

Creaturely Freedom and Divine Anxiety

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An open God is an anxious God. To create without absolute knowledge of the actual future is to risk. In choosing among real alternatives for creation, God must weigh their respective potentialities, both positive and negative and, yes, “roll the dice.” Such a God can be fully ‘omniscient’ in the only coherent sense of the term—knowing all that is knowable—and still experience epistemic doubt. Contemplating such a God makes me unashamed to admit my own fallibility. The perfect placidity of the God of classical theology tells a different story. A God untroubled by anxiety instills dreams of dogmatic certainty.

In this paper, I draw on both process theism and existentialism to critically analyze classical theism’s impact on traditional western conceptions of ‘faith’. I argue that the classical conception of omniscience promotes a perniciously *anti-fallibilist* understanding of faith *as certainty*—which, ironically, results in idolatrous self-deification by believers.

Traditional ‘Omniscience’, *Imago Dei*, and the Distortion of ‘Faith’

Traditionally, Christian thought has treated faith in “revealed truth” as—among other things—an epistemic compensation for the imperfection of human reason. In terms of what we now call existential psychology, this compensation has typically been understood as offering an antidote to the “problem” of “anxiety”. Not only the anxiety

associated with our *ontic* condition—our mortality, but also the anxiety associated with our *epistemic* condition—our fallibility, is to be alleviated through the embrace of a faithful certainty in the core dogmas of Christianity, on this traditional view. And this view of the epistemic anxiety that is occasioned by our recognition of our own non-omniscience, as being a problem in need of solution, only becomes more self-conscious—it is never fully abandoned—in the analyses of modern existentialist thinkers from Pascal and Kierkegaard to Tillich and Niebuhr.

As radical as these thinkers' responses to the tradition are on other points, they largely retain the presupposition that it is a negative thing for humans to feel epistemically anxious. Anxiety about our own finitude and fallibility, we are told, is a threat to the integrity of the self—rather than being, perhaps, a natural and, indeed, a *virtuous* element in the consciousness and conscience of any psychologically mature and epistemically responsible fallible being.

I believe that one compounding, if not originating, factor in the *problematizing* structure of traditional theological approaches to epistemic anxiety is the classical doctrine of divine omniscience, which posits a form of divine knowledge and understanding that—in its absoluteness—bears no parallel whatsoever to the limitations on human knowledge that provoke our anxiety. Theologically, the absence of such a parallel threatens to undermine the notion of human beings as *imago dei* and, thus, necessarily drives theology in the direction of an epistemically naïve (and, therefore, arrogant) conception of *fideism*. Thus, too often faith is taken to provide a (humanly unachievable) degree of

certainty that justifies attitudes and acts of theological or moral coerciveness towards others.

In Christian theology, it is notable that ‘the Fall’ is predicated on the very emergence of human consciousness of the distinction between “good” and “evil”. As soon as the question of alternatives arises, there is a rupture in the relationship between the human and the divine. Indeed, this rupture surely must be understood to predate Eve’s and, later, Adam’s actual consumption of the fruit. Their disobedience to God in the act of consuming it logically presupposes and is made possible by Eve’s prior entertainment of the possibility of such disobedience. That is to say, the Fall occurs, for Eve at least, the moment that she even *considers* the counter-narrative presented by the serpent as an alternative understanding of her situation, opposed to that which she has received from God. In that moment of deliberation, both her consciousness and her conscience are formally decoupled from the will of God. There could be no turning back, then—even should she have decided not to eat the fruit, the experience of having entertained an alternative to obedience would have left its indelible imprint upon her, in the form of an awakening to the potentiality for self-determination that had been merely latent to that point. The fruit itself, and her act of consuming it, then, are mere signifiers of the transformation of her self that had already occurred, even before she reached out to pluck it from the tree. (Eve is so much more interesting than Adam not least because her Fallen-ness is self-actuated and originary, whereas his is passive and derivative. *She*, not he, is the template for real personhood.)

Kierkegaard, one of the most insightful analysts of the epistemological implications of Christian theology that the tradition has produced, examines the connection between the capacity to entertain alternatives and separation from God with characteristic profundity in his *The Concept of Anxiety*—tellingly subtitled: “A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin.”¹ Here (and we’ll forgive, for the moment, his misappropriation of Eve’s rightful place at the center of this analysis on behalf of Adam), Kierkegaard observes that,

[E]very attempt to explain Adam’s significance for the race as *caput generis humani naturale, seminale, foederale* [head of the human race by nature, by generation, by covenant]... confuses everything. He is not essentially different from the race, for in that case there is no race at all; he is not the race, for in that case also there is no race. He is himself and the race. Therefore that which explains Adam also explains the race and vice versa.²

Thus, Adam (or, more accurately, Eve) represents not the progenitor but, rather, the archetype of human sinfulness. We are not sinful because Adam (or Eve) sinned. We are sinful because we are *like* Adam (and Eve). Accordingly, Kierkegaard writes, “The Genesis story presents the only dialectically consistent view. Its whole content is really concentrated in one statement: *Sin came into the world by a sin.*”³

Yet, the “qualitative leap” that is the act of sin obviously presupposes the capacity for such a leap, and Kierkegaard identifies this capacity with the presence of anxiety, which “is freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility.”⁴ And what is the “possibility of possibility”? It is precisely the entertainment of alternatives. For, where there are no alternatives, there is only necessity issuing into actuality. Thus, when Kierkegaard tells

¹ Ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte, with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton UP: 1980).

² *Concept of Anxiety*, 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 32 (emphasis in original).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

us that, “The narrative of Genesis also gives the correct explanation of innocence. Innocence is ignorance,”⁵ we are dealing with ignorance not as the absence of knowledge, *per se*, but, rather, as the absence of the recognition that one can make use of one’s knowledge in order *to choose*. In the state of innocence, therefore, “the whole actuality of knowledge projects itself in anxiety as the enormous nothing of ignorance.”⁶ But this “nothing” is not so much a *void* as an *opening*, a lacuna in the logic of necessity that presents itself, at first only dimly and ambiguously, as a space in which something *else*, something *other than what is*, might be found. That is, as possibility.

Anxiety, then, is the slow but steady, quiet yet terrible, upwelling of the recognition of choice, which comes like a flood from which there is no escape, despite its unhurried pace, because one does not notice it until one looks around and finds water everywhere, with no dry pathway out. At that moment, it becomes only a matter of time before one decides to risk the unseen dangers that lie beneath the water’s surface and plunge in, in hope of making it safely to some new shore before one drowns.

Such anxiety, Kierkegaard tells us, is unknown to angels. For angels are rich in knowledge but bereft of freedom. They do not entertain alternatives to God’s will. Their existence is thoroughly bound up in necessity. Their being is undifferentiated; their actions are nothing other than the result of their functions; their will is not their own. As Kierkegaard puts it, “Even if Michael had made a record of all the errands he had been sent on and performed, this is nevertheless not his history.” For, “an angel has no

⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁶ Ibid., 44.

history.”⁷ History arises from the qualification of “spirit” as differentiated and free—that is, as relating itself to possibility and manifesting itself through choice. In other words, historical being is fallen-ness, and fallen-ness is historical being.

Hence, angels need no salvation, since they are never alienated from God’s will. Human beings, on the other hand, require salvation precisely because we stand in an individuated relation to possibility that provokes anxiety; our anxiety drives us to exercise our freedom; and our fallibility makes it inevitable that our freedom will lead us astray. Kierkegaard, succinctly summarizing the drift of nearly two millennia of traditional Christian theological doctrine, writes: “Only in the moment that salvation is actually posited is this anxiety overcome.... When Salvation is posited, anxiety, together with possibility, is left behind.”⁸ In other words, salvation—which Kierkegaard consistently, across his many pseudonymous personae, identifies with the achievement of “an absolute relation to the absolute”—represents an exit from history. To be sure, the saved individual remains within the scene of history, but she no longer relates to it as one who is pulled to and fro by possibility. For her will, like Abraham’s, has been given up to God. In this sense, the saved individual is, putatively, one who makes of her own self a sacrificial offering to God. She relinquishes her relation to possibility; she transcends freedom through an infinitely free choice to relate herself *faithfully* to the absolute, and, thereby, we are to believe, she escapes the flood.

⁷ Ibid., 49.

⁸ Ibid., 53.

In traditional *orthodox-ist* understandings, such a conception of faith is, accordingly, posited as a reconciliation with the divine that is predicated on a return to the uncritical state that is prior to the Fall, in which no question of alternatives arise, because the answers are all pre-given to the believer in the formulations of orthodox doctrine and the pronouncements of the Church or tradition (or of the individual believer's own, self-authorized reading of text or sign).

Thus, faith effects not merely a moral but also an epistemic reconciliation of the human and the divine. Indeed, *the former is a function of the latter*. Faith in certain revealed "truths" regarding the human condition and the proper response to it is taken to bridge the gap between our finite and fallible minds and God's perfect understanding—not in the sense of providing human beings themselves with perfect understanding, of course, but, rather, by providing a putatively inerrant representation of those aspects of God's perfect understanding that are relevant to our salvation.

Bultmann's kerygmaticism provides a telling example of how this problematic traditional conception of reconciliation was carried over into existentialist theology, even as such theology sought to divest itself of the mythic and legalistic content of traditional theology. Having stripped away the accretive layers of cultural and mythic content from the *evangelium*, leaving only the core doctrine of the salvation in Christ, Bultmann, nevertheless, tells us that "genuine patience of disposition consists in this—in our readiness to hear, in the 'no' by which *God negates our desires and our will*, His secret

‘yes’.’⁹ And he decries the human propensity toward a “highhandedness that tries to bring within our own power even the submission that we know to be our authentic being.”¹⁰ But is it not true that any “submission” that we claim to make to God is, in fact, an act of choice conditioned and qualified by our own freedom and fallibility? When I claim to relate myself to “the absolute,” is it not, in truth, always *my own construction of the absolute* to which I relate?

To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that our various constructions of the divine cannot embody some genuine truth about it, only that no such construction can escape the limitations of the finitude and fallibility that essentially and ineluctably characterize all human understanding. Hence, “our desires and will” can *in no way be negated* through faith. Rather, any faithful relation to any construction of the divine carries with it the very forces of desire and will that condition the individual’s choice to affirm *that*, rather than some other (or no), construction thereof. No relation to any understanding of “the absolute” can overcome our relation to possibility, precisely because any and every fallible human understanding of the absolute necessarily represents only one possible such understanding among many. Thus, anxiety cannot be “overcome”; it can only be suppressed.

⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, “Sermon on Lamentations 3:22-41,” in *This World and the Beyond: Marburg Sermons*, tr. Harold Knight (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1960), 236—emphasis added.

¹⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 28.

Divine Openness and the Virtue of Anxiety

As a *Whiteheadian* open theist, of course, I reject not only the classical conception of omniscience but also the notion of omnipotence, *per se* (which I agree with Whitehead is inextricably bound together with the former). Whitehead discusses the pernicious historical effect of the doctrine of omnipotence in *Religion in the Making*, where he comments on Psalm 24, with its triumphal ode to the “Lordship” of God over the world and human history, observing that “This worship of glory arising from power is not only dangerous: it arises from a barbaric conception of God. I suppose not even the world itself could contain the bones of those slaughtered because of men intoxicated by its attraction.... The glorification of power has broken more hearts than it has healed.”¹¹ Here I simply add that the same can be said of the *glorification of certainty* that we find in the classical doctrine of omniscience.

In the same way that the glorification of absolute power combined with the idea (and *ideal*) of *imago dei* in western theology and history to produce notions of human rulership predicated on coercive, rather than consensual, authority, the glorification of God’s absolute knowledge of even the future course of actuality combined with the doctrine of *imago dei* to help produce a notion of faith that tends tragically toward an arrogant and coercive *orthodox-ism*, which posits its own authority as morally superseding the autonomy of those who disagree. Others may be compelled to obey spiritual and moral dictates that are not their own, on this view, because their freedom to choose otherwise betrays them.

¹¹ Ed. Judith Jones (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 55.

Indeed, as illustrated in Kierkegaard's insightful analysis, the classical conception of divine omniscience undermines and denigrates the very idea of the freedom to choose. As Kierkegaard fully understood, even *God is not free* on this view. For, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere¹², if God has absolute knowledge of the definite actual future associated with each possible world that God might create, then it follows that God has absolute knowledge of which possible world is best. Add to this the claim of divine omnibenevolence and it follows, necessarily, that there is one and only one "choice" that God could make regarding which possible world to create. That is to say, there would be a "best of all possible worlds," known to God as such, which would constrain God's "choice" to the selection of that specific world. And this would be not merely an internal "constraint" that might be seen not really to be a constraint at all but, rather, as a constraint imposed by an external relation to the actual course of affairs determined by the known but (putatively) "free"—and, hence, ontologically independent—choices of the future agents inhabiting that world. Only by forthrightly acknowledging that the classic doctrines of omniscience and omnipotence render the notion of creaturely freedom absurd can classical theists escape this implication of divine constraint, but, then, their systems collapse into pantheism.

The God of open theism, on the other hand, must take account of the *unknowable choices* of future free individuals, so that the divine creative determination cannot be reduced to a simple calculation of fully known factors leading necessarily to one particular, inescapable judgment. God, on this view, must truly choose and, in doing so,

¹² "Between Hartshorne and Molina: A Whiteheadian Conception of Divine Foreknowledge," *Process Studies*, forthcoming.

must truly risk. Thus, if we further presume a loving God, then we may speak sensibly of *divine anxiety* regarding the course of the future—linked to God’s concern for the wellbeing of God’s creatures as related to the not-fully-predictable outcomes of their own, and their fellow creatures’, free decisions. And this notion of divine anxiety can provide a parallel between the human condition and the divine condition, helping to rescue our understanding of the doctrine of *imago dei*, and our theologies in general, from the temptation towards coerciveness, supersessionism, exclusivism, and intolerance.

All action involves risk, because all action is relational. We do not make ourselves more like God to the extent that we deny our anxious uncertainty in moments of defining choice. We make ourselves more like God to the extent that we acknowledge this anxiety; accept it as a necessary and appropriate accompaniment to freedom; recognize its normative implications—namely, that we should be humble and non-coercive in our relations to others; and, yet, display the courage to act, despite the impossibility of absolute knowledge that we act rightly. In short, if we wish to live in the image of God, when the flood waters of anxiety press up around us, challenging our sense of absolute security and confidence in our own beliefs, we must stop looking around for some magical exit from reality and learn to swim.