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Anxiety, Freedom, and the Future of the Past

Kresten Lundsgaard–Leth*

> The possible corresponds exactly to the *future*. For freedom, the possible is the future, and the future is for time the possible. To both of these corresponds anxiety in the individual life. An accurate and correct linguistic usage therefore associates anxiety and the future. When it is sometimes said that one is anxious about the *past*, this seems to be a contradiction of this usage [. . .]. The past about which I am supposed to be anxious must stand in a relation of possibility *to me*. If I am anxious about a past misfortune, then it is not because it is in the past but because it may be *repeated*, i.e. become future.
>
> Kierkegaard 1980: 91 (my emphasis)

abstract: In this article I present a close reading of Section 5 in Søren Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*. After an introduction which alludes to the literary fiction of Jonathan Franzen, the article turns directly to Section 5, in which Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Vigilius Haufniensis, unfolds the phenomenon of anxiety as the original experience of existential freedom. In the first step of the argument, I argue that the transition of the human being from its natural state into an existence of ethically qualified freedom is a process which must be understood as a peculiar self–disturbance at the heart of subjectivity. In a second step, I claim that this self–disturbance is connected to the essential normativity of language that human beings always already find themselves in. In a concluding discussion, I suggest the interpretation that the linguistical self–disturbance of a human self implies an ethical requalification of the possibilities of one's past as well as of one's future.

keywords: S. Kierkegaard, anxiety, temporality, freedom, existence.

The most recent novels of the American author Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010), are in many ways two quite distinct works of literature. Nonetheless, the two books share a couple of essential

* Kresten Lundsgaard–Leth, University of Aalborg.

characteristics. Firstly, they both tell the story of a disintegrating and massively dysfunctional family (the Lamberts and the Berglunds, respectively). Secondly, they both manage to present their dubious protagonists in a conspicuously ambivalent tone of genuine sympathy *as well as* of scathing satire. Third– and most importantly, both stories turn out to *end* in a much more hopeful way than the reader had come to expect throughout the unfolding of the narrative. As such, the members of the Lambert family in *The Corrections* actually do come together against all odds for one final Christmas party before Albert, the family father, will shortly die. In *Freedom*'s case, Walter and Patty Berglund decide to give their broken marriage one last chance, in spite of the fact that virtually *nothing* which has happened so far suggests that they will ever manage to mend their unhealthy relationship. (cf. Franzen 2001a: 613 ff.; Franzen 2001b: 514 ff.) One curious aspect of the way in which the novels end is the way in which the reader surprisingly ends up expecting a more hopeful *future* for Franzen's fictional characters than he or she had expected to expect *prior* to the ending. To phrase this point in temporal categories, Franzen's concluding alteration — from hopeless to hopeful — of his novels' *present* co–instantaneously implies an alteration — also from hopeless to hopeful — of the imagined *future* of the novels. Taken in isolation, this point is admittedly trivial: coming to expect a brighter future is thus surely a non–controversial by–product of coming to experience one's current situation as *better* than one had expected it to be. This is not all, however. As such, it is not merely the fictitious future of Franzen's fiction which is ultimately transformed by the *how* of its ending(s). It is also its *past*.

But what is meant hereby? To begin with, it seems hermeneutically on–point to argue that we cannot make sense of the *whole* (e.g. an entire novel) without taking all of its parts (e.g. the ending) into account. (cf. Grondin 1994: 76 ff.) However, we still need to be much more specific as to *how* the reciprocal relationship of ending and entirety works in the case of Franzen's fiction. On this interpretation, the past of the two novels is not merely transformed because their endings allow us to *contrast* the hopefulness of their envisioned future with the "factual" hopelessness of what came before. If this were the entire analysis, the effect of the ending(s) would amount to nothing but the reader's acquired capability to contrast one thing (i.e. the past) with another thing (i.e. the future) *totally* different from it. However, as I will argue: any such abstract "logic of contrast" simply does not capture the actual essence of what is at stake here. What *is* going on is instead something more complex: the reader who makes it to the end(s) of *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, respectively, cannot merely look back at the preceding parts of the novels' plots and conceive of them as being entirely *different* from the ending. Rather, a different interpretational option offers itself: thus, the reader finds him– or herself

capable of carrying through a specific retroactive sense–making according to which the surprisingly hopeful ending is perceived as the very *result* of what came before as opposed to being its complete opposite. An unlikely and improbable result to be sure, but a result nonetheless. When we look upon it this way, the analysis suffers a vital displacement of perspective. Instead of thinking that the hopeful prospects of the ending have somehow *falsified* the hopelessness of the past at the level of third–personal *content* (i.e. focusing on *what* [f]actually has happened), the reader can experience a much more *internalized* mode of falsification. On this level, it is the reader's very *own* understanding of what he or she took to be the *truth of the past* which turns out to be wrong; and not the past in–and–of–itself. One way of fleshing out this line of argument may be the following: by realizing that the *actual* result of the past was something much more encouraging than the past "itself" had initially led us to expect, we realize that the real truth about the past cannot be captured by grasping its mere *probability*. In other words, the past of the narrative — by way of its ending — retroactively reveals itself to the reader as having always comprised more *possibility* than he or she had been able to see while it happened. Until the ending made him or her see the past in a different light; namely: as the *past of the future*. In summa: when Franzen ultimately lets his readers experience a different future for his characters than the readers had thought they would *come* to expect he — in the exact same instant — also enables those very readers to experience everything that led up to this moment as something *other* than they had hitherto thought it to be.

Formally, this weird experience of our past experience turning out to be a different experience from the one we thought we had already had (e.g. any given situation leading up to a good rather than a bad outcome) appears to be structured as a temporal recoil of sorts. Experiencing one's future differently thus always implies the co–instantaneous possibility of experiencing one's past differently. And this structural feature of human existence is exactly what Franzen's novels put on display in such powerful fashion.

As I have hinted at in the formulation above, I believe there to be a *universal* lesson about human existence to be distilled from the *specific* experience made accessible to us by literary fiction, such as Franzen's. Moreover: in order to try and figure out this universality with more precision, I will argue that we would do well to turn to Søren Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*.[1] On my reading, *The Concept of Anxiety* is first and foremost a — both

1. To be sure, a certain Vigilius Haufniensis (i.e. the vigilant Copenhagener) declares himself the author of *The Concept of Anxiety*. In the case of *The Concept of Anxiety*, however–clearly as opposed to some of the other works of the early 1840s — I do not consider the alleged pseudonymity to be of

phenomenologically sensitive and philosophically systematic — attempt at depicting what it means for human beings to experience themselves as being ultimately *free*. (cf. e.g. Grøn 1996: 69 ff.; Grøn 1998: 101–110; Malantschuk 1996: 70 ff.; Kosch 2010: 210–212, Greve 1990: 233 ff.; Marino 1998: 317 ff.) At this early stage, however, being free is not so much the answer we are looking for as it is the very *question* we ought to be posing.[2] And as my introductory remarks on Franzen have also already indicated, I am convinced that working through one vital section of Kierkegaard's intricate analysis of anxiety can help us see how experiencing oneself as free — and thus *ethically* accountable — essentially has to do with a certain re–experiencing of one's own existential temporality, that is: of one's present and future, as well as one's past. We will return to these points later.

In the following, I wish to approach these questions in a slightly unorthodox manner. As such, I intend first and foremost to present a very close reading of one *single* section (i.e. § 5) of *The Concept of Anxiety*. Although the headline of this exact section is homonymous with the title of the very work which contains it (i.e. "The Concept of Anxiety"), it is obviously not to be taken for granted that the main analyses presented therein is by implication representative of the entire work. To be frank, I do not think it is. How could it possibly be? On the other hand, I also do not believe that the aspiration towards explaining a whole text is the only possible justification for focusing particularly on one specific section of a philosophical text. Alternatively, a highly local interpretation like the one offered here can be justified by the way in which it ultimately allows us to unfold a number of core concepts and phenomena that are essential to the problem of existential freedom central to *all* of the Kierkegaardian pseudonyms. Briefly put, and very preliminarily, one can think about the experience of anxiety as it is presented in section 5 as the existential *proto*–experience of freedom itself. Obviously, this bold claim must be vindicated in the following. Without further ado, let us thus enter section 5. Kierkegaard himself begins with the following, rather complex passage:

> Innocence [*Uskyldighed*] is ignorance [*Uvidenhed*]. In innocence, man is not qualified as spirit [*Aand*] but is psychically qualified in immediate unity with his natural condition [*Naturlighed*]. The spirit in man is dreaming [. . .]. In this state there is

special importance to the text.

2. By giving priority to the questioning of freedom rather than freedom as the answer, I primarily wish to accentuate the point that we cannot allow ourselves to be certain at the outset as to *what* it is we are even looking for (i.e. "freedom"). To begin with, "freedom" is thus nothing more than a word for *whatever* it might be — if anything at all — which distinguishes human existence from natural beings (obviously, this manner of beginning draws on Heidegger's initial claim from *Sein und Zeit* regarding "The necessity of an explicit retrieve of the question of Being". [Heidegger 1996: § 1; cf. Mulhall 2005: 1–12])

> peace and repose but there is simultaneously something else [. . .] for there is indeed nothing against which to strive. What, then, is it? Nothing [*Intet*]. But what effect does nothing have? It begets anxiety [*Angest*] [. . .]. Dreamily, the spirit projects its own actuality [*Virkelighed*], but this actuality is nothing, and innocence always sees this nothing outside itself [. . .]. Fear [. . .] refer[s] to something definite, whereas anxiety is freedom's [*Frihedens*] actuality as the possibility of possibility [*Mulighed for Muligheden*]. (Kierkegaard 1980: 41–42)[3]

Reading these lines, one is reminded why Kierkegaard is oftentimes depicted as a both "ironic" and "parodic" "writer" (as opposed to a genuine philosopher, presumably). According to these suspicions, Kierkegaard is someone who one should be careful not to think of as "edifying" or "serious" — or differently put: as someone who would never bother to make any "definite" points. (cf. e.g. Poole 1998: 48–66)[4] At the very least, it triggers a certain conceptual opaqueness that the opening sentence appears to confuse a *normative*, an *epistemic*, and a *biological* mode of description by juxtaposing concepts such as "innocence," "ignorance," and "natural state."[5] Since philosophy ought to be about clarifying concepts rather than obscuring them, Kierkegaard must surely be kidding? This apparent confusion, however, is straightforwardly dissolved. It thus vanishes once one realizes two important modifications: first, (i) the alleged "innocence" of our natural condition must be read as a meta–normative rather than a full–fledged normative qualification to the extent that nature must be thought of as *pre–* or non–ethical. As such, what is natural is neither good nor bad. Instead, the natural condition is simply *prior* to both good and evil.[6] Second, (ii) the ignorance addressed here has little if anything to do with epistemic knowledge about this–or–that fact in the natural world not to mention with logical truths within the immanent realm of thinking. On the contrary, the "object" of the peculiar ignorance at hand is precisely the very *difference* between good and evil which nature (qua essentially pre–ethical) must necessarily be ignorant of. Having realized this, one must additionally recognize that the genuine challenge does not lie in figuring out the asserted innocence–ignorance of

3. Here, it would surely have been more accurate if Thomte had chosen to translate "som Mulighed for Muligheden" into "as possibility *for* the possible" rather than "as the possibility *of* possibility". (Kierkegaard 1980: 41–42, my emphasis)

4. As will be made obvious in the following, I completely disagree with Poole's characterization of *The Concept of Anxiety* as "probably the most ironic and certainly the most parodic of all the aesthetic works." (Poole 1998: 60)

5. Unfortunately, the phonetic semblance of the key concepts of this passage, i.e. "Uskyldighed," "Uvidenhed," and "Naturlighed," does not translate well into English.

6. For this reason (and a number of others), any talk of a Kierkegaardian return — not to say advancement — to some beastly nature *beyond good and evil* is utterly senseless. The occasional talk of the "lilies of the field" and "the birds of the sky" as "teachers" (*Lærermestre*) we can *learn* from is deliberately opposed to thinking about them as moral ideals we should somehow seek to live up to. (cf. SKS 11, 22–23)

the natural condition. Rather, the true task is to figure out how *human* nature somehow becomes de–naturalized; i.e. knowing of the Ethical Difference as well as — potentially — "guilty." The answer to this question has to do with "spirit" but this only displaces the focus of our questioning. For what, then, is spirit?

We are told right away that in the natural condition, the spirit is "dreaming." Unlike what is the case in early Schelling, Kierkegaard's choice of metaphor is not meant to suggest that *all* of nature is somehow dreaming spirit. (cf. Furhmans 2003: 8–12; Moe Rasmussen and Brock 2013: 9)[7] Nature — for its part — is just nature, whereas the human being is "marked" by spirit. Although the text explicitly establishes that man in his natural condition is "not qualified as spirit," we should not be fooled: whether or not any given human being has yet to actualize his or her spirituality, he or she is invariably qualified as *potential* spirit. (cf. Grøn 1997: 28 ff.) Since actualizing one's spirit largely depends on becoming *conscious* in a certain way, the expression *dreaming spirit* points to specific lack of self–consciousness (*Selv–Bevidsthed*). We shall return to this subject matter shortly but first we must understand the way in which dreaming spirit becomes disturbed in its "immediate unity." Both very accurately and eloquently, Kierkegaard argues that man in his natural condition has *nothing* "against which to strive." Moreover, it is precisely this very nothing which "begets anxiety." This sudden transition from a mere nothingness to a curiously efficacious nothing is crucial. The complexity of the argument is somewhat enhanced when Kierkegaard moves right on to say that the "effect" — and *eo ipso* the efficacy — of Nothing has to do with some kind of *agency* on the part of spirit itself. Thus, dreaming spirit — and what is more: the effect of nothing — is nothing but this very projection of spirit's *own* actuality which the both innocent and ignorantly dreaming spirit can apparently only experience as something "outside" of itself — or to be even more precise: as *nothing* outside of itself. What regards being qualified as spirit it turns out that anxiety is the very first qualification of spirit *qua* dreaming. Furthermore, dreaming spirit is essentially different from awoken spirit in so far as the latter has explicitly posited its *own* other whereas the former experiences its otherness *as if* it were the effect of an "intimated nothing". (cf. Kierkegaard 1980: 41)

We must be sure to read and interpret these passages carefully: (i) anxiety *appears* to disturb the peace and quiet of spirit as it dwells in its natural condition; (ii) this disturbance *appears* to come from an — at this point —

7. Outside the context of the upbuilding discourses (the authority of which is by no means philosophical but much rather theological), Kierkegaard thus usually refrains from Schellingian formulations like this one: "Daher ist in jeder Organisation etwas Symbolisches, und jede Pflanze sozusagen der verschlungene Zug der Seele." (quoted from Fuhrmans 2003: 8)

unfathomable nothing outside of the self; but, as Kierkegaard has already virtually given away, (iii) the apparent disturbance coming *from* nothing is in reality an auto–disturbance coming from the spirit's *own* other.[8] For this reason, one cannot make sense of anxiety as a kind of second–order "fear." Fear is actually about some concrete *other* (e.g. a barking pit–bull coming toward me) whereas the nothing of anxiety is fundamentally a projection of spirit's *own* actuality. (cf. also Mulhall 2005: 110–119)

In a first step towards fleshing out what the actuality of spirit truly amounts to, Kierkegaard (in)famously offers the cryptic formula that "anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility." Clearly, this dense conceptual cluster establishes a close relation between spirit and freedom — or to be more accurate: it simultaneously posits a relation of *identity* and of *difference* between the two concepts.[9] First, (i) anxiety *is* freedom — in at least some form or another. Second, nonetheless, (ii) anxiety is merely freedom *as* the possibility of (i.e. for) possibility. To explicate this differentiated composition, one is logically compelled to distinguish between freedom as *fully* actualized on the one hand and freedom as the mere *possibility* of any such actualization on the other. But still: what are we to understand by the possibility of this latter kind of possibility? Here, we would do well to bethink that the nothing which triggered anxiety was nothing but a projection of an otherness *immanent* to spirit itself. Moreover, the categories of *modality* presented in the above formula (i.e. actuality and possibility) reveal themselves to be very viable "tools" in our attempt to make sense of this internal otherness. It is namely the curious co–existence of both actuality and possibility *inside* spirit itself which explains spirit's anxious *self*–disturbance of its immediate unity in the natural condition. Nature is what it is, just as non–human beasts simply are what they are. In a crude sense of the term, nature also *becomes* what it becomes, but it is nonetheless the essence of purely natural becoming that the actualizing processes are entirely pre–determined as to their respective teleology: foxes will become foxes and nothing else and although some foxes may be better or worse foxes than others, becoming a fox abides by one standard and one standard alone: the fox essence. (cf. Kierkegaard 1980: 43) In contrast the actuality of human existence — i.e. being free — is precisely *not* exhausted by its natural actuality (i.e. its genetic set–up). Spiritual actuality thus necessarily implies

8. To my mind, many commentators neglect this vital aspect of the argument which Kierkegaard develops in section 5. (Cf. e.g. Malantschuk 1996: 28–29)

9. On a purely formal level of description, this dialectical manner of conceptual determination is undoubtedly inspired by Hegel's idea of speculative dialectics. (Cf. e.g. Houlgate 2005: 36–47) That Kierkegaard's passionate "existentialization" of Hegelian dialectics ultimately makes their positions as good as philosophically incommensurable is, however, an altogether different story. (cf. e.g. T. Heywood 1979: 408 ff.; Thomte 1980: xi)

the possibility for a realm of non–natural possibility in the sense that we cannot ever be sure what it means for the latter kind of nature–transcending possibility to become actualized.[10] To sum up these last few points: anxiety is spirit's experience of itself as something *in* nature whose full actuality is co–constituted by having possibilities that are not dictated *by* nature. As such, freedom is an open and consequently problematic "task" rather than a kind of essential property of spirit. (cf. e.g. Sløk 1978: 157 ff.; Grøn 1996: 14 ff.; Liessmann 2013: 88)

Still, some crucial points require further clarification: How is spirit constituted, besides being non–natural in the depicted manner? And how are we to understand the emergence and functioning of ethics, sociality and temporality from the perspective of section 5 of *The Concept of Anxiety*? Moving further into the section will show to be profitable in our attempt to elucidate these matters:

> The anxiety that is posited in innocence is in the first place no guilt [*ingen Skyld*] [. . .]. In observing children, one will the discover this anxiety more particularly as a seeking for the adventurous [*Eventyrlige*], the monstrous [*Uhyre*], and the enigmatic [. . .]. He who becomes guilty through anxiety is indeed innocent, for it was not he himself but anxiety, a foreign power, that laid hold of him [. . .]. And yet he is guilty, for he sank in anxiety [. . .]. There is nothing in the world more ambiguous [*Tvetydigere*] [. . .]. That anxiety makes its appearance is the pivot upon which everything turns. Man is a synthesis [*Synthese*] of the physical and the psychical; however, a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third. This third is spirit. (Kierkegaard 1980: 42–43)

As much as anxiety disrupts man in his natural condition, the very first sentence of the above passage explicates that this disruption is not initially an *ethical* qualification of spirit. Instead, as an appearance of dreaming spirit, anxiety is still "no guilt." A true understanding hereof requires us to realize that the (self–)experience of the possibility of possibility in anxiety cannot represent a sufficient condition for actual, ethical self–understanding. If this were not the case, anxiety would always already automatically posit guilt (i.e. ethically molded self–experience) without additional requirements. To illustrate this assessment, Kierkegaard somewhat surprisingly turns to "observing children." Although one should surely be cautious not to

10. This interpretation thus finds itself to be in clear disagreement with Günter Figal's claim that Kierkegaard entertains "an Aristotelian conception of the relationship between possibility and actuality." (Figal 2000: 208, my translation) Kierkegaard's understanding of natural processes is surely an Aristotelian one, but his notion of spiritual actuality is far beyond the scope of Aristotle's *practical* as well as *natural* philosophy. (Cf. Aristotle 2006: 1138b–1145a; Rapp 2004: 14–49) Along similar lines of arguing, I think Sartre is massively in the wrong when he describes Kierkegaard as a "Christian existentialist" who believes « essence » comes before existence, also in the case of humans. (cf. Sartre 2002: 43–44)

turn *The Concept of Anxiety* into an exercise in developmental psychology, I believe this staging to offer a very apt example: inasmuch as children are rarely thought of as ethically accountable in the same way as adults, they do nonetheless inhabit a realm of radically non–natural possibility when they are out *playing*. From this perspective, being *good* at playing is essentially about being good at imagining *improbable* possibilities such as being the prince of Persia (i.e. the adventurous), fighting an evil fiend (i.e. the monstrous), or to devise all sorts of mysterious stories (i.e. the enigmatic). I will return to this later on. For now, suffice it to say that the play of children spells out that human beings undoubtedly do fantasize about both thrilling and anxiety–inducing possibilities long *before* they have become ethically self–aware. (cf. e.g. Malantschuk 1996: 30–31; Marino 1998: 316)

Here, allow me to (re)focus on the intricate functioning of anxiety itself. Once one experiences anxiety *as* anxiety (i.e. becomes self–conscious about having the experience of anxiety [cf. Grøn 1996: 25]), something quite peculiar comes to pass. Simply by inversing the allocation of grammatical operators, Kierkegaard offers a both stylistically and philosophically masterful depiction of what we might call the *ethical recoil effect* of anxiety. In the first movement, (i) anxiety functions as the grammatical subject which "laid hold" on the human object — or differently put: anxiety is something that has *happened* to the anxious subject (i.e. object) from the outside. In the very same instant, however, a second movement is delineated in which (ii) the human subject has noticeably appropriated the occupation of the grammatical subject. Thus, our human agent becomes guilty by virtue of *sinking* into anxiety's "objectivity."[11] But how are we to understand this odd inversion which is allegedly the very "dialectics" through which spirit awakens to its ethical existence? (Cf. Kierkegaard 1980: 43). The way I see it, a coherent interpretation of the simultaneity of the two movements must apprehend the following:[12] that which is *happening* to the anxious subject is in reality the subject happening to *itself* in the sense that the subject realizes that it is "something" that *can* happen to itself — as well as to the world — in a certain way. On this line of reasoning, anxiety cannot be understood as just another contingent experience of any given human subject. Rather, it is the proto–experience of subjectivity itself — or of *being* a subject. Or to put it differently: anxiety is neither an actual object happening to me (as opposed to being run over by a train), nor is it a deliberate "action"

11. I first noticed the grammar of this passage during a very fruitful discussion with Christian Hjortkjær at Testrup Højskole's annual Kierkegaard Summer Week Course.

12. This point is conspicuously overlooked by the vast majority of interpreters of *The Concept of Anxiety*.

of *mine* in any usual sense of the term. As a psychological intermediate term (*Mellembestemmelse*) between external objectivity (i.e. *what* happens to me) and subjective action (i.e. how I choose to "happen" to the world), anxiety accentuates how experiencing *that* I am potentially free (i.e. under–determined by my natural condition) is not itself something which I freely choose to experience. (cf. e.g. Kosch 2010: 210–212; Schultz 1979: 355; Sartre 2002: 57; Kierkegaard 1980: 49)

Importantly, the ethical self–consciousness proper *triggered by* anxiety ought by no means to be equated with anxiety *itself*. Anxiety is first and foremost a *passive* experience of an enigmatic "nothing" which — as we have seen — then becomes further conceptually qualified as freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility. On the purely anxious level of dreaming spirit, however, possibility cannot itself transcend what the Kierkegaardian vocabulary labels the "aesthetic" or — more rarely — the "aesthetic–metaphysical." (cf. Kierkegaard 1980: 119; SKS 7, 126 & 270) We cannot go into detail at present about the "aesthetical" (cf. e.g. Greve 1990: 39–79; Grøn 1996: 73–76; Caputo 2007: 21–32) but the following distinction may nonetheless be fruitful to our present purposes: aesthetical possibility and ethical possibility are not necessarily contradictory (nor even different from one another) at the level of mere *content*. The possibility of robbing a bank is thus aesthetically accessible to the playing of children as much as it is an actual ethical option to adult decision–making. As it is, being an adult is not even the defining line of demarcation between the aesthetical and the ethical, respectively. More to the point, a guilty (i.e. an ethically self–aware) response to the (passive) experience of anxiety posits the decisive fissure between the two existential stances.[13]

In a further clarification of how to comprehend the very possibility of an ethical response to anxiety (which is essentially what separates the ethical from the aesthetical way of living), Kierkegaard famously remarks that man is a « synthesis » between the physical and the psychical, united in spirit. Instantly, the reader notices that the psychical and the spiritual are presented as being of separate orders. In–and–of–itself, this differentiation is not a very complex one: most animals are thus both physical and psychic beings. As such, we can meaningfully describe a phenomenon like for instance animal pain from a *physiological* as well as from a *psychical* perspective. Inside the former vocabulary, we try and flesh out the causality of the central nervous system and the neuro–transmitters. Inside the latter, we might refer to the qualia of the alleged *experience* of pain, which we take the animal to suffer (*pace* Descartes). In any case, the synthesis–character of human existence

13. As Kierkegaard is obviously well aware, an adult can easily refuse to become ethically self–aware and thus remain stuck inside the domain of the aesthetical.

is not on par with the animalistic aggregate of a psychical component combined with a psychic component. On the contrary, anxiety "makes its appearance" because the horizontal axis of psyche and physicality is disturbed by the vertical axis of spirit. Here, the metaphor of verticality seems appropriate in so far as the term spirit designates that the first–order relationship of psyche and physicality becomes "spiritually" synthesized, and thus ethically re–qualified, by relating to itself in a second–order relation. (cf. Grøn 1996: 19–23; Kierkegaard 2004: 43) Or to rephrase an earlier point: whereas animals are *what* they are, the human condition is constituted by having to relate to *who* one wants (or wills) to become.

However, a purely *formal* self–relation still cannot be sufficient to ethically mark the subject as potentially guilty. The existential cynicism of the Kierkegaardian aesthete is precisely characterized by exercising an ethically untroubled self–reflectivity in which the "possibility for possibility" experienced by anxiety remains within the domain of entirely noncommittal (i.e. aesthetical) possibilities (cf. Greve 1990: 60 ff.). To grasp what is yet missing in the picture, we must turn to one final, lengthy passage from section 5:

> Innocence still is, but only a word [*Ord*] is required and then ignorance is concentrated [. . .]. Instead of nothing, it now has an enigmatic word [. . .]. When it is assumed [in Genesis, KLL] that the prohibition [*Forbudet*] awakens the desire, one acquires knowledge instead of ignorance [. . .]. The explanation is therefore subsequent. The prohibition induces in him anxiety, for the prohibition awakens in him freedom's possibility [. . .] the anxious possibility of *being able* [*at kunne*] [. . .]. Innocence can indeed speak, inasmuch as in language [*Sproget*] it possesses the expression [*Udtrykket*] for everything spiritual [. . .]. This applies above all to the difference between good and evil [*Godt og Ondt*], which indeed can by expressed in language but nevertheless *is* only for freedom. (Kierkegaard 1980: 44–46)

In the opening part of this dense section, Kierkegaard evidently adds something novel to the explanatory equation of section 5, namely the idea of an "enigmatic word." As will become evident shortly, the ethical qualification of the realm of possibility experienced in anxiety presupposes the functioning of words — or to be even more accurate: the already existing practice of a language game containing prohibiting (i.e. ethically loaded) words.[14] But how are we to understand this? Here, one must keep in mind that Kierkegaard has yet to account for the exact relation between two kinds of transition, namely: the transition from ethical ignorance to knowledge on the one hand and the transition from innocence to guilt on the other. Intuitively, we seem to have to choose between two alternatives: either (i) we *know* about our original sin be-

14. Admittedly, this is arguably a somewhat Wittgensteinian way of making the point. For an excellent study which compares Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, respectively, cf. Mulhall 2001: 81–93 and 323 ff.

fore we commit it, or (ii) we commit it before we know about it. Surprisingly, none of these options turn out to capture precisely the tricky processuality at stake. In order to make sense of this, one must recognize how the text develops a doubling of the knowledge–component at stake. As such, we both encounter the (i) knowledge of freedom's possibility and the (ii) knowledge of the "difference between good and evil." (Kierkegaard 1980: 45)[15] Whereas the former kind of knowledge suspends the ignorance of the natural condition, the latter presupposes the qualitative "leap" from innocence to guilt which for its part must necessarily transcend a mere gain of "quantitative" knowledge (or consciousness). Interestingly, *language* — and the words on which its practicing depends — has a vital function to play concerning both types of knowledge. To illuminate this point, it is profitable to return to the case of children's play. Unquestionably, children are exposed to a normatively qualified use of language which they can (and will) go on to mimic in their playing. For instance, kids are told that they *ought* to refrain from telling lies. Also, they are very likely to reduplicate these *normative* rules (e.g. "you ought to do your homework" or "you ought to protect the princess from the dragon") in games even before they have anything like a clear (not to mention self–conscious) conception of actual, ethical responsibility. In a quite literal way, children thus encounter words and sentences that are *enigmatic* to them to the extent that their meanings seem impossible to exhaust in any kind of concrete practice (e.g. "*throwing* the ball") let alone by an ostensive definition (e.g. "*this* is a stone"). Just as literally, children are thus taking part in — and adapting to — normative language games *before* they fully realize the complete (and earnest) implications of the "games" they have been playing all along. Or in Hegelese: they know not (yet) what they do.[16]

Quite masterfully, Kierkegaard here turns to the story from *Genesis* of Adam and Eve's original sin. In his retelling, Kierkegaard accentuates how encountering a (linguistic) prohibition can awaken an anxious knowledge of simply *being able*. This knowledge, which ethically speaking presents a

15. Interestingly, this distinction comes very close to the way Heidegger elaborates productively on the Kantian distinction between transcendental and practical freedom, respectively. Moreover — and just like his existentialist predecessor — Heidegger insists on *thinking* about freedom without adopting the Kantian notion of freedom as being constituted by the necessary laws (and corresponding causality) of *practical* reason (cf. Heidegger 1983: 20–26; Kant 1999a: 3 ff.).

16. As von Eggers has recently — and convincingly — argued, the meaning of very small children's babbling of language–like sounds (i.e. "lalangue") ultimately expresses nothing but the inexplicable desire *that* there be a meaning at all. (Cf. von Eggers 2013: 60–68) In structurally analogous fashion, we might add that older children — as well adult aesthetes — have a just as *un*knowing relationship to ethical meaning that blabbering babies have to meaning *as such*. Furthermore, Kierkegaardian anxiety is not primarily a way in which the « homeliness » of the social world becomes alien to us. (cf. Heidegger 1996: §§ 39–42; Mulhall 2005: 110 ff.; Figal 2000: 192–209) More to the point, anxiety is ultimately a way in which the anxious subject's own subjectivity becomes alien to him or her. Or differently put: an experience of self–disturbance as a constitutive feature of subjectivity itself.

"higher form of ignorance," is no knowledge of *this or that* specific possibility. Instead, it is a final qualification of the possibility of possibility experienced in anxiety. Still, fully to understand what is at stake in the encounter with ethical words, anxiety cannot. (cf. Malantschuk 1996: 32–34; Kosch 2010: 210–211; Ugilt 2013: 48–56)

Ultimately, *real* "knowledge" of ethics has little if anything to do with knowledge of some epistemic let alone ontological *fact about the world*. Instead, ethics is primarily something one *does* to oneself — or more accurately put: it is a way of requalifying the relationship to oneself that one is always already destined to become (*qua* spirit). (cf. Kierkegaard 1980: 43; Grøn 1997: 179 ff.) Having realized this, it becomes clear why section 5 rounds off with the assertion that the difference between good and evil "can be expressed in language but nevertheless *is* only for freedom." (Kierkegaard 1980: 46) To be sure, one cannot act ethically *without* first encountering freedom's possibility in the experience of anxiety. Just as surely, however, one also cannot know the difference between good and evil without having first *acted* ethically. In this sense, the explanation of what *really* happens when anxiety happens to the subject is necessarily revealed *ex post facto* — or to be even more precise: *after the act* (rather than the natural fact). In summa: whereas the meaning of the pure possibility of possibility is immanent to the rules of the normative language games in which we are always already embedded, actual freedom's difficulties and dilemmas in the face of good and evil require for the subject to requalify and thus transcend the non–natural possibilities of human sociality as existentially decisive possibilities for him– or herself to choose.

A human subject thus cannot understand the ethical without having entered it him– or herself through a "qualitative leap." (Kierkegaard 1980: 49) That being said, how come Kierkegaard coins this existential transition one in which the individual necessarily becomes *guilty*? Should not the ethical qualification of existence (i.e. grasping the difference between good and evil) present the individual with a real alternative between good and evil rather than an inevitable guiltiness — or in other words: to what extent does the transcendence of innocence entail *actual freedom* rather than *necessary guilt*?[17]

To understand the concepts of freedom and ethics in *The Concept of Anxiety*, the reader must be willing to consider the possibility that the aforementioned either–or between actual freedom and necessary guilt presents us with a false — and ultimately abstract — dichotomy. But what is

17. Clearly, the argument I present here does not pretend to clarify everything that is implied in actual freedom. To focus on the individual's anxious passage from innocence to guilt is to focus on the individual's relationship to the past rather than to the future. I am fully aware that an exhaustive account of actual freedom in *The Concept of Anxiety* would have to move on to talk in (much) more detail about the individual's relationship to his or her future.

the alternative? Or to rephrase this question from within the Kierkegaardian vocabulary: How can it *both* be true that (i) the individual posits his or her own "sin" *and* that (ii) "sin presupposes *itself*, obviously not *before* it was posited (which is predestination), but *in that* it is posited?". (Kierkegaard 1980: 62; my emphasis; cf. e.g. Ugilt 2013: 51–52; Malantschuk 1996: 36–40)

In an attempt to offer a coherent interpretation of these matters, I would like to conclude this article by discussing the intriguing *temporal* implications of freedoms actualization (and its guiltiness), which we have hitherto considered mainly from the point of view of *modality*.

First and foremost, the entrance into the ethical realm of freedom's actuality is *not* predestined by our natural not to mention social, past. This has to be the case, since the ethical requalification of spirit's self–relationship *is* essentially the very (self–)experience that being spirit comes with possibilities that are exhausted neither by natural nor social predispositions. (cf. Kierkegaard 1980: 46–47)[18] *After* we have sunk in anxiety and taken the qualitative leap, however, time(s) *literally* change(s): for one, (i) an ethically free person envisions his or her *future* in a completely different way than purely natural beings.[19] Not only has the subject's future become open to radical novelty. It also becomes clear that I will be ethically *responsible* for the way in which my future actions will — or will not — help promote certain values and practices. As such, the possibility for radical novelty is not merely there because it is expected to somehow happen *ex nihilo*. On the contrary, it is reexperienced because I experience *my* free doing as constitutively co–decisive for what both I myself and the world will come to be. (cf. e.g. Grøn 1996: 16) On the other hand (ii), however, the experience of freedom does not only open up the future to our responsible — as well as irresponsible — doing. Simultaneously, freedom retroactively re–opens our past to us. We can make sense of this claim simply by inversing the temporality of the preceding argument: just as the future is proto–actively transformed when we look at as a space of *future* actions, the past is retroactively re–qualified in the instant we are enabled to conceive of it as a space of past *actions*. To exemplify this, it makes intuitive sense to think of a promise I made in the past as a past ethical action for which I can — and should — still hold myself ethically accountable. That being said, is this example not something quite different from the above claim that we *must* experience ourselves as "guilty" in (or after) the very *instant* our self–relation becomes ethically

18. Here, I will not elaborate further on Kierkegaard's analogy to the "the dogmatic issue of hereditary sin." For present purposes it will suffice to accentuate that it simply does not — for reason previously presented — make sense to think of sinning as a naturally determined feature of being human. One sins *freely* — or one does not sin. (Cf. Kierkegaard 1980: 46–47)

19. Another way of presenting this point would be to stress that non–spiritual animals are precisely characterized by not relating to their future *in toto*.

marked? And along the same lines of questioning: is it not simply absurd to suggest that someone who has just realized the existential implications of making promises should become prone to think of him– or herself as having (always) already failed to keep his or her promises? Here, let us have another look at the text itself. In the dense introduction to the *Concept of Anxiety* we encounter the following, complex set of propositions:

> This ethics does not ignore sin, and it does not have its ideality in making ideal demands [*fordre idealt*]; rather, it has its ideality in the penetrating consciousness of actuality, of the actuality of sin [*Syndens Virkelighed*] [. . .]. It is easy to see the difference [. . .] that the ethics of which we are now speaking belongs to a different order of things. The first ethics was shipwrecked on the sinfulness of the single individual [. . .]. At this point, dogmatics came to the rescue with hereditary sin [*Arvesynden*] [. . .] at the same time it sets ideality as a task, not by a movement from above and downward but from below and upward. (Kierkegaard 1980: 20)

Initially, the passages above all seem to add to (rather than reduce) the complexity of our analysis.[20] Nonetheless, I believe we can use it to unlock the argumentative deadlock in which we find ourselves. To begin with, Kierkegaard is obviously contrasting *his* notion of ethics with a different (and alleged) first ethics. According to the standard notion of (first) ethics, we are responsible to a number of regulative norms (or ideals) such as "do not break promises." On this model of normativity, one becomes ethically guilty by failing to actualize whichever ideal one is held responsible to; be it socially or individually sanctioned. As is obvious, Kierkegaard rejects this understanding of ethics which he believes to shipwreck inevitably on each individual's *eventual* sinfulness. Instead of thinking about ethics in terms of an ideal normativity which can either be upheld or — more likely — violated, the text urges us to contemplate what it refers to as the "actuality of sin." (cf. Grøn 1998: 82; Greve 1990: 228) Again, it seems intuitively odd that a text which tries to explain the actuality of *freedom* simultaneously thinks of itself as arguing the case for the actuality of *sin*. Does not actual freedom imply the exact opposite, namely the *possibility* of a sin, the actualization of which depends on how humans administer their freedom? Yes and no. On the one hand, the introduction of the dogma of hereditary sin is of no use to our understanding of freedom if it is meant to imply that all human beings are sinful *by nature*. We know this already. On the other hand, however, there exists a *different* possible interpretation of what Kierkegaard means when he contends that sin presupposes itself *as soon as* it is posited. (cf. Kierkegaard 1980: 62) On this interpretation, hereditary sin must be taken as an expression of the ability on the part of the ethically self–aware

20. Admittedly, the following, concluding interpretation must be said to be at least as productive as downright exegetic of character.

subject to conceive of its pre–ethical past *as if* he or she had acted freely in it.[21] Importantly, the proclaimed sinfulness of the past cannot not be seen as a result of *concrete* sins one has actually committed with full ethical self–awareness. On the contrary, the retroactive positing of one's sinful past *as if* one had always already acted in it is a maximally *free* and thus truly ethical way to appropriate one's past — and everything that happened in it. Moreover, it is a way to connect experiences that were temporally prior to one's ethical self–relation with the ontology of freedom that is constitutive to the latter's self– and worldview.

If we look at it this way, both the temporality and the modality of ethics are turned inside–out. Instead of conceiving of ethics as a practice in which we start out in innocence only to slowly become worse (with every violation of ethical ideality, that is) ethics is now perceived as a practice in which we are always already in the wrong at the outset but in which we might also actually move on *towards* something more hopeful. In first ethics, one can do nothing but dread how one is single–handedly turning one's initially unspoiled subjectivity into a sinful subject who fails to live up to ideality's unfulfillable standards. In "second ethics," on the contrary, one begins by taking over the responsibility for everything one's "concrete" and imperfect subject *happens* to have become. And whereas the notion of responsibility implied in first ethics is bound to shipwreck on the "repentance" of its failure to actualize idealized normative standards "from above," the responsibility of the ethics presented in *The Concept of Anxiety* presupposes the retroactively posited (but nonetheless instantaneous) ethical failure of the subject as its very starting point. It is thus Kierkegaard's fundamental argument that ideality can only meaningfully be posited as an existential "task" for the future if the subject has appropriated its *pre*–ethical past — and not just its specific ethical failings — as ethically sinful *in toto*. Only through this retroactive existential maneuver is it possible for an existing individual (*Hiin Enkelte*) to accommodate the entire actuality of the past in an affirmative action towards future possibilities.

If this interpretation is sound, Kierkegaard is forcefully arguing that it is simply existentially misguided to look at the past as well as the present through an unforgiving lens of abstract future ideals spawned by our ("aesthetic–metaphysical") imagination. Instead, we must endeavor to begin our ethical movements "from below and upward." Or differently put: ethics ought to start in the concrete actuality of the present as given over to us by the past. This is not to say that we should abide by some predestined mechanics of natural history (not to mention causality), of course. For human

21. I am not familiar with other interpretations of *The Concept of Anxiety* that argue the case for an *als ob*–structure such as the one I here suggest.

beings qua spiritual, this amounts to an alienating and ultimately absurd proposal. In contrast — as we began by considering with regard to Jonathan Franzen's fiction — the past *qua* the past of an ethical re–appropriation is also the *past of the future* and ultimately the past as re–qualified by *ethical possibility*. As it is, the attentiveness to the actuality of sin is thus also a retroactive encompassment of all the ethical possibilities of the past. For as we know: there simply cannot be sin without freedom and there cannot be freedom without (non–natural) possibility. As such, we cannot relate to our pre–ethical past *as if* we had acted ethically (i.e. freely and responsibly) in it without co–instantaneously relating to it *as if* we could have chosen to act *non*–sinfully. Or to be even more accurate: *as if* the possibilities of our pre–ethical past were ethically at our disposal before anxiety had triggered any understanding of freedom's possibility whatsoever. Otherwise, to be sure, we could not have *acted* sinfully. Once this realization has been made, we also see how ethics' original sinfulness is first (if not foremost) a way to re–potentialize past possibility for the sake of existing human beings who must act into a still radically possible future.[22]

On this model, it makes complete sense when Kierkegaard asserts that we can only « be anxious about the past » to the extent that that which we are anxious about is experienced as being possibly *repeated* in the future. (Kierkegaard 1980: 91) To complete this picture, however, it is absolutely crucial to add that one can attach hope to the past in the exact same way. From this perspective, the past is not merely a history of our many ethical failures. It is just as much a reservoir of our actual ethical deeds as well as of the infinitely many non–actualized possibilities for ethical agency that has *not yet* been acted into possible — and possibly hopeful — existence. The individual who relates him– or herself to his or her past in this radical and re–potentializing way has become a genuine "pupil of possibility" *qua* the "weightiest of all categories." And "whoever has been truly brought up by possibility has grasped the terrible as well as the joyful. (Kierkegaard 1980: 156)

22. There is a number of interesting similarities between this interpretation of the freedom of the past in *The Concept of Anxiety* and Kant's attempt at a rational reconstruction of past history as seen from the perspective of the ideal of practical reason. (Kant 1999b: 3 ff.) Despite these similarities, though, Kant's notion of freedom as a postulate of practical reason places his position well within the realm of first ethics in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term.

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