



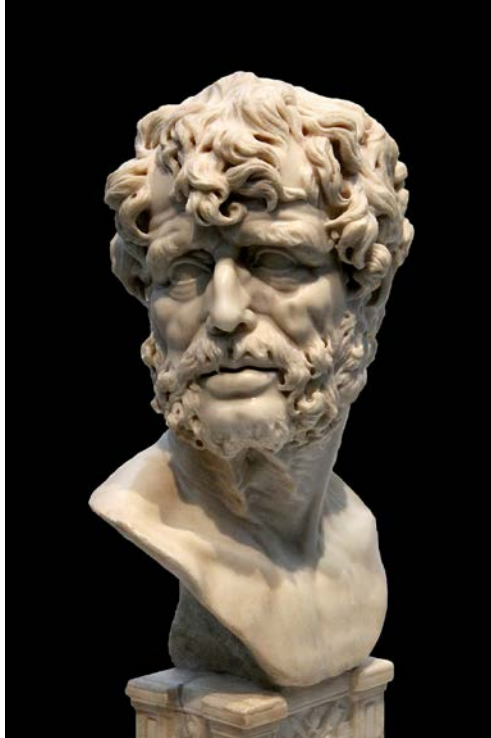
Our program will begin shortly...

Jason K. Swedene

Anxious People

“No creature is more fretful... than man”

- *Seneca the younger (c. 55 AD)*



Anonymous, 17th century imaginary bust of Seneca (*Prado Museum*)

“a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach... a sense of the insecurity of life.”

- *William James (1901)*

Three Philosophical Diagnoses of Anxiety + Some honorable mentions

Diagnosis One

The Stoic: Anxiety is the state of not acknowledging what we can and can't control

Epictetus (50 - 135 CE)

→ Greek philosopher who was born into slavery

- Became disabled, perhaps because of a beating he received from his master
- Stoicism was quite popular in the Hellenistic and Roman world



Stoicism - *Some things are in our control, and some things are not.*

Anxiety stems from an ignorance of what we have control over and what we do not.

What's in our control - we don't need to feel anxious about this.

→Why? It's in our control!

E.g., A musical performance? A lecture to colleagues? [Test-anxiety](#)?

What's not in our control - we shouldn't be anxious about that either; we don't have control over this!

E.g., What the crowd will think is outside of our control; how many attend; whether the car
airbag goes off suddenly

Does anxiety have an object?

- The Ancient Stoics thought it did have an object.
- Since the 19th century, many philosophical accounts of anxiety argue that it **doesn't**.

Fears have an object that, once removed, dissipates the fear.

If the fear persists, then either the object is not removed **or** is not *perceived* to be removed.



Diagnosis Two

Anxiety is the wretched human condition

Blaise Pascal (1623 - 1662)



Anxiety cannot be cured by earthly thoughts

anxiety - uneasiness beyond any clear cause

boredom -

→ “Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he faces his nullity, isolation, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, sadness, grief, spite, despair.” (Pascal, *Pensees*)

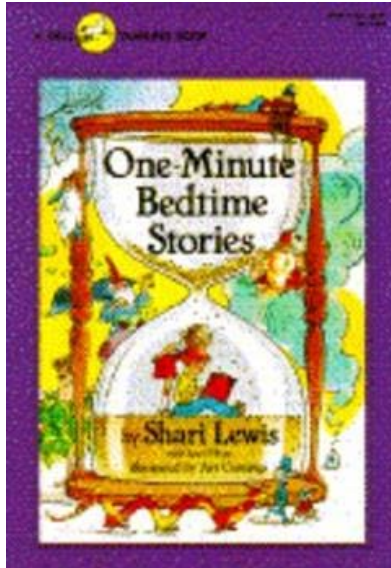
→ boredom can also occur when we are engaged in an old diversion that we no longer find meaning in (Cf. [Lars Svendsen](#), *A Philosophy of Boredom*, 2005)



inconstancy - we go from one thing to another seeking diversion from anxiety

Living in the present

→even when doing something valuable, such as reading to our child a bedtime story, **part of us wants to escape the present.**



We are

→ “so unwise that we wander about in **times that do not belong to us**, and do not think of the only one that does”

→ “so vain that we dream of times that are not and blindly flee the only one that is. **The fact is that the present usually hurts....**”

Pascal writes:

→ “Sometimes, when I set to thinking about the various activities of men, the dangers and troubles which they faced and court, or in war, giving rise to so many quarrels and passions, daring and often wicked enterprises and so on, I have often said that **the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his own room.**”

Diagnosis Three

Soren Kierkegaard (1813 — 1855): **Anxiety is the possibility of possibility**



Kierkegaard, S., & Hannay, A. (2015). *The concept of anxiety: A simple psychologically oriented deliberation in view of the dogmatic problem of hereditary sin*. Liveright Publishing Corporation.

Anxiety is our condition because we are free.

Anxiety is

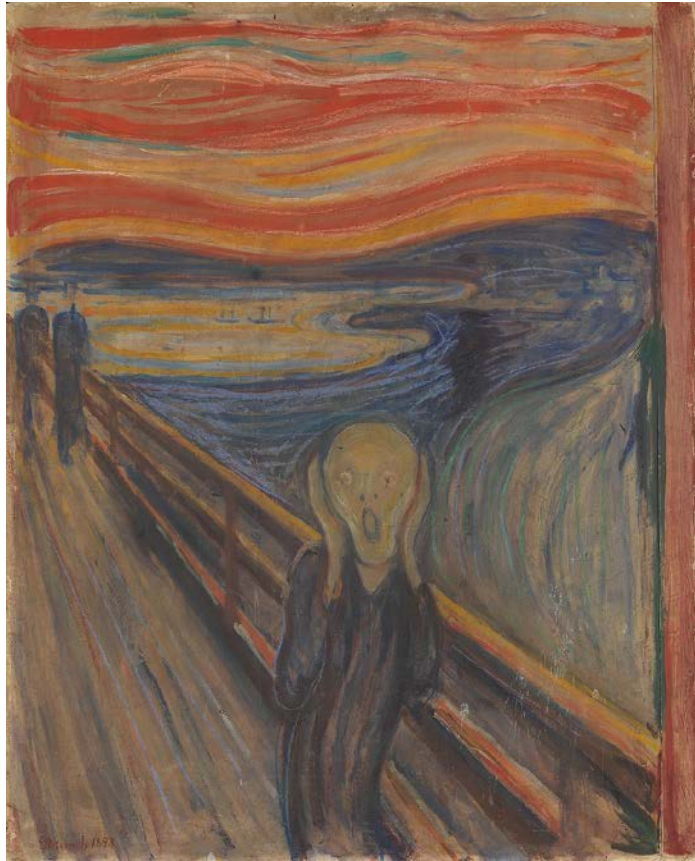
1. “The possibility of possibility”

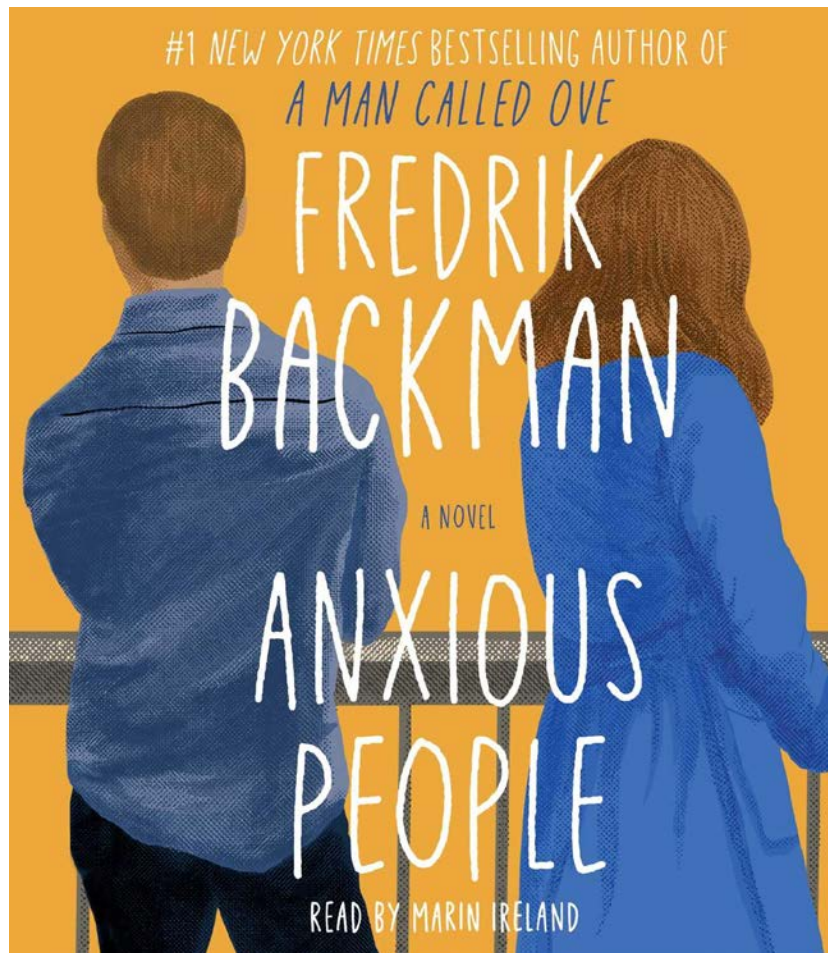
“I must point out that it is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite, whereas anxiety is freedom's actuality as the **possibility of possibility**. For this reason, anxiety is not found in the beast, precisely because by nature the beast is not qualified as spirit.” (p. 42)

If we weren't free, we'd have no anxiety, because everything would be determined. Since we are free, we have anxiety.

2. The possibility is to “be able to”

→ could this be why bridges represent anxiety and cause it for so many?



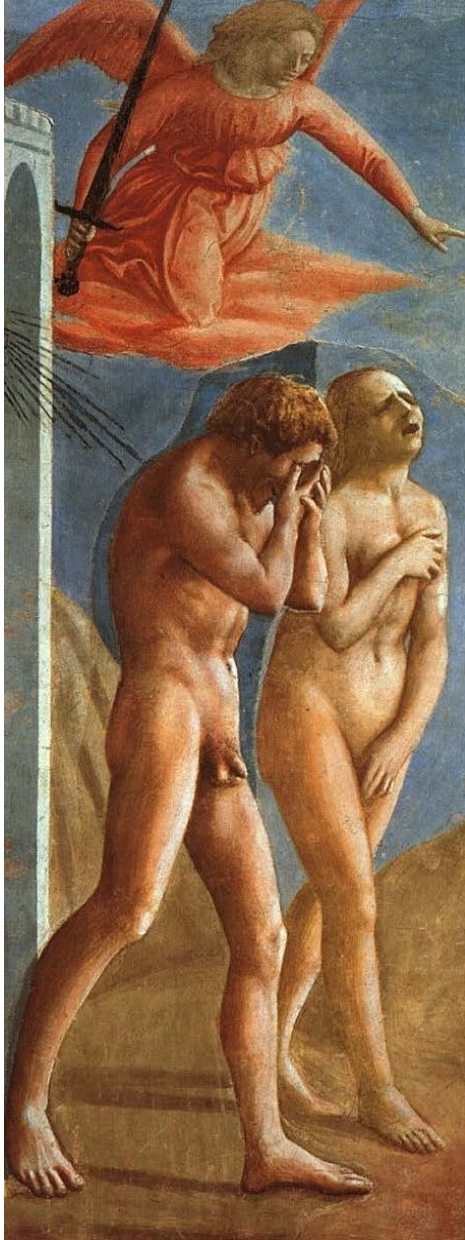


3. We both love anxiety and want to flee from it

"[to] flee away from anxiety, he cannot, for he loves it; really love it, he cannot, for he flees from it." (p. 44)

Anxiety and Sin





Masaccio, *Expulsion*

Masaccio, *Expulsion*

Adam and Eve were in an anxious state.

They knew of God's order. They knew they could choose.

Kierkegaard: Sin is the **qualitative leap** from innocence to guilt, an exercise of freedom.

Yet, as surely as we cling to freedom, we flee from it.

Some examples of fleeing

Adam and Eve to God:

Eve says that *the serpent* tricked her.

Adam says that *the woman* (“who You put here with me!”) gave it to him.



Elvis Presley to his beloved:

“Shall I stay? Would it be a sin if

I can't help falling in love with you?”

Francesca to Dante:



Auguste Rodin, *The Kiss*, 1887, *Musee Rodin*

“One day, to pass the time away, we read

of Lancelot—how love had overcome him.

We were alone, and we suspected nothing.

And time and time again that reading led
our eyes to meet, and made our faces pale,
and yet one point alone defeated us.

When we had read how the desired smile
was kissed by one who was so true a lover,
this one, who never shall be parted from me,

while all his body trembled, kissed my mouth.

**A Gallehault indeed, that book and he
who wrote it, too; that day we read no more.”**

————— Dante, *Inferno*, Canto V

→ Francesca is **fleeing** from her anxiety, even in hell!

-she blames the book (*Lancelot*) and its author; not herself for exercising her
freedom



Francesca da Rimini in the Inferno by Nicola Monti (1810)

If Elvis really couldn't *help it*, he would not be free. Since he is free, he has anxiety.

Kierkegaard would not be surprised that in the many possibilities offered by Tinder, everything stores, and infinite browsing that we would be fretful, agitated, and insecure.



Honorable Mentions

#1 **Anxiety comes from the fact that we must define ourselves: Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 - 1980)**

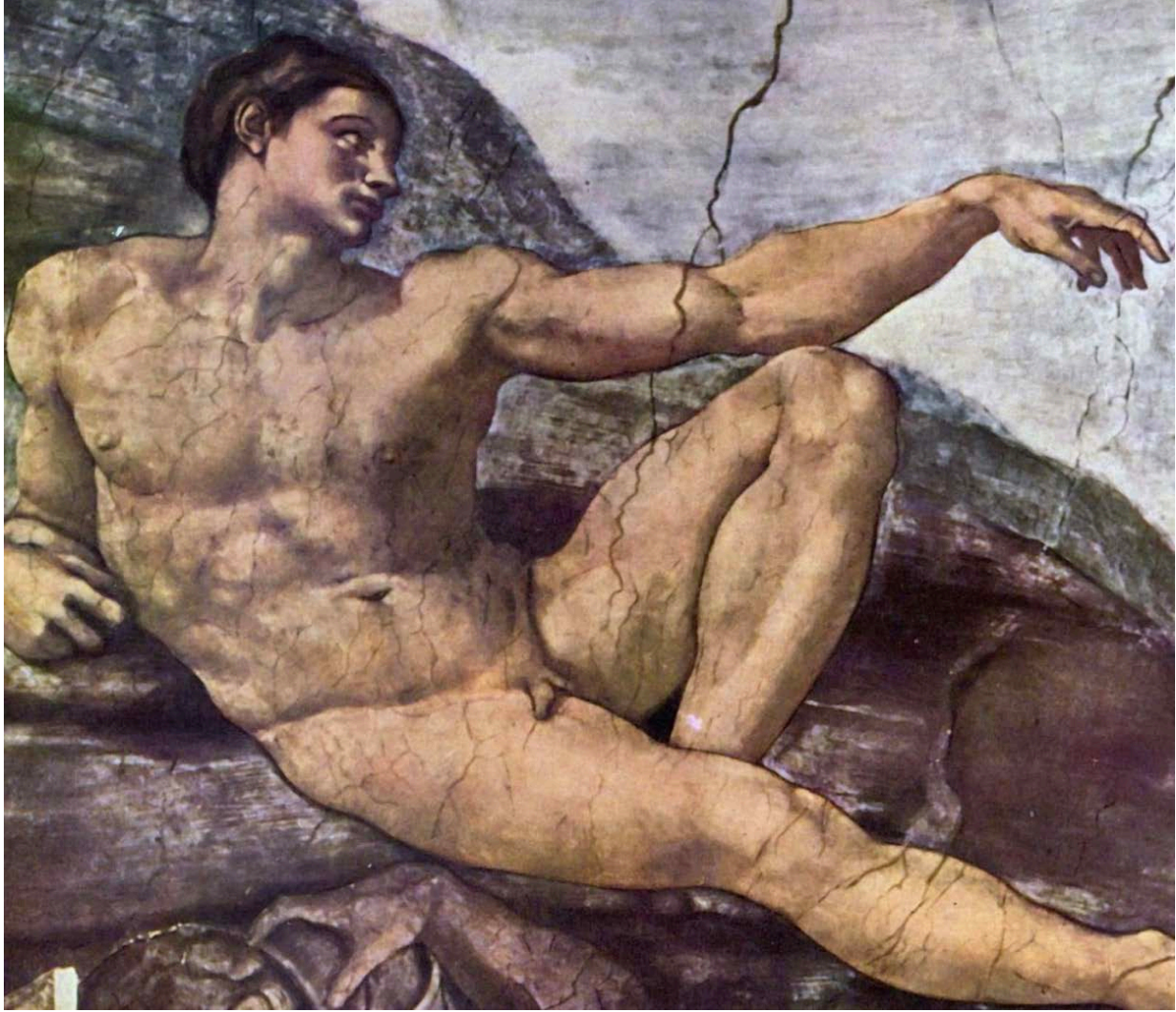


Abandonment

If God doesn't exist, we do not have a design / plan
/essence / definition

Sartre (from *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 1945):

"We are alone, without excuses. That is what I mean
when I say that man is **condemned to be free.**"



So, how will we define ourselves and create values?

You are the sum total of your choices.

In short, you are what you choose.

You are not your hopes, aspirations, imaginations, feelings, thoughts, social position, etc.

We must *do* something

"The genius of Proust is the works of Proust. A man engages in his own life, draws his own portrait, there

is nothing more. This is hard for somebody who has not made a success of life. But it is only reality that counts, not dreams, expectations or hopes."



Not only do we have to choose for ourselves, we choose for everyone

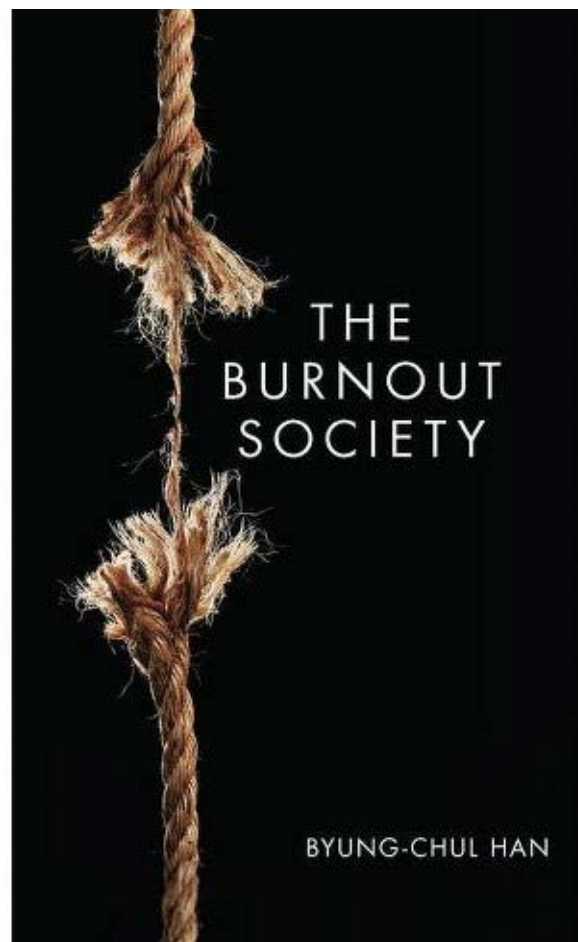
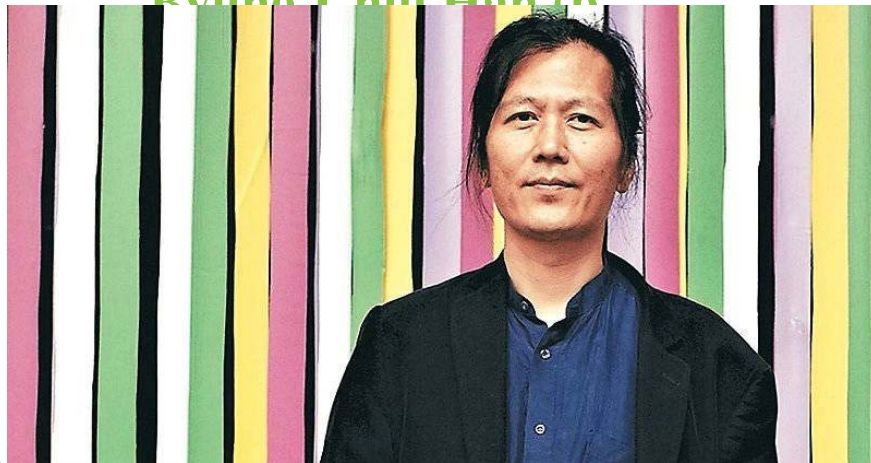
"Our personal responsibility is vast, because it engages all humanity."

"Each man must say to himself: am I right to set the standard for all humanity? To deny that is to mask the anguish."

#2 Anxiety comes from the fact that we've internalized authority and are, at once, master and slave.

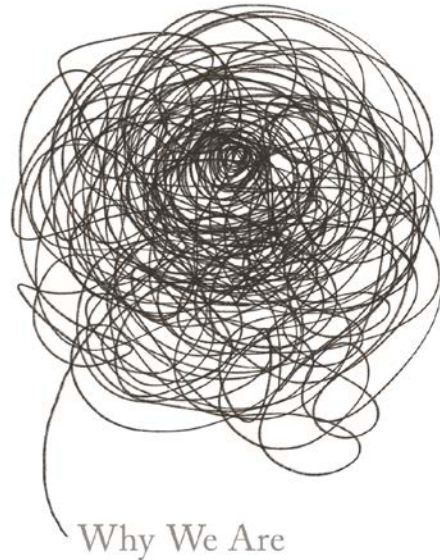
Byung Chul Han (b

1950)



We move towards the cure when we can be “able not to be able.”

Final Thoughts from Benjamin and Jenna Storey's *Why We are Restless* (Princeton, 2021)



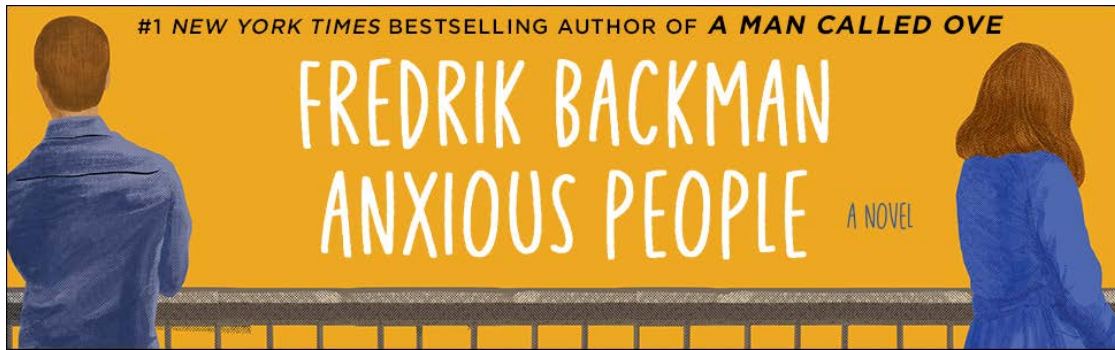
Why We Are
Restless

*On the Modern Quest
for Contentment*

Benjamin Storey
Jenna Silber Storey

Our anxiety comes from our modern desire to be open-ended, like pluripotent stem cells which have the ability to become anything...

“How did we arrive at the strange condition, in which long and expensive education fails to prepare the young to deal with the plain necessity of choosing to become something? Why does this love of indeterminacy persist into adult life, as we try to be super-parents, CEOs, and Samaritans all at once?” (177)



Thank you for
joining us today!



Please take our
post-event survey
<https://bit.ly/lssulibraryevent2122>