

## “KILL ME A SON”

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When psychoanalysis studies literature, philosophy or other kind of texts, the aim is not to give a diagnosis of the author. The aim is to learn from the studied text. Today I will look at what we can learn from a reading of Kierkegaard's text: *Fear and Trembling*, which besides *The Concept of Anxiety* is probably one of the most important works on anxiety. I will focus on Abraham and the sacrifice of his son Isaac. My main idea is, that Kierkegaard can teach us about melancholia, which, according to Lacan, is a structure connected to the psychoses. Hereby I am not talking about Kierkegaard as a person, who once lived in Copenhagen, whose mother died when he was little or who had a particular relationship to Regine Olsen, etc.

Bob Dylan's famous song *Highway 61* points at the trembling reality of Abraham's sacrifice:

*Oh God said to Abraham: "Kill me a son"*

*Abe says, "Man you must puttin' me on"*

*God say, "No." Abe say, "What?"*

*God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but*

*the next time you see me comin' you better run."*

*Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?"*

*God says, "Out on Highway 61."*

In contrast to Dylan's Abraham, the Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* does not protest against God's will or his temptation. Even though Abraham believes that God will spare Isaac at the last moment, Abraham will obey God's will. Kierkegaard does not consider the task of Abraham a killing. And of course God does not need to threaten Abraham because anyone who believes, obeys.

He [Abraham] knew, that God the Almighty was testing him: he knew it was the greatest Sacrifice, that could be made; but he also knew, that no Sacrifice was too great, when put forth by God – and he drew the Knife. (op. cit., p. 22)

If you don't believe, then it is murder, but if you do believe, it is not, Kierkegaard says.

Why then the title of Kierkegaard's text: *Fear and Trembling*? Why fear and trembling, which also function as pseudonyms for anxiety, when everything is okay regarding belief? The horror comes from Abraham's confrontation with Isaac's possible reaction in foreseeing his own death. Furthermore, it comes from the consequence of the very act: the death of Isaac! The fear and trembling comes from the consequences of following a temptation from the [big] Other, God, which Abraham does not understand, yet obeys. However, in his belief, he approaches madness, insanity or a psychotic state, as we express it in a psychoanalytical context. Kierkegaard expresses it in this way:

... But Abraham was greater than all the Others, great with Power, bearing the Secret of Folly, great with Hope with the Form of Madness [*Vanvid*], great with Love having the Form of Self-hatred. (...) He left his earthly Reason [*Forstand*] taking with him his Belief ... (ibid., p. 18)

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard assures us that Abraham is not mad because he believes.

From an ethical point-of-view or seen from a common discourse, he is either a killer or psychotic. But regarding belief, Abraham is neither a killer nor psychotic.

The ethical Expression for, what Abraham did, is, that he would kill Isaac, the religious [expression] is, that he would sacrifice Isaac, but precisely in this Contradiction Anxiety lies ... (p. 29-30)

Through his belief and the idea of the sacrifice to the [big] Other, Abraham also escapes anxiety, which comes from the confrontation with his act: First Isaac's horror is in seeing his father's intention to kill, then in the death of his son. Abraham transgresses the ethic dimension or stage, as Kierkegaard says, and enters the religious stage on account of his anxiety. He springs from the ethical to the religious stage because of anxiety. Through his belief, Abraham can also

pass through anxiety.

Hence, it is not only necessary to believe, thus avoiding the blind alley of the ethical dimension that deems the act a killing, but also to confront oneself with the anxiety connected to the contradiction between the ethical and the religious dimension. This is why Kierkegaard in his text *The Concept of Anxiety* sees anxiety as the highest form of freedom, even though, as Abraham's temptation stresses, it is also the greatest lack of freedom. Furthermore, Abraham can pass through the religious anxiety without going crazy. This is connected to the paradox of belief:

... a Paradox, which is able to make a Murder into a holy and God-pleasing Act, a Paradox which gives Isaac back to Abraham, which no Thought can understand, because Belief begins, where Thought stops. (p. 50)

Belief begins where language stops and the Real begins. I understand the Real here, as Lacan does: as incomprehensible and impossible ... for the subject to approach. Confronted with anxiety, which is a signal of the Real, speech stops. God or the gods are in the Real, as Lacan stresses. Hence, Abraham neither talks about God's demand nor about Isaac's possible death, because he cannot.

From a religious point of view, Kierkegaard states that Abraham's act is neither a killing nor an ethical act. However, belief can not be mediated or explained, but has always been there, otherwise Abraham is lost. If belief has not been here for ever, then Abraham is about to commit a crime, or acting-out a psychotic act ordered by the [big] Other, God, whose orders cannot be doubted. But belief has, according to Kierkegaard, always existed, and every argument made to convince us of this, fails. This is the paradox of belief.

However, for me it seems to be rather difficult to spot the difference between Abraham's act and the act of a psychotic subject. In some cases of psychosis, the subject is exactly like Abraham, asked by a voice coming from the [big] Other, maybe from God, to kill another person. This could be a psychotic man, who kills his children and wife, or a psychotic woman, who cuts off the heads of people passing her on the road, because she is ordered to do so by God.

Abraham is like a psychotic subject outside the Law commanded by a voice to do the worst possible: Kill his next of kin. Abraham is hence, according to Kierkegaard himself, "...the Singular higher than the Common ..." (p. 61). Abraham is outside the Law understood as the common and symbolic Law prohibiting murder and incest. He is outside an ethics following such prohibitions. Ethically speaking, the killing of Isaac would concern Abraham's hatred towards him, but because Abraham is outside of the Law and every kind of ethics, he is also outside of hate. Because God asks him, he must obey.

As I have said, Abraham cannot talk about this, because, confronted with the signal of the Real, anxiety, his speech stops or becomes impossible to understand in a common discourse. Placed outside a common discourse, Abraham talks like a psychotic subject occasionally does, in tongues, or as Kierkegaard says: "... in a divine Tongue." (p. 103) or in "a strange Tongue." (p. 107)

Let me stress a small, though important aspect connected to Abraham's act, namely the gaze. In one of the first chapters in his text, called *Atmosphere*, Kierkegaard presents three different versions of Abraham's act. In all of them the gaze plays an important role. 1) In the first version, Abraham's gaze towards his son is at first mild, and then, just before the terrible act, it is wild, seen by Isaac. Of course Isaac reacts with terror seeing the wildness in his father's eye. 2) In the second version, firstly Abraham addresses his gaze towards the Morija-mountain, the place for the killing, but after his attempt to sacrifice his son, his gaze is darkened. 3) In the third version, the gaze comes from Isaac: He sees the trembling of Abraham just before the act, but never "talked to any Human Being about what he had seen and Abraham did not know that Someone has seen it." (p. 16) After this, in this third version, Isaac has lost belief.

In these three versions we recognise a displacement of the gaze from father to son. This displacement underlines, what is going on in the text: To Abraham God represents the cruel father or the [big] Other demanding the hardest sacrifice of all. To Isaac, Abraham also represents a cruel father: His murder-attempt destroyed his son's belief. Hence, we have a cruel paternal dimension. On the other hand, to his father, Isaac only represents a lost object, an object to sacrifice. He is an object lost from a social discourse. Lacan's name for such an object

is object little a: Horrified, Isaac looks at the gaze of his [big] Other, his father, and sees that he is reduced to an object of sacrifice, a fallen object or a piece fallen outside the social bond or discourse. What Kierkegaard teaches us can be understood as a perspective for the clinic: When the subject is reduced to an object a in the desire of the [big] Other, anxiety appears.

I will return to this aspect, but before doing so, I will point out another central aspect of the gaze. Later in the text, Kierkegaard says about Abraham's act:

The One, who looks at it, becomes paralysed. Who strengthened the soul of Abraham, so it did not become dark for his Eye, so he neither saw Isaac nor the Ram? The One, who looks upon this, he becomes blind. (p. 23)

The gaze is suspended in the very act of sacrifice, in so far that Abraham's eyes were blinded. Or the imaginary dimension is suspended between Abraham and his son. This imaginary dimension concerns the image of the other, here the image of Isaac, but also the image, which the subject has of himself regarding the other. This image is suspended in Abraham's act. Not recognising the image of the other, his son, or of himself, Abraham approaches a depersonalisation: blindness and paralysis. When the image is dissolved, the subject is depersonalised.

When Kierkegaard talks about the neighbour and love in his book *Works of love*, he does not place the neighbour as a beloved one or as an image. The neighbour is outside the image of the other or the image of the one, who shall love the neighbour. As a matter of fact, to love one's neighbour is only possible if the subject denies himself. "To love the Neighbour (...) is the Love of Self-denial ..." (op. cit., p. 59) "... only in Love to the Neighbour is the Self, who loves, pure spiritual defined as Spirit ..." (ibid., p. 61) Somehow, the love of the Neighbour seems only possible if you are dead or at least not a subject connected to the image of a beloved other or of yourself. Or real love, according to Kierkegaard, is only possible, when the other is a lost object or a dissolved image. Hence, it is not only the other who is fallen or a dissolved image. It is also he/she, who loves his/her neighbour. We can in Kierkegaard thus localise a lack of recognising the image of the other, at least when talking about the religious stage. Furthermore, it is a question of self-denial. As the case of Abraham shows us, this can result in a certain depersonalisation: blindness or paralysis.

In the second version of Abraham's act, in *Atmosphere*, in *Fear and trembling*, Abraham has lost all pleasure eternally (op. cit., p. 15). Kierkegaard does not develop this further in *Fear and trembling*, but we can use his book *Sickness unto Death* as an indication for Abraham's possible feelings. God will of course not let Abraham die, even though he suffers a lot afterwards. Hence, Abraham cannot die, and this is perhaps his highest form of despair. Sickness unto death is, according to Kierkegaard, despair of not being able to die. "... Hopelessness is, when even the last Hope, Death, is not there." (op. cit., p. 77) In some way, Abraham's suffering is imposed by God, who will not let him die. Abraham is a living dead, and his "... Death is [a death] not being able to die." (ibid., p. 80) Submitted the will of the [big] Other, Abraham or anyone suffering from sickness unto death, is dead all the time, but cannot die (cf. p. 77).

Kierkegaard often uses the word melancholia to describe such a state, where the subject is alive, but only as dying not being able to die. Hence, he teaches psychoanalysis about melancholia, which is another word for a particular psychotic structure. In melancholia, the subject suffers, with no possible escape. He has fallen into a sort of self-denial, or he is like Isaac, placed as an object sacrificed to the [big] Other, who he cannot escape neither in life nor death. This is why Abraham cannot stand to see the image of himself or his son: This image creates anxiety, because it is an offer to the [big] Other who receives the subject as a victim. The subject tries to avoid the mirror of his image, because this image is understood as an image seen by the [big] Other waiting for the subject's sacrifice. Submitted to the gaze of the [big] Other, the subject is reduced to an object sacrificed to the [big] Other. One of Lacan's few remarks on psychosis in the seminar *The Anxiety* stresses this: "If that, which is seen in the mirror, gives rise to anxiety, then it is not proposable to the Other's recognition." (op. cit., s. 142)

Y. Depelsenaire notes in *Une analyse avec Dieu. Le rendez-vous de Kierkegaard* that Kierkegaard was probably melancholic, which his engagement with Régine Olsen, his relationship to his severe father and his (lack of) place in his cultural context (social bonds) underline. This melancholia can be expressed like this: "Morte-vivante, impuissante à vivre, impuissance à mourir" (Depelsenaire, op. cit., s. 58) This state of living dead also includes a relation to the

ideal:

*Le rapport du mélancolique à sa maladie est en fait encore un rapport à l'idéal. L'idéal forços du mélancolique ressurgit dans le reel sous forme de cette enveloppe de silence : dire sans parole, hors discours, 'vérité pour moi', pour reprendre là en son sens fort une catégorie chère à Kierkegaard. (ibid., p. 62)*

All alone in language or situated in a speech without any talk, the melancholic is somehow lost from the rest of the world. This is the case of Abraham walking towards the possible sacrifice of his son, and it was the case of Kierkegaard in his social 'bonds'.

But it is also possible to see Kierkegaard's huge production as an attempt to 'cure' himself. The works constituted an on-going dialogue or an analysis with God: an attempt to be cured of the sickness unto death, but also the impossibility to be cured of melancholia. It was a never ending analysis with God, which separates it from a Lacanian psychoanalysis, which has an end, even though it seemed to stabilise Kierkegaard's life. He died very young (42 years old), the cause of death never being made certain. Did it have a psychical cause? Or was it caused by his melancholia?

In the era of globalisation, the Other (science) presumes to know how the subject functions, its possible sickness and healing, - a knowing Other which seems to refer the subject to a psychotic structure. The Other knows, and the subject is submitted to the Other's rule and knowledge, as the psychotic subject experiences it. The discourse of science implies a foreclosure of the subject under the promotion of an unlimited knowledge. Kierkegaard's 'alternative' is a secret and singular relationship to God, who also knows all, but the subject can only participate in this knowledge if he accepts to be placed outside social bonds. Furthermore, what goes on between the subject and God is unknown (cf. Abraham's impossibility to talk about his act), and even though it perhaps deems the subject to be a living dead, it still represents an alternative to post-modern science, however, this alternative being rather negative.

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