

The Law of the Conservation of Anxiety



by Theodore Dalrymple

It sometimes seems as if there were nowadays a law of the conservation of anxiety: If we aren't anxious about one thing, we'll be anxious about another.

For example, it isn't all that long ago that we were worrying about the dangers of [deflation](#), but now it's inflation that we must worry about. Of course, inflation is more readily observable than deflation, but economists told us that deflation was a deadly hazard. The rate of inflation was too low, they said, and suggested that measures be taken to raise it to 2 per cent.

In short, it seems that whatever the rate of appreciation or depreciation of the value of money, it's the wrong one, and therefore something to worry about. "I think, therefore I am,"

said Descartes; it would be more accurate nowadays to say "I worry, therefore I am." Not to worry is not to care, and there's no defect of character in these days of conspicuous compassion than that of not caring.

Although by no means a worrier by temperament, I have learned to worry by dint of paying attention to news headlines. When stock markets around the world fall, shall we say by 3 percent, I see destitution staring me in the face, though I didn't feel destitute immediately before the stock market rose by the 3 percent by which it has now fallen. There's a curious asymmetry at work here: If the stock market recovers the 3 percent the following day, I feel no jubilation equal and opposite to the anxiety it caused by the fall. Not for me irrational exuberance, more likely irrational downheartedness.

Whenever I hear about the present recession, or the recession unavoidably to come, which is very often, I feel depressed, though I have by now lived through many recessions and don't remember having suffered unduly in any of them. I know that no man is an island entire of itself and all that, and the fact that *I* haven't suffered during recessions is no guide to the misery to others that they have caused, for example by raising unemployment: But I'm not sure how far my depression when I hear about recession is really caused by concern for the myriad others who are completely unknown to me. No, it's the prospect of personal impoverishment that depresses me, even though I know that it's extremely unlikely to happen, and if it did, almost everyone would be in the same or similar boat, which would be some kind of consolation.

I learned recently that the economy of my country, Britain, had contracted by 0.1 percent the previous month. This caused me to feel very gloomy indeed, though the contraction (assuming that statistic was an accurate reflection of reality) affected my daily life not at all: I had slept and eaten just as well as ever, I had pursued my interests with the same enthusiasm, the only difference being the gloom that

I now felt because of the statistic. The same went for all my friends, except for one who was mortally ill.

I learned at the same time that one of the problems confronting the country was full employment. Hang on a minute, I thought, isn't full employment supposed to be a good thing, what governments aim at when there's unemployment, and therefore something to be rejoiced at or at least grateful for?

Ah no, this turned out to be simplistic: There's *good* full-employment and *bad* full-employment, and it seemed that we had the latter rather than the former. The lack of what Marx called the reserve army of labor meant increased competition between employers for labor, which in turn meant rising wage levels unmatched by increases in productivity. But aren't increased wages to be welcomed as good in themselves? No, because they would lead to inflation without growth, to stagflation.

To put things in a nutshell, there's no silver lining without a cloud, and so there's always something to worry about.

As if economics weren't enough, there's epidemic disease too, just as the dangers of COVID seemed to be receding. Today, for example, I learn that there have been 20 cases of monkeypox diagnosed (so far) in Britain, a doubling of cases in no time. Monkeypox is like smallpox, but with a fatality rate only about a third as high, up to about 10 percent, with children particularly vulnerable. (There are two strains, one rather worse than the other.) The disease is caused by a pox virus and its spread might have been encouraged by the cessation of smallpox vaccination after the total elimination of smallpox, which conferred cross-immunity to it. The virus is first spread to humans by infected small animals in Central and West Africa, but can then be passed on by person-to-person contact, the virus being contagious through breath, bodily fluids, skin contact, and even inanimate objects handled by the infected.

With travel between regions now so easy, the world has become the monkeypox virus's oyster.

Here, then, is another cause for anxiety. There are not as yet many cases, and it seems that no transmission of the disease proceeds beyond a chain of six, but the measures necessary to prevent the spread of monkeypox are uncannily similar to those recommended for the prevention of COVID. Great oaks from little acorns grow, and our imaginations, long used to apocalyptic projections of current trends (indeed, rather enjoying such projections) can easily magnify the sudden appearance of monkeypox among us into the disastrous pandemic long promised us. We have long been primed against the dangers of complacency; the dangers of overreaction are somewhat less present in our minds because they're much less vivid, or lurid.

Yes, we never lack for reasons for anxiety, which it is our duty as citizens to feel even if anxiety is an unpleasant feeling and by feeling it we improve nothing and affect nothing. Our watchword is not eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die, but eat, drink, and be anxious for tomorrow we die.

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