The Nothingness of the Anguish[1] in Søren Kierkegaard's work as Modernity's Infernal Redemption

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Abstract

The intention of this short study is to discuss the reverberations of Søren Kierkegaard's philosophical considerations on anguish and on void in the context of the latest postmodern theoretical trends (Ben Woodard's dark vitalism), by presenting the mechanisms by means of which the *anguish* gets to produce an "existential switch" which extracts the individual from the register of disintegration and introduces him into the register of the project (Heideggerianly speaking). I will try to demonstrate the compatibility between the structures of the late modernity and the Kierkegaardian vision on tension and on paradox, and will I will attempt to connect the possible findings to the relevant and congenial phenomenological, existentialist and aesthetic theories or set of theories circulating in today's exegetical canon.

Keywords: anguish, communication with an undetermined differential, nothingness, void, individualization

The dismantlement of identity and the stimulation of the death-drive

Modern man's loss of the sense of the Self (a phenomenon perfectly analysed by Anthony Giddens in his *Modernity and Self-Identity*), his impossible to classify confusions, his weird panic attacks but also his sick thirst for dark adventures are a real everyday problem for the Western postmodern societies. When introducing

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1 The present study treats the words "Anguish", "Angst" and "Anxiety" as synonyms, in which case, regardless of which of the three terms we will decide use, we are referring to the same state: "Angst means fear or anxiety (*anguish* is its Latinate equivalent, and *anxious, anxiety* are of similar origin). The word *angst* was introduced into English from the Danish, Norwegian and Dutch word *angst* and the German word *Angst*. It is attested since the 19th century in English translations of the works of Kierkegaard and Freud. It is used in English to describe an intense feeling of apprehension, anxiety, or inner turmoil. (…) The word *Angst* has existed since the 8th century, from the Proto-Indo-European root **anghu-*, »restraint« from which Old High German *angust* developed. It is precognate with the Latin *angustia*, »tensity, tightness« and *angor*, »choking, clogging«; compare to the Ancient Greek ἀγχω (*ankho*) »strangle«". Taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angst, consulted on the 12th of May, 2015, 19:02 p.m.

all these confusions and unstable tense social energies into a competitive (usually capitalistic and fashion-related) centrifugal force, the societal vector slowly reinstalls the *vortical*[3] as a primordial post-Freudian death-drive (Todestrieb). That is, it re-activates nature's (matter's) instinct to complete its cycles by self-destruction and by returning to the inorganic: "In the beginning, there was cosmic dust from which organic life emerged and to which it seeks to return: the function by which 'most universal endeavour in all living matter revert[s] to the quiescence [*Ruhe*: rest, quiet, peace, calm] of the inorganic world' (Freud, 2003, p. 101), [...] where existential doubt and skepticism (endemic to self-conscious humanity) is replaced by a state untroubled by anything beyond the mere execution of its own inexorable and objective physical laws (Daniel Lukes' footnote: There have been several attempts to equate Freud's death drive with the second law of thermodynamics: the law of entropy [...])" (Lukes, 2013, p. 73).

As A. Giddens notices, modernity's adaptive stress that gives birth to imponderable personalities starts with an Alice-in-Wonderland-like impression of ridding an existential, multi-functional and ubiquitously-multitasked juggernaut, and ends up in excreting a demagnetized self and ethos (*hence the general state of panicked dizziness which dominates the modern urban life*); a biosphere whose protoplasm unconsciously oozed back into the uncreated (*hence contemporaneity's fascination with the infernal fecundities of death*): "Understanding the juggernaut-like nature of modernity goes a long way towards explaining why, in conditions of high modernity, crisis becomes normalized. (...) The crisis-prone nature of late modernity thus has unsettling consequences in two respects: it fuels a general climate of uncertainty which an individual finds disturbing no matter how far he seeks to put it to the back of his mind; and it inevitably exposes everyone to a diversity of crisis situations of greater or lesser importance, crisis situations which may sometimes threaten the very core of self-identity" (Giddens, 1992, pp. 184-185).

In the dizziness of the late modernity, there appear, as Ben Woodard observed, the symptomatic phenomenal premises for the awakening, in the rawest primordial corners of the consciousness of matter, of a darkly-vitalist death-drive (the strongest of all revelatory instincts or the instinct with the strongest signal): living and dead matter's alike natural inner tendency to disengage from its object(ive) boundaries and gauges and to return to an overflowing, free-of-determinations and voraciously expanding *stream of pre-life throbbing and boiling plasma*: "Of course, the striking visuals of the spatial torsion only re-emphasize the unpredictability of a materiality made of powers and flows and not objects, or at least not objects that are anything more than temporary arrests or slowings-down of those powers" (Woodard, 2013, p. 28).

In other words, the breaking and the fraying of the identity in modernity re--installs the vortical at all ontological, aesthetic and phenomenal levels "(…) not only (...) as an indeterminate object but as the edge of a disastrous object (…) vortexes that in themselves are objects with a minimal boundary (…)" (Woodard, 2013,

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3   The word "vortical" is an adjective crafted by Ben Woodard and meant to signal the influence of the vortex.

p. 33). The science-fiction, the diabolically and violently-fractal and edgy forms of modern painting, the outburst of neo-nihilist lamenting theorizations (which reached their peak with Jean Baudrillard) and other forms of extreme art being but testimonies (symptomatic reverberations) in this regard, and also unforgiving and blood-thirsty redemptive nails in the coffin of Kantianism: "The vortical is rampant in science fiction: black holes, spatio-temporal disturbances, singularities, warp gates, worm-holes, etc. These anomalies give space a material constitution, likening it to an environment or ecosysem. After musing on cyclones, Nick Land writes: »A dark fluidity at the roots of our nature rebels against the security of *terra firma*« (Land, 1990, p. 107). Land goes on to note how reason acts as a salve against the fluidity of nature. The chapter where Land has this discussion is entitled 'Fanged noumenon', and, as the title implies, Land argues that noumena cannot be an epistemological limit but rather are an ontological fact. In other words, noumena are fanged because they do not remain harmlessly domesticated in the cage of Kantian categorization, but rather, damage and determine us and our thinking by their very nature" (Woodard, 2013, p. 31).

In our late modernity (or post-modernity), an aguish-driven ubiquitous *vortical manifestation* resurrects the most abrupt and downright descending demons of the living and of the dead matter alike, converting the unintelligibility of states into edgy human drives and premonitions of an auspicious (regenerative) disaster.

Thrown under the wheels of the juggernaut of an unprecedented process of deterritorialization-reterritorialization (in which context the juggernaut could be interpreted not just as a symbolic messenger of the vortex but also as a reflex of Gilles Deleuze's infernal machine), like prayers left unanswered, men are once again (just as in Søren Kierkegaard's time) seized by despair's dizziness and buried by its whirlpools into the absences of places (and this is our main argument in favour of an analysis of the late modernity through Kierkegaardian lenses): "Despair is essentially or qualitatively different from dizziness since despair is the responsibility of the individual whereas dizziness is not (...), [*author's note*: And even if S. Kierkegaard believes that] »the difference is that despair is related to spirit, to freedom, to responsibility« (*SKJP* 1, 749), [*author's note*: this belief did not prevent him from concluding that] dizziness is to the psyche as despair is to the spirit[4] (*SKJP* 1, 749)" (Beabout in Conway and Gover, 2002, p. 41).

What is the meaning of this enraged, desperate and premature burial into the uncreated? Is this interment carried into effect into the uncreated or straightforward into nothingness? In order to be able to properly answer these questions with correct references to both modernity's essence and S. Kierkegaard's specificity, we will make a detour through Simone Weil's mystical texts.

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4   The citation in question from S. Kierkegaard (1980a, p. 16) reads as follows: "Because the relation is spirit, is the self, upon it rests the responsibility for all despair at every moment of its existence, however much the despairing person speaks of his despair as a misfortune and however ingeniously he deceives himself and others, confusing it with that previously mentioned case of dizziness, with which despair, although qualitatively different, has much in common, since dizziness corresponds, in the category of the psychical, to what despair is in the category of spirit, and lends itself to numerous analogies to despair".

DECREATION AND DESTRUCTION. THE GREATER REALITY OF THE VORTEX COMPARED TO THE PETTY WORLD OF THE MUNDANE

What Simone Weil termed "*decreation*" is a term opposed to "*destruction*". *Decreation* is an embodiment/absorption into the life-giving vortex of the primordial void, not as persons but as vortex-powered hungry human voids in our own turn – a phenomenon which is an answer to a proto-call and which stands opposed to destruction's mere (dull, stupid and dispirited) incorporation of matter into an inactive (a vortex-deprived) void: "Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated. Destruction: to make something created pass into nothingness. A blameworthy substitute for decreation. (...) There exists a »deifugal« force. Otherwise all would be God. (...) Renunciation: Imitation of God's renunciation in creation. In a sense God renounces being everything. We should renounce being something. That is our only good. (...) We participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves" (Weil, 2003, pp. 32-33).

In an age in which necessity leads to decreation (eradication, crashing, melting and undoing of man's *identity* into an *identification* with the fertility of the nebulae of chaos) and in which there are enough academic religious arguments meant to teach man how to accept his passage back into the uncreated as an ultimate revelatory phenomenality (Simone Weil's "decreation" being a transformation from the same phenomenal family as Jacques Lacan's "dés-être"[5] [the time of the ultimate separation erupted from the desire to attain the absolute difference] and preparing the ground for Jacques Derrida's "deconstruction"), the mundane (the non-philosophical areas of expression) is often perceived as a defiling drill, as a copycat and deprived-of-forces vortex (with lowercase "v") of dull agglutination into and towards the nothingness (with lowercase "n").

Our argumentation here will run counter to that of Linda Hutcheon who claims that postmodernity's despair (emanating from relativity, provisionality, transitoriness, instability and from the impossibility of attaining unifying experiences) is but an over-inflated surface effect, that in fact a disarticulation with many faces and tempos has governed humanity throughout all its ages: "The particularizing and contextualizing that characterize the postmodern focus are, of course, direct responses to those strong (and very common) totalizing and universalizing impulses. But the resulting postmodern relativity and provisionality are not causes for despair; they are to be acknowledged as perhaps the very conditions of historical knowledge. Historical meaning may thus be seen today as unstable, contextual, relational, and provisional, but postmodernism argues that, in fact, it has always been so" (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 64).

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5   At J. Lacan, man's undoing or "dés-être" is a phenomenon appearing in the very moment of death as a decisive mark of the passage, of the transformation, or of that *shock wave* (or *auroral ripple*) of pure energy that "hosts" the heat and the secret of creation. Man is essentially a "being of passage" (Virgil Ciomoş) defined by his "foi" (his mystical and occultly-primordial belief in the trace left by the transcendental in order to be thematized in its indeterminacy as such) than by his "croyance" (the belief in something determined, i.e. representable and signifiable).

What she considers a perverse contemporary exacerbation – will be reassumed by us in here as more than a coincidence or a hysterical emphasis, i.e. as the very symptom / signal of an apocalyptic return of the primordial vortex.

Moods as vibrations of the vortex. Anxiety as matrix of all the possible moods

On the contrary, S. Kierkegaard's anxiety is a search for a way to respond to the Nothingness within (written with a capital "N"), a strive for a fair encounter (simultaneously for the masses and nobly-enough against them), beyond the mundane, with the primordial source of our *spirituality* – the one that is situated in the infernal eye of the vortex of creation and that can only be intuited via instincts and via their most fundamental and raw expression, *the moods*. The moods are the first symptom of man's incompatibility with the mundane as well as of his propensity towards the transcendental inflammations.The clearest explanation for the array linking moods to primordial sources and, further on, to anxiety, is given later in the history of philosophy, in M. Heidegger's *Being and Time*, where the German thinker develops a line a vision clearly drawn from S. Kierkegaard's earlier work on this subject: "The possibilities of disclosure which belong top cognition reach too short a way compared to the primordial disclosure belonging to moods, in which Dasein is brought before its being as »there«" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 134); "Understanding is never free-floating, but always moody [*befindliche*, situated]. Having a mood brings Dasein face to face with its thrownness...not known as such, but disclosed far more primordially in »how one is«" (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 339-40). But it was S. Kierkegaard who first saw the possibility of such a discursive vector straight into the monstrous heart of the unknown: "Kirkegaard categorizes boredom as a *mood* [*Stemning*] – along with the related moods of irony, melancholy, anxiety and despair. Moods lack determinate objects, and are pervasive (if ephemeral) states of mind which condition the individual's whole orientation to existence (...)" (McDonald, 2009, p. 63).

Anxiety as *archi-mood* remains the primal human emotion. Two main reasons stand behind our choice to return to S. Kierkegaard, in a postmodern chaotic, vortical and rampantly heterogeneous context: The *Vortex* of the primordial void communicates with us through anxiety and at the level of our instincts. Our instincts are responsible for our "sins" and for our drives – for our need to allow the signifier to be demonized by the frenzy of the "tectonically"-active uncreated.

And S. Kierkegaard's strive to encounter the target of invocations and the source of imprecations, of allegories and of benedictions can only be motivated, as Paul Tillich observed, by a painfully clear and paralyzing anticipation (premonition) of the great *cycles of matter* – in fact "just" a set of reflections in the human psyche, because such over-invading baroque re-activated memories of matter become visible especially in ages of crisis, when the agitation of matter activates the mirrors of possibilities, which begin reflecting heavier than before each-other's ways, prospect, projects and sharp angular *fractal* fears: "The first assertion about the nature of anxiety is this: Anxiety is the state in which a being is aware of its possible nonbeing. The same statement, in a shorter form, would read: anxiety is the existential awareness of nonbeing. »Existential« in this sentence means that it is not the abstract knowledge of non-being which produces anxiety but the aware-

ness that nonbeing is a part of one's own being. It is not the realisation of universal transitoriness, not even the experience of the death of others, but the impression of these events on the always latent awareness of our own having to die that produces anxiety. Anxiety is finitude, experienced as one's own finitude. This is the natural anxiety of man as man, and in some way of all living beings. It is the anxiety of non-being, the awareness of one's finitude as finitude" (Tillich, 2000, pp. 35-36).

No one can escape anxiety because, as Jean-Paul Sartre saw it (somehow contra S. Kierkegaard), anxiety is not just a psychological phenomenon but the central existential living structure of our reality (the most active arhi-tectonic impulse), one constantly differentiating man from both angels and animals ("moreover, Kierkegaard asserts explicitly that anguish / anxiety is a specific phenomenon specific to humans, a seizure that distinguishes man from both animal and angel" [Diaconu, 1996, p. 123]) and one actively (architectonically) involved in any type of becoming/evolution.

Extracting (recuperating) the Vortex from the pathologies of the mundane

The question arising here is how can one recuperate the transcendental when being constantly "crammed" in the inauthenti*cities* of the modern urban life?

The direction in which (the type of "displacement" according to which) we will try to develop a model of answer to this question will be envisaged, in this study, in virtue of the M. Heideggerian logic according to which the transcendental authenticity throws itself (offers itself) into the mundane inauthenticity (the sphere of *das Man*), and emerges there "nihilistically", as *psychopathology* (the negative attestation of the "place" where the revelation inscribes itself as "eventness" [we use here Mikhail Bakhtin's term] and less as historicity, because, in order for two reality-levels to be able to meet and conjoin, there must an experience other than that of history, for instance the atemporal eventfulness of a carnival [if we are to bring a concrete example]). Taylor Carman perfectly extracts and synthesizes this vortical dynamics (i.e. with direct reference to the swirling of the vortex) generated by M. Heidegger's "dichotomy" (in fact a chiasma) between authenticity and inauthenticity: "Yet something more seems to be at stake in Heidegger's description of falling as a force that somehow constantly steers us away from ourselves: »Falling is an ontological concept of movement« (SZ, 180)[6]; This »agitation« (*Bewegtheit*) of Dasein in its own being is what we call the *plunge* (*Absturz*)" (SZ, 178). Falling is not just a prior condition of intelligibility, but an ongoing dynamic tendency, a perpetual pull away from authentic existence: "The movement of plunging into and within the groundlessness of inauthentic being in *das Man* constantly tears the understanding away from projecting authentic possibilities and drags it into the

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6   Mark Wrathall and Jeff Malpas' sprecification: Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 2, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977). Henceforth cited as SZ (citations in general are to page numbers of the eighth edition [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1957]).

sedated presumption of possessing or attaining everything. This constantly being torn away from authenticity, yet always feigning it, along with being dragged into *das Man*, characterizes the agitation of falling as spiralling (Wirbel)" (SZ, 178). Like being closed off and concealed, then, "It is part of Dasein's facticity that, *as long as it is what it is*, it remains in the throw (*im Wurf*) and is whirled (*hineingewirbelt*) into the inauthenticity of *das Man*'(SZ, 179)" (Carman, 2000, p.17).

The same idea was given a first existentialism and incipiently phenomenological expression by S. Kierkegaard who, at the very dawn of modernity, observed (anticipated) this tendency of the human psyche to "whirlpool itself" into decreation and to return to the uncreated, as an answer to various indigestible and impossible to assimilate forms of tension. He providentially linked it to the paralyzing anxiety experienced before the infernal presence of the purity of possibilities, a germinal idea (vesicle) that was to bloom later, in L. Sartre's analyses: "Sartre invokes the example of vertigo, where a person is said to be not so much afraid of falling over a precipice as affected by the thought that he can if he chooses »throw himself over«; and this is reminiscent – no doubt designedly – of an image that Kierkegaard himself employs when he compares anxiety with the feeling aroused by looking down into a yawning abyss. Thus it is characterized by him in one place as the »dizziness of freedom«, something that occurs when »freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself« (CA[7] 61). Again, Kierkegaard refers to it elsewhere as »a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy«; the subject is pictured as standing ambivalently poised, at once attracted and repelled by the disturbing »possibility of being able« (CA 42 ff.). The air of urgency and tension (…) infects such descriptions (…)" (Gardiner, 1988, p. 108).

The paradox within which the Danish dialectician S. Kierkegaard conceived the issue of anguish (*sympathetic antipathy* and *antipathetic sympathy*), in the earliest days of modernity, advanced in those days a vision that Zygmunt Bauman would call today a fluid or a liquid structural night-vision of a reality ruled by anticoagulant instabilities (growing disturbances which prevent entities and configurations from reaching their coherence, cohesiveness and chiasma) and "protoplasmatically" traversed by steepish and ironish opposite tension currents that bore, hole and invaginate their deep, slow and hard (nerve-pressing) whirlpools all across the psychosphere.

In other words, at S. Kierkegaard, there is no chiasma and no synthesis between the authentic and the inauthentic (as it is the case with M. Heidegger), only a demented tension between the two, a tension which summons all of man's energies in order to prepare a leap (a kairos) from one existential level (stage) to another (S. Kierkegaard speaks of three such stages: ethical, esthetical and religious). The anxiety is anxiety experienced in front of the void/vacuum that we have to overcome by "jumping" (from one existential level to another), but it is also the tensioning element that prepares our springs for this big "anti-gravitational" displacement (because we in fact "jump" over our own inner nothingness): "(...) Kierkegaard mentions the fact that man represents a synthesis between body

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7   CA = Kierkegaard, S. (1980). *The Concept of Anxiety*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

and soul, synthesis in which the element of mediation is represented by the spirit, and that before the Fall [*author's note*: before fallibility] the spirit was absent, its place being occupied by the dread-generating Nothingness. The commentators are unanimous in interpreting human anguish as actual dread experienced in front of the nothingness of one's own liberty, in front of one's own possibilities of action, unknown to the individual himself. It is not simply a »response to the unknown, to what is not identified« (Rotenstreich, 446[8]), because, as shown by Hans Rochol, anxiety is not the dread of the exterior, objective nothingness, but the dread of the *not-yet nothingness*, of the nothingness of one's own spirit that is just about to be placed [*author's note*: enacted]. The Nothingness which generates anxiety is not absolute, but only temporary, »a simple *not-yet* nothingness« (*ein blosses* noch *Nichts*) (…) (Rochol, XXXII[9]). It is still a »for the time being [*author's note*: up to now] absolute nothingness« (noch gar *Nichts*), since the future self involves a radical act of creation [*author's note*: a "jump"], the subject not being determined or conditioned by something present; between the state of paradisiacal innocence and that which follows after the committing of the first sin we have no continuity, but only a leap that our thinking can only approximate with the help of psychology, and it will do so without being able to understand it or to find a sufficient reason for it. The nothingness of the primeval, Adamic anxiety, is a »noch *gar* (s.n.) Nichts«, because freedom will establish the self from [*author's note*: out of] nothing[10], freedom being devoid [*author's note*: free] of cause. The same interpretation is to be found at Stack as well, in the definition given to anguish as »dizziness that can be felt by someone in front of the sheer, precipitous possibility« (Stack, 1977, p. 155)" (Diaconu, 1996, pp. 120-121).

And the "state of affairs" where there is no chiasma and no synthesis between the authentic and the inauthentic and where one is forced to literally "jump" over his disarticulations is basically post-modernity's condition à la lettre: "Modernity is best characterized not as an already established 'structure', nor as something which clearly has the capacity to become structured and coherent, but rather as a fruitless attempt to achieve structure and coherence. Everything leads us to the conclusion that structures are being »destructured« even before they have gained a coherent internal stability. They are then integrated within new systems which themselves are already threatened by contradictions and negativity. Everything leads us to the conclusion that it is impossible to represent the »world« as having a realizable structure and a possible stability" (Lefebvre, 1995, pp. 187-188).

The accumulated pain coming towards us from the tension of this incompleteness (constant inconsistency) proves itself to be the very "fuel" necessary in the enactment of the leap (of the kairos) from one existential level to another. In essence, it is a chaos-filled transition towards the origin of chaos and of creation, towards the uncreated as generous potency. Every kairos is a personal spiritual

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8   Mădălina Diaconu's reference: Rotenstreich, N. (1983). Love and Leap. Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's Approaches to Philosophy. *Kant-Studien*, 74, Heft 4.

9   Mădălina Diaconu's reference: Rochol, H. (1984). Übersetzt, mit Einleitung und Kommentar hrsg. Von Hans Rochol, Felix Meiner Verlag. In: S. Kierkegaard (Ed.), *Der Begriff Angst*. Hamburg.

10 Mădălina Diaconu's footnote: "The fact of becoming a self is, according to Rochol, »a self-creation out of nothing«" (*eine Selbst-Schöpfung aus dem Nichts* – *ibidem*, XXIII).

exercise for re-enacting the primal movement of the uncreated towards fragile intricacies of creation.

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