

In Search for Forgiveness

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Simon D. Podmore, *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God Anatomy of the Abyss*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion, Bloomington, 2011, 280 p.

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Everyone who is somehow familiar with Søren Kierkegaard's philosophical writings has had the chance to notice that most of his influential concepts are far from providing a very optimistic view upon the individual's life and its perspectives.

Terms and themes such as *melancholy*, *anxiety*, *despair* and *spiritual trial* (or *struggle*) do not really reveal the most positive characteristics of human existence, an existence infinitely, radically and qualitatively separated from God through *sin*. If Kierkegaard diagnoses sin as the initial and the insurmountable difference between humanity and God¹ then what Kierkegaard provides through his works is just "a detailed cartography of the abyss without showing any exit from it" (xi).²

But here is where Simon D. Podmore³ "enters the arena" with his new book *Kierkegaard and the Self before God. Anatomy of the Abyss* setting a more optimistic perspective. The

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(original) sin determines an initial relation between the human self and God characterized as an impasse for the self to reach God. Simon Podmore starts his inquiry with these two questions: "How can the self be known in *relation* to a divine other who is infinitely qualitatively *different* from itself? And how can one stand *before* God when there is an infinite abyss *between* self and the divine?" and attempts to answer them by arguing "that the true expression of the infinite qualitative difference is found, not in the self's initial sense of sin and estrangement, but in the Holy *mysterium* of forgiveness. And as such, I maintain that the key to understand this transition from the consciousness of sin to the acceptance of forgiveness is also the key to the abyss." (xvi). Thus as a general aspect of the study Podmore suggests another way of reading Kierkegaard, by contrasting despair, melancholy, anxiety or spiritual trial with faith, forgiveness and the love of God.

A central concept of the book, *the abyss*, is introduced in the first chapter. Podmore states that in order to define one's existence before God it is compulsory to accept the distance (the abyss) which separates humanity from divinity. But the abyss cannot be assimilated with nothingness otherwise we can no longer speak about an anatomy of it⁴. It is quite interesting to point out the reason why Podmore associates these two terms, *the abyss* and *the anatomy*. "All anatomy involves a dissection (from the Gr. *anatome*: "dissection"), and dissection requires a cutting-apart (from the Lat. *dissecare*: "to cut into pieces"); hence the *severance* of the abyss is implied in its very anatomization - the infinite severance between God and humanity."(2).

Apart from this acceptance of *the abyss* (dn. *Dyb*) as the severance of humanity from God, Podmore stresses upon a second meaning. The Danish *Afgrund* implies another "kind" of abyss, "an abyss into which one can fall, in which one loses any ground on which one might stand before God." (8). This second meaning of the abyss suggests that what is the most dreadful is not the abyss in itself but the relation of the individual to the abyss. When the individual becomes conscious about the deep separation from God created through sin, God becomes the dreadful absolute Other, the One which the sinner relates to

through despair. Despair marks the relation between the individual and God, a step which the individual has to surpass in order to come before God for forgiveness.

But first “before the self can behold itself in this divine mirror” (9) it has to deal with this despair, it has to come to know itself and it has to recognize its failure to know itself according to its own powers. And only then, consequently, the “need to orient self-knowledge in relation to a divine *other*” (9) will emerge.

Podmore dwells on this inner struggle of despair in the second chapter entitled *The inner Abyss*. According to the author despair represents the failure of the isolated self to become a self before God. This failure of the self is to be found in the modern reading of the Socratic “know thyself”. Starting with its elementary sense as separation from the other, the self ends up by being also separated from itself (as the Cartesian striving to sustain the self as both the subject and the object of its own self knowledge). This myth of the autonomous self opens the way to the collapse into the postmodern “death of the self” which contagiously relates with the “death of God”, another modern assumption. Starting from the well known treatise of the self from Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death*, Podmore arrives to the conclusion that if “God is dead” “then surely ‘the self’ is also abandoned to the impossibility of becoming transparent to itself, for it cannot do so alone. Without God, the self has only its melancholy failure to become itself on which to meditate.” (23). And even the death of God itself comes as a consequence of this modern autonomy of the self, as defining itself without the God on whom it once depended (24).

Ultimately from man’s perspective the estrangement between self and God is an abyss created through *sin*, which drives his self to despair, melancholy and anxiety, while from God’s side the same abyss reveals itself as *forgiveness* (of sins). To put it simply, the individual has to find a way to arrive to the point where he can receive God’s forgiveness thus overcoming this estrangement from God.

While despair is the abyss of the unknown, melancholy is an existential abyss which expresses the sense of a loss.

Initially the (human) self senses the loss of the relation of itself to God through melancholy (in its religious acceptance). “The presentiment melancholy (Gr. *melancholia*) of the self which feels the presence and the absence, the loneliness and grief of the abyss between self and self, self and God” (50) also initiates the rise of self-consciousness. This presentiment gives self a “hint” for the eternal within itself, the sign of the initial relation between self and God. Eventually the importance of melancholy consists in the awakening of a religious longing “for that which is missing in relation to the self: namely the God-relation” (58). Still the religious melancholy is not sufficient in itself to overcome the abyss between the human and the divine even though it opens the desire to behold God.

Despite the alienation created by melancholy and despair and the fear and trembling of the self before that which is the Wholly Other (God), divine omnipotence does not crush the human but ensures his freedom. As Podmore puts it not only once throughout the fourth chapter (*The Melancholy Theophany*) “despite the fear of annihilation, divine omnipotence does not crush a person, but instead withdraws through the concessive gift of independence in the freedom of the self” (86).

But before one can be able to accept this gift of freedom one has to pass through a *spiritual trial*. Podmore starts the discussion on the spiritual trial (dn. *Anfægtelse*) around two biblical stories: the ordeal of Abraham and Jacob’s encounter with the Stranger. One of the most important issues in understanding Kierkegaard’s concept is that only if one dares to enter into the God-relationship does one encounter spiritual trial (106). The necessity of passing through this kind of struggle is a central step in the self’s becoming nothing before God (through resignation to the divine will).

This is the kind of trial which Abraham has to overcome when he is asked to sacrifice his son only to regain him right before he was about to kill him. Another important aspect regarding *spiritual trial* which can be foreseen somehow from Abraham’s story above is that “in its authentic form it does not express an instance of demonic dread, because it is ultimately a struggle of love prevailing over fear. Nor is it finally a struggle

to the death, since this trial seeks neither the annihilation of the self nor the death of God” (119).

Chapter six, *The Anatomy of Spiritual Trial* dwells further on the tormenting experience of spiritual trial starting with a comparative discussion between Kierkegaard and Luther upon the topic. Thus according to Luther *spiritual trial* “came to denote a form of temptation (*tentatio*), which takes place through an assault upon man (*impugnatio*) which is intended to put him to test” (120). Temptation can be identified as coming from the devil which from Luther’s point of view is the one which originates the tension of the spiritual trial within the human self. Kierkegaard though “situates the tension of spiritual trial irreducibly between the self and God” (129). If one can evade the temptation as being some kind of seduction, one should on the other hand voluntarily accept the confrontation with the dreadful Other if one intends to relate to God not through sin but through forgiveness.

Nonetheless both of them believe that the anguish of spiritual trial is created by the feeling that one finds himself before a dreadful God. What makes the difference between Kierkegaard’s *Anføgtelse* and Luther’s *Anfechtung* is that for the latter the tension of the spiritual trial is between the devil and the individual whereas for the former the same tension is only a matter between the individual and God.

As Podmore states “Kierkegaard’s understanding of spiritual trial was determined by the *voluntary* suffering of Christ’s passion” (137) and most of all by Christ’s fight to resist despair by praying at Gethsemane. Conceptually what “Gethsemane” suggests is prayer’s faith in divine possibility over human impossibility. Christ submits his will to the divine will which means he does not ignore his own willing but he acknowledges his thoughts and desperation in order to relinquish them (144). It is thus by renouncing the despair of human impossibility sensed in the very moment of spiritual trial (as in Christ’s Gethsemane) that the beginning of faith in divine possibility emerges (149).

We can ask ourselves at this point what does human impossibility and divine possibility actually refer to? In other words what is it that is possible for God and impossible for

human? Throughout the chapters of this book we could experience the great struggle that the human self has to pass through in order to (first be conscious about and then) surpass this abyss, this infinite, radical and qualitative difference as Kierkegaard names it which separates itself from God. If the meaning of this difference is essentially *sin* then the whole struggle is just a dying cause. But according to Podmore *sin* is not “the right answer”. Right from the beginning he confesses that “this project commenced under the belief that the meaning of Kierkegaard’s ‘infinite, radical, qualitative difference’ between humanity and God was essentially *sin*. Mercifully, it concluded with the conviction that the true meaning of the infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity is expressed through *forgiveness*” (xi).

What is it that can be forgiven? It is of course our sins but this is a job we cannot do and this is because of a thousand reasons thoroughly depicted by the author within his study. Though what we can do is to freely accept God’s possibility to forgive our sins. The self surrender of prayer marks the maximal point of intimacy between self and God and one must be careful in dealing with it otherwise one falls again in the deepest despair. It is decisive to accept that the self cannot “itself decide what *sin* is and decide the possible reach of forgiveness. The flaw is in conflating what one can forgive oneself with what God can forgive one: that is, the omission of the infinite qualitative *difference* between human and divine forgiveness” (167).

Kierkegaard and the self before God is not the lightest reading one can have and a book review of 2000 words is not the best way to clarify all the aspects and the themes treated (when rightly understood!). However, if you are interested in “a contemporary theological reading of the theme of the ‘self before God’ as defined by way of the category ‘of infinite qualitative difference’ in Kierkegaard’s writings” (xiii), exploring the problems of despair, anxiety, melancholy, spiritual trial and their more positive counterparts, faith, forgiveness and the love of God and if you are curious to find out how thinkers such as Augustine, Luther, Otto, Tillich, Levinas or Derrida deal with

such themes then Simon D. Podmore's latest study might be the right book to read.

NOTES

¹And indeed Kierkegaard states (Kierkegaard 1985, 47): "What, then, is the difference?" Johannes ponders. "Indeed, what else but sin, since the difference, the absolute difference, must have been caused by the individual himself".

²An idea that according to Podmore is shared by many philosophers and theologians as it is the case of Karl Barth.

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⁴ The title of first chapter is *Anatomy of the Abyss*.

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