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1

The *Topos* of Anxiety

Is it possible – even desirable – to treat anxiety as a concept? This is a compelling question which everyone attempting to come to terms with Kierkegaard’s philosophy has to face. In effect, it can be argued that only provisionally can anxiety (dread in some translations of Kierkegaard’s works) be considered a pivotal concept in Kierkegaard’s thought, since to treat anxiety as a concept proper would amount to failing to acknowledge its ‘abysmal’ qualities. In Kierkegaard’s formulation, anxiety by its nature stands beyond definition, making the task of giving it a proper definition almost impossible. Paradoxically, Kierkegaard’s observation is consonant even with Kant’s analysis of concepts, which dictates that one should not attempt a definition of the concepts, for on the one hand, in the case of empirical concepts, one can never be certain about their limits and originality, and, on the other, in the case of *a priori* concepts, one can never be certain about the completeness of the analysis. Thus, definition can be applied only to ‘invented concepts’, where the inventor is seen as having the right to set limits (CPR, p. 587). Arguably anxiety should not be considered an invented concept and consequently even under the scrutiny and strictness of Kant’s analysis, the concept is amenable only to exposition (see Kant’s discussion regarding ‘invented concepts’ in CPR, p. 587). Anxiety resembles chaotic kinesis; it is dizziness, since ‘he whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy’; it is the dizziness of the possibility of freedom (CA, p. 61). It appears also as γρίφος (riddle), a ‘*witch’s letter*, which is a magic-like set of picture segments of people and animals which recombine when unfolded and turned’ (CA, p. 254). It is this very difficulty to conceptualize anxiety properly that compelled Jean Wahl to suggest that the title *Concept of Anxiety* is a provocation (as discussed in Sartre, 1974, p. 164). Sartre too did not fail to acknowledge the peculiar status anxiety

occupied in Kierkegaard's thought in his argument against its treatment as the object of a concept. This is because as long as anxiety is 'the source of a free and temporalizing choice of finitude, it is also the non-conceptual foundation of all concepts' (Sartre, 1974, p. 164). In Haufniensis' own words, 'anxiety makes its appearance [as] the pivot upon which everything turns' (CA, p. 43). Thus, anxiety is conceived as a pivot around which the whole of human existence, both actual and possible, revolves. The full title of the book significantly reads *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*.

It is important to note from the outset that by being described as a '*Simple ... Deliberation*' the book is written with the intention of keeping the greatest possible distance from any kind of speculative and systematic philosophical knowledge. Kierkegaard directed a good deal of his criticism against Hegel's speculative philosophical science due to his conviction that such a philosophy, which claims to be able to explain and incorporate the 'whole' and the 'universal', fails to make space for the 'single individual' and for the absurd. Thus, according to Anti-Climacus, one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, an important category is that of particularity. For Kierkegaard, 'the particular individual cannot be thought speculatively; the particular human lies below the level of the concept; one cannot think an individual human being, but only the concept "man"'. This is why, according to the author, 'speculative philosophy promptly alludes to the doctrine of the generation's *superiority* over the individual; for one cannot expect speculation to acknowledge the concept's *powerlessness* in relation to actuality' (SUD, p. 152).

Kierkegaard attempts to illustrate his point in refuting Hegel's elaborations on 'actuality' in the *Science of Logic*. Accordingly, he argues that 'Actuality', the title of the last section of *Logic*, gives Hegel 'the advantage of making it appear that in logic the highest has already been achieved, or if one prefers the lowest' (CA, p. 10). At the same time, it is impossible to do justice to actuality within the limits of logic, because actuality has contingency as an essential part and the latter cannot be admitted within the realm of logic. Paradoxically, nor is logic served if it incorporates actuality since 'it has included something that it cannot assimilate, it has appropriated at the beginning what it should only *praedisponere* (presuppose)' (CA, p. 10). On the one hand, Haufniensis' discussion on the relation between actuality and logic concerns the dynamics of actuality that transgress the limits of logic and necessity. On the other, and as a consequence, it strives to establish the boundaries

of each 'science' – in the peculiar Kierkegaardian use of the term – and to show the confusions that any failure to observe this differentiation may bring. Indeed, the Introduction to the *Concept of Anxiety* focuses mainly on the author's intention to explore anxiety within the field of psychology, which is the *topos* of the development of many concepts throughout Kierkegaard's works. This is evident even in considering the sub-headings of some of his books, e.g. Repetition is described as 'a venture in experimenting psychology', *The Sickness unto Death* as 'a Christian psychological exposition for upbuilding and awakening', etc. (Thomte, 1980, p. xv).

Under the heading *Introduction*, in the form of a subtitle, Haufniensis delineates his own project in the following manner: 'The sense in which the object of our deliberation is a task of psychological interest and the sense in which, after having been the task and interest of psychology, it points directly to dogmatics' (CA, p. 9).

Genesis 3, which narrates the Fall, forms the background of Kierkegaard's elaborations on anxiety (see CA, 9). Accordingly, for Kierkegaard anxiety is seemingly a proper subject of the science of dogmatics. The use of the term 'science' can be seen as a further ironic remark directed at all those thinkers who take themselves seriously and conceive of their works as a contribution to science. Thus, although Kierkegaard seems keen to observe the limits of each science, at the same time he treats the term 'science' ironically. It should not be surprising then that he explicitly spells out that although he will be touching on a dogmatic issue, he intends to treat it within the field of psychology. Kierkegaard complicates things further as his pseudonymous author Haufniensis explicitly sets as his task to treat anxiety in such a way as to keep in mind constantly and 'before its eye the dogma of hereditary sin' (CA, p. 14). Thus, the concept of sin is introduced as both the prerequisite and the complementary dimension of any analysis of the concept of anxiety. Indeed, Kierkegaard's attempt to deal with 'a dogmatic issue while being psychologically oriented' mainly aims at uncovering sin as *possibility* rather than as *actuality* (Thomte, 1980, p. 221).

In order to grasp this distinction clearly, and before moving on to an analysis of the concepts of anxiety and sin as possibility from the perspective of 'psychology', it is important to note that although in Kierkegaard's philosophy anxiety can be well treated within the field of psychology, this is not the case with the concept of sin as actuality. Kierkegaard emphasizes time and again his argument regarding the boundaries of each science, insisting that we have to be very careful

in the treatment of the concepts. Thus, each concept is said to belong to a certain 'place', while a mood corresponds to each place. It follows that sin has its 'specific place', or, more accurately,

It has no place, and this is its specific nature... When sin is treated in a place other than its own, it is altered by being subjected to a nonessential refraction of reflection. The concept is altered, and thereby the mood that properly corresponds to the correct concept is also disturbed, and instead of the endurance of the true mood there is the fleeting phantom of false moods. (CA, p. 15)

Moreover, the proper mood corresponding to sin is 'earnestness',¹ a notion bearing significant theological and mystical connotations at least since Boehme's *The Way to Christ*. For Kierkegaard, the peculiarity of sin consists mainly in that 'its idea is that its concept is constantly annulled' (CA, p. 15). This state of affairs entails that the overcoming of sin in earnestness is seen as the fundamental task of human beings. It is certainly striking that in Haufniensis' account, the proper *topos* for the analysis of sin cannot be found in any of the known sciences. Instead, sin in this view is the subject of a sermon,² 'where the single individual speaks as the single individual to the single individual' in earnestness (CA, p. 16).

Kierkegaard's objection to the treatment of sin within the field of the sciences³ is certainly not devoid of interest. Haufniensis seemingly provides us with a strict methodological rule for the distinction and classification of the sciences, which is strangely reminiscent of Kant's attempt to establish a rigid distinction between the concepts and categories of the understanding and transcendental ideas in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In a quite different context and without making a similar distinction between the sciences,⁴ Kant warns against any kind of conflation between the two faculties and fields. In Kant's system the pure concepts of the understanding (i.e. unity, reality, etc.) deal with possible objects of experience, whilst ideas (i.e. God, the soul, etc.) are

nothing but regulative principles, which... indeed prescribing greater unity than the empirical employment of understanding can achieve...if, on the other hand they be misunderstood, and be treated as constitutive principles of transcendent knowledge, they give rise, by a dazzling and deceptive illusion, to persuasion and a merely fictitious knowledge, and therewith to contradictions and eternal disputes (CPR, p. 569)

Consequently, any employment of the transcendental ideas in the field of experience could lead to illusions, paralogisms, antinomies, etc. (CPR, pp. 318, 555).

Indeed, the function of the transcendental ideas of reason is restricted; they act *as if* they were what they are supposed to be, as in Kant's formulation 'we declare... that the things of the world must be viewed *as if* they received their existence from a highest intelligence' (CPR, p. 550). Kant discusses three sciences that should be grounded in the 'as if' principle – psychology, cosmology and theology – which have as their subject matter the transcendental ideas of the soul, the world and God respectively (CPR, p. 551).

It has been remarked that Kant mainly reformulates in a critical way Wolff's distinction between the branches of 'metaphysics', i.e. ontology,⁵ cosmology, theology and psychology⁶ and their respective objects (Caygill, 1995, p. 338). Whilst Wolff's system presents us with an inevitable dialectical confusion between the *a priori* and *a posteriori* elements of those sciences, Kant attempts to secure the limits of each science, and constructs his own metaphysics. Accordingly, in his *Architectonic of Pure Reason*, Kant defines the architectonic 'as the scientific in our knowledge', or as the art of constructing systematic unities, while systematic unity is exactly 'what first raises ordinary knowledge to the rank of science' (CPR, p. 653). Thus, philosophy 'is the science of the relation of all knowledge to the essential ends of human reason' or in other words 'the legislation of human reason' (CPR, p. 658). As such, it has a twofold function; first as a *propaedeutic*, 'which investigates the faculty of reason in respect of all its *a priori* knowledge and is entitled *criticism*'; and secondly, as the system of pure reason. The latter is conceived as the 'science which exhibits in systematic connection the whole body of philosophical knowledge arising out of pure reason (true as well as illusory) and which is entitled *metaphysics*' (CPR, p. 659). However, in the wider sense, *metaphysics* can include the whole of pure philosophy, including *propaedeutic/critical* philosophy.

Another distinction that Kant makes is between metaphysics in the strict sense that comprises only the speculative employment of pure reason and metaphysics that includes also the practical employment of pure reason, that is metaphysics of morals (CPR, p. 659). Kant develops his fourfold distinction of the sciences that constitute metaphysics – ontology, rational physiology, rational cosmology and rational theology – whilst rational physiology is divided into *physica rationalis* and *psychologia rationalis* (CPR, pp. 663–4).

The question arises, does Kierkegaard develop a systematic distinction between sciences and concepts/ideas in a similar manner to Kant? On the one hand, it would be misleading to argue that Kierkegaard, the exponent of 'indirect communication', would ever attempt to develop a proper theory of knowledge. The very fact that in his thought moods serve as the criterion for the delimitation of each science strongly suggests that his whole discussion of the issue has an ironic dimension. Kierkegaard seems to be teasing his readers, confusing them with contradictory statements, such as criticizing Kant's and Hegel's attempts to develop systematic or 'scientific' philosophical systems on the one hand, and apparently attempting something similar himself on the other. This ironic dimension is certainly neither accidental nor a matter of literary style. Its function is important, given that for Kierkegaard irony is a way of life and a sign of inwardness. It is synonymous with the Delphic dictum *know thyself* which in his interpretation means 'separate yourself from the other' (CI, p. 177).

Consequently, the adoption of the ironic mode can be interpreted as a call to readers to differentiate themselves from his account, to appropriate his words rather than blindly adopt or reject the theories he develops. In other words, Kierkegaard invites his readers to 'take notice', to behold, not in the sense of discovering a hidden truth but of noticing that there is something that can trigger the movement of inwardness. Thus, the adoption of an ironic tone is not an indication of 'falsity' in the narrated account, as there is arguably no interplay between the antithetical poles of falsity, and no dialectical reconciliation of the two into something higher. The emphasis rather is on the 'more or less' of the, at bottom, non-measurable interiority, rendering useless the employment of any kind of external criteria of truth. Indeed, the postulated roles of interiority and inwardness is of crucial importance, since they render the connection of concepts with moods more intelligible. Indeed, Kierkegaard explains in an ironical manner

that science, just as much as poetry and art, presupposes a mood in the creator as well as in the observer, and that error in the modulation is just as disturbing as an error in the development of thought, have been entirely forgotten in our time, when inwardness has been completely forgotten, also the category of appropriation, because of the joy over all the glory men thought they possessed... (CA, p. 14)

It can therefore be argued that Kierkegaard's employment of moods testifies to his substitution of inwardness for reason, which explicitly renders

existence the central theme of his philosophy. In this sense it would not be mere word-play if it were argued that Kierkegaard develops a Critique of Inwardness instead of a *Critique of Pure Reason*, as he sets the limits of – and even furnishes us with – ‘categories of existence’ (Wahl, 1969, pp. 19–29). Similarly, although Ricoeur presents Kierkegaard as a non-critical thinker who ‘had no interest in conditions of possibility, at least not as an epistemological problem’ in the Kantian sense, he nevertheless acknowledges affinities between Kierkegaard and Kant (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 16). First, advancing the argument that draws a limit to ‘knowledge’, he parallels the ‘philosophical function of *paradox* in Kierkegaard... to that of *limits* in Kant’. Secondly, Ricoeur argues that

Kierkegaard’s categories of existence constitute a different kind of critique, a *critique of existence*, and that they address the question of the possibility of *speaking* about existence. The existence of the singular individual is not a mystical⁷ experience that must be passed over in silence. Kierkegaard was far from being an intuitionist; he was a reflective thinker. (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 16)

The question concerning *how* Kierkegaard intended his readers to approach his introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety* should remain open, as his thought appears contradictory even when he attempts to give a strict and systematic account. Nevertheless, he claims that ‘a contradiction is always the expression of a task, and a task is a movement’ (CA, p. 28). Such a task is perhaps never completed, but this hardly lessens its dynamics since, as an aporetic movement, it opens up infinite possibilities.

Kierkegaard presents his readers with a parade of the sciences depicted as suitors flirting with the concept of sin, the first science considered being aesthetics. Haufniensis postulates that if sin is treated in the field of aesthetics the mood is altered and it becomes either ‘melancholy’ or ‘light-minded’. This is because tragedy and comedy are the two poles of the contradiction that is peculiar to the category in which ‘sin lies’ under what he perceives aesthetics to be. Thus, although ‘according to its true concept, sin is to be overcome’, in the case of aesthetics sin becomes either something that endures and causes grief to the individual, or something ‘non-essential that is annulled’ and as such causes laughter.

Metaphysics⁸ is considered next. If sin is dealt with in the field of metaphysics the mood becomes that ‘of dialectical uniformity and disinterestedness,⁹ which ponders sin as something that cannot

withstand the scrutiny of thought' (CA, p. 15). The problem with metaphysics lies mainly in the fact that it does not offer an active, vivid account that, by touching the heart of each individual, would make sin a matter of life-concern. On the contrary, even in its attempt to overcome sin, metaphysics restricts itself to doing this 'as something to which thought is unable to give life' (CA, p. 15). More clearly, sin and its proper mood, earnestness, 'cannot be thought'. As Anti-Climacus explains, 'one cannot *think* a particular human being, so neither can one think a particular sinner' (SUD, p. 152). Indeed, because of this, 'there can be no seriousness [earnestness] with sin – when it is only to be thought. For seriousness is precisely that you and I are sinners. Seriousness is not sin in general...!' (SUD, p. 152). On the contrary, thought concerns the whole of humanity, since to be 'a particular human being is to be nothing; just think – and then you are the whole of humanity, *cogito ergo sum*' (SUD, p. 152).

Regarding the possibility of traditional ethics being the proper *topos* of dealing with sin, Kierkegaard argues that this is impossible as ethics is an ideal science while its ideality is not confined only to the natural ascription of ideality into every science. In contrast to the other sciences, ethics aims at bringing 'ideality into actuality', whilst it is not 'the nature of its movement to raise actuality up into ideality' (CA, p. 16). Consequently, its movement is a movement from above and downward, and as such it is never complete. Kierkegaard thus concludes that sin can belong to ethics only 'in so far as upon this concept it is shipwrecked with the aid of repentance. In other words, if ethics is to include sin, its ideality comes to an end' (CA, p. 17).

Furthermore, Kierkegaard examines the possibility that another science, namely dogmatics, could be the proper *topos* for the study of sin, since in opposition to ethics, dogmatics allegedly moves from actuality to ideality. Although this science does not deny the concept of sin, it cannot act as the proper *topos* where sin could be properly treated, since it can offer an explanation only in so far as 'hereditary sin' is presupposed, and this, in Kierkegaard's eyes, is a far cry from an adequate explanation (CA, pp. 19–20).

'Second ethics' is the only science that is seen as appropriate for the analysis of sin's manifestation, but not 'with its coming into existence' (CA, p. 21), and which originates¹⁰ in the science of dogmatics:

Here ethics again finds its place as the science that has as a task for actuality the dogmatic consciousness of actuality. This ethics does not ignore sin, and it does not have its ideality in making ideal demands;

rather, it has its ideality in the penetrating consciousness of actuality, of the actuality of sin, but note carefully, not with metaphysical light-mindedness or with psychological concupiscence. (CA, p. 20)

It seems that Haufniensis' task converges with that of Johannes de Silentio, who in *Fear and Trembling*,

allows the desired ideality of aesthetics to be shipwrecked on the required ideality of ethics, in order through these collisions to bring to light the religious ideality as the ideality that precisely is the ideality of actuality, and therefore just as desirable as that of aesthetics and not as impossible as the ideality of ethics. (CA, p.17n*)

Thus, 'second ethics' is completely different from what is commonly perceived under the term ethics. In order to make this point more explicit, Haufniensis reformulates Aristotle's canonical distinction of the sciences. He includes under what Aristotle called πρώτη φιλοσοφία (first philosophy), 'the totality of science which we might call *ethnical* [i.e. pagan], whose essence is immanence and is expressed in Greek thought by *recollection*'. Under the name *secunda philosophia*, he understands 'that totality of science whose essence is transcendence or repetition' (CA, p. 21). It follows that *secunda philosophia*, and within it *second ethics*, provide the place for sin to emerge (CA, p. 182).

Although by second ethics Kierkegaard means mainly *Christian* ethics, it is important to bear in mind that second ethics does not point to an external imposition of moral rules but rather signifies an existential ethical view. Thus, inwardness, 'authentic' existence, appropriation and transcendence are more or less synonymous with proper ethical existence. Consequently, central concepts such as 'love as duty', 'sacrifice', etc., do not take the form of Kantian maxims, for they do not claim objective validity and universality, but are on the contrary subject to individual experience, inwardness and appropriation. Second ethics' demands are 'specified by genuine divine commands and not merely by a moral law that can also be thought of as a divine command' (Quinn, 1998, p. 352). Until those demands are appropriated, they remain in the state of untruth. The transition from one's own untruth to one's truth presupposes a redoubling of the existence, as one has to become a new person (see PF, pp. 14–22). Moreover, this qualitative transformation of the whole existence does not indicate an internalization of fixed, divine demands, which once internalized acquire universal validity. On the contrary, every person is conceived as having a completely singular way

of appropriating them, while it follows that there are no external criteria by which one can judge the ethical/religious life of another. *Appropriation* and *inwardness*, then, constitute the meaning of the Delphic Oracle for Kierkegaard and as such provide a wholly new approach of life, ethics included. For Haufniensis appropriation and sincere conversation substitute for the ethical judgement according to moral laws and constitute the proper relationship between two individuals as 'appropriation is precisely the secret of conversation' (CA, p. 16). Moreover, his conception of existence is dynamic and thus the struggle for the attainment of inwardness is conceived as incessant. In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* and while commenting on Plato's *Symposium*, Johannes Climacus makes the aporetic statement that existence 'is that child who is begotten by the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and is therefore continually striving' (CUP, p. 92). Although second ethics manifests the existence of sin as its subject-matter, a residue is left unexamined, namely sin's coming into existence.

At this point, psychology comes into play. If sin is dealt with from the point of view of psychology, the mood 'becomes that of persistent observation, like the fearlessness of a secret agent, but not that of the victorious flight of earnestness out of sin' (CA, p. 15). Indeed, psychology has been one of the many suitors offering a possible 'place' from where sin could be dealt with, although in the end it too fails. One of the main drawbacks of psychology is exactly what Haufniensis considers its main feature, namely 'persistent observation'. According to Haufniensis, in order to study a phenomenon, psychology first has to take hold of it, like taking a photograph, and then stick to this very moment and make it static. In Haufniensis' words, 'the subject of which psychology treats must be something in repose that remains in a restless repose, not something restless that always either produces itself or is repressed' (CA, p. 21). Therefore, if the concept of sin were treated within the field of psychology, then it would suffer the consequence of being transformed into another concept, due to the fact that its main characteristic, namely that it is continually annulled, would be cancelled. Thus, sin becomes a state, and as such '*de potentia*, it is not, but *de actu* or *in actu* it is, again and again' (ibid., 15). Moreover,

The mood of psychology is that of discovering anxiety, and in its anxiety psychology portrays sin, while again and again it is in anxiety over the portrayal that it itself brings forth... That this state has its

truth is certain; that it occurs more or less in every human life before the ethical manifests itself is certain. But in being considered in this manner sin does not become what it is, but a more or less. (CA, p. 15)

Since Haufniensis' main concern is to grasp the moment before sin is committed and anxiety reaches its peak, it follows that he intends to address sin as a possibility. Sin *qua* possibility should therefore be captured as the gaze is fixed to the moment preceding the manifestation of sin:

but this abiding something out of which sin constantly arises, not by necessity (for a becoming by necessity is a state, as, for example, the whole history of the plant is a state) but by freedom – this abiding something, this predisposing presupposition, sin's real possibility, is a subject of interest for psychology. (CA, p. 21)

Furthermore, it is argued that there is a qualitative difference that splits the 'before' and the 'after' of sin's coming into existence, and therefore psychology is thought to 'bring its concern to the point where it seems as if sin were there, but the next thing, that sin is there, is qualitatively different from the first' (CA, p. 22).

It is evident that Haufniensis' treatment of anxiety focuses primarily on the 'moment' preceding sin's coming into existence, because of the latter's privileged position with regard to anxiety. The introduction of anxiety as a key theme to the interpretation of the biblical corpus is of crucial importance, since there lies the promise for the development of a novel understanding of time, history and the individual. The lack of a proper treatment of the concept of anxiety can be said to result in the adoption of a clear-cut distinction between a postulated 'before' and 'after' regarding the event of the 'Fall', which was indeed adopted by numerous philosophical and theological interpretations based on Genesis 3. Kierkegaard develops an alternative and challenging account of the 'Fall' as he refrains from postulating an abysmal qualitative difference between Adam and the subsequent generations of individual human beings.

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