



Anxiety, helplessness, and courage

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Published online: 2 September 2022

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Abstract In this essay, I discuss the root and meaning of anxiety before turning my attention to the relationship between anxiety and courage, arguing that courage is often a defense against anxiety: an externalization of an internal crisis. Discourses of courage draw attention away from the true problem of anxiety, rather than addressing it, sponsoring a kind of uncourageousness by externalizing anxiety, transposing it onto concrete and manageable external feared objects. Furthermore, courage and bravery discourses do not accord with the reports of persons who have performed brave acts, who describe their behavior either as forms of service to internalized values or as moments of madness. Contemporary courage discourses reinforce the belief that, in courage, there is a component of the self that is capable of helping the self in times of need. Yet, this helper self is either substantially degraded or missing entirely in the case of anxiety, which is organized around failures of help and consequent experiences of shame and helplessness.

Keywords anxiety · courage · helplessness · shame · externalization · crisis

To begin, we must attend to the distinction between anxiety and fear. This distinction has been an important part of phenomenological, existential, and psychoanalytic investigations of anxiety for well over a century (e.g., see Kierkegaard, 1844/1980a; 1849/1980b; Freud, 1926/1959; Heidegger, 1927/1962; May, 1950; Tillich, 1952; and also Stolorow, 2007). Such thinkers typically differentiate fear from anxiety by looking to the presence (fear) or absence (anxiety) of an identifiable dreaded object. Anxiety, then, has come to be understood as an objectless fear, a “fear of fear itself,” or a fear of nothing (*no thing*). This tradition

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of distinguishing fear and anxiety has continued to receive support from other branches of psychology, including neuropsychology, psychopharmacology, and phenomenological psychology.

On this matter, Freud, himself, offered similar distinctions. First, according to Freud (1926/1959), fear has “an [external] object” of reference in the world, and anxiety, which is characterized by “indefiniteness and lack of object” (p. 165). Second, traumatic anxiety, which we are concerned with in this essay, is a state of “psychical *helplessness* [emphasis added]” (p. 166), differing from signal anxiety, which expects or anticipates the traumatic event or traumatized state by repeating its affective state (anxiety) (p. 167). In this essay, I argue that anxiety depends largely on early experiences of help and/or their deficiency.

In growing-up experience, failures of help comprise all parental behaviors that do not meet the child’s (basic) needs, including a “lack of genuine warmth and affection,” (Horney, 1999, p. 80), indifference, failed attunement, neglect, abandonment, impingement, and abuse. These are experienced by the child as persecutory hostility by the caregiver(s): what Karen Horney named “basic evil.” Horney argued that basic evil led to basic anxiety as well as a schema of neurotic defenses, owing to the child’s inability to express rage at needed caregivers.

That failures of appropriate help are “evil” to the child is not to say that the child has a sophisticated concept (or any concept at all) of evil. Rather, it means that the child is exposed to what is perceived as hostility and aggression where, from an adult’s point of view, there may or may not be any conscious hostility or aggression. For D.W. Winnicott (1989, p. 146), failures of appropriate help are traumata for the child who sees the adult as “breaking faith” with the child and therefore destroying the relationship between child and caregiver(s). Specifically, what is ruined is the possibility of internalizing good aspects of the caregiver, whose benevolent image is needed by the child to create internal good (helping) objects. Internal helping objects are, like caregivers, stronger than the child’s ego or self, which cannot survive alone.

It is a truism of the evolutionary, developmental, and psychosocial sciences that human beings are creatures for whom help is central to development (see Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969). Attachment theory has convincingly demonstrated that our emotional and intellectual development is shaped by our early dependence, which is to say our incapacity to help ourselves early in life and our reliance on caregivers to help us for a considerable period of time.

It hardly needs to be stated that failures of help, while potentially devastating, are both inevitable and necessary parts of development: If help were perfectly and completely given and received, children would never grow up. Nevertheless, in helpless moments, the child’s self is unable to obtain what it needs and finds its fantasy of primary narcissistic omnipotence disrupted by an unwelcome, even horrifying, sense of absence, abandonment, and desolation. If such moments are repeated often enough, they threaten to become permanent features of the growing child’s psyche.

If appropriate help is not provided at essential moments in the child’s development, then we might say that the child’s *discovery* of its own helplessness comes too early, too suddenly, too fully, in the form of traumatically infused



anxiety. It is traumatically tinged because the self lacks internal helpers, or, as Dori Laub (2012) might say, lacks access to the external and the internal “other,” the “thou” of every dialogic relationship, including, of course, the self’s. Perhaps it is also worth noting that help, too, may traumatically *impinge* upon the recipient’s capacity to succeed or fail on his or her own, the result of which may be a degradation of autonomy and self-feeling and self-attributions of helplessness and worthlessness.

Thus, failures of help along with parenting behaviors that differ strongly from those famously suggested by Winnicott—adaptation with a gradual reduction of adaptation (see 1989, pp. 3–18)—prevent the child from internalizing a helping object. Lack of appropriate help also precludes the development of an internal working model of the world as a benevolent place where the self can act and exercise its will, making possible (e.g., desired, gratifying, wished-for) experience actual.

Early encounters with trauma and evil lead to a sense of helplessness before a world wherein one feels unable to act. Why? First, the child is helpless in several senses. At the most basic level, the child is physically helpless in a world of adults. He does not have the power to determine the course of his own daily life, and depends, to a great degree, on the attention and care of others to thrive. At a psychic level, the same is true, but its meaning runs deeper: The inner experience of helplessness means that the child still relies on caring, benevolent, good external objects to help him, and if those objects are inadequate, deficient, or absent (even in an emotional if not literal sense), then the child, who has not yet developed the psychic means of helping himself, has no means of feeling safe from threatening, fearsome, aggressive, or destructive impulses and fantasies.

Second, the encounter with trauma and basic evil makes the world impossible for the child to comprehend or navigate. As Peter Marris (1986, p. 8) reminds us: For the child (and the adult as well) “each discovery is the basis for the next, in a series of interpretations which gradually consolidate ... into an understanding of life” without which “we would be helpless.” The possible (particularly the desired and the wished-for) cannot be made actual, at least not by the self alone, for life is not only unpleasant but unfathomable. Put simply, without internal helping objects, the self cannot make itself real or worthwhile. Selfhood, freedom, and autonomy become impossible, and, indeed, the category of the possible, itself, may seem impossible.

The helplessness we feel when faced with a dislocation of sense and meaning is therefore mirrored in early growing-up experiences. Regardless of whether we conceive of early childhood behavior as the result of drives or of relationships with internal and external objects, a child’s smile or cry operates (or ought to operate) within a field of predictability, stability, and regularity. Those who do not receive help in predictable, regular ways develop shame instead of self-worth. The unanswered cry, the need, and the part of the self that needs help is disconfirmed by the caregiver’s neglect. When help is needed, help cannot be expected or relied upon. What is worse, the needs that cry for help but receive none readily turn into abject aspects of the self, parts of the self so repugnant that they do not deserve attention or care. The infant’s experience of helplessness turns into an experience of



worthlessness if help is not received reliably, in time, and in good enough measure. Internalized rage at the caregivers, which may be equated with shame created by helplessness, then, becomes the root of anxiety.

A Helpless World

Helpless in an unhelpful world, all that is reliably present is one's own anxiety. That is one reason why the experiences of anxiety and helplessness are idealized as their opposites: specifically, as the possibility of overcoming (external) evil with (internal) courage. But courage discourses suggest a fixation on external objects of fear and external crisis; and the crises on which we fixate are rarely the real crises that have motivated our fixation. Of course, they may be "real" enough, in the sense that real others (or we, ourselves) may be harmed or even killed, but these external crises very often refer us back to an experience of internal crisis that occurred much earlier (see Kagan & Schlosberg, 1989), when we were confronted with the trauma and evil to which to which we had no adequate response. Courage is the denial of this experience and its idealized transformation into a vindication of the self even as the self faces a host of potential targets of externalization on which to displace its trauma. Such targets include objects deemed unlikely or unworthy of helping the self, obstacles, or even impossibilities, all deemed bad or evil.

This condition, of course, closely resembles Melanie Klein's account of the paranoid-schizoid position in its chief characteristic: a radical splitting of good and bad and of self and object. The inability to integrate good and bad and self and object makes the world incomprehensible, leaving us helpless to navigate it. In the paranoid-schizoid position—which we all visit at various moments of experience—it is impossible to communicate, relate, or meaningfully act in the world (action as an expression of self).

Thus, in this defense, by which anxiety rooted in basic evil is transformed as the very means to conquer evil, we see an extraordinarily powerful dynamic. This dynamic has sticking power; if challenged, as extreme and absolute as it is, it will likely show considerable resistance. Or, put another way, the desire to rediscover in adult experience what was "basic" or given in the child's experience is something shared by all of us. But not all persons desire to rediscover that evil exists or that neither the self nor others are helpful in recognizing, confirming, or satisfying the self's basic needs. The urge to repeat this way of experiencing life may be most clearly understood in light of what Marris (1986, p. 8) calls the "conservative impulse" toward a given system of meaning. The goal is to conserve or preserve meaning and sense in the world, not according to its terms, but according to one's own. "It does not matter," of course, "that the system may be false on another system's terms, so long as it identifies experiences in a way which enables people to attach meaning to them and respond" (Marris, 1986, p. 7). This is true even for a system or scheme of living that predominantly features evil, anxiety, helplessness, and shame.



“The Courage to Be” and the Externalization of Anxiety

The concepts of courage and bravery have become so much a part of common language that they are often applied to situations in which they stand out as inappropriate, especially when given a closer look. For instance, the headline “Brave one-year-old undergoes successful heart transplant operation” would be difficult to defend if its attribution of bravery is examined thoughtfully (Scarre, 2010, p. 30). While there are important distinctions between bravery and, say, heroism, differences between bravery and courage tend to be semantic, trivial, or arbitrary. One might take as an example Warshaw’s (2019) brief article on the difference between bravery and courage, where bravery is defined as “the ability to confront something painful or difficult or dangerous without any fear,” while courage is understood as “the ability to confront something painful or difficult or dangerous *despite* any fear” (emphasis in original).

Much of what has been written about the relationship between anxiety and courage should disturb those with psychoanalytic sympathies, mainly because these literatures often endorse a defensive externalization of anxiety and a form of magical thinking. Often praised for its ability to afford human beings the “opportunity” to act courageously, anxiety, for Paul Tillich, is precisely the opportunity to enact “the courage to be,” which entails “resist[ing] the radical threat of nonbeing,” by rejecting the “courage of despair” and attending to the “meaningful attempt to reveal the meaninglessness of our situation” (1952, p. 140). For Rollo May (1950), anxiety is a boon because it gives us a chance to act courageously and in freedom, by which May means—surprisingly—to transform our amorphous anxieties into manageable fears of identifiable objects, and then to avoid them or to stand against them in such a way as to reduce fearful experiences.

More recently, Coline Covington has argued that “being true to oneself is at the core of bravery [for Covington, bravery and courage are identical] and is the common factor in each act of bravery” (2021, p. xvii). Standing against “prevailing political forces,” bravery is, then, “the opposite of evil” because it requires only being “true to oneself” (2021, p/ xvi). Here, too, we see an externalizing of the feared [evil] objects and a questionable connection between being one’s true self and an external combat against external ills.

A related understanding of anxiety and courage is championed by advocates of exposure therapy and others, such as Sherry Armatenstein (2020), who, in offering “tips to overcoming anxiety and phobias” argues that:

it is human nature to avoid emotions that scare us ... Except that by continually avoiding looking at the “boogeyman” within, you become hostage to the monster. Typically, this involves hiding from any potential stressor that might cause upset and engaging in endless distractions ... The good news is that once you face your fear [*note that it is not one’s anxiety that is faced*]—and give the boogeyman air—rather than shove it into a distant compartment of your brain, it begins losing the ability to rule you and dictate your decisions. (paras. 1–2)



We commonly think of courage as overcoming fear to accomplish something meaningful in the world. The literatures and discourses cited above suggest that courage may be, instead, an externalizing defense against internal anxiety. In other words, to rid oneself of anxiety, find a suitable external fear that can be faced and make it manifest in the world, as Armatenstein recommends. Once the experience of anxiety is made external and bounded, then it can be faced according to the dictates of external reality. But of course what is avoided is precisely the internal reality of a crisis of impossibility.

To be sure, there are several discourses about courage (e.g., historical, political, feminist) aside from those which I have cited. Sadly, it is beyond the scope and size of this paper to review the extensive literatures on the subject, from Plato's day to the present (for excellent beginnings, see Mackenzie, 1962; Scarre, 2010; Walton, 1986). It suffices to say that, in most cases, courage and bravery are valorized as a means by which experiences of anxiety may be transformed into something positive in the world, primarily because we wish them to be. Involved in this assertion, then, is a kind of magical thinking: for instance, the belief that "being oneself" combats "evil" in the world. But, of course, this magical power is, in actuality, little more than a projection of inner angst onto external objects or others. Indeed, like Covington's "prevailing political forces," Tillich externalizes his fear and hatred upon what he describes as an uncourageous (existentialist) lot who "are unable to understand what is happening in our period" (1952, p. 140).

Such considerations leave us with a vision of courage that seems, frankly, quite *uncourageous* in its refusal to contend seriously with the experience of anxiety itself. Instead, in what would seem to be a well-organized defense against anxiety, these approaches are attempts to dislodge anxiety from the anxious self, either by making that self a part of our anxious species-being (e.g., see Heidegger, 1927/1962), or by contending that anxiety may be magically transposed into fears of palpable objects which may be confronted or faced.

An interesting example of courage in this respect is the oft-cited 1943 defacing of the Feldherrnhalle, a bastion of Nazi power and authority in Munich, by the White Rose student opposition group. This act has been described as one of "outstanding courage" as well as one "plainly ... calling for the most exceptional bravery" (Scarre, 2010, pp. 1–2). This defiant vandalism of one of Hitler's most sacred shrines (while perhaps doing little to halt Nazi aggression throughout Europe) may be understood as a metaphorical expression of externalized anxiety. The helplessness of students, like that of many citizens and groups in Germany, before the Nazi rise to power, generated profound anxiety and even shame, rooted in the perceived inability to defend oneself and others. It is a point of interest that the action was not precisely one of destruction but rather of "de-face-ing." Here, we see an effort to strip some of the veneer of power and authority from the Nazi Party by causing it to "lose face," as it were. Even some members of the White Rose, such as Christoph Probst, criticized the vandalism as a "pointless escapade" (see Dumbach & Newborn, 2006, pp. 140–141), whereas, from the psychological standpoint I have briefly constructed above, the act fulfills its (internal) mission, which is to externalize the shame and ugliness of helplessness into an outcry (a crying out) that receives attention, even if the attention is ultimately negative.



What Courageous People (Don't) Say

Many courage discourses ask us to do the needful, to “be afraid [of something] and do it anyway,” and “to do what needs to be done in spite of fear” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 199), particularly when that action is required or desired by others. In this case, individuals are asked to set aside their fears—including their fear of being harmed or killed—for the sake of an object with which they identify and upon identification with which they depend. The paradigmatic example of this type of courage is the soldier who throws herself on a grenade, killing herself but absorbing the impact of the explosion to preventing her comrades from harm.

It is curious that many persons describe such putatively courageous acts as deriving from an alignment with social norms and values, primarily with “adherence to values, beliefs, and norms that were internalized, adopted as one’s own, and/or developed in the course of experience” (Staub, 1978). The Oliners, in their famous study of those who helped Jews during the Nazi occupation of Europe, found no subjects who cited courage as a motivating factor in their actions. Instead, respondents focused on what they call a “normocentric” motivation “rooted ... in a feeling of obligation to a social reference group with whom the actor identifies and whose explicit and implicit rules he feels obliged to obey” (Oliner & Oliner, 1988, pp. 188–189). Others understand their brave acts as acts of madness (Scarre, 2010, pp. 159–160n).

Here, it would seem to be anxiety, not fear, that arises internally when faced with danger. The danger most pressing seems to be the prospect of violating core internalized values. And here, too, courage discourses would utterly miss the point that courage, in such cases, involved the dread of the loss of identification with the good object rather than an overcoming of fear. In Winnicottian language, we might even say that courage appears as a giving way to the *false* self, to the self that adapts and conforms to the demands and desires of other persons and groups.

In general, theoretical discourses of courage and anxiety do not match up with lived experience. Philip Larkin’s poem, *Aubade* (2003), captures the situation well. Against that anxiety which “stays just on the edge of vision ... a standing chill,” Larkin notes:

Courage is no good:
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.

In living with our anxieties:

... telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
Work has to be done.
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.



Our anxiety remains, yet there is nothing (*no thing*) to fear. Life goes on and the “world begins to rouse,” our daily work resumes and “postmen... go from house to house.”

Courage and Crisis

As we have discussed, most courage discourses suggest a fixation on external objects of fear and external crisis. But the crises on which we fixate are rarely the real crises that have motivated our fixation. Of course, they may be “real” enough, in the sense that real others (or we, ourselves) may be harmed or even killed, but these external crises very often refer us back to an experience of internal crisis that occurred much earlier, when we were confronted with the possibility of psychic death or damage, an experience to which we had no adequate response but anxiety because we had no means of struggle, “nothing (*no thing*) to do.”

Crisis may be understood as a state in which the individual can find no possible response. Crisis implies *stasis* in both the original and the casual uses of the term. It implies an extreme helplessness, at least inwardly. But it can also describe a state of frenetic activity, even though this activity is not likely to—and is frequently not even intended to—resolve the underlying predicament. For instance, when Kagan and Schlosberg (1989) describe families who are “addicted” to a state of perpetual crisis, they mean both that there is a real, fundamental intrapsychic problem to be overcome (a real crisis, such as the past or present psychic death of one or both of the parents) and a false problem that is always being called forth, one that may symbolize the real crisis, but that is never linked up with the deeper problem.

In states of crisis, actions and speech are often placed on a combative moral plane. Another important reason why theoretical discourses of courage do not match up with lived experience is that most discourses of courage (see also Shklar, 1989; Scorza, 2001) do the same. In the (moral) combat against crisis, the reality of the self is obscured and an exaggerated solidity and integration is accounted to the self, one that selves rarely possess. Put another way, discourses of courage presume a non-problematic subject that is exactly what is missing if one must resort to the kind of defensive externalization and magical thinking cited above. Courage is, in this way, a defense and a retreat from unresolved anxiety, from an inner reality that is more disintegrated than the courageous stance implies. The “good and evil” political forces implicated in most courage discourses locate persons in a moral drama that shares many similarities with the dilemma of the perpetual crisis: It simplifies the characters and their problems, necessitating an endless struggle in which one is destined to fail.

I would argue that anxiety, as opposed to fear, cannot be fought with courage. Indeed, these reflections help us understand why, while courage seems to have some important role in the discussion of fear, it has little place in serious discussions of anxiety. Since anxiety reflects a state of crisis in the inner world, there is no external object to fight and to serve as a vehicle for courage. Indeed, the best we can say is that not courage but mourning and integration are the work of the anxious self: that *integration is to anxiety what courage is to fear*.



Although we have all faced, to one degree or another and at one time or another, failures of help, a truly *helpless world* is one in which the self can neither find help nor help itself. If such helplessness is a significant feature of growing up, then a result of a lack of help in the home or family is that the world becomes organized around help's absence. In other words, the world becomes a place where help and helpers are needed yet vilified, a place where persons and groups are marked by their (shameful) need for help or their (hateful, envious) "privilege" in having received help.

In such a situation, a state of helplessness is actively maintained by attacking help and helpers, owing to envy and resentment, both psychically and manifestly in the outer world. Such attacks are designed to ensure that no help will be found, that one's helplessness will be shared by others, even as the attacks themselves may be understood as cries for help. In the end, they repeat the experience of needing help and failing to find it.

While most scholars have understood help as an expression of our need for "belongingness" and the aversion to help as a marker of our drive for independence, what may be overlooked is the extent to which we may seek to belong to a group whose identity is closely aligned with helplessness itself. Such groups, which frequently include both hate groups and victim and survivor groups, take as their mission the rejection or destruction of helping agents, as beneficial help becomes, itself, a threat to the group's fundamental fantasy that it inhabits a cruel and unhelpful world.

If understood as a helping agent, individuals and groups may attack the government itself, or its specific policies and projects, from affordable healthcare to foreign aid, from affirmative action to local, State, or Federal public health measures. Indeed, it is a tragedy of political psychology that there are just as many opportunities to give or receive help as there are opportunities to play out the internal drama of helplessness, trauma, and hate in the external world by attacking helpful policies and institutions and organizations that offer needed help.

Conclusion

Having argued that courage discourses draw attention away from the problem of anxiety rather than addressing it, and that anxiety is internalized shame rooted in helplessness, a brief, concluding excursus on true helplessness and psychic death is needed. True helplessness would mean not only the impossibility of acting in the world but the impossibility of surviving psychically, for we begin and remain dependent on others' help to support our identities, meanings, and attachments. Indeed, we may say that we need help to keep ourselves alive because aliveness means involving the self in projects in which the self's possibility is made real or actual.

Encounters with the psychic death, then, are traumatic because they mean the end of possibility. To say as much is to say that in the state of psychic aliveness, one encounters possibility in a Kierkegaardian sense (1844/1980a). Psychic death is the threat of not being, not merely of dying and not only of being nothing, but rather of



being *nothing (no thing) but what one is*, of being a creature without possibility, and so of being lifeless and inert. The threat of psychic death is piqued when we are confronted with situations where nothing is possible for us, when there is nothing (*no thing*) to do, when we are unable to act, as in anxiety as well as crisis.

The capacity to imagine and create possibility, and then to make the possible actual, contains within it one side of the overwhelming possibility and existential freedom that is anxiety. The *other* side of anxiety is the possibility that we will *not* come into being, that we will *not* make the possible actual, or that we will succumb to a world in which nothing is possible for us. To begin to resolve this dilemma ultimately requires an acknowledgement of one's incompleteness and vulnerability within certain limits. These limits are defined by the self's ability to rely on an internalized helper (internalized good object) to "help itself" in times of need. That is, it takes the integration and acceptance of both contingencies—possibility and impossibility—rather than courage, to begin to face our anxiety at a fundamental level.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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