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**ON KIERKEGAARD'S UNFEASIBILITY
OF COMPREHENDING AND COMMUNICATING
WITH GOD AND THE DESPAIR THEREBY EVOKED**

Before one proceeds to interpret any of Kierkegaard's thoughts circuitously displayed in his works, it seems advisable to elucidate succinctly the Dane's sentiments on the very communication between the author and the reader, the understanding of which is a *conditio sine qua non* for any interpretation, which aspires to be warranted.

In his *Journals*, Kierkegaard revealed that he perceived his task as a writer quite divergently from the most of his contemporaries, who striving to edify, wrongly confined themselves to merely stating their convictions. According to the Dane, the greatest impact can be exerted on a reader by means of *maieutics*.¹ This Socratic method of assisting the interlocutor to bring forth and thus become aware of his latent knowledge is to be found in most of the Danish thinker's writings.

Therefore, it should not astound that Kierkegaard proves such a fervent enthusiast of noms de plume. A pseudonymous author does not express Kierkegaard's views. By means of sobriquets, Kierkegaard sought very frequently to distance himself from the various ways of living which he depicted in his books. Thus, diverse pen names present

¹ Cf. for example Kierkegaard, S. *Om min Forfatter-Virksomhed*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v.18, p. 67 and Himmelstrup, J. *Terminologisk Ordbog*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v. 20, passim.

manifold *Lebensarten*, which the philosopher portrays in the hope of rendering it possible for the reader to see that the only existence, which is truly worthy of that name, is the religious one.

Kierkegaard purported that the main objective of each person should be to endeavour to become a Christian. This 'endeavour' transpires to be of vital importance, as one can never attain the aim, irrespective of how much exertion is put into it.² This fact notwithstanding, one has to attempt and do one's utmost to approach the ideal. Hence, most of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors (e.g. Constantin Constantius, Vigilius Haufniensis, Johannes de Silentio, Johannes Climacus) are not Christians, but solely illustrate paradigmatically miscellaneous stages of life; these being: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious (the ideal), plus two 'transitional stages' between the three stages: the ironical stage is the transitional stage from the aesthetic to the ethical and the humorous from the ethical to the religious.³ Kierkegaard deemed the three (or five) stages to be the stages of growth in the development of personality, and although the religious stage is the crowning of one's existential evolution, it remains for the reader to ascertain which 'sphere' of existence he desires to 'accomplish'.

Having delineated the absolute prerequisite for a successful interpretation of Kierkegaard's philosophy (indirect communication), we can now begin to investigate how Johannes de Silentio views the possibility of comprehending and communicating with God.

Fear and Trembling is an exhaustive study of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. The old narrative is analysed with thrilling dialectic. Abraham transgresses all ethical standards, for he is guided by a higher objective.⁴ Still, for Johannes de Silentio, from the ethical point of view Abraham can solely be regarded as a murderer.

Abraham is confronted with the dilemma whether to comply with the ethical command which states that *thou shalt not kill* or whether to abide by the religious imperative which imposes obedience to God's command on His worshippers. Two crucial questions arise: *Is there an absolute duty to God?*⁵ and *Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?*⁶ Johannes de Silentio fields both questions affirmatively and thereby delimits unequivocally between the ethical and the religious ways of existing. This absolute duty, i. e., relativization of ethics can, needless to say, solely be levied on men by God. Nonetheless, it has to be clearly accentuated that Johannes de Silentio postulates teleological suspending (Suspension) of the ethical, not its abolition.⁷

Abraham's grandeur consists in his imposing capability of retaining faith in God, against all reason. Regardless of the incomprehensible atrocity of God's command (to offer the life of one's beloved son), Abraham trusts implicitly in God to the very end. On

² Cf. for example Kierkegaard, S. *Indøvelse i Christendom*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v. 16, passim.

³ The 'stages of life' are presented in various works of which as a paradigmatic synthesis of the three stages *Stadier paa Livets Vei*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v. 7-8. can be quoted

⁴ „Han overskred ved sin Gjerning hele det Ethiske, og havde et høiere τέλος (...)” Kierkegaard, S. *Frygt og Bæven*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v. 5, p. 55. *Fear and Trembling. A Dialectical Lyric* by Søren Kierkegaard. Translated with Introduction and Notes by Walter Lowrie. Princeton 1945.

⁵ „Gives der en absolut Pligt mod Gud?” op. cit. p. 63.

⁶ „Gives der en teleologisk Suspension af det Ethiske?” op. cit. p. 51

⁷ Geismar, E. *Søren Kierkegaard. Livsudvikling og Forfattervirksomhed*, København, 1926, v. 2, p. 67

the ground of his immense act of faith, his unconditioned, blind obedience to God's command to slay Isaac, he becomes eulogised and acclaimed as 'The Father of Faith'. Abraham is a 'Knight of Faith' who transgresses the law and because of his faith and hope, against all reason, that he will not lose his son (by no means does he resign as many a tragic hero would have done), he is exempt from the horrifying duty, due to his staggering ability to 'retain his temporal desires, when he has already renounced them.'⁸ He knows nothing about God's purpose to put him in such a plight. This is what makes the religious sphere so paradoxical: the impossibility of comprehending and communicating with God.⁹ The Knight of Faith arduously ascends the path of existence leading through the stages of life towards God. He toils alone: nobody accompanies him, nobody counsels him, and nobody even understands him.¹⁰ To the obvious question: 'Why and for whom was Abraham ready to consummate the sacrifice?', Kierkegaard answers: for God and for himself; for God, who wanted him to give evidence of his faith, and for himself, as he yearned to give the evidence.¹¹

The entire book is thus a panegyric on Abraham, 'the Father of Faith'. Johannes de Silentio deems Abraham to be an illustrative example of the religious life. Due to his close relationship with the divinity, the Knight of Faith is completely incomprehensible to others. For the uninitiated, reason recoils before the absolute paradox of a father who proves capable of slaying his own son.

It has to be stressed, though, that Johannes de Silentio's Abraham differs from the biblical Abraham, since he is presented from the author's specific, existential point of view. As highlighted above, most of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writers are not yet Christians. This applies not to the least extent to Johannes de Silentio, who understands the absurdity of Abraham's predicament and admires it, but who completely fails to comprehend his faith; as a matter of fact, not only cannot he comprehend, but is thereby petrified as well.¹²

With prodigious acumen Johannes de Silentio points out that a Christian, being incapable of: firstly, comprehending God's commands (how can the morbid command to consummate a sacrifice of one's child, which makes the mind boggle, be rationally explained) and secondly, communicating with God (if Abraham had misinterpreted the command of God, who did not want him to kill his son, he could not have ascertained it by means of a prayer as God remains always silent) has no other option, but to acquiesce that Christianity is a matter of faith, not of knowledge. Moreover, this matter of faith is full of paradoxes and absurdities.

⁸ „(...) thi det er stort at opgive sit Ønske, men det er større at fastholde det, efter at have opgivet det; det er stort at gribe det Evige, men det er større at fastholde det Timelige, efter at have opgivet det.” Kierkegaard, S. *Frygt og Bæven*, Samlede Værker, 1862, v. 5, p. 19.

⁹ Geismer, E. *Søren Kierkegaard. Livsudvikling og Forfattervirksomhed*, København, 1926, v. 2, p. 68

¹⁰ „Naar et Menneske tiltræder den tragiske Helts i en vis Forstand tunge Vei, da skal Mange kunne raade ham; den, der gaaer Troens trange Vei, ham kan Ingen raade, Ingen forstaae.” Kierkegaard, S. *Frygt og Bæven*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v. 5, p. 62.

¹¹ „For Guds Skyld og aldeles identisk hermed for sin egen Skyld. For Guds Skyld gjør han det, fordi Gud fordrer dette Bevis paa hans Tro, for sin egen Skyld gjør han det, at han kan føre Beviset.” Op. cit. 56.

¹² „Medens derfor Abraham vækker min Beundring, forfærdet han mig tillige.” Ibid.

It is also worth mentioning that the postulate of absurdity and paradoxicalness of the Christian doctrine situate Kierkegaard in the acute opposition to the then-reigning Hegelianism. Hegel's philosophical optimism purported that all the discrepancies and inconsistencies of Christianity had been duly unravelled and reconciled, or as he put it 'mediated' owing to the ostensibly higher synthesis of philosophy, by which religion had been reduced to terms which might be grasped by the intellect. Hegel endeavoured to combine religion with philosophy as he was of the opinion that they were equivalents which complemented each other. Kierkegaard separated them violently. It is the task of reason to 'concoct objective truths' and encompass them in a system. Faith cannot be proved or warranted, as it would cease to be faith if it were proved. Reason is the rational, faith is the irrational. Certainty (rationality) would obliterate faith. If one seeks to prove the existence of God, one perpetrates a ludicrous *circulus vitiosus*: if one succeeded in proving His existence, faith would cease to exist. Mediation has to be repudiated.¹³ The Danish apologist of faith acknowledges the indisputable supremacy of faith.

One can safely maintain that scarcely has any other Christian-religious thinker succeeded in either separating knowledge and faith to such an extent, or in accentuating the inherent paradoxicalness of faith. Frequently, Kierkegaard's standpoint is, quite rightly, compared to Tertullian's famous *Credo, quia absurdum*¹⁴, since for both thinkers one can by no means enter into Christianity by way of reason, speculation or science. It can only be achieved by way of faith and in spite of all reason.

In the last part of *Unscientific Postscript*¹⁵, Søren Kierkegaard (Johannes Climacus) presented his analysis of the religious sphere, in which he singled out two forms of religion. The first one is referred to as Religiousness A and is of a human nature; as an *exemplum* of this, ancient Greek religion could be given. The other is named Religiousness B and it epitomises Christianity. To Kierkegaard Christianity is an inhuman religion, for it is in flagrant contradiction to the instinctiveness of human nature and its natural craving for happiness in the temporal life. Not only does this religion exact dying to the world and a concentration solely on life after death, but it also proves to be completely and utterly absurd from the intellectual point of view. Into the bargain, there is nothing that can corroborate it and those who resolve to believe will never experience any tangible contact with the subject of their beliefs (neither will they comprehend nor will they communicate with the Maker).

According to Kierkegaard, Christianity, an inhuman religion as it is, drives an individual to despair. Despair (Fortvivlelse) is the fundamental theme of *The Sickness unto*

¹³ If one wanted to enumerate Kierkegaard's onslaughts on Hegelian philosophy, an entire volume of quotations could originate. Suffice it to say that Kierkegaard particularly abominated Hegel's *Vermittlung*, i. e. *Meditation*. Let us quote two utterances from two of his earliest works which paradigmatically express the view which he never renounced: „Det er utroligt, saa megen Blæst der i den hegelske Philosophi er bleven gjort af Meditationen, og saa megen taabelig Passiar, der under det Firma har nydt Hæder og Ære.” *Gjentagelsen*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v. 5, p. 130 & „Dette er Paradoxet, som ikke lader sig mediere.” *Frygt og Bæven*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v. 5, p. 61. C.f. also Geismar, E. Søren Kierkegaard. *Livsudvikling og Forfattervirksomhed*, København, 1926, v. 3, p. 67 sqq.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard himself quotes the sentence in connection with humour and irony, cf. *Om Begrebet Ironi*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v.1, p. 331

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, S. *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v. 10

*Death*¹⁶ by Anti-Climacus (Søren Kierkegaard). Quite contrary to the generally prevailing conviction, despair is not a rare phenomenon. As a matter of fact, the case is that despair concerns all and sundry. Each and every individual is to a greater or lesser extent in despair, yet many a man remains oblivious to it: 'As the doctor perhaps must say that there is probably no person alive who is in perfect health, so one must say, if one knew the person aright, that there is not a single living person who still is not in some despair (...) as a doctor will speak of going about with a disease in the body, so he will go about with a disease, carry with him a sickness of the spirit (...). And in any case no person has ever lived, and there is no person alive outside Christendom, who is not in despair, and not one within Christendom unless he is truly Christian; and in so far as he is not completely so, still he is somewhat in despair.

(...). It is not a rare exception that one is in despair; no, the rare, the very rare exception is that one is not in despair.

But the vulgar view has a very poor understanding of despair. Among other things (...) it completely overlooks, it completely overlooks that not to be so is precisely one form of despair (...). In a far deeper sense, it is the same with the vulgar view in determining despair as it is when it determines whether a human being is ill or not (...). It is generally assumed that a person, when he does not state himself that he is ill, is well, not to mention, when he himself does say that he is well. The doctor, on the other hand, considers disease differently. (...). The doctor knows that just as there is disease which is merely imagination, so there is also a state of health; (...). It is necessary for a doctor (...) to know (...) whether the person supposedly ill really is so, or whether the person supposedly well is perhaps in reality ill. The physician of souls is in the same position with regard to despair.¹⁷

There is a plethora of forms of despair. The most significant definition of despair is 'a sickness of the Spirit, of the Self'. According to Kierkegaard, a human being is 'a

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, S. *Sygdommen til Døden*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v. 15. *The Sickness unto Death*. Translated with an Introduction, by Walter Lowrie. Princeton 1951

¹⁷ Som vel Lægen maa sige, at der maaskee ikke lever eet eneste Menneske der er ganske sund, saaledes maate man, hvis man ret kjendte Mennesket, sige, at der ikke lever eet eneste Menneske, uden at han jo dog er lidt fortvivlet (...) saa han dog, som Lægen taler om at gaae med en Sygdom i Kroppen, gaaer og bærer paa en Aandens Sygdom, (...). Og i ethvert Tilfælde har der intet Menneske levet og der lever intet Menneske udenfor Christenheden, uden at han er fortvivlet, og i Christenheden Ingen, forsaavidt han ikke er sand Christen; og forsaavidt han ikke ganske er dette, er han dog noget fortvivlet.

(...). Det er ikke det Sjeldne, at En er fortvivlet; nei, det er det Sjeldne, det saare Sjeldne, at En i Sanhed ikke er det.

Men den vulgaire Betragtning forstaaer sig meget daarligt paa Fortvivelse. Den overser saaledes blandt Andet ganske (...), den overseer ganske, at det just er en Form af Fortvivelse det ikke at være det, (...). Det gaaer i en langt dybere Forstand den vulgaire Betragtning i Forhold til at opfatte Fortvivelse, som det stundom gaaer den i Forhold til at bestemme, om et Menneske er syg eller ikke (...). I Almindelighed antager man, at et Menneske, naar han ikke selv siger, at han er syg, er rask, end sige, naar han selv siger, at han er rask. Lægen derimod betragter Sygdommen anderledes. (...). Lægen veed, at som der er en Sygdom, der kun er Indbildning, saaledes ogsaa en Sundhed; (...). Læge har (...) at kjende, om den formeentligen Syge virkelig er syg, eller om den formentligen Sunde maaske er virkelig syg. Saaledes ogsaa med Sjelekyndiges Forhold til Fortvivelse." Kierkegaard, S. *Sygdommen til Døden*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v.15, p. 81. As quoted in: Brandt, F. *Søren Kierkegaard. 1813-1855. His Life – His Works*, Copenhagen, 1963, p. 73 sqq.

synthesis of body and spirit'¹⁸, and the spirit is the self. Similarly to Socrates, Kierkegaard was of the opinion that the Self (Socrates' ψυχή) is what constitutes and distinguishes an individual.¹⁹ This fact notwithstanding, all men share one thing about the self: it has been bestowed upon them as an assignment and it is everyone's task to accept and develop their self.

The Sickness unto Death is divided into two sections: the former is primarily devoted to the despair tormenting the natural man (who is guided by speculation, reasoning, experience), the latter with despair in the Christian (who follows the directives of the Scriptures). We cannot, unfortunately, go into minute analysis of all the particular differences and nuances between the various types of despair for lack of time and space. Suffice it to say that in all cases despair consists in 'despairing over oneself' (one's Self). Despair is prompted by the failure to accept and develop the Self in accordance with special laws for the development of the Self, e. g., the ethical laws and religious laws. Apart from the laws, there is also a development of understanding the Self, development of feeling the Self and, eventually, development of the will. It goes without saying that such developments, can go (and frequently do) in the wrong direction, which results in an existence that Kierkegaard christened as 'fantastical'.

To despair is to 'despair over one's Self': despair is either *to want despairingly not to be oneself*²⁰, or *to want despairingly to be oneself*²¹. The former relates to the natural man: being unable to reconcile himself with the thought of impending and inexorable demise, he does not want to be himself (i. e., somebody who is bound to die); the latter concerns the Christian, for whom death is just the hope of a better existence. Despair is caused here by the person's awareness of their imperfection and not being able to comply fully with God's Command(ment)s.

Because of the differences, the natural man and the Christian are completely incapable of understanding each other. There is a chasm between them, for the Christian is an individual who lives (be)for(e) God: his Self is before God, whereas the natural man (atheist) does not. Thus, a natural man is sick unto Death, while the Christian is aware of the sickness and may be healed of it, like Lazarus. 'This sickness is not unto death'. (St. John, Ch. 11, v.4).²² In the case of the Christian, it is the disease in the Self that is his despair (his Sickness unto Death); if he, on the other hand, does have faith in Him, who is the Life and Resurrection, the Sickness unto Death does not concern him. All in all, the Sickness unto Death is incurable in the case of the natural man, but it can be cured in the case of the Christian: solely through Faith. Thus, the opposite of being in despair is to believe.

And now we come to the greatest difficulty exhaustively expounded in *Fear and Trembling, The Sickness unto Death*, and the majority of Kierkegaard's works: it is prodigiously difficult, if viable at all, to acquire the Christian Faith. It is difficult to cease to be a natural man (atheist), i. e., to become a Christian, as the doctrine of Christianity is a 'blasphemy' against common sense. It is 'fatuous', 'preposterous', 'paradoxical',

¹⁸ Cf. op. cit. p. 73

¹⁹ Although Socrates, being a heathen, could obviously not talk of the soul (self) in terms of Christianity. Only intuitively, could he postulate its existence.

²⁰ „fortvivlet ikke at ville være sig selv”, op. cit. p. 73

²¹ „fortvivlet at ville være sig selv”, ibid.

²² „Denne Sygdom er ikke til Døden” (Joh. XI, 4). Op. cit. 69

'absurd' and 'it can drive an individual insane': 'And now for Christianity! Christianity teaches that this individual person, and so each individual person, whatever he may be, man, woman, maid-servant, minister of state, tradesman, barber, student, and so on, this individual person is *before* God - this individual person, (...) exists before God, can speak to God whenever he wants to, certain that he will be heard, in brief, this person is invited to live on the most intimate terms with God. Furthermore, it is for this person, also for this person's sake, that God comes to the world, lets himself be born, suffers, dies; and this suffering God practically begs and prays, this person to accept the help which is offered to him! Verily, if there is anything to make one lose one's reason, it must be this!'²³

Faith is, then, subjective (contradictory to the objective truths closed in a philosophical system) and paradoxical (contradictory to the logical system). The contact with God cannot be achieved by means of rational categories in accordance with reason, but against it. That is why *Fear and Trembling* was written not by a Christian, but by Johannes de Silentio, a name that paradigmatically expresses the natural reaction of a human being faced with the incomprehensible (God): silence. Communication concerns everything but God, faith entails silence. An individual confronted with God trembles fearfully in silence.

In this paper, only two of Kierkegaard's dissertations have been taken into consideration: *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death*. Although they differ widely from each other, with regard to the contents and the leading motif, the main issue remains the same: it is an individual confronted with Christianity. It has to also be added that the books were not written at the same time: *Fear and Trembling* in 1843 and *The Sickness unto Death* in 1849. Therefore, they reflect a development that each individual is supposed to undergo: an evolution from a non-Christian (Johannes de Silentio) to a Christian (Anti-Climacus). Kierkegaard asks what people know about the Maker. God is silent, He does not give us any directives, nor does he send any signs which could instruct us what we are expected to do. Nevertheless, we have to know who He is, whether He is and what He wants of us so as to comply with His will. God's silence brings us to uncertainty and dread, which evoke despair that can solely be healed by an act of faith. In such an act of absolute faith communication between God and individual is somewhat possible, although it is not understood as a conversation between equals: it

²³ „Og nu Christendommen! Christendommen lærer, at dette enkelte Menneske, og saaledes ethvert enkelt Menneske, hvad han saa forresten er, Mand, Kone, Tjenestepige, Minister, Kjøbmand, Barbeer, Studiosus o.s.v., dette enkelte Menneske er til *for* Gud - dette enkelte Menneske, (...), dette Menneske er til for Gud, kan tale med Gud, hvad Øieblik han vil, sikker paa at blive hørt af ham, kort, dette Menneske tilbydes det at leve paa den fortroligste Fod med Gud! Videre, for dette Menneskes, ogsaa for dette Menneskes Skyld kommer Gud til Verden, lader sig føde, lider, dør; og denne lidende Gud, han næsten beder og bønfaller dette Menneske om dog at tage mod Hjælpen, som tilbydes ham! Sandeligen er Noget til at tabe Forstanden over, saa dog vel dette! Op. cit. p.138. As quoted in: Brandt, F. *Søren Kierkegaard. 1813-1855. His Life – His Works*, Copenhagen, 1963, p. 83 sqq.

is realised in God and through God. Were men devoid of 'the eternal' (God), their existence, being hopeless and empty, would turn to despair.²⁴

All things considered, it is solely by acts of faith that God and His commands are accessible to us, for 'communication' (and 'comprehension') consists here in striving to abide by God's commands. God is infinitely beyond man's reason and in the temporal world God and a human do not have a common language, God remains *Deus absconditus*. Thus, man seeks in an act of faith to transgress the boundaries of the temporal world and approach the Creator closer. In spite of the fact that his exertion will never be accomplished successfully in this life, and in spite of the fact that attempts at communicating with God amount basically to soliloquies, faith remains for Kierkegaard the sole unshakeable support of our existence. Nevertheless, it has to be instantaneously emphasised that although despair *is* soothed by faith, it is never completely eradicated from human existence, as the true faith, i.e., Abraham's faith, is hardly to be found in people.²⁵

²⁴ „Dersom der ingen evig Bevidsthed var i et Menneske, (...), dersom en bundløs Tomhed, aldrig mættet, skjulte sig under Alt, hvad var da Livet Andet end Fortvivelse? (...) - hvor var da Livet tomt og trøstesløst!” Kierkegaard, S. *Frygt og Bæven*, Samlede Værker, 1962, v. 5, p. 17.

²⁵ (...); thi egentlig er det ikke Tro, men Troens fjerneste Mulighed, der yderst i Synskredsen ahner sin Gjenstand, dog adskilt fra den ved et svælgende Dyb, indenfor hvilket Fortvivlelsen driver sit Spil.” Op. cit. 21