

Abstract

In his work *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor explores the contours of anthropology through studying contemporary philosophical thought in the postmodern West, wherein human identity is viewed as an internal, unique, moral ideal that finds fulfillment through the affirmation of others. This phenomenon has been termed by Robert Bellah as **expressive individualism (hereafter EI)**. Though the political and societal implications of EI have been discussed by Carl Trueman and other scholars, the intersection between EI and contemporary **existential anxiety (hereafter EA)** from a theological perspective has not been substantially studied.

We argue that EI is a significant contributing factor to the heightened EA experienced in the West. Applying W. Ross Hastings's theological and Trinitarian approach to human anthropology and ethics, we argue that the external pressures of EI alienate individuals from their larger communities, resulting in increased EA due to instability in interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the internal pressures of EI distance the individual from meaning beyond the self. Without a transcendent *telos*, individuals today are left with unfulfilled desires and increased discontentment.

Ultimately, we conclude that a theological approach to the issue of EA provides novel frameworks that can inform ministerial care. For future research, we suggest further exploration of the intersection between EI and anxiety in the fields of clinical psychology and applied apologetics.

Introduction, Research Question, and Thesis

A major part of life's journey lies in the discovery of personal meaning and fulfillment. In contemporary Western thought, EI is often seen as a moral ideal by which humans can find ultimate value. Charles Taylor explores the productive elements of individualism, but he also acknowledges its shortcomings. He rightly describes EI as a "condemnation" in which humans must find their own meaning or face despair. The vastness of the universe and potential options of self-expression and meaning could send a person into a cycle of finding an expressive outlet, becoming unsatisfied with it, and continuing the search for a new identity. **This begs the question of whether such a cycle could lead to an increase in EA if pursued extensively.**

We argue that adherence to EI as an ideal can lead to EA by means of alienating one from their community, fracturing relationships, lacking higher meaning, and inhibiting the fulfillment of meaningful desires. By examining these elements discussed among philosophers and theologians, we hope to contribute to academic conversations concerning EI and suggest a better approach to reducing EA from a theological perspective.

Methods

We adopt the theological anthropology of W. Ross Hastings as outlined in his book *Theological Ethics*. Hastings argues that theology revolves around the Triune God (*Theological Ethics*, 25). Several significant implications for human identity follow:

1. Humans are "essentially relational beings" since we image the Triune God who is a community of persons (93).
2. Human relationships are communitarian as opposed to individualistic, since they are designed to mirror the community of divine life (35).
3. Sin ultimately results in fragmentation within the self (106).

Following Tillich, we define EA as "the state in which a being is aware of its possible nonbeing" (*The Courage to Be*, 35).

As a final note, our conclusions are not meant to claim any clinical or psychological import. Instead, they are meant to focus on the phenomenological experiences of individuals who suffer existential anxiety. We hope to illuminate the intersection between such experiences, modern expressive individualism, and theological anthropology.

Future Work

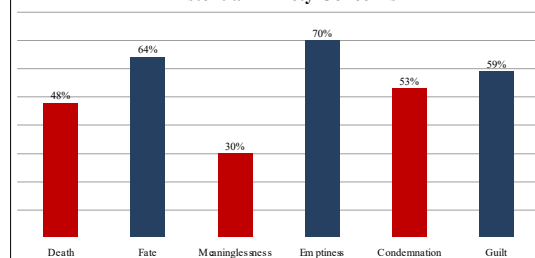
1. Examining the statistical differences of EI and EA between generations (ex. Gen Z vs Baby Boomers).
2. Examining how Eastern cultures view EI and how it affects their EA.
3. Using a psychological approach in researching connections between EI and EA.
4. Conducting statistical analysis of people who adhere to EI ideals in relation to their experience of EA.

"At one moment, we understand our situation as one of high tragedy, alone in a silent universe, without intrinsic meaning, condemned to create value."
(Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 68.)



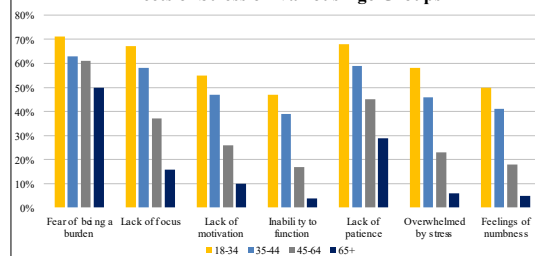
Photo by Greg Rakoz, 2015.

Existential Anxiety Concerns

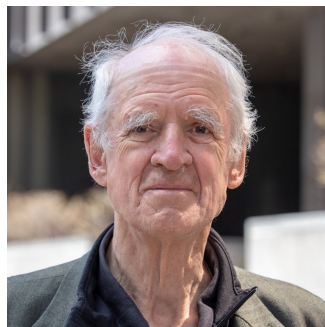


Berman, Steven L., Carl F. Weems, and Timothy R. Stickle. "Existential Anxiety in Adolescents: Prevalence, Structure, Association with Psychological Symptoms and Identity Development." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 35, no. 3 (June 1, 2006): 306.

Effects of Stress on Various Age Groups



"Stress in America 2023: A Nation Recovering from Collective Trauma." *American Psychological Association*. November 2023.
<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2023/collective-trauma-recovery>



Charles Taylor, Canadian philosopher and professor emeritus at McGill University.
Photo by Léa-Kim Châteauneuf, 2019.

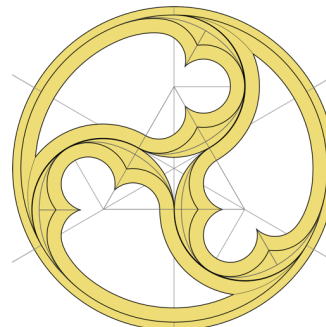


Illustration of perichoresis (περιχώρησις), a theological description of the co-inherence of the persons of the Trinity.
Diagram by Perhelion, 2013.

Dedicated to Jorge Rafael Rivera Ortiz,
a father who loves his son and gave him
contentment, happiness, and peace.
1972-2024

Results and Conclusions

Alienation from Community

- To be truly individualistic, a person would have to fully alienate themselves from any influence from culture, society, and community.
- W. Ross Hastings believes that people are meant to be in community with each other and with God.
- Isolation from community would inevitably heighten EA because humans are not made to exist outside of fellowship with their fellow man.

Instability in Relationships

- EI detaches us from meaning-making relationships with God/others.
- Romantic relationships or deep friendships reduce to potential inhibitors to self-discovery.
- E.g. Christine Emba displays how sexual freedom betrays a deeper desire for committed relationship.

Lack of Higher Meaning

- EI, with its vast array of expressive options, causes a sense of Kierkegaardian "dizziness" in establishing one's identity while largely restricting the options to self-centered expression.
- Limiting meaning to that which comes only from the self may place more pressure and stress on the individual than if they could find value through a transcendent being and his moral ideals.

Unfulfilled Desires

- Humans do not long only to "feel" happy. Rather, they desire to be a certain way (εὐδαιμονία) which leads to happiness.
- Taylor critiques EI's ineffectiveness at creating real individual meaning and sharing a moral horizon upon which to have significance.

Conclusions

As a philosophy, EI presents a vision that, for many, seems to be an attractive and wise way of living. However, when examining the philosophy through a Trinitarian perspective, EI seems to bring more stress instead of peace. Many who would subscribe to EI experience, to some degree, a form of EA which results in feeling a sense of condemnation to create value. Furthermore, EA increases as EI is focused on self-truth and self-wholeness which moves people into prioritizing the individual journey over relationships. Said priority alienates people and communities in general because of the emphasis the authentic individualist has in finding and protecting their own authentic self which supposedly promises well-being and happiness. However, said happiness does not seem to be met in a satisfying way because the EI philosophy lacks the *telos* resting place of the human soul which, in the Christian story, is deeply connected to the Trinitarian relationship.

In looking at human nature through a perichoretic, relational Trinitarian model, one has a clearer view to better understand people's existential anxiety as they try to find contentment, happiness, and peace. We are reminded of Jesus' call to those unsettled in life, **"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me"** (John 14:1, ESV).

Bibliography

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