
KEY PHILOSOPHICAL-THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD IN THE WORK OF PAUL TILLICH

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Abstract

The article maps Tillich's inspiration by and reception of Søren Kierkegaard. Tillich was inspired by Kierkegaard not only in the general sense of emphasizing the existential dimension of human existence and self-aware reflection, but in the very concrete sense, in overtaking and adapting some key concepts introduced by Kierkegaard almost a century earlier: being, existence, paradox, anxiety, and the use of symbols. Drawing from the rich heritage of Kierkegaard's intellectual legacy, Tillich created his own system and arrived at his own, unique conclusions. These were radically different and sometimes opposed to Kierkegaard's original understanding of Christian doctrines. Tillich's own understanding of Kierkegaard contributed to this 'intellectual divorce', along with a different starting point and context of Tillich's intellectual reflection (that of Nazi Germany and, later on, the situation of acute secularization of society).

Keywords: Tillich, Kierkegaard, anxiety, man, Christian doctrines

1. Introduction

Paul Tillich (1886-1965), a renowned German-American intellectual, belongs among the most prominent and influential theologians of the 20th century. In my article, I will analyse selected philosophical concepts of S. Kierkegaard that provided ample inspiration for Tillich in his own intellectual development and specific context. Both Tillich and Kierkegaard focus their philosophy of religion on the human being, on his/her personal, inner reflection and existential experience. Both pay close attention to the realities of despair, anxiety, as well as loneliness in one's life, noticing that human individuals are on a constant search for deeper meaning in life, driven by an unquenchable desire for an authentic existence.

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2. Being

Tillich interpreted the fear of non-being as the consciousness of being finite and conditioned. The being is limited by time, space, causality, and substance. Non-being as an important philosophical attribute had been analysed more closely in his *The Courage to Be*: “In Leibnitz’ doctrine of finitude and evil as well as in Kant’s analysis of the finitude of categorical forms, nonbeing is implied. Hegel’s dialectic makes negation the dynamic power in nature and history; and the philosophers of life, since Schelling and Schopenhauer, use ‘will’ as the basic ontological category because it has the power of negating itself without losing itself” [1]. Non-being dominated even the philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre. Tillich had become convinced that man has an anxious awareness of an inauthentic being, the awareness which leads to guilt and anxiety. The threat of non-being comes out of the awareness of being finite and conditioned and it thus expresses the being limited by time (inescapability of death). Man is anxiously aware of inauthentic being: for example, aware of not being what God intended him to be (as it is defined within polarities of fate and freedom, individualization and participation, dynamism and form). This awareness results in anxiety, which can be overcome only by courage. Tillich emphasized that anxiety cannot be mistaken for fear, which always has an exactly determinable cause (danger, pain, enemies) and therefore can be eliminated by an act. Tillich sees the possible origin of the concept of non-being in the ‘demonic’ in humans. The demonic becomes a mythical expression of the power, which has been separated from the Divine origin and has become a destructive structure. Consecutively, he indicates structures of evil, which generate anxiety in the very nature of the human being. He identifies the powers of sin and evil, which stand in opposition with the unification of man and God. They express reduction of the Divine to human dimension and manipulation. The demonic represents an elevation of desire for unrestrained knowledge and skill, which lead to separation of man from God and finally result in his self-destruction.

3. Man and his anxiety

Tillich and Kierkegaard always responded to the problems that humans were confronted with in concrete situations. They shared the awareness that man falls into despair whenever he is pushed to the limit, or in situations where human existence could become endangered. Both conceive alienation to be the foundational difference that separates man from God and comes out of human guilt and sin. Man is qualitatively different. We could ask, if even the man of today still keeps awareness of his guilt, sin and alienation from God. Reading Tillich and Kierkegaard, we are confronted with their belief, that man is sinful (Kierkegaard), lives in alienation (Tillich), although he is subordinated to God and distant to Him. Man lives in a tragic situation, in a tragic inevitability of evil. He lives in alienation, which according to Kierkegaard is constitutive of our

human condition. Tillich, concerning anxiety and despair, wrote that, “Hegel was not able to understand the human situation in terms of anxiety and despair. Kierkegaard could not follow Hegel; all his life he possessed a melancholic disposition” [2]. Individual personhood, understood in a deflated, Hegelian manner, lacks a solid “existential basis, related to the deepest aspirations and, yes, fears and doubts of the individual - a desire permeated by passion” [3], as well as anxiety, according to Kierkegaard. He rejects the Hegelian understanding primarily because it is built upon abstract “intellectual, logical deduction which builds upon imaginary ultimate principles of human thinking that helps to grasp conceptually the evolutionary process of the world as the dynamic of relationships between spirit and the reality in its physical and cultural-social dimensions...” [4]. Inspired by Kierkegaard’s deep, existential thinking, Tillich pointed out the existential experience, the anxiety so characteristic of Kierkegaard. For Tillich, God, as well as for Kierkegaard, “it is a matter of infinite passion and interest” [5]. Tillich was concerned with anxiety in his most significant philosophical work *The Courage to Be*, a collection of lectures he held at Yale University.

Tillich’s Christian belief remains in the background, although one can notice his pastoral concern for man, and, obviously, emphasis on ontology. Tillich strove to comprehend the condition of the contemporary man, who is filled with doubt, and disturbed by social and political uncertainties. Tillich was fascinated by Kierkegaard’s interpretation of anxiety one can experience: „Man is not only finite, as is every creature; he is also aware of his finitude. And this awareness is ‘anxiety’. In the last decade the term ‘anxiety’ has become associated with the German and Danish word *Angst*, which itself is derived from the Latin *angustiae*, ‘narrows’. Through Søren Kierkegaard the word *Angst* has become a central concept of existentialism. It expresses the awareness of being finite, of being a mixture of being and non-being, or of being threatened by non-being.“ [6] However, in *The Courage to Be*, he does not quote Kierkegaard with respect to anxiety at all.

Anxiety and fear have different meanings, although they reside on the same ontological ground. The fear is stirred up by the concrete and therefore always means ‘to fear something’, to fear suffering. We can face fear and analyse it. One must have the courage to cope with any ‘object’ of fear. Fear can be overcome. Despite that, anxiety has no ‘object’. The only object of anxiety is the ‘threat’ itself. Anxiety always means being anxious of the absolute non-being, and it resides in each individual person. Tillich indicates two kinds of anxiety. The first is connected with the doctrine of the fall, as it is symbolized by the biblical narration of the fall of Adam and Eve. The second is represented by the anxiety of the fall itself [2, p. 463].

There are three types of anxiety according to Tillich [1, p. 40-53].

3.1. The anxiety of fate and death

The anxiety of death and fate is inescapable, it cannot be ignored. Non-being threatens our ontological self-affirmation: relatively in respect to fate, absolutely when concerning death. It is related to the recognition of human mortality, which disturbs every one of us. One gets unsettled, because he does not know that his decisions and actions will not lead to trouble, which might eventually even lead to death. Courage represents a counterbalance of the anxiety. It makes one rely fully on himself, rely entirely on the answers and question we have discovered ourselves.

3.2. The anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness

This type of anxiety touches the very ground of human existence. One is afraid to lose the meaning, aim, the final determination and theological perspective. This is directly related to the loss of spirituality. It is the case of losing one's place in the world. When threatened by non-being, we lose meaning within our worldview. In the dimension of emptiness relatively, absolutely when taken in terms of the loss of meaning. To react positively to the anxiety means to have an unreserved faith and accept one's self within limits of one's own individuality. According to Tillich, God Himself is the source of being and of the power to one's authentic being.

3.3. Anxiety of guilt and condemnation

This type of anxiety impacts our moral self-consciousness and self-affirmation, because once we are free human beings who make decisions within the standard axiological polarities, we become responsible for our moral being. The essential condition of such an anxiety comes about the moment we realise that our being does not suffice us. Non-being threatens the moral self-affirmation of man: in respect to guilt relatively, absolutely when being condemned. It can be counterbalanced by the courage to be, to exist, to accept oneself even though we know that we are unacceptable.

Through Tillich we detect terms like guilt, anxiety, despair, being, death, which frame his theological determination of anthropology.

Tillich divided anxiety into periods: Ancient (ontic anxiety), Middle Ages (moral anxiety) and Modern period (spiritual anxiety). Anxiety is a condition of being aware of the possible non-being. Anxiety means experiencing possible non-being [1, p. 57-61]. In agreement with Barth, Tillich perceived God as absolutely different, though at the same time, he sensed the connection of the spiritual realities in human life, which is distant to God. Therefore, Tillich recognized anxiety as the foundation, which might give birth to the existential experience of spiritual transcendence of man. It is obvious, that by using the term Tillich wanted to emphasize the exigency of the 'courage to believe' even despite one's doubts. One has to seek the truth, which leads him to limit

situation, to the final point – the decision. Three types of anxiety open this way, the three possible ways of existential courage ‘to be’.

4. Existence

According to Tillich, Kierkegaard emphasized that we do not live in the realm of essence, but that of existence. Existence is the spot of deciding between good and evil [2, p. 460]. Like Tillich, Kierkegaard allows a wide range of various interpretations or misinterpretations as a result of his complexity and non-systematic approach. Tillich found Kierkegaard inspiring in many respects: in his emphasis on the existential experience of reality, passion, his quest for truth, work, and in his moving on the very border of Philosophy and Theology. He recognized Kierkegaard as “the real founder of existential philosophy” [7] and the critic of Hegel [6, p. 25]. In spite of this fact, in his study titled ‘How My Mind Has Changed’ published within *The Christian Century* series he argued that: “I have never been an existentialist in the sense that Kierkegaard or Heidegger is an existentialist” [8]. Tillich saw in Kierkegaard a congenial thinker, but how Thatamanil wrote about Tillich’s thoughts: „Like Anselm and Augustine, Tillich’s Systematic theology is an expression of ultimate concern. Theology, for Tillich, rests on a venture, on an existential risk, a Kierkegaardian leap, and not on any appeal to clear and distinct ideas, not even the idea of being. For these many reasons, Tillich cannot easily be classified as a thinker who is owned by the ontotheological.“ [9]

5. Symbols

Using symbols, like Kierkegaard, Tillich brought his ideas closer to the contemporary man, and he made his interpretation actual and perspicuous. Tillich emphasized the paradoxical nature of religion and the necessity of personal experience. He even used Kierkegaard as an example: “Kierkegaard’s symbol of his continual suspension as a swimmer over the depth of the ocean and his emphasis on the ‘leap’ which leaves everything regular and rational behind are classical expressions of this type of religion” [5, p. 119].

God is the most eminent symbol for Tillich, because, when we speak about his omnipotence and perfection, we speak about God in symbols. However, if we speak about the I-Thou relationship, where God takes part in the personal relation of the man to the God, we no longer move in symbolic language. The personal relationship must be kept alive; the relationship is not a symbol. Religion speaks only in the language of symbols.

The Symbol indicates something standing apart of symbol itself [10]:

- it takes part in the reality of the indicated;
- it reveals the strata of reality, which would otherwise remain inaccessible to us;
- it reveals dimensions and structures of our soul, structures which correspond to the structures of reality;

- it originates in the individual or collective unconsciousness and it remains alive by taking roots in the unconscious;
- it cannot be invented; it arises and perishes just like living beings;
- it perishes once it stops evoking answers;
- it is present in every act of faith.

6. Paradox

“The Existential thinker needs special forms of expression, because personal Existence cannot be expressed in terms of objective experience. So Schelling uses the traditional religious symbols, Kierkegaard uses paradox, irony, and the pseudonym, Nietzsche the oracle...” [8]

Tillich was inspired by Kierkegaard’s concept of paradox, which he eventually employed in his own thought. Paradox stands in contrast to any expected idea we may have based on our experience. It forms an expression of something which stands against human comprehension and expectations. Jesus Christ, both God and man, is such a Christian paradox. Tillich also identifies the new being, which struggles against our human self-complacency, despair, as paradoxical. The Christian paradox is a fundamental component of the presentation of Christianity. Paradox means faith against reason, and therefore, to follow the Christian path one must undergo the struggle on the intellectual level in an attempt to provide “the necessary framework that connects the scattered pieces into an intelligible whole” [11]. Interestingly, although he was familiar with it, Tillich never used or quoted Kierkegaard’s definition of paradox from his work *Philosophical Fragments*.

7. Actuality of Kierkegaard’s and Tillich’s Christian philosophy from the viewpoint of the current social and spiritual crisis - the necessity of re-interpreting the concepts

Tillich – the truth must be re-interpreted anew for every upcoming generation. If we fail to do so, we do not speak the language of the day – we lose touch with our time. Tillich is critical to fundamentalism, evangelicalism, and apologetics. He was heading towards the righteous quest for truth, and the creative understanding of his own existence. He stressed the individual experience and personal engagement. The philosophy of existence reveals a number of existential questions, which must be re-articulated in light of contemporary experience and attitudes. Symbols must be present in the whole context of the philosophy of religion. Tillich defends the thought that unlike the theologian, the philosopher of religion wishes to remain abstract and general.

The philosopher, therefore, creates generally operative concepts.

Tillich’s fundamental message says that either Philosophy or Theology have to re-interpret both symbols, as well as concepts, in order to give them new meaning for our time and contemporary Philosophy. As we were reminded by Gallus, concerning the three historical epochs by Tillich: the Modern Age is

“determined by anxiety and the loss of meaning” [12]. This is the reason why the contemporary man, filled with doubt, needs to reinterpret the concepts to understand them again in context. Tillich was convinced that without interpreting Christianity, one cannot fully understand and live the Christian faith. Therefore, we could read the title of his work *The Courage to Be* as *The Courage to Believe*, which is more representative of the content of the book.

The effort by both authors, to harmonize with ‘their readers’, their attempt for mutual comprehension, and their existential experience are also related to the anxiety – despair [13]. Tillich answered the question: „What Books did most to shape your Vocational Attitude and your Philosophy of Life?: Hamlet (Shakespeare), Our Mutual Friend (Dickens), History of Philosophy (Schwegler), Faust I (Goethe), Christian Faith (Schleiermacher), Freedom (Schelling), The Will to Power (Nietzsche), The Idea of the Holy (Otto), Sickness unto Death (Kierkegaard), Being and Time (Heidegger).” [14] Both Kierkegaard and Tillich had faced and written of suffering and despair. For Tillich, despair is “the sickness unto death” [15]. Both bring us to solution: Kierkegaard wrote about the necessity of passion, Tillich about “ultimate concern“ [16].

Tillich defines ultimate concern: „is unconditional, independent of any conditions of character, desire, or circumstance. The unconditional of any conditions of character, desire, or circumstance. The unconditional concern is total: no part of ourselves or of our world is excluded from it; there is no ‘place’ to flee from it. The total concern is infinitive: no moment of relaxation and rest is possible in the face of a religious concern which is ultimate, unconditional, total, and infinite.“ [5]

Tillich relates his category of “the finite interest” to Kierkegaard’s concept of “infinite passion and interest” [17]. Though Tillich often quotes or refers to Kierkegaard, his own work remains in principal conflict with Kierkegaardian practice. American professor Lee Barrett identified Tillich not only as an inheritor of Kierkegaard’s message, but also as its saboteur [18]. We can even view the differences. Tillich considered himself an aesthetic and contemplative personality, influenced by mysticism, related romantically to nature and German literature. His nature differed from Kierkegaard’s, based on pietism and subjectivism. This plainly shows the difference in their views on philosophy and acceptance of Schelling.

The other is manifested in Tillich’s idea that culture is a component of religion, while religion is the substance of culture. Kierkegaard had always distinguished between the state, culture, and Church. Tillich attempted to connect religion with existential philosophy, deep psychology, and fine art.

With the help of philosophical concepts and symbols, Tillich from the very start wanted to make Christianity trustworthy and relevant for the secular society, as well as to reinterpret the basic concepts of Christianity. Unlike Kierkegaard, who proposed a difference between Christianity and Christendom. He even treated Philosophy with contempt – in response to Hegel, whom he mockingly called ‘System’.

Tillich had been under constant attack and criticism by American theologians and fundamentalists, as he had refused to accept the American philosophy of the 20th century.

Hamilton presents serious objections against Tillich in his chapter titled, *Anti-Kierkegaard: Tillich never goes deep enough*: “Tillich avoids entering into any detailed discussion of Kierkegaard’s teaching, and when he refers to a Kierkegaardian term or idea he does not explain why he interprets it in one way rather than in another“ [17, p. 40]. Hamilton continues: “Tillich makes faith the servant of knowledge because he has started out from the assumption that truth comes nowhere else but in the whole that a system gives” [17, p. 48]. We must agree with Hamilton on this point. Indeed, Tillich does not analyse Kierkegaard’s thoughts sufficiently in their own merit. He fails to see, for example, the complexity of Kierkegaard’s concept of faith and its ethical implications. “In his concept of faith, Kierkegaard turns his attention to fundamental questions of ethics as they are contemplated in the subjective, inward experience of the individual. Far from being an unwarranted leap to a state of self-satisfied quietism, however, true faith has a strong mobilizing effect on the individual with potent ethical and social consequences.” [19]

Tillich also never focused on the analysis of biblical verses in the traditional sense. He avoided religious language, e.g. he did not even use the word ‘God’. God was for him, Being itself.

Tillich analysed the human being and the human condition using concepts of Psychology.

8. Conclusions

It is evident that Kierkegaard significantly influenced Tillich’s thought and work. Tillich found help in his limited situations and life crises precisely in Kierkegaard’s books, which ever again helped him to find the courage to be. He influenced generations of his students and colleagues, deeply inspiring them by highlighting Kierkegaard. His concepts of alienation, anxiety, finality, suffering, and others were influenced by Kierkegaard. Even though these connections can be traced, we cannot identify Tillich as being Kierkegaard’s disciple. As we can read in Schulz’s reference to Kiefhaber: “In fact, many passages of their published works (Tillich included – the note of RK) can be aptly characterized as an ‘Incognito – Rezeption’” [20].

Tillich pointed out the connection of Philosophy and Theology using the method of correlation. It contains the fundamental task of asking oneself about the meaning of being and one’s own existence, which can be satisfyingly answered in no other way than through theology. “Every creative philosopher is a hidden theologian (sometimes even a declared theologian). He is a theologian in the degree to which his existential situation and his ultimate concern shape his philosophical vision.” [5, p. 25] Tillich does not view Philosophy and Theology in a conflict, because they have no common ground. The difference, according to him, lies in their different attitudes, sources and content. Precisely the method of

correlation is the “fundament of Tillich’s whole thinking, the function of Hegelian dialectics, which remains hidden beyond the correlation. In fact, Tillich had always advanced in three steps: essence – existence – transcendental unity.” [12, p. 30]

Tillich, as well as Kierkegaard, always written and responded to the particular problems and condition of the day. He realised that man experiences despair when driven to the limit situation, which results from the human guilt caused by sin. He comes out of the theological perspective, which shows man as created in the image of God and bearing within himself the potentiality to the eternal, which, thanks to the fall, becomes restricted to the finite and thoroughly changed in its quality. He pointed to the fact that we live in distance from God, in essential alienation, which we are called to realise. Reading his texts, one is confronted with the fact that he is distant from God, but also aware of Him and in need of His interest in human existence.

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