

WAS KIERKEGAARD A NIHILIST?

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The long history of rational demonstration of God's existence in the history of philosophy was crossed with a thick line by S. Kierkegaard in the third chapter named as "The Absolute Paradox: A Metaphysical Crotchet" of his "Philosophical Fragments" edited under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus in 1844. Kant was the first who started to criticize the philosophical demonstration of God's existence and revealed the futility of the theoretical reason's attempts to reach God; still he perfused these attempts in a perspective of the reason as the practical potency. The very claim of reason to demonstrate God was called by Kierkegaard "a metaphysical crotchet" and that was different from Kant. What does such bound of reason's potency mean? And what is the ground that supports it? First of all it suggests that demonstrating of existence in general is quite a dubious thing. "If, namely, the god does not exist, then of course it is impossible to demonstrate it. But if he does exist, then it is foolishness to want to demonstrate it, since I, in the very moment the demonstration commences, would presuppose it not as doubtful – which a presupposition cannot be, inasmuch as it is a presupposition – but as decided, because otherwise I would not begin, easily perceiving that the whole thing would be impossible if he did not exist"¹. These Kierkegaard's arguments that are pointed against the possibility to demonstrate the existence still border in some aspects with Kant's arguments. Kierkegaard argues that "the whole process of demonstration" realizable by reason "continually becomes something entirely different, becomes an expanded concluding development of what I conclude from having presupposed that the object of investigation exists"².

However, it's important to notice, that Kierkegaard treats such complication of "demonstrating of God's existence" not as possibility to doubt or distrust in reality, which is indefensible by reason and therefore "doubtful", but as doubt and distrust in the demonstrating by itself, *i.e.* in the very thought. On the other hand, Kierkegaard does not criticize a particular demonstration of God's existence (as Kant does) that would leave the space for the other attempts to prove, but deconstructs a substantiation by itself, *i.e.* he radicalizes the thought, reveals it as the thinking which detects its own borders by contemplating God. The thinking experiences its limitations, for God is possible to be thought about only as the Unknown:

"But what, then, is this unknown, for does not its being the god merely signify to us that it is the unknown?"³

Hence, God appears as the limit to which the reason repeatedly comes back. Would we get something more "positive" if we

substituted a static form of conception for a dynamic one? What purport of God's idea would be revealed by such a movement? "[...] it is the different, the absolutely different. But it is the absolutely different in which there is no distinguishing mark"⁴. Does such a "definition" of the different (God) describe its (His) "purport"? Kierkegaard says: "[...] this is not the case". The reason cannot "prosperously" conceive an absolute unlikeness. "<...> the understanding cannot even think the absolutely different"⁵. Therefore, according to Kierkegaard, "this is not the case [...]"⁶. The Reason (the understanding) "cannot absolutely negate itself"⁶. Thus, the reason cannot transcend itself and is able only to grasp the essential point of such a conceiving structure. This point is negation. The reason negates itself by conceiving the Unknown (God) and coming to it (Him) as to the frontier of the conceiving. Still such negation cannot be completely performed, for it would mean overrunning of the reason, and that is impossible.

That is why answering his own question, what this unknown is, which unsettles even man's knowledge of himself - Kierkegaard makes such conclusion: "It is the unknown. But it is not a human being, insofar as he knows man; or anything else that he knows. Therefore, let us call this unknown *the god*. It is only a name we give to it"⁷.

How would it be possible to describe and name such a movement of the negation performed by Kierkegaard that by radicalizing its effort negates itself and still is not able to perform the negation completely? What is the essential definition for such "paradoxical passion of the Reason" that is based on its incapability?

Johannes Climacus finds first of all himself not only beyond the *kathaphasis* but also beyond the *apophasis*.

"[...] a frontier is expressly the passion's torment, even though it is also its incentive. And yet it can go no further, whether it risks a sortie through *via negationis* [the way of negation] or *via eminentiae* [the way of idealization]"⁸. By fixing such a frontier to which the Reason comes both by negation and affirmation Johannes Climacus has "lifted" his own movement beyond both negative and positive structures. He didn't identify himself either with *via negativa*, or with *via affirmativa*. On the contrary, Johannes Climacus assumes that the structure he has discovered is more profound and at the same time is common to both negation and affirmation. The affinity of such a structure is first of all testified by the common result that is succeeded by using the methods that are considered to be alternative. That result is the frontier: "the Unknown" or "nothing more than a name".

While Kierkegaard's opposition to cathaphatic position remains undoubtful, his relation to the negative theology doesn't seem to be uncontroversial. The outwardness of relation to *via negativa* declared by Johannes Climacus, however, makes us ask whether the structure of the movement performed by him (*i.e.* Johannes Climacus) is really different from *via negativa*.

Though do we have a possibility to compare these two movements in a structural perspective? Could the structure of *via negativa* be a sufficient ground to recognize the movement of Johannes Climacus' thinking? Can

we unambiguously suggest that the discourse of negative theology is more familiar to us than the way Johannes Climacus talks to us?

We may recall the idea of Jacques Derrida that was published in his brilliant essay “Sauf le nom” dedicated to the negative theology that the thing, which we used to call the apophasis or the negative theology, has no certain definition. That means the estimation of somebody’s relation to the negative theology is performed only by showing the structure of *via negativa* at the same time.

First of all we may notice quite a superficial resemblance of these discourses. In a few texts that are assigned to apophatic theology God is discussed as “the Unknown”. We face “the Unknown” in the “Mystical Theology” of Pseudo Dionysius:

“All the incapacity to cognize by superior part is united with the absolutely Unknown and in the absolute obscurity one may cognize by over reason”.

In mystical poetry of Angelus Silesius God as “the Unknown” is described even more explicatory:

„Der unerkandte Gott.

Was Gott ist weiss man nicht: Er ist nicht Licht, nicht Geist,

Nicht Wahrheit, Einheit, Eins, nicht was man Gottheit heist:

Nicht Weissheit, nicht Verstand, nicht Liebe, Wille, Güte:

Kein Ding, kein Unding auch, kein Wesen, kein Gemütte:

Er ist was ich, und du, und keine Creatur,

Eh wir geworden sind was Er ist, nie erfubr“

(Angelus Silesius, *Der cherubinische Wandersmann*, 21, IV, 1674).

Derrida shows by his deconstructive effort that the apophatic theology doesn’t say much on this “unknown God” and on everything He “has” in himself, except “the name”:

“Except the name that describes nothing plentiful and even nothing divine (*Gottheit*)”¹⁰.

Obviously, this nominal resemblance (or even identity) of vocabulary but not of discourse doesn’t provide the answer about the structural identity of *via negativa* and Johannes Climacus’ thinking. We may expect the answer by asking - what is the target for the very annihilative effort in both cases?

In the deconstructive mirror of Derrida the annihilative movement that is adequate to the structure of apophatic theology is reflected first of all as the ontological-semantic self-demolition. Consequently it is pointed at the very language. The nihilism of *via negativa* appears as annihilation of the language that demolishes itself:

“God” “is” the name of that endless fall, that endless emptiness of the language”...¹¹

Derrida also points at the structure of self-reflection of negative theology’s discourse and treats the self-reflective function of the language in this discourse as the structural description, which is even more essential than the widely observable characterization – the disclosure of self-representativeness of the notions, images, and figures:

“At the same time it (the negative theology – R.Š.) becomes not a simple language and not a proof of the language but, first of all, it turns into experience of the given sense and the most strictly and the most inexplicable “essence” of the language: the talk about language, the “monologue” (in hetero-logic sense according to Novalis or Heidegger) in which the chart and the language speaks about themselves and perform the case where *Die Sprache spricht*. That is the source for such a poetical dimension and the aspect of a fiction that is sometimes ironic and always allegorical. The fiction that was treated by somebody only as a form, an appearance or a simulacrum... It is true that the fiction of the desert seeks to unmask the images, figures, idols, and rhetoric [...] at the same time (*simultaneously*)”¹².

The direction sign of annihilation performed by Johannes Climacus is the reason. Thought is the passion of Johannes Climacus and the supreme degree of that passion is craving for its end. Such diversion of the reason, which is determined by desire, according to him, is paradox. The paradox is made from the reason’s annihilation of itself: “[...] the ultimate potentiation of every passion is always to will its own downfall, and so it is also the ultimate passion of the understanding [*Forstand*] to will the collision, although in one way or another, the collision must become its downfall. This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think”.¹³ Therefore, the naming of the attempt of the reason of this kind a paradox emphasizes the self-annihilative structure.

However, Kierkegaard identifies the reason with the reflection. Therefore, a real target of annihilation is the act of reflection. The reason is able to seek after the self-destruction and self-denial namely because it is the reflection. The structure of the reflection act is made by assertion as *adequatio* or by assertion as *representatio*. On the other hand, the point, which is grasped i.e. reflected as the *accordance* of the reality or as the *representative* of the reality, becomes necessarily the “content” of thought. By seeking to think God’s idea and by disability to grasp it as the content, the reason discovers negating and annihilating of itself. On the other hand, the representativeness of the reason and the expression of its contents by the notions and images is the link to the relation between the reflective reason and the language. So, it seems that both the movement of annihilation performed by Johannes Climacus and the negative theology have the same target, which is the language.

Then may we assert that the target of the negative theology and the target of the movement of annihilation performed by Johannes Climacus are the same? Does the negation of discursiveness as the potency on the way to God fit both cases?

Johannes Climacus once again confirms the inability of the language (the discourse) which is based on reflection to express the idea of God by saying: “Thus the god has become the most terrible deceiver through the understanding’s deception of itself. The understanding has the god as close as possible and yet just as far away”¹⁴.

So, what can we *say* about God? Johannes Climacus: “[...] god merely signifies to us that it is the unknown”¹⁵. It seems that Kierkegaard in his *Philosophical Fragments* tries to escape from the using of the concept that would claim to express the contents of God’s idea. In this case “the Unknown” is found and named as the limit and otherness. He doesn’t try to describe the contents of God’s idea positively; on the contrary he demonstrates the inability of such description. However, does the attempt of such ability signify the attempt to do it in a negative way?

Purportedly confirming the discrepancy of his way and *via negativa* Johannes Climacus is loath to name God as the Nothing (or Nothingness). The “unknown” for Johannes Climacus is not *a nothing*, but does this mean that it is not *the Nothingness*?

However, in Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments* the Nothingness as the “concept” explored in the discourse of the negative theology doesn’t appear.

Whereas in Angelus Silesius’ work we read this:

„Nichts werden ist Gott werden...“
(VI, 130).

Master Eckhart interpreting St. Augustine said: “Then Apostle Paul sees Nothingness, he sees God”¹⁶.

These Augustinian-Eckhartian words embrace not only the point of Master Eckhart’s nihilism but also involve all the essential usage of Nothingness as the “concept” of negative discourse. Nothingness is not a “content” grasped by speculative thinking, but the felt reality, the present. “To see Nothingness” doesn’t mean to disclose the essence of the concept, but to feel and to experience the revelation of Nothingness. Here not only God’s identity to Nothingness is emphasized but also the very movement of identification (*to see Nothingness*). God coincide with Nothingness (*nihil*) when the sight/vision (*apertis oculis*) grasps the impossible to scan and blind point from which any seeing comes to the end. The mystical thinking of Master Eckhart is shot through with the inability to represent the thing that is impossible to represent: the experience. The interpretation of the figure of Nothingness discovers that this figure behaves not as the concept, which fits with the certain defined object; we won’t find such adequacy here for the Nothing understood as the object. It’s rather the concept for the holdup of the very metaphysical attempt. Nothingness is the curtain that covers something impossible for the reason to think and express discursively. Nothingness is the curtain under which not the reason, but the experience is fixed. Nothingness may be experienced as a space, latitude, or openness, but it is impossible to think as if it was “something”, something that is definite. The apophatic theology implies Nothingness as the “real” name of God *a parte hominis*.

The concept of Nothingness has two main meanings in Western tradition: the *absolute* Nothingness that is negative Nothingness – the total lack of Being or the shortage of any of its aspects; and the *relative* Nothingness, i.e. nonbeing or the abidance across, still not beyond everything, but beyond the certain dimension of Being, namely dimension of the objects and beings. According to the second meaning Nothingness

hierarchically stands not “bellow” the objects (beings), but “above” them. In the apophatic theology this Nothingness coincides with real God, beyond any of the names we would like to call him and beyond any of the images our imagination would create. But this Nothingness also coincides with the initial place where this God may present himself and where lack of him may be felt. That “place” is the experience.

Thus, structure of the negative theology’s discourse reveals its essential point performed by annihilation: the self-destruction of reflection and discursiveness, and opens the plane of experience.

Does Johannes Climacus who fixates the frontier of reflection and self-negation get to the plane of experience? And what would this mean according to Kierkegaard? Does the chance to meet God for Johannes Climacus reveal beyond the reason and beyond the reflection? The faith, according to Kierkegaard, reveals itself beyond the reason. However, to think about the faith means to face the paradox and to find the inability to reason about the faith. And this is different from being in immediate experience. That’s why the movement of annihilation performed by Johannes Climacus has no ability to negate itself and to come away beyond itself: this movement is not only aimed at the reflection but it is also performed by the reflection. Johannes Climacus remains in the reflection and coincides with it. Describing the faith as the “jump” or as the “absurdity” Kierkegaard characterizes it as something different from the reflection, *i.e.* he characterizes it according to the reflection.

Does the interpretation of Abraham’s faith presented by Kierkegaard in his “Fear and Trembling” come away beyond the reflection?

Already in “Concluding Unscientific Postscript” outlining the faith as the religiosity B (i.e. different from institutional religiosity) Kierkegaard calls it not only the absolute paradox, but also even the double paradox. In the double structure of Kierkegaardian paradox we may distinguish not only the paradoxicalness of that which has been tried to be perceived, but also the paradoxicalness of the very relation with the apprehensible points. The absurd faith in things impossible to believe is the “content” of the paradox. In “Fear and Trembling” the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio explicates this “content” of the paradox as the *movement* of the faith.

Thereby together with Johannes de Silentio we may ask:

“The knight, then, makes the movement, but which one?”¹⁷

On the other hand, what is the movement obligatory to thinker who tries to recognize the knight of faith?

Thus, we may attribute to Kierkegaard’ thinking the structure of the double reflection. We may even assert that he pays attention rather to the very capability to reflect than to the reflected things. Therefore, Kierkegaard is more concerned about how to “grasp” the mirror reflex of the faith’s knight by the act of reflection than what is the face of that knight reflected in this mirror.

Kierkegaard is similar to the choreographer who would like to show the special trick which is not intended to perform and which is impossible to do even for him. He wants to *show Abraham’s* movement. V. Podoroga

says that “Kierkegaard’s theatre is ruled by the liberated gesture and the cult of non verbalized flight; this is the theatre of the pathos, passion, and movement”¹⁸. V. Podoroga accurately using the idea of G. von Kleist calls Abraham’s movement the movement of the puppet. The thing which is common for puppet’s movement is that the master and the puppet together create the solid scenic machine that produces the certain movement. Fingers of the master and the puppet connected to them produce the subjection attributed to the particular conception.

Thus, in Kierkegaard’s theatre the movement of the faith is demonstrated in a puppet way – without coming beyond the reflection. This issue is evidenced by the Kierkegaard’s attention to that, which is prior to the faith. The movement which is prior the faith is the endless resignation and abdication. The power of the endless resignation as the rejection of everything and the negation is annihilative power, which is still possible to grasp. But there is no possibility left to perceive the forward movement: the movement of faith. “Every time I want to make this movement, I almost faint <...>”.¹⁹

According to Kierkegaard, the resignation is possible to perceive because there is no need of faith to do that. “The act of resignation does not require faith, for what I gain in resignation is my eternal consciousness. This is purely philosophical movement that I venture to make when it is demanded and can discipline myself to make, because every time some finitude will take power over me, I starve myself into submission until I make the movement, for my eternal consciousness is my love for God, and for me that is the highest of all. The act of resignation does not require faith, but to get the least little bit more than my eternal consciousness requires faith, for this is paradox”.²⁰

The Kierkegaard’s description of the movement of faith is not an explication of the experience, but the link to the immediate experiential relation with the reality. By saying that Abraham sacrifices Isaac in the name of nothing, which means in the name of God, he draws a perspective of the nihilistic thought showing the limits of the reflection. Still differently from the mystical tradition of the negative theology he doesn’t attempt even to describe the plane of the faith as the plane of the experience by using the figures of annihilative character. Kierkegaard’s nihilism, according to the direction of annihilative step, structurally coincides with the nihilism that is explored in the negative theology’s discourse. Although in Kierkegaardian perspective the apophatic theology appears as the approaches of the same frontier, the frontier of discursiveness and reflection, the real intention of the negative theology is to transcend this frontier in the plane of experience. And that is exactly the reason of Johannes de Silentio “dizziness” and his “blackout”.

Endnotes

¹ Kierkegaard S. *Philosophical Fragments. Johannes Climacus*. Ed. and transl. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987. P. 39.

² Ibidem, p. 40.

- ³ Ibidem, p. 44.
- ⁴ Ibidem, p. 44–45.
- ⁵ Ibidem, p. 45.
- ⁶ Ibidem.
- ⁷ Ibidem, p. 39.
- ⁸ Ibidem, p. 44.
- ⁹ The reference is translated from Lithuanian: Pseudo Dionisijas, *Apie mistinę teologiją* // Naujasis židinys. 1992. N. 11. P. 4.
- ¹⁰ Jacques Derrida. *Essai sur le nom*. Éditions Gallilée. 1993. The reference is translated from Russian version: Деррида Ж. *Эссе об имени*. С.-Пб., 1998. P. 94.
- ¹¹ Ibidem, p. 97–98.
- ¹² Ibidem, p. 96.
- ¹³ Kierkegaard S. *Philosophical Fragments...* P. 37.
- ¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 46.
- ¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 44.
- ¹⁶ Meister E. *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*. Vol. III. Stuttgart und Berlin, 1936. S. 189–190.
- ¹⁷ Kierkegaard S. *Fear and Trembling* // Kierkegaard S. *Fear and Trembling. Repetition*. Ed. and transl. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983. P. 43.
- ¹⁸ Подорога В. *Выражение и смысл*. М.: Ad Marginem, 1995. P. 115–116.
- ¹⁹ Kierkegaard S. *Fear and Trembling...* P. 48.
- ²⁰ Ibidem, p. 48.