Kierkegaard - Fear in relation to the divine spirit

The state of beholding the spirit, but not being able to grasp it, is what Kierkegaard calls a state of ‘nothingness’. One could also call it a state of emptiness or a vacuum that triggers a fear in the human being.
Sören Kierkegaard, born in Copenhagen in 1813, is considered an important Danish philosopher. He is one of the existentialists. In his writings, he addressed the existential feelings of fear, despair and powerlessness which, for him, were a prerequisite and a kind of trial to come to true life in God by overcoming these feelings. Kierkegaard was deeply religious. He defended genuine, original Christianity which, for him, meant accepting suffering and renouncing this world. He accused the Danish Lutheran Church of deceiving the faithful congregation by fostering religion as a means of consolation and thus bringing Christianity down. He asserted his point of view most poignantly in the journal Øjeblikket (The Moment) which he had published a year before his death.

"Man is spirit. What is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self?"¹ This is the beginning of Kierkegaard’s writing The Sickness unto Death. In the self, the finite earthly man, and the infinite man, who has his origin in God, are united. However, man is not aware of his divine, spiritual component. He strives for happiness and contentment, both of which, however, are fallacies, since the spirit is disregarded in this striving. Before the biblical Fall, man had contact with the spirit, but the spirit was dormant in him. Man was, therefore, innocent and ignorant and there was silence and tranquility within him. According to Kierkegaard, man experienced it as a state of ‘nothingness’, a nothingness which caused enormous fear.

**The “Nothingness”**
What does Kierkegaard mean by ‘nothingness’, since after all, man was linked to the spirit before the fall? The spirit wants to lead to consciousness, however, a consciousness which has a connection with the divine. According to Kierkegaard, the spirit wanted it before the Fall and still wants it today. Although dormant, the spirit contacted man, imparted possibilities to man, but withdrew again because man could not comprehend the spirit. This state of beholding the spirit, but not being able to grasp it, is what Kierkegaard calls a state of ‘nothingness’. One could also call it a state of emptiness or a vacuum that triggers a fear in the human being. Man was not aware of the spiritual, nor did he yet have an I-consciousness with a strong will as we know it today. The spirit was indeed close to him, but at the same time distant, as to render man unconscious. That is to say, man could not consciously use the spiritual powers, could not consciously express himself with them. The biblical Fall of Man occurred from the fear of the state of ‘nothingness’, which Kierkegaard sees as a symbol of our existential conflicts.

**The qualitative leap**

With the prohibition not to eat from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve became aware of the possibility of making a decision. By eating the fruit, Adam decided against the spirit and in favor of ‘sin’. For Kierkegaard, sin means not only the awareness of sensuality and sexuality, but also a life of self-will far from God. Kierkegaard calls this the qualitative leap. It was a leap, however, not made in freedom, but out of fear. He emphasizes that not only Adam made this leap, but also every human being after Adam, including ourselves. "The possibility of freedom is not to be able to choose the good or the evil. ... The possibility is (if anything) to be able ..."Fear is not a destiny out of freedom, it is a captive freedom, captive in itself."²

This moment of leap, says Kierkegaard, cannot be explained. It is a psychological moment that happens not only once but constantly within us, accompanied by an existential anxiety involving a desperate search for a link with the spirit. In our fear, we are constantly confronted with the resolve to decide for or against the spirit.

If we were to look at our world from the outside, one would think that there must be tremendous freedom and happiness associated with countless possibilities of choice. When has mankind, in the western world, ever had so many opportunities to choose and to shape its life as it pleases as in our time? However, the countless possibilities do not mean happiness for us; rather, they suffocate us and are, therefore, often experienced as a threat. With many decisions we want to get the best for ourselves
without consideration of collateral damage. We want to realize our earthly happiness with our decisions, but this does not conform with the divine plan. Intuitively, our conscience comes forth and we feel that we should take a different path. Other decisions we experience as existential, such as marriage, starting a family, changing jobs, moving to another city, another country or separating from our partner. These decisions are connected with fears of losing one's individuality or freedom as well as existential fears of abandonment and loneliness. The spirit, however, wants to unify and with the spirit man would not feel lonely. But this requires a willingness to open oneself to the spirit. This is the existential fear of which Kierkegaard speaks.

**The fettered freedom**

With the leap, the I-will and the actual self-consciousness of man were born. Man became knowledgeable, able to recognize good and evil, which means that he was able to experience polarity as positive and negative, as pleasant and unpleasant, and as joy and suffering in his own flesh. The life of self-determination gave man not only happiness and freedom, but also pain and suffering. This is what Kierkegaard means when he talks about the qualitative leap.

Fear is "the dizziness of freedom that arises when the spirit wants to unify and freedom now looks down into its own possibility and grasps finiteness in order to hold on to it. In this blur, freedom sinks down powerlessly. [...] At the same moment, everything is changed, and freedom, in raising itself up again, sees that it is guilty. Between these two moments lies the leap that no science has explained or can explain." ³

However, man is not only exposed to suffering, he is not only a victim, but he is also a perpetrator with his I-will. He has to learn that he cannot achieve happiness on earth and with his decisions he causes much destruction and damage in the world and enjoys his happiness at the expense of others.

All these points show that man has not found the freedom of happiness. It is always a "fettered freedom", says Kierkegaard, because fear resonates in every decision and in every action. It is the fear of becoming and being guilty of having chosen self-will and self-centeredness. It is the conscience that calls us to change course in every action and from there stirs up a justified fear in us.

**The spirit disturbs our order**

However, the spirit does not leave man alone. According to Kierkegaard, man is a
being of body and soul and the spirit is the connecting element between the two. The spirit wants the synthesis, wants to establish the unity of spirit, soul and body in man. Therefore, it approaches man, disturbs the order of body and soul and thereby causes enormous fear in man again. According to Kierkegaard, the more the human being admits the spirit, the more the human being allows the spirit to enter his entrenched order, the greater is man’s fear. Again, it is the fear of 'nothingness'. The spirit that is no longer asleep in us is distant, it is foreign to us but at the same time we perceive its power. This is exactly what causes fear. Furthermore, the spirit disturbs our idyllic small world of security which we have built and to which we want to hold on. We are forced to let go. Thus, we are faced with nothingness, with an emptiness that triggers fear in us. Moreover, the spirit triggers a process of purification in us, that is, we first must walk through a valley of tears in order to enter the Promised Land. Who likes to descend into the depths of his psyche and recognize not only his qualities, but also his egoistic self-centeredness and his greed and thus the pain he has inflicted on his fellow human beings?

What can man do to come to a solution?

**Opting for the spirit**

Kierkegaard's answer is that man must reach his inner self by becoming aware of the eternal in himself and understanding "that he can demand absolutely nothing from life and that the horrible, the lost, the annihilation dwells next door to every man." ⁴

In addition, man must find faith. Kierkegaard understands faith to be an inner certainty that we partake in the spiritual. By following his faith and opting inwardly for the spirit, man can reverse the qualitative leap and lose his fear. However, it is only by accepting the enormous fear of the unknown power of nothingness and of being nothing before God, that the Spirit can reveal itself in man. Man then experiences the sustaining guidance of the Spirit. He does not return to the state before the fall, when the spirit was still asleep within him. But with the awareness of good and evil and the acceptance of fear, suffering and guilt, man gains conscious discernment and thus maturity.

Quotations:

2) Kierkegaard, Sören: *Der Begriff Angst* (The Concept of Fear), 1991: p. 47

3) ibid., p. 57

4) ibid., p. 142

Literature:

