

The Redemption of the Feeling in Kierkegaard's and Tillich's thinking

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ABSTRACT

In the modern era, with the development of the "objective", scientific method, subjective, personal feelings and emotions have gradually become somewhat dubious sources of knowledge. A few religious thinkers, however, particularly those emerging from the existential tradition, have come to revitalize the belief in subjectivity, along with the trust in the authority of faith and inwardness in finding out important truths about our personal existence and about the human condition in general. In my paper I wish to investigate and compare the thoughts of two highly influential Christian philosophers of the 19th and the 20th century, respectively; those of Søren Kierkegaard and of Paul Tillich. These two unique thinkers, although living under considerably different historical circumstances, carried out strikingly similar analyses about the role of emotions and faith in human life, and through the emphasis of such phenomena as anxiety and despair they both attempted to "redeem" and reaffirm the significance of feelings and the subjective side of reality.

Keywords: subjectivity, inwardness, anxiety, truth and faith, religious existentialism

KIERKEGAARD'S QUEST FOR AUTHENTIC SUBJECTIVITY

Existence and inwardness, in other words, bringing the ontological truth of subjectivity to the fore: this is what elevates Kierkegaard's philosophy to be the prototype of all other existential philosophies. While combating the then dominating *Systemphilosophie* of German Idealism and especially that of Hegel, he gradually formulates and develops his own characteristic philosophical attitude. This attitude provides central ground to the individual's personal subjectivity, and believes that what is really at stake in philosophical thinking is precisely this singular and irreproducible intimate reality, that is, the subjective reality of the self, which always slips through the cracks of rigid systematical thinking. Under the influence of the late Schelling's lectures and writings, *Existenz* became the key concept in his thinking, and the elaboration of this concept extended along his entire oeuvre.

What makes this thinking so unique and exemplary for other existential philosophers? One approach could be that he seems to be the first thinker in the modern era who was able to divert the course of philosophical thinking from being occupied primarily with general concepts and universal ideas toward the importance of human singularity, the unrepeatability and the contingencies inherent in the human condition, that is, toward the actual *differentia specifica* of the individual human existence. In absolute terms, he was not the first one to do so in the history of Western Philosophy but Socrates who inspired Kierkegaard greatly. This emblematic Greek thinker's philosophy was characteristically of a personal nature, and this personal nature is exactly what Kierkegaard – who is sometimes

labeled as the “Socrates of Copenhagen” – attempted to revive when he analysed the concept of irony (*On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*), or also when he engaged into a polemic discussion with the teachings of Socrates regarding the concept of sin in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Ultimately though, what brings these two – both spatially and chronologically – distant philosophers together is not so much the convergence of their thematic interests, but the way in which they cultivated philosophy.

A few lines earlier I have mentioned the “*differentia specifica* of the individual human existence”. How are we to understand this? Kierkegaard waged a philosophical as well as a personal war against the dominance of the all-absorbing, all-consuming monstrosity of the Hegelian system that seemed to devour the individual self just as well as every other part of reality. His famous thesis – “the truth is subjectivity” – was conceived in this spirit: “Contained in the principle that subjectivity, inwardness, is truth, is that Socratic wisdom whose undying merit is to have heeded the essential significance of existing, of the fact that the knower is one who exists...”. [1] In so far as epistemology falls into the exclusive competence of the individual subject, would there be still any place left for such categories as “*differentia specifica*”? Wouldn’t this be, one might ask, a sure way of sliding back into the abyss of *Systemphilosophie*? For instance, the conceptual analysis of “anxiety” that features so prominently in Kierkegaard’s work, is it to be understood as an objective or “merely” a subjective analysis? As a matter of fact, Kierkegaard in his analyses worked out a sort of proto-phenomenology that antedated the one Husserl is to develop some 60 years later. The analysis of the concept of anxiety is, for instance, neither the accurate and detailed jotting down of Kierkegaard’s own experiences of anxiety, nor is it a logically necessary description of an objective, natural law, but a conceptual framework, a mode of discourse that provides a viable alternative to the objective idealistic approach which exalts the abstract while neglecting the concrete.

It is important to point out right from the outset that in his inquiries Kierkegaard always remained in relation with religiosity, and, in particular, with the Christian God. Christianity supported him with a basis on which he could build up his anti-systemic reaction to the challenge of Hegelianism. For him, the human individual is a dynamic complex of references that has a fundamental feature of becoming-ness (*werden*), hence it is always amidst continuous change. The ideal *telos* of this change is the authentic form of being which, by passing through different life phases, enables the individual to fulfil his inner potentials, and eventually to become his true self. As we shall see, this true self is unattainable for those who reject faith, religiosity and irrationality *en bloc*; in other words, for those who refuse to accept and embrace the belief in the many paradoxes that are intrinsic in Christianity. There is no authenticity for the self-outside of the properly understood and appropriated Christian religiousness, claims Kierkegaard: “It is Christian heroism (...) to venture wholly to become oneself, an individual human being, this specific individual human being, alone before God...”. [2] But, one might ask, why would anybody strive to become his true self? The answer is this: “because to have a self, to be a self, is the greatest concession, an infinite concession, given to man, but it is also eternity’s claim upon him.” [3]

What does the Danish thinker mean by the *self*? “A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation...”. [4] The individual is, hence, a synthesis, namely, first of all, the synthesis of body and soul, and secondly, the synthesis of the spirit with the synthesis of body and soul. The self in an incessantly moving, dynamic

system of relations, in which there is a vigorous tussle between such opposites as freedom and necessity, infinity and finitude. Kierkegaard maintains that an eternal, divine part exists in man, and the name of this eternal component is spirit. The individual human being, however, has a completely individual constituent as well, which belongs exclusively to him, and which he can either win or lose. This implies that being our true selves is not a natural state or a default position of the individual, but, in order to become ourselves, we must actively search for our authentic selves.

It is well known that Kierkegaard distinguished three stages of human life: aesthetic, ethical and religious. While in the aesthetic stage one's unreflective and particular passion is dominant, in the ethical stage: boredom, passivity, impersonality and the levelling of individual differences are characteristic. The ethical stage extinguishes the uniqueness of a personality, since personalities exist by differing or deviating from the generic, and the ethical attempts to eliminate exactly these very differences. At any rate, ethics cannot be reasonably grounded, according to Kierkegaard, as there is no such thing as an "individual *per se*", therefore in order to answer the fundamental question of morality – how should I live? – we can only give particular answers which cannot be universalized. Furthermore, *passion*, which is present in the aesthetic stage but absent in the ethical, will be, in the religious stage, that instrument and crucial impulse which helps the individual swing over his resignation and his feeling of guilt, in the direction of faith. After all, as Kierkegaard put it in *Fear and Trembling*: "the highest passion in a person is faith." [5]

If man cannot expect proper guidance from the world without, then there is only one place left to turn to: the world within. What do we find inside the soul? We find *anxiety* – sounds Kierkegaard's grim answer. If anxiety is what we find, then what is characteristic of this specifically human "symptom"? Here is the description from *The Concept of Anxiety*: "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." [6]

A few lines earlier ago, I have called anxiety a "specifically human symptom", and now we can see why it is apt to call it exactly that. Anxiety is the symptom of the presence of the spirit. The more intense the anxiety, the more fully the spirit is present, claims Kierkegaard. Consequently, it is absent in animals or even in new-born human babies. But what may be of more interest at this point is that anxiety is clearly distinguishable from fear, inasmuch as the former has no definite object while the latter always has one. Kierkegaard argues that if anxiety has no object, its object is nothing, in short: anxiety is anxiety from nothingness. The picture becomes even more nuanced when it is further asserted that "anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility". [7] This concise definition points to the fact that in anxiety the possibility of possibility becomes real. To put it more simply: the very possibility becomes reality that one might become one's true self.

"Anxiety is a *sympathetic antipathy* and an *antipathetic sympathy*". [8] Thus anxiety is fundamentally ambivalent for the individual, and it is ought to be so, since the terror that is an inseparable element of it may lead the individual to the correct path in search of his true self. Inasmuch as "[t]he history of individual life proceeds in a movement from state to state", [9] it is "an adventure that every human being must go through – to learn to be anxious in order that he may not perish either by never having been in anxiety or by succumbing in anxiety". [10] In short: having to face anxiety will always be an inevitable part of our lives. As a result, one of the main things in life is to learn "to be anxious in the

right way”. [11] The educational impact of anxiety involves directing our attention to the infinite possibilities, or rather, to the possibility of the infinite, that lie ahead of us. The possibility of the infinite manifests itself in the fact that through the experience of anxiety the individual’s existential quest turns toward faith, and it may govern the subject in the direction of absolute faith in God, which, in Kierkegaard’s assessment, is the ideal state: the true stage of religiousness. The person, who, in truth, learns from the experience of anxiety, imprints into his mind that “the assaults of anxiety, even though they be terrifying, will not be such that he flees from them. For him, anxiety becomes a serving spirit that against its will leads him where he wishes to go”. [12] How are we to understand that “against its will leads him where he wishes to go”? It may be interpreted that in the temporary paralysis of anxiety one forgets all his wishes and wills, and his instinctive reaction is to escape the horrible discomfort he finds himself in. However, his original will, prior to the commencement of his anxiety was to find himself, and this is exactly what he might achieve in the state of anxiety when he is brought into the presence of God. Nevertheless, the only way to be brought in front of God is through faith, that is, through that “inner certainty that anticipates infinity”. [13]

True faith, in Kierkegaard’s view, is an unshakable certainty which cannot be overwritten by anything, not even by our moral intuitions or the laws of society. If the man of true faith – the “knight of faith” – receives a divine command to sacrifice his one and only son, he will not hesitate and ponder what would be the right thing to do: he will unfalteringly fulfill God’s command. This is vividly illustrated in *Fear and Trembling* through the exemplary story of Abraham in the Old Testament. The reason why Abraham was not at a loss upon hearing God’s command, argues Kierkegaard, was not that he was some sort of religious fanatic who could kill his own son without remorse, but because *in spite of* every imaginable possibility he still unabatedly believed in God’s justice. As it was already formulated in the title of the final chapter of *Either/Or*: “The edifying [is] in the thought that against God we are always in the wrong.” Therein lies the ultimate paradox of human existence, i.e. as soon as his authentic selfhood turns into reality, and he becomes who he really is in front of God, from that moment on the individual accepts – through his unwavering and absolute faith – God’s orders whatever these orders may be. Without absolute faith in God’s infinite goodness and justice, the religious stage would immediately collapse. Therefore, we must *want* to have absolute faith in God. We must want to be able to blame our own limited knowledge whenever we find ourselves disapproving of God’s will. That is why one can say that the real either/or is not to be found in the ethical stage but rather in the religious: one either wins or loses everything – middle way does not exist.

There is, however, something else which makes it difficult for the subject to choose to enter into the religious stage, and it is just as unavoidable as anxiety is: it is called *despair*. Despair occupies an important role in Kierkegaard’s theory of our painful quest toward truth and authentic selfhood. Essentially, it describes the state in which man, having to choose between different alternatives, misses himself and finds himself forced to walk a false path. Despair is the disruption of the equilibrium of opposing forces within the subject, hence it is a form of disharmony, “the sickness of the spirit”, which – unlike anxiety – can bring about the complete downfall of the individual. Therefore, in a sense, it is a breeding ground for inauthenticity; when one is in despair, it seems a lot easier to lose than to find ourselves.

Despair – as its German original ‘Verzweiflung’ indicates – means duplication, the disintegration of the self as a synthetic unity, and it implies the insecurity of the individual. In one word: it is the “sickness unto death”; a deadly disease, but not because we have to die

of it. “On the contrary, the torment of despair is precisely this inability to die”. [14] How is it possible that one is unable to die? Here we need to remember one of Kierkegaard’s earlier premises, namely, that human subjects have a divine element within their selves, and this divine element is immortal. Man in his desperation sets out to destroy his very self, to annihilate himself, but he is unable to do so, for the immortal element is a substantial part of his being which cannot be destroyed. Thus the meaning of despair lies in the realization of hopelessness regarding the impossibility of destroying one’s self.

Despair has three major variations. In the first one, the person is not aware of his own despair, since he doesn’t even know that he possesses a self, not to mention that this self is eternal. As in this state despair has not yet been realized by the subject, it is unaware, as it were, spirit-less, thus the other two forms of despair seem more significant to our discussion. Kierkegaard argues that “real despair” has two forms: first, when we desperately do not want to be ourselves, and second, when we desperately want to be ourselves. Between these two extremes the golden mean is the authentic existence “when despair is completely rooted out (...): in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.” [15]

We can see that self-reflection, i.e. the awareness of the dynamic synthesis that constructs the self, is just as necessary as the personal will which chooses itself, and as the recognition of the subject of its origins and its basis in God. It is obvious now that without the affirmation of the transcendent primacy the subject would never be able to become his authentic self. That is to say, those who desperately want to become themselves simply by their own powers are to be reduced to become the victims of their own self-deception.

Thus the object of our despair is none other than our self, hence the desperate person despairs on account of his actual, current self, because that is precisely which he wants to get rid of, in order to establish his true, authentic being:

The self that he despairingly wants to be is a self that he is not (for to will to be the self that he is in truth is the very opposite of despair), that is, he wants to tear his self away from the power that established it. In spite of all his despair, however, he cannot manage to do it; in spite of all his despairing efforts, that power is the stronger and forces him to be the self he does not want to be. But this is his way of willing to get rid of himself, to rid himself of the self that he is in order to be the self that he has dreamed up. He would be in seventh heaven to be the self he wants to be (...), but to be forced to be the self he does not want to be, that is his torment—that he cannot get rid of himself. [16]

When man desperately doesn’t want to be himself, he is “in despair to will to be someone else, to wish for a new self”, [17] he is fleeing from himself; that is why the characteristic trait of this attitude is weakness. Conversely, if somebody desperately wants to be himself then he is revolting against the divine substance within him, and on the highest level of this desperation, which Kierkegaard calls “demonic despair”, “in hatred toward existence, it wills to be itself” [18] Increased awareness and rebellious defiance are the trademarks of the “demonic despair”, which intends to prove that the self can create himself without God. This, however, is not possible, according to Kierkegaard. Being authentic, that is, becoming *actually* a person, is, in fact, only achievable via the renunciation of total personal autonomy, along with laying man’s ultimate trust in the divine providence, having recognized the fundamentals of one’s own being in the transcendent realm.

TILLICH’S INSIGHTS ABOUT ANXIETY AND FAITH

The thinking of Paul Tillich is in many ways reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s religious philosophy. Borrowing the existential categories and some of the interpretations enabled this

influential Protestant theologian to formulate his own contribution to the analysis of the general confusion and anxiety of our age. However, not only did he analyze the context in which widely experienced meaninglessness and growing despair held sway, he attempted to offer new solutions and interpretations as well to the emerging problems. The central concept of his ontology and ethics is *courage*, which is elaborated in his seminal work, *The Courage to Be*. In this book, he warns against the objectification of man, defending the individual from the tendencies of modern natural sciences. As he writes:

There are realms of reality or – more exactly – of abstraction from reality in which the most complete detachment is the adequate cognitive approach. Everything which can be expressed in terms of quantitative measurement has this character. But it is most inadequate to apply the same approach to reality in its infinite concreteness. A self which has become a matter of calculation and management has ceased to be a self. It has become a thing. [19]

However, it is not only in the approach of modern natural sciences where Tillich sees dangers regarding the status of individual selfhood. He also cautions against the encroachments of Husserlian phenomenology:

The existence of man and his world is put into "brackets" – as Husserl, who derives his "phenomenological" method from Descartes, has formulated it. Man becomes pure consciousness, a naked epistemological subject; the world (including man's psychosomatic being) becomes an object of scientific inquiry and technical management. Man in his existential predicament disappears. [20]

He asserts that the existentialists have realized the seriousness of the gradual loss of individual personhood in the leading discourses of modernity, and their general reaction was a bold revolt against this growing trend. Joining hands with prominent representatives of the philosophy of life as well, such as Schopenhauer and Bergson, this revolt has become typically, although not exclusively, of anti-religious and atheist in nature, declaring the utter emptiness and hypocrisy of such formerly meaningful and well-functioning elements of the establishment as church religiosity. Tillich, although a deeply religious person himself, finds that the "deepest root of the Existentialist despair and the widespread anxiety of meaninglessness in our period" is in the intolerable image of God. [21] Just as man is unable to tolerate being turned into an object in the eyes of modern sciences, or to become the pure – that is, pure from all individual traits – consciousness of phenomenology, he is unwilling, likewise, to accept to yield before the authority of an omnipotent and omniscient eternal God, compared to whom he is nothing but a speck of objectified transitoriness.

For God as a subject makes me into an object which is nothing more than an object. He deprives me of my subjectivity because he is all-powerful and all-knowing. I revolt and try to make *him* into an object, but the revolt fails and becomes desperate. God appears as the invincible tyrant, the being in contrast with whom all other beings are without freedom and subjectivity. (...) This is the God Nietzsche said had to be killed because nobody can tolerate being made into a mere object of absolute knowledge and absolute control. [22]

In spite of his qualified understanding of modern man's aversion towards such an image of God, Tillich contends that humanity is "essentially religious". Borrowing from Jaspers' terminology, he argues that faith is an "ultimate concern" for man, and that the experience of the need for faith is universal. Man feels that he has been separated from his own essence, and he is seeking for the reunion with this essence all throughout his life. He is desperately in need for redemption and the way to redemption leads through religious faith. Traditionally speaking, the separation of man from God has been usually conceived as a

punishment of Adam and Eve's original sin of breaking God's law by eating from the tree of the knowledge good and evil. Strictly speaking, the sources of humanity's original sin were twofold: disobedience and curiosity. Separation from the divine essence is undoubtedly a severe punishment, since one is forced to experience the anxiety that it brings forth in one's life. It causes existential anxiety in man; first, because he feels that something is not quite right, something is always missing from his life (namely, God); second, because part of the punishment was that he couldn't eat from the tree of life, consequently he became mortal, so he experiences constant anxiety due to his fear from death. Tillich believes that this kind of existential anxiety is entirely normal part of being human, so to speak, an essential element of our human condition. It can be neither terminated nor should it be attempted to done away with, because, for one thing, it is ontologically hardwired, and, for another, it is a reminder that one has to courageously strive towards the understanding of his predicament.

Whereas existential anxiety is normal and is present in every human being, although perhaps routinely overshadowed by the daily concerns of life and is, thus, hidden from one's direct awareness, pathological anxiety is something different. Tillich reminds us that these two shouldn't be confused, and while pathological anxiety can and must be attended to medically, existential anxiety belongs to the realm of priestly and ministerial care. The "religious healing" mediates the "essential" for the believer, which enables him to find his true inner self, his subjective truth. Here Tillich thinks along the same line as Kierkegaard, arguing that every individual has a divine essence within his individual personhood which ontologically grounds his very being. Without acknowledging the divine rootedness of one's self, one can never become truly himself, and is destined to tread false paths in search for authenticity. Although man was punished by God partly for his curiosity, i.e. for his inclination of trying to understand the world around him, the only way back to God is by way of a correct understanding of man's ontological situation. However, this understanding is not at all a purely rational insight, but rather an emotional attunement which carries through man the deeply troubling experience of *despair*, which, in Tillich's theory, is the highest form of anxiety: a borderline situation beyond which there is no place to go. In despair, one desperately needs a proper emotional preparedness, namely *courage* in order to find faith and, with this faith, to find God. It is not any kind of courage though that is satisfactory here, but a very special sort of courage: the *courage to be*.

Having insufficient place in this brief summary to provide a profound analysis of Tillich's intricate concept of the "courage to be", it shall be suffice to say for our purposes now that this concept is intended to show the way out of the extremes of neurotic anxiety which manifest themselves in our transitional age in various but equally disastrous forms, such as religious fundamentalism, political totalitarianism, or the remarkable abundance of psychopathological diseases. In faith, "courage to be" unites two kinds of distinct courages: the "courage to be as oneself" and the "courage to be as a part". Only when these two unite, is one ready to transcend both in a courage that is based on God. Thus the ultimate meaning of "courage to be" is to attain the courage to be accepted "in spite of being unacceptable". Man must affirm himself in spite of all the guilt and the fear of condemnation he experiences in his soul. He must transcend his self in this courage, and lay his trust in God, because God is the only one that can "accept the unacceptable". Since the "essential" is not external to oneself, but is located in the divine depths of every existential being, this "essential" grounds our courage to transcend ourselves. Had we decided to reject this essential self, we would experience guilt and regret for not fulfilling our individual potentials. On the other hand, if

we gather the courage to recover our true divine self, we will find that this self is not a static substance but a vitalistic and dynamic essence in which all our individual potentials lie.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can assert that both Kierkegaard and Tillich placed great emphasis on the redemption of the subjective, personal sides of truth and understanding, and based their theories on the special and decisive functions that feelings and emotions have in epistemology. They believed that emotions and dispositions play a crucial role in forming our mental capacities for understanding the ontological structures of reality, and they claimed that only exceptional emotional experiences, such as facing anxiety and despair – along with a certain kind of emotional reaction to these unsettling experiences (passion or courage) – can enable us to redeem our lives. As they both stood on the ground of Christian tradition, they argued that man is in the state of sinfulness, and needs to be redeemed by the divine essence that is to be found within himself. However, this divine essence can only be accessed with the assistance of our feelings. Therefore, we can say that the expression, “redemption of the feeling”, has a double relevance here. First, the reputation of feelings and emotions are redeemed and restored from the dubiousness where modern scientific world view had put them. Second, the feelings themselves have a strong redeeming power in the sense that they can help to teach people how to save their souls from sinfulness and from the grip of anxiety and meaninglessness. In this second sense, feelings and emotions are probably the most useful tools one has at his disposal, arguably even more important than reason itself.

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