original theological response. *Fourth*, I shall articulate Balthasar's christocentric solution to the problem of anxiety that arises in the encounter between the infinite God and the finite person.

II. The experience of the ontological difference

The psychiatrist and philosopher Rudolph Allers, an early mentor of Balthasar, once remarked that in his experience all cases of neuroses originate with a metaphysical crisis, namely, a failure of finite subjects to accept their finitude and radical dependence on the infinite approximation of their conscious horizon (i.e., God).³ To Allers, the "metaphysical problem," moreover, is always tied to an obsession with self, which leads to the failure of accepting one's limitations. Consequently, Allers contends, one is filled with an unremitting concern for one's own ego, which is perceived as being in constant peril. What emerges is a successfully disguised egocentricity that is an

Dennis D. Martin and Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000). All subsequent references are to the German text (translations are my own) with corresponding pages of the English text. Balthasar understands anxiety as the experience of one's finitude or lack of freedom to realize the infinite horizon that constitutes conscious life. His understanding, therefore, is concerned with the distinctively existential rather than biological manifestation of anxiety.

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 35.

³ Rudolph Allers, *The Psychology of Character* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1931), 347.

essential component of the neurotic character: "The neurotic," Allers contends, "is like a man gazing into a small hand-mirror that reflects his own features, but excludes the outside world."⁴ In other words, human anxiety is understood by Allers to be, at its root, a meta-physical problem that translates as a breakdown in the relationship between the finite person and the infinite God that occurs whenever the inner world of a person is dominated by an obsession with self preservation; and so, being alone in one's finitude, one perseveres in the avoidance or rejection of the presence of the infinite—a presence that is inextricably linked with conscious life and which overshadows one's inner world precisely as the horizon of freedom that alone can save a person from his or her anxiety.

Balthasar relates the experience of the ontological difference (i.e., between finite and infinite freedom) and anxiety in a manner consistent with Allers' own understanding. To Balthasar, this encounter with the infinite is potentially anxiety producing, insofar as anxiety is understood to be the experience that emerges in the meta-physical space or, as Balthasar puts it, the void (*Leere*) between God and man whenever one turns away from God and toward the self.⁵ Balthasar understands this void as being a constitutive dimension of the inner life of each person where God *qua* the mysterious infinite ought to be experienced in the act of faith.⁶ However, Balthasar opines that because of sin, which in this context means the turning away from God, this void is experienced by humans as the radical absence of God.⁷ Though we shall discuss this more fully below, the point is that when the observance of faith and trust in God is absent in the conscious, intentional life of a human being, the moment one experiences the presence of the infinite, which is perceived, Balthasar contends, as a foreign, even threatening presence, one faces a life-shaping decision: one either enters into the space of this mystery or turns away, in which case a void that can never be understood fully emerges where God ought to be—thus producing anxiety. The encounter with this strange presence, that is, the void that betokens the presence of infinite freedom, is experienced as something like spiritual vertigo (*Schwindel*), that is, experienced as an endless abyss that one cannot claim as one's own, nor understand, nor fill, nor even cross by one's own power.⁸ To the extent that one turns away from this encounter, one becomes, as Augustine would put it, blind to God's presence; and so, one perceives and interprets the mysterious presence of the infinite as a

⁴ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁵ Balthasar, CA, 80 (Eng., 133–134).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 81 (Eng., 135).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 79 (Eng., 132).

void, a nothingness.⁹ By means of sin, therefore, one makes thicker the veil that divides man and God; in effect, one pushes God away, thus rendering oneself open to the onslaught of anxiety. Tragically, such an experience, Balthasar contends, has been interpreted in ways that have led ineluctably to subjectivism or “identity” thinking (i.e., the subject as locus of the Absolute) as the person attempts to close the gap between the finite and infinite dimensions of his inner world precisely by defining them as the constitutive make-up of the self, which entails claiming for oneself infinite freedom. Such a Hegelian-like sublation not only makes God/the infinite dependent upon the finite, but also serves to intensify anxiety as one remains trapped, indeed suffocated, in one’s self-preoccupation; and this precisely because the infinite is no longer something one has faith *in* but rather something one identifies with oneself.¹⁰ Yet, for Balthasar, the finite and infinite maintain an absolute difference, as manifested by the experience of the void that such a sublation ineluctably creates between them. Nevertheless, to Balthasar’s thinking, the galvanizing factors of such a vertiginous experience, which, again, originate at the border of one’s encounter with the infinite approximation of the inner world of self-consciousness, are identified by Balthasar as the concrete experiences of subjective limit and objective mystery.

With respect to subjective limit, the uneasy experience of spiritual vertigo that overcomes the person who realizes this limit is, again, nothing other than the awareness of the infinite by the finite *and* the finite person’s realization of his or her absolute inability to erect a “bridge” between them. Being finite and guilty of sin (i.e., turning away from God), one experiences oneself to be limited and, in a sense, exiled from that same infinite horizon. On this point, Balthasar is echoing Aquinas in arguing that the simultaneous experience of contingency and the seeming possibility of transcendence is, for the person, the locus point of the arrival of anxiety in the mind.¹¹ This anxiety overwhelms a person, moreover, to the point of neurotic collapse, especially when this sense of exile escalates into a fear of the void itself which the anxious person associates with the total dissolution, or death, of self. While common to moderns in their general failed acknowledgment of the infinite, this fear, interestingly, Balthasar believes to be absent to the medieval mind, which is due, he avers, to an apparently overwhelming collective faith in God. Be that as it may, the anxiety Balthasar associates with the experience of the ontological difference emerges in *the awareness* of limitation.

⁹ Augustine *Confessions* (trans. Henry Chadwick [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992]) 8.10.22.

¹⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele: Studien zu einer Lehre von letzten Haltungen*, 3 vols. 3rd ed. (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1998) 141.

¹¹ Balthasar, CA, 74 (Eng. 124).

Moreover, the experience of the awareness of limit and finitude against an infinite horizon introduces a second element, which for Balthasar is *the encounter with objective mystery* that is experienced as awe in the presence of something unfamiliar and mysterious in the familiar.¹² Interestingly, Balthasar asserts that the apprehension of mystery, and the anxiety that arises from such an apprehension, is not limited to the inner world of a person. For example, Balthasar assays the “familiar,” in terms of the world of beings as such, concluding that what is sensible is rendered mysterious precisely when something *other* is recognized *in* it, while yet remaining concealed.¹³ Balthasar interprets this experience as a catching sight (*ansichtig wird*) of the presence of the infinite, which leads one to seek out the source of this encounter.¹⁴ This movement is the search for the mysterious in the mundane; for example, when one seeks out the source of the shudder that overcomes one in the presence of the roaring sea and the crashing thunder, or the longing of one who desires to know the *source* of attraction “behind” the setting sun and the surrounding landscape it illumines. This experience of mystery has an erotic dimension in that one yearns to be united with the source of the experience of the universal in the particular, the one in the many. As Paul Tillich remarked, this movement is an awareness of existential estrangement and the subsequent move toward essential being.¹⁵ And yet, the fear of no return of that love, indeed of nothingness at all, entails that man’s engagement with mystery produces an element of anxiety, for in the particular experience of mystery, i.e., God *qua* the infinite, is recognized without ever being reducible to any one object of perception. God is elusive, yet somehow perceivable. This experience is precisely what is meant by an encounter with the transcendent and mysterious source of beings, the unfamiliar in the familiar.¹⁶

This recognition of the unfamiliar in the familiar data of human experience likewise is the occasion of man’s awareness of the ontological difference as man perceives the mystery of infinite freedom in the object of his apprehension. According to Balthasar, this catching sight of the signification of something extraordinary in ordinary experiences of the sensible world betokens the moment of the infinite’s arrival to, and apprehension by, the conscious mind.¹⁷ Balthasar asserts:

With respect to content, however, this double movement is the drawing away and uprooting [*abstraction*] of the mind from its familiar

¹² Ibid., 69 (Eng., 117).

¹³ Ibid. (Eng., 117–118).

¹⁴ Ibid., 68–69 (Eng., 117–118).

¹⁵ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 127.

¹⁶ Balthasar, CA, 69 (Eng., 118).

¹⁷ Ibid. (Eng., 118).

environment into the unfamiliar horizon of Being and then its retreat back to the world, which now becomes visible for the first time in its character of being an appearance [*phantasma*], resulting from its contingency and un-familiarity. The *excessus*, the *ekstasis* of thought beyond sensation conceals within itself the first beginnings of anxiety – not because a larger space opens up, but because this space, which makes conceptualization possible, is still inadequate to offer a satisfactory interpretation of the objective world, indeed, precisely because this yawning ontological difference rules out such an interpretation. The same structure that reveals the truth of Being also veils it; the same structure that causes the light of Being and of the agent intellect (*intellectus agens*) to dawn also spreads to the same extent the night of meaninglessness and incomprehensibility. In the ontological difference the world becomes abstract in two directions: the existent loses some of its importance inasmuch as it is seen as the appearance of Being, and Being gains nothing in importance inasmuch as it is dependent upon this existent as its appearance.¹⁸

In short, the mysterious experience of the ontological difference (again, the experience of infinite freedom, of infinite expansiveness present within both the landscape of the inner world of the human subject and the exterior world of creaturely being) shakes the mind into anxiety, for this “difference” casts an ever-present shadow that irrevocably accompanies thought. This mysterious experience is an incontrovertible and concrete fact of human experience; and the inability to elucidate this experience in a meaningful, that is, theological manner is, according to Balthasar, one of the central root causes of anxiety in the modern world. In other words, each person must go beyond the fear that arises out of the experience of limit and mystery. One must, that is, set one's gaze not on the fear itself, in the vain attempt of overcoming it, but on the infinite presence made manifest at the border of one's experience of limit and mystery—otherwise, one will remain absorbed in self-obsessive anxiety. Such a need to attend to the infinite entails for Balthasar that only a theological reading of anxiety can make sense of anxiety's presence in the life of each person.

The next logical question for Balthasar, therefore, is how to understand *theologically* the origin of this anxiety-producing void created in the experience of the ontological difference.¹⁹ This question, our second issue for examination, presupposes that for Balthasar the only meaningful response to the limit and mystery one encounters in the experience of the infinite, must come from outside, from the infinite itself. In short, anxiety results because helplessness, radical dependency, and a futile sense of having no control define the human experience of the infinite, as one is simply unable to unite in oneself

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 78 (Eng., 130–131).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 80 (Eng., 133).

the finite and infinite dimensions/tensions inherent to one's conscious life.

III. The theological response to anxiety

For Balthasar, the most tantalizing aspects of the ontological difference are *how* the mind is able to grasp this difference at all and *why* the mind is unable to “unlock” the secrets accompanying it (the mind) through its own efforts. The resounding question, presented in various ways down through the centuries, can be expressed in the following manner: Why can there ever only be a partial, and ultimately mysterious, knowledge of infinite freedom, indeed of God? The question of the shadowy presence of the infinite to the human mind presupposes, paradoxically, some kind of absence—an absence that initially caused wonder and awe, but can only lead to an ever-greater yearning for more: more of being, more of infinite life, more of God. One can only say with Balthasar that the origin of anxiety is, and can only be, explained theologically as sin, that is, sin understood as the falling away from intimacy with, and trust in, the infinite God. Balthasar writes, “The void that opens up in the mind, the occasion of its anxiety, could then be traced back to an absence—and whose absence, if not that of its Creator and grace-giver, the ‘sweet guest of the soul’ who had chosen it as his residence?”²⁰ But this understanding does not dismiss the experience of the ontological difference as something intrinsically evil, as an unfortunate consequence of some primeval event that involved an apple and a serpent. As Balthasar tells us, the ontological difference is “by necessity the very imprint of creatureliness itself, in whatever state the creature may be.”²¹ The issue is rather *the quality* of the experience of God in the conscious life of the person.

With sin, precisely the inexplicable happens as one turn's one's gaze on oneself in order to sate one's own desires apart from the will of God: one chooses darkness over light; one chooses to go one's own way and do one's own thing. One chooses, that is, to shift one's gaze away from God and towards the self as the measure of what is real; and so, no longer consenting to be determined by God, one is lost; and in one's state of being lost, one is made anxious. Such a condition, Balthasar avers, “expands” in some way the distance between a person and God, while the void is filled, so to speak, with one's own obsessions and fears. It follows then, that the person is responsible for God's perceived withdrawal and for establishing the void where meaningfulness and life with the infinite

²⁰ Ibid., 80 (Eng., 133–134).

²¹ Ibid. (Eng., 133).

should be. For Balthasar, what is most alarming is the fact that if God does not act to reverse this existential tragedy, man will renew this rebellion against the light on a daily basis. This understanding is Balthasar's existentially informed rendering of the fall of humanity and his understanding of why there is anxiety at all:

We are not saying that Adam saw God face to face, for if that had been true, his subsequent falling away from God would be inexplicable. We say only that the space within Adam that became a place of emptiness and indifferent freedom through the withdrawal of the divine presence was a space that God had originally created for himself and had filled with his mysteriousness and, on the other hand, unquestionable presence. It was a presence in faith, naturally, but it occurred in a now no longer attainable obedience and love that possessed and embraced God immediately and with childlike certainty. A faith for which God, though not seen face to face, is the most present, *most concrete* reality, whence all that is substantial in the world receives its equally certain and unquestionable rightness, obviousness, and nameability. In the evening breeze of paradise God walks and talks with Adam: invisible, yet as tangible and all-pervasive as the wind. In him we live, and move, and have our being.²²

And so, for Balthasar, the experience of the ontological difference must be given a theological reading vis-à-vis the biblical account of the fall of humanity. From this perspective, Balthasar's approach moves definitively in an original direction, that is, away from other modern and secular interpretations of anxiety that are grounded in decidedly philosophical preoccupations with the self, to a theological explanation focused more on the biblical narrative and the saving activity of God. However, before elucidating more fully Balthasar's theological position, and in order to provide some context with respect to those interpretations of anxiety that Balthasar challenges, a brief description will be provided of the philosophical positions towards anxiety taken by some of his modern interlocutors: Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Freud.

IV. Balthasar's critique of classic philosophical interpretations of anxiety

Kierkegaard is the thinker that Balthasar most obviously engages in *Der Christ und die Angst*.²³ It is Kierkegaard who articulates the possibilities of anxiety as originating within the dynamic space between the finite and infinite dimensions of the person; the space, that is, where one becomes aware that one's freedom is actually grounded

²² Ibid., 81–82 (Eng., 135).

²³ Ibid., 12 (Eng., 38).

in what he names the possibility of unlimited possibilities.²⁴ Importantly, Kierkegaard recognized that only by an act of the infinite can one's anxiety be quelled, and here Kierkegaard appeals to the role of faith as a necessary medium for the arrival of the infinite in the void: "Now the anxiety of possibility holds him as its prey until, saved, it must hand him over to faith. In no other place can he find rest, for every other place of rest is mere chatter, although in the eyes of men it is sagacity."²⁵ Kierkegaard's elucidation of the role of faith in overcoming anxiety is enormously critical to understanding Balthasar's own work on anxiety. However, to Balthasar's thinking, Kierkegaard's work on anxiety is incomplete in that it remains a purely philosophical analysis focused predominantly on subjective experience, though certainly not devoid of any ultimate theological conclusions.²⁶ Balthasar argues that for Kierkegaard, anxiety arises in the mind when one perceives the mind's openness to the infinite, while concomitantly remaining acutely aware of one's limitations as a finite being. Indeed, Kierkegaard says that "(w)hen the discoveries of possibility are honestly admitted, possibility will discover all the finitudes, but it will idealize them in the form of infinity, and so the individual will then be overwhelmed by anxiety until he again overcomes them in the anticipation of faith."²⁷ In other words, Kierkegaard's analysis of anxiety suggests to Balthasar that he (Kierkegaard) does not move successfully beyond the "finitudes" which seem to redound always to the necessity of faith. As long as the mind is capable of perceiving the co-presence of the finite and infinite one is ineluctably made anxious precisely because the finite human knower is utterly incapable of overcoming the abyss that constitutes the relation with the infinite.²⁸ Of course, such an understanding makes sense when seen in the light of Kierkegaard's vitriolic response to Hegelian sublation. To Balthasar's thinking, however, this preoccupation of Kierkegaard's to unmask the dangers of identity thinking never developed beyond a philosophical critique and presentation of anxiety.

The problem with Kierkegaard, Balthasar maintains, is that he is so absorbed with reflecting upon the structure of the finite mind and its relationship to anxiety, that he can never adequately assay the relationship between the mind and God and how God *acts* to alleviate the anxiety of the individual: "Kierkegaard operates here with the categories of Romanticism and of German Idealism. And

²⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁶ Balthasar, *CA*, 7 (Eng., 32).

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 157.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

while his intention is a Christian one, he so emphasizes the relation of the spirit to itself that he risks forgetting the main point: the relation to God."²⁹ To Balthasar, the mind is anxious because of the void in his inner world that betokens the absence of God. Anxiety is the hell of God's absence:

As for the essence of anxiety, it is quite true that Kierkegaard identified its point of origin rightly but he did not sufficiently describe, with respect to its content, the vertigo caused by the void that opens up within the finitude of the mind. The mind is made anxious, not by the void of nothingness in its own interior dimension, but by the abysmal emptiness present wherever the nearness and concreteness of God have withdrawn into a distant estrangement and have yielded their place to "someone over there," to an abstract relation to an "other."³⁰

While Kierkegaard is extremely insightful in pointing out the origins of anxiety, namely, the discovery and experience of the void present to consciousness, as well as the only response to this void, namely, faith, he nevertheless fails to ground anxiety in an overarching theological narrative that, for Balthasar, alone can make sense of this phenomenon. This failure to provide a theological solution is why Balthasar will argue at the outset of CA that "anxiety remains for him [Kierkegaard] a matter of the finite mind horrified by its limitlessness, and thus God and Christ are rarely mentioned directly in this work [*Concept of Anxiety*], which was nevertheless intended to be an exclusively Christian book."³¹ As a result, Balthasar avers, this understanding of Kierkegaard shaped the book's later destiny: "(O)riginally a response to philosophical and psychological challenges, the book did not free itself sufficiently from them to avoid dissolving again into philosophy, on the one hand, and psychology, on the other, and so its ultimate fate was a twofold secularization."³² Because Kierkegaard is seemingly occupied with the identity thinking of his philosophical predecessors, he fails to amplify the thread of his argument, namely, that faith alone overcomes existential anxiety, by not providing a theological response grounded in the saving activity of God with respect to the void as this is conveyed in the biblical narrative of Christianity.

Another important dialogue partner in CA, though of less importance to Balthasar than Kierkegaard, is Martin Heidegger. Unlike Freud, who evades the metaphysical dimension of the human person altogether in his consideration of the provenance of anxiety, Heidegger understands anxiety to arise precisely in the awareness of Being and the dread [*angst*] that arises in one's positing of the

²⁹ Balthasar, CA, 83 (Eng., 138).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85 (Eng., 140–141).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7 (Eng., 32).

³² *Ibid.*, 7–8 (Eng., 32).

possibility of not being at all (*Das Nichts*). Given that the starting point for such a consideration is the ontological difference, there is a philosophical kinship between Heidegger and Balthasar. Again, for Heidegger, anxiety arises in the awareness of the possibility of not-being, that is to say, anxiety is induced by reflection upon the limit of existence and the awareness of being able not to be.³³ Anxiety is quite literally the fear of nothingness, of consignment of self to oblivion. But in order to be aware of this nothingness, one must be able to posit Being; for it is Being that provides the infinite backdrop to man's finite horizon and possibilities. The awareness (and fact) of Being gives rise to the question: What does it mean not to be? This is, arguably, the encounter with the void of which we have been speaking, for it is the finite person's conscious awareness of self and the self's limitations prescinding from the subject's first perception of Being. However, in the case of Heidegger (and Kierkegaard), the main preoccupation is to provide a philosophical study of precisely *that* experience (finite man and infinite Being). I believe Balthasar ultimately rejects this approach as a morbid obsession that cannot get past the person's reflection on his/her own finitude. There is even the suggestion by Balthasar that there is a lack of courage in Heidegger's position insofar as his preoccupation with self, with *Dasein*, presupposes a kind of flight from the encounter with God.³⁴

While both Kierkegaard and Heidegger fall short of providing an acceptable reading of anxiety, their insights nevertheless bring one to the border of a properly theological reading. However, given that anxiety is quite common in the West, and so is a problem that requires immediate attention, one asks at this point which interpreter of anxiety has had the greatest impact on modern culture generally? Has it been Kierkegaard and/or Heidegger? One might, however, suggest Sigmund Freud, which is apparently Balthasar's position as well.³⁵ While Kierkegaard and Heidegger are Balthasar's immediate interlocutors, one may contend that the most fruitful aspect of Balthasar's insights on anxiety can be used to counter the secular interpretation of Freud.

It is well known that Freud had much to say about the provenance of anxiety.³⁶ Freud's starting point intentionally dismisses the metaphysical dimension of the human person in favor of an empirical,

³³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 176–177.

³⁴ Balthasar, CA, 70 (Eng., 119).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 8 (Eng., 32). Balthasar's strident criticism of Freud and the culture of psychotherapy that he spawned is described by him (Balthasar) as a toxic antidote (*giftigen Gegengift*) to anxiety by modern persons (see p. 10 (Eng., 36)).

³⁶ See Sigmund Freud, *The Problem of Anxiety*, trans. Henry Alden Bunker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1963).

“scientific” presentation. With Freud, anxiety is approached from a purely natural/empirical angle. Freud’s reading of anxiety is, however, very interesting and germane to our study. He seems, however unintentionally, to transpose themes that typically constitute theological language surrounding the God-human relationship into empirical, scientific categories. More precisely, Freud argues that anxiety arises from the “repression of instinctual drives,” and that the most basic repressed experience is the danger to one’s life that is experienced in birth, i.e., the danger of separation from the safety of the mother’s womb and solitude as the person is thrown into a foreign, seemingly hostile world.³⁷ As a result, Freud tells us that “anxiety thus seems to be a reaction to the perception of the absence of the object.”³⁸ This sense of helplessness and loneliness, coupled with a longing for safety that occurs with parturition—separation anxiety!—is grounded in the perceived loss of the object’s love.³⁹ Given our account of Balthasar’s approach to anxiety, Freud is quite on the mark in his assessment of the *thematic characteristics* of anxiety: namely, the experience of separation and fear of solitude and alienation; the overwhelming “sense” of abandonment and helplessness in the face of this separation; sadness over the loss of one’s love. How can one not perceive, albeit through the lens of modern psychiatry, the presence of the experience of Adam in the Garden? Freud is re-writing the story of the Fall in a different key and with an altogether different instrument. Yet, Freud intentionally dismisses *any* metaphysical account of the structure of the human person, which is *de facto* a radical rejection of the Catholic and Balthasarian understanding of the person. It is Rudolph Allers who articulates well the reason we cannot accept Freud’s conclusions: “We must remember that the fundamental hypotheses that form the starting-point of psychoanalysis are unacceptable when regarded from the standpoint of a positive metaphysic and from a Catholic conception of the universe.”⁴⁰ The Roman Catholic conception of the universe depends upon the signification of God to the human knower, precisely as the epistemological and ontological ground. To suggest otherwise, as Freud intentionally does, is to risk deepening the person’s alienation from God and subsequent consignment to the miasma of anxiety. Having formulated the basic philosophical understandings of anxiety, we are now in a position to introduce our fourth point, namely, to elucidate more fully Balthasar’s theological contribution to the understanding of anxiety as it specifically unfolds in CA.

³⁷ Ibid., 75.

³⁸ Ibid., 76.

³⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁰ Allers, *The Psychology of Character*, 338.

IV. The Biblical Response to Anxiety

Balthasar's reading centers on Christ. Christ is the one who in his life, especially in his anguish in the Passion, experienced and accepted anxiety (the absence of God's presence) completely; and by his suffering he gave meaning to it.⁴¹ In CA, Balthasar provides a qualification for his theological and christocentric explication of anxiety by first addressing the narrative of the Old Testament. According to Balthasar, the Old Testament provides an historical account of a people who in their own way experienced the ontological gulf between humanity and God *and in that experience* perceived rightly the need for a mediator, which is to say a saving act on the part of God. And so, the proper understanding of anxiety, which culminates in christology, begins with the collective experience of Yahweh by Israel.

Balthasar avers that the Psalms of the Old Testament are filled with images of a languishing people that cry out to God for justice and mercy, and of a God who in yearning for his people, seems to permit, indeed longs for, that cry that he might approach them with some saving action.⁴² Yet, again and again, as we see in Job, the approach of the Lord is itself anxiety-inducing. (Job 7:14–15) God's coming in darkness causes one to tremble with fear as the overpowering presence of the righteous God is akin to a penetrating light that lays bare all the guilt and sin of each person. And so Balthasar writes, "Here it becomes obvious that one cannot live in such immediacy; he will be burned up by the sheer superiority of God's power."⁴³ For "no arrangement, no agreement, no dialogue is possible where the naked Absolute and the naked contingent collide."⁴⁴

Anxiety in the Old Testament occurs in two distinct ways. On the one hand, it occurs when one turns away from God, only to be greeted by the torturous and searing loneliness and meaninglessness of life apart from God. Balthasar writes, "The descent to the river of the netherworld begins already in the subjective isolation of sinning – for sin is a striving to evade the communication of divine light."⁴⁵ On the other hand, anxiety is experienced when one is approached by God, as he is overwhelmed, blinded one might say, by a presence too powerful for words. Citing scripture, Balthasar responds,

God, who delivers himself up for the creature, is a "devouring fire, a jealous God" (Deut 4:24), so much so that to see him and to live are incompatible things – hence, Isaiah considers himself lost because he

⁴¹ Balthasar, CA, 13 (Eng., 40).

⁴² Ibid., 29 (Eng., 63).

⁴³ Ibid., 30–31 (Eng., 65).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 31 (Eng., 65).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 19 (Eng., 47).

has seen the king with his own eyes (Is 6:5), and Daniel, dazed, falls on his face in a deep sleep before him (Dan 10:9). After issuing the command to fear none of the things that make the wicked anxious, God has to add: "The Lord of hosts . . . let him be your fear, and let him be your dread" (Is 8:13).⁴⁶

Yahweh's approach is overwhelming and always comes with the demand for obedience.⁴⁷ This is the paradox of ancient Israel's relationship to Yahweh. If they turn away from him, they are benighted with anxiety and hopelessness. When Yahweh approaches, they are aware of their failure, sin, and inability to keep his laws; thus they are struck down in terror and fear. Balthasar, echoing Job, is right to point out that humanity requires a mediator to be saved from this inescapable anxiety.

Job cries out, not for his children, his property, his wife, his friends, but for a mediator: "Would that there were a judge between us, who might lay his hand upon us both. Let God take his rod away from me, and let not my fear of him terrify me (9:33–34)." He cries out for justice with God, which can come to him only from God; he appeals from God to God (16:19–20): from a hidden, absent, and incomprehensible God to to such a One who would turn toward man in a human way (23:1–7); from a God who for him has "changed into Satan" and whom one can no longer call upon since he has become an utter No, to a God who, beyond all dialectic of anxiety, would simply say Yes to man.⁴⁸

Balthasar tells us that the anguish of Job, who represents Israel's relationship with Yahweh, is experienced not only with respect to actual material suffering, but in the anxiety caused by "the intrusion of darkness into the finite realm of faith's light."⁴⁹ A mediator is necessary. Yet, the mediator promised does not come simply in order to abolish anxiety. If a mediator is necessary, and he is, then he can only become human by entering into the full experience of a human being.⁵⁰ Balthasar is speaking here of the necessity of the anxiety of the mediator himself.⁵¹

Thus, the experience of the Old Covenant, that is, the "intrusion of darkness into the finite realm of faith's light," becomes God's own experience in the New Testament; indeed the Jewish experience is an "anticipation of the Cross, of God's own anguish."⁵² From the moment of Jesus's birth, his entrance into finite existence, "anxiety

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 (Eng., 57).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 26 (Eng., 59).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 31 (Eng., 65–66).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 36 (Eng., 73).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 37 (Eng., 74).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 36–37 (Eng., 73).

is not spared him but rolls over him like waves," right up to his hour in the garden:

On the Mount of Olives it is a final, precipitous plunge into the abyss of anxiety that immediately breaks over him: vicariously, for every sinner and every sin, he suffers the anxiety of facing the God of absolute righteousness. All that the Old and New Covenants know of anxiety is here gathered together and infinitely surpassed, because the person who in this human nature is frightened is the infinite God himself.⁵³

In this event, God knows what it is like for man to experience the overwhelming and sometimes maddening experience of the worst kind of anxiety – the utter desolation that follows from the absence of God:

It is, finally and most profoundly, the anguish that Christ suffers on account of his world, which is in danger of being lost to him – which, indeed, at that moment *is* an utterly lost world. So as to be able to suffer this anxiety and therein to demonstrate humanly how much the world matters to him in his divinity and how concerned he is for the world's sake: for this purpose he became man. It is an anguish he wanted to have without any consolation or relief, since from it was to come every consolation and relief for the world. Therefore it is, in the proper and strict sense of the word, the absolute anxiety, which undergirds and surpasses every other anxiety and thus becomes the standard and tribunal for all. This anxiety is drained to the dregs upon the Cross in the actual abandonment of the Son by the Father. Since the subject who endures this abandonment in his human nature is divine, it is an absolute forsakenness and therefore the absolute measure of the abyss and of every other abysmal experience. Only the Son knows exhaustively what it means to be forsaken by the Father, for he alone knows who the Father is and what the Father's intimacy and love are.⁵⁴

What one learns from this is that God does not come to abolish anxiety, for it is a given of human existence as such, but rather comes to enter into it himself and therefore to be in solidarity with suffering humanity; and in this solidarity God revalues anxiety by giving humanity a perspective and orientation for overcoming it. The Incarnation of God, which signifies the promise of the mediator, alone gives meaning to anxiety, especially in the abandonment undergone on the Cross. Christ teaches that fear and anxiety are quite real when understood as separation from God. It is this separation that Balthasar likens to the void of our human experience of the ontological difference, which is the encounter between human finite consciousness and the dimly perceived infinite. The yawning gap between them

⁵³ Ibid., 37 (Eng., 74).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 38 (Eng., 75).

(finite consciousness and the infinite), shrouded in darkness, is an indication of this "separation." It is little wonder that sin is perceived in the Bible as a burning sensation, like salt being rubbed into the wound that is a person's torn soul. But, as Balthasar's account of the Incarnation teaches, the *fact* of the ontological difference, the void between finite and infinite that governs one's perception of Being, does not condemn one to anxiety. God does not abandon humans. Balthasar's originality, therefore, can be seen with his attempt for the first time to complete the philosophical presentation of anxiety (Kierkegaard) by way of a theological and Christological rendering. The solution he proposes for all Christians is the *imitatio Christi* at the level of encounter.

The encounter between the infinite God and the finite person, which is the ever-present and guiding theme driving Balthasar's thought, is at the heart of this understanding of anxiety as well; indeed, there never is one without the other. The moment when a person is *aware* of Being, he or she enters the dimension of encounter with the infinite God. But the sheer strangeness and unfamiliarity of this 'presence' calls to mind an even greater awareness of absence. Metaphorically speaking, one undergoes a vertiginous experience as one stands atop a cliff in which the drop is incalculable and yet into which one is called to leap. Yet Balthasar helps us navigate through this vertiginous experience. In the first place, Balthasar tells us that anxiety has been entirely defeated by the Cross, for anxiety is "one of the authorities, powers, and dominions over which the Lord triumphed."⁵⁵ The inescapable anxiety of the Old Testament presents the reader only with a finite sense of hope that anxiety will not be the last word; for the hope of Israel was of a mediator who had not yet arrived. Since Christ illumines the earth with the presence of heaven in himself, thus bridging the infinite and the finite, "the finitude of grace and its modality of hope" is finally removed.⁵⁶ This prompts Balthasar to assert boldly that "fear has been invalidated" and, remarkably, that anxiety is now prohibited!⁵⁷ In other words, human beings have no reason to fear or be anxious.⁵⁸ One perceives a rejection of Heidegger and a resounding "No" to modern philosophy that would entreat man to accept anxiety with a kind of Stoic resoluteness:

If it is true that anxiety about being in the world, about being forlorn, about the world itself, about all its supposedly or really unfathomable dimensions, anxiety about death and anxiety about perhaps inescapable

⁵⁵ Ibid., 42 (Eng., 81).

⁵⁶ Ibid. (Eng., 82).

⁵⁷ Ibid., 43 (Eng., 82).

⁵⁸ Ibid. (Eng., 83).

guilt – lies at the root of modern consciousness; if it is true that this anxiety is the basis of contemporary neuroses and that this anxiety is supposed to be overcome through a modern existentialist philosophy by entering into it and affirming it and enduring it with determination to the very end, then to all of this Christianity can only say a radical No. By no means does a Christian have permission for or access to this kind of anxiety.⁵⁹

Yet, if anxiety has been forbidden by Christ, what must the person *do*? Again, there is only one thing and that is to imitate Christ on the Cross by surrendering all of one's hope and trust to God. One must, and can only, make an absolute decision *for* God in one's attempt to overcome anxiety.⁶⁰ Because of the concrete example of Christ, one follows him by consenting to be present in the space, to wait (Latin) as it were *with Christ* who himself has descended into the absence, into the void made ever wider by human sin.

Balthasar avers that the promise of freedom from anxiety is rooted in *this* decision.⁶¹ And this decision must be resolute, for falling back into sin casts one back into the anxiety of the sinner which is grounded in emptiness and meaninglessness—the darkness of Hades.⁶² Freedom from anxiety depends on “not going astray.”⁶³ Man is called to be fearless, daring to face whatever suffering comes his way and not to retreat into himself.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, Balthasar does not provide the reader in CA with an example of what this decision for God looks like in the ordinary life of the Christian. For example, he could have spoken about temptation as *the* occasion for making a courageous act of trust.

Balthasar does, however, provide a sustained account of the encounter between God and the person, and the decision one must make for God in his 1955 work *Prayer*. In this work Balthasar argues consistently that if, after the initial encounter between God and the person, the person resorts to her own thought in order to make sense of the encounter itself, indeed “to explain” the relationship she assumes to have with God, she runs the risk of falling into subjective, even Gnostic, pride. It is in prayer, that is, the basic opening of self to God in an act of surrendering love and devotion, indeed, in a consent to be silent, to wait for God in the void, that one has an example of what the decision or at least the occasion for trust looks like. Prayer is the way to enter into *and emerge out of* the void; not that prayer does away with the void, but rather is the experience of

⁵⁹ Ibid., 45–46 (Eng., 86).

⁶⁰ Ibid., 26 (Eng., 58).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 32 (Eng., 67).

⁶³ Ibid., 33 (Eng., 68).

⁶⁴ Ibid., 47 (Eng., 88).

not being alone in the void.⁶⁵ Only in an authentic life of devotion and sacrifice, of concern for the “obligations” of the natural and supernatural, can one find freedom from anxiety. In other words, the only life that can surmount the torment of anxiety is the one that is turned away from the gloomy obsession with finitude and toward the infinite God in an act of surrendering love no matter what perils lie before a person.⁶⁶ Allers tells us that this characterizes the life of the saint: “It follows that the only person who can be entirely free from neurosis is the man . . . who has steadfastly accepted and affirmed his position as a creature and his place in the order of creation; in other words, beyond the neurotic there stands only the saint.”⁶⁷

Even though Balthasar has argued that anxiety is forbidden to the Christian, he was speaking of *a particular kind of anxiety*, namely, anxiety that comes both from sin and from the failure to hope and trust in God. For anxiety, whether “bad” or “good,” is constitutive of human experience. Thus, something like anxiety is allowed to endure in the one who, having advanced in the spiritual life, shares in the suffering of Jesus on the Cross. What this entails is an experience of the love that Jesus the Son ultimately experienced from the Father who raised him from the dead. It is precisely in this deepening of one’s decision for and abandonment to God, exemplified in the sufferings of Jesus on the Cross, that anxiety resurfaces; but this is an anxiety of a wholly different kind. On the one hand, one is undergoing a kind of final purgation of self-determination and sin, so as to experience more fully the light of God. The anxiety of the sinner, on the other hand, is a fire that can only lead to the despair and confusion of utter darkness:

There is an objective basis to the sin-anxiety that is forbidden to the Christian, and in that anxiety the properties of sin disclose themselves: a turning away, flight, a rigidity of life, sterility, desolation, the plunge into the abyss, constriction, incarceration, withdrawing into self, banishment. In contrast, the basis for the anxiety of the Cross is nothing other than the love of God, who takes this entire world of anxiety upon himself so as to surmount it by suffering, a love that is in all respects the opposite of the sinner’s experience of anxiety: it is instead a turning toward, an availability, life, fruitfulness, security and support, expansiveness, liberation.⁶⁸

In short, to Balthasar, the courage of the Christian, which can certainly be laden with anxiety, is in turn nothing other than an act of faith, in which one dares to place oneself and the whole world in

⁶⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986). See especially Chapter One: *The Necessity of Contemplation*.

⁶⁶ See Allers, *The Psychology of Character*, 348.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁶⁸ Balthasar, CA, 48–49 (Eng., 90).

the hand of the One who can dispose of a person for death and for life.⁶⁹

V. Conclusion

Anxiety betokens the awareness of the encounter with the infinite, of the presence (and absence!) of transcendence, of Being. Anxiety, therefore, characterizes the state of the mind that is brought before the infinite to the encounter with God that always already requires a decision for God. Practically speaking, this means the decision (with Kierkegaard) to entrust oneself to God.⁷⁰ The alleviation of the anxiety that originates with the act of entrusting oneself to an unknown God/Infinite is possible because of the concrete appearance and the lived experience of God himself (it is here that we see why Balthasar forbids anxiety!); for with Christ the void is now suffused with his presence.⁷¹ The very possibility for freedom from anxiety rests with the surrender of one's whole life to Christ. It is in this surrender that one creates a space which God alone can fill: "Right where I become intentional about bearing my heart and my life, the real power, which is not mine but God's, radiates most purely."⁷² Anxiety characterizes that *moment* of encounter and decision: one either surrenders to God, who has sent his Christ to bridge heaven and earth by conveying him to the void, or one retreats into oneself by looking past God and gazing at the void itself.

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⁶⁹ Ibid., 49 (Eng., 90)

⁷⁰ Ibid., 95 (Eng., 154).

⁷¹ Ibid., 87 (Eng., 142–143).

⁷² Ibid., 95 (Eng., 154).