

K I E R K E G A A R D  
A N D T H E S E L F  
B E F O R E G O D

*Anatomy of the Abyss*

S I M O N D . P O D M O R E

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## PREFACE

*. . . but what madness, when he who himself has lost the eternal wants to heal him who is at the extremity of sickness unto death.*

—*Works of Love*

I wish to begin by confessing that this project commenced under the belief that the meaning of Kierkegaard’s “infinite, radical, qualitative difference” (*uendelig svælgende kvalitativ Foskjel*) between humanity and God was essentially *sin*. Mercifully, it concluded with the conviction that the true meaning of the infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity is expressed through *forgiveness*. The former approach would result in a theological madness: a “loss of the eternal”—to adopt Kierkegaard’s warning—in which the abyss itself threatens to become all-consuming. This trajectory would further corroborate the suspicion, shared by many philosophers and theologians, that Kierkegaard provides a detailed cartography of the abyss without showing any exit from it. My initial suspicion that Kierkegaard’s God was ultimately a God of despair was itself merely an echo of the discomfort that many readers of his work have felt before. Such a misgiving has found one of its most influential expressions in Karl Barth’s warning that those who remain within Kierkegaard’s schema have been consumed by it: Kierkegaard’s “infinite qualitative difference between God and man, with all its consequences, has eaten itself right into them.”<sup>1</sup>

This Barthian sense of ambivalence toward the melancholy Dane has never been far away during this project. That said, it is notable that this oft-repeated legend for Kierkegaard—“the melancholy Dane”—represents a perception that only sees half the face, as it were, of one of modern theology and philosophy’s most insightful exponents of the *triumph of faith over despair*. The phrase itself derives from P. T. Forsyth’s 1910 book, *The Work of Christ*, and Forsyth’s full expression is “the great and melancholy Dane in whom Hamlet was mastered by Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, as with much relating to Kierkegaard, the darker aspect has prevailed and the second part of Forsyth’s “dialectic,” which redeems Kierkegaard from the melancholy of the first, fades, unheeded, into obscurity.

Despite frequently acting the apologist for Kierkegaard, it cannot be denied that one must first enter into the darkness of the abyss in his writings before one can discover the light of forgiveness that shines through them. It just so happens that on first glance at Kierkegaard's corpus, a certain darkness glimmers more brightly than the divine light he seeks. Reading his dramatic evocations of melancholy and despair in particular, it can be tempting to echo William Blake's assessment of Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it."<sup>3</sup> But this would be a great injustice to Kierkegaard, in whom the Romantic impulse toward demonic heroism is recognized as a hubristic despair which—as Forsyth himself recognized—must be mastered by the grace of divine forgiveness. It is because he intimately knew the bitter waters of religious melancholy that Kierkegaard is so adept at evoking the unconditional love of God without subsequently undermining the human pathos of despair. What he endured spiritually—admittedly, partly because of his "crazy upbringing" and partly due to unhealthy self-mortification—would have consigned many to the nihilism of a final despair. But Kierkegaard was able to derive hope by showing in his writings how despair (Dn. *Fortvivelse*) is born from doubt (*tvivl*), and therefore how its spell can be broken by faith in forgiveness and the love of God.

By making the transition from a reading of the "infinite qualitative difference" as *sin* to a reading of the infinite qualitative difference as *forgiveness*, the process of research, reflection, and writing has in one significant regard reflected the *metanoia* of the "self before God" that I have sought to elucidate in Kierkegaard's writings. The endeavor to exist as a self before God—*coram Deo*, according to Martin Luther's earlier formulation—begins with an initial sense of abyssal estrangement: the consciousness of an impasse that separates humanity from divinity. The difference between self and God—and therefore the source of the self's estrangement from knowledge of its own true self—is firstly sensed as an irreconcilable chasm whose darkness is inhabited by despair. The God before whom one strives to stand initially appears to be an onerous and dark infinity; and in the infinite space that separates the self from God (and thus from itself) lies what appears to be an unfathomable and vertiginous abyss of sin and alienation. What is more, the gaze of the self cannot, of its own willing, penetrate this abyss. But the longer one remains with the abyss the more one's eyes become accustomed to its darkness and the more one may begin to discern a *beyond* to the fear and trembling of apparent divine abandonment. There is a mystery in this abyss, and the great *mysterium* of the abyss is divine forgiveness. The self's own

self-searching gaze is lost in the swarming darkness of the abyss; and so the self must see itself *through the gaze of the Other*: it becomes known to itself relationally, through the forgiving gaze of the divine.

But this theological reading of the “self before God” requires a preliminary disclaimer: this work is not a straightforward attempt to determine definitively what Kierkegaard’s personal conception of the self was. Such an endeavor is inevitably subverted to some extent by Kierkegaard himself—by the “indirect communication” of his authorship, by his hiding the secret heart of Søren Kierkegaard among the various alter egos of his creation. Therefore, as regards his pseudonymity (or polynymity), I generally heed what Kierkegaard in 1846 declared to be “my wish, my prayer”: he asks others to cite “the respective pseudonymous author’s name, not mine.”<sup>4</sup>

So I seek to explore and develop a contemporary theological reading of the theme of the “self before God” as defined by way of the category of “infinite qualitative difference” in Kierkegaard’s writings, without forcing this reading directly into Kierkegaard’s “hand.” Consistent with the perspective of a personal journey toward self-knowledge, the “hiddenness” of Kierkegaard forces the reader to confront their own hiddenness. Hence Kierkegaard frequently encourages his reader to read his works aloud to themselves, so as to efface the authority of the author and discover a personal address to one’s own hidden self that is contained within the act of reading. While this has proven amenable to poststructuralist receptions,<sup>5</sup> it should also be noted that there are theological and pastoral motives and precedents for such an approach. The hidden and the revealed reside at the heart of all theological endeavor. The central tenet of the hiddenness of God disrupts human attempts to possess certain knowledge of God-in-Godself, turning us instead toward an anthropocentric reflection on knowing God in relation to ourselves. This implies not only the subjectivity of faith, but also the subjectivity of reading. As Kierkegaard himself noted in 1851’s aptly titled *For Self-Examination*, perhaps the most potent disruption of objective reading and the subsequent existential assertion of *metanoia* is exemplified by the moment of self-recognition—“the transition to the subjective” (FSE, 38)—that David realized in his confrontation with the prophet Nathan: “Thou art the man!” (2 Samuel 12:7).

But once again, this is not a work about reading Kierkegaard; nor a work about how Kierkegaard should be read. It is a work that proposes a reading of Kierkegaard which, by exploring the relation between two hitherto under-examined themes in his writings, seeks to construct a theological account of the “self before God” that passes through the problems of despair, anxiety, melancholy, the “death of God,” and the “death of self.” But this work does not seek to evade the charge that the search for “the self” is often a dubious,

vain, or narcissistic enterprise, destined to suffer from its own futility and hubris. On the contrary, it is my contention that Kierkegaard's writings contain some of the most valuable and insightful expressions of *abortive attempts at self-knowledge* in modern Western theology, philosophy, and literature. Kierkegaard's writings *transcribe* the failure of the modern self, and *identify* this failure to transmute primal anxiety into faithful religious selfhood as despair in its various guises. Situated firmly within the milieu of modernity, the idiom that Kierkegaard expresses is that of selfhood or the "self." However, as Kierkegaard's (consciously anachronistic) rehabilitation of older religious notions such as *desperatio*, *praesumptio*, *Anfechtung*, etc., demonstrates, modern humanity may still be in need of a physician of the *soul*. Although often expressed in modern forms of inauthenticity which are recognizable to even the most bourgeois reader, Kierkegaard is adept at penetrating the heart of the enigma of self-knowledge—an enigma that has recurred in various forms since the earliest Christian writings. In this regard, for example, Kierkegaard observes that the classical *acedia* ("carelessness") of the desert monastic anticipates and shares some of the pathos that is found in the *ennui* of modern aesthetes.

In one sense, Kierkegaard's works could be read as developing an *apophatic* or negative theological anthropology in which the failure of self-knowledge is evoked in order to unveil a *cataphatic*, or positive, truth of selfhood that cannot be attained by merely natural means. It is only through the mystery of the self's relation "before God" that the self can come to know itself. The self is revealed to itself in relation before God: the self learns to see itself through the eyes of God, not as an object of divine wrath, but as forgiven and accepted—a recipient of the divine gift of freedom and selfhood expressed through the "impossible" gift of the forgiveness of sins. And yet, in the endeavor to stand before God, the self is explicitly confronted by the fear and trembling of the infinite qualitative difference between humanity and divinity. It is at this point that the self must come to recognize its despair and, by acknowledging its own sinfulness, accept the "impossible" gift of forgiveness through which the self can become itself, and become free, *before God*.

It is this point that marks what is arguably Kierkegaard's most important contribution to theological anthropology. For all his illustrations of fallen, hubristic selfhood, despair, and self-deception, Kierkegaard conspicuously refuses to eliminate the modern idiom of selfhood—even though he is not averse to undermining many of its conceits, along with numerous other philosophical and theological categories of modernity. Nor does Kierkegaard reverse the modern quest for selfhood into a mystical negation or oceanic absorption of the self in God. God remains the Other—albeit, this work

argues, the *Holy Other* that is revealed in forgiveness, rather than the Wholly Other that is primarily discerned through the consciousness of sin and despair. Despite the numerous dangers of self-delusion, Kierkegaard's writings leave the reader with the impression that it is not necessarily a mere modern hubris to wish to become a self, to earnestly strive to heed the old oracle: "Know thyself." In fact, it is a divine gift, an obligation of eternity and anxious freedom, to become oneself. The essential difference between the modern self and the "self before God" is that the self before God must behold itself in the divine "mirror of the Word" (JP 4:3902 / Pap. X<sup>4</sup> A 412) rather than through the self-regarding gaze of a Narcissus. The error of non-relational modes of self-knowledge lies in the solipsistic or even demonic attempt to take hold of and define oneself through the sheer exertion of self-will. In Kierkegaard's works, God calls for the individual to become a relational self, a self that expresses its own God-given freedom; a self, or an "I," that is capable of loving God, the Absolute "Thou," in return. As such, Kierkegaard does not simply excoriate the self as a manifestation of hubristic will-to-power or as a modern conceit or philosophical construct. Instead he retains the idiom of the self as a means of expressing the modern Western form of the human drive for self-understanding, and rearticulates it, via the Christian narrative of sin and forgiveness, in its authentic theological relation *before God*.

It is perplexing why Kierkegaard's category of the "before God" has remained so under-examined, though some indication as to why this is so can be found in the under-recognized depths of its resemblance to Luther's notion of the individual *coram Deo*. Following the decline of the dialectical theologies of the early twentieth century—with their emphasis upon such Kierkegaardian-Lutheran themes as the infinite qualitative difference between man as sinner and God as Wholly Other—there has been conspicuous reserve concerning Kierkegaard's influence by Luther.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, an avowedly "contemporary application" of Kierkegaard's thought has explicitly announced a desire to "loosen the thread of Kierkegaard's Lutheran straitjacket."<sup>7</sup> This polemic may seem strange given M. Jamie Ferreira's recent observation that "the more general question of Kierkegaard's relation both to Luther's thought and to the Lutheranism of his day is an important one and awaits comprehensive treatment."<sup>8</sup> There are notable exceptions to the recent lack of recognition given to Lutheran themes in Kierkegaard, and I know of several doctoral theses recently written or being written around this subject. But the present work is not one of those that is principally concerned with Kierkegaard's admittedly often highly ambivalent relation to Luther.<sup>9</sup> This work does, however, give prominence to the recognition of the Lutheran resonances in Kierkegaard's notion of "before God" and the "spiritual trial"

(Dn. *Anfægtelse*)<sup>10</sup> evoked by the infinite qualitative difference in particular. In this reading, it is Kierkegaard's overarching and similarly under-examined notion of the "infinite qualitative difference" that I take as the hermeneutical key to unlocking the apparent impasse of the self before God. In this way, I address the questions: how the self can be known in *relation* to a divine other who is infinitely qualitatively *different* from itself? And how can one stand *before* God when there is an infinite abyss *between* self and the divine? In attempting to resolve these central questions, I argue that the true expression of the infinite qualitative difference is found, not in the self's initial sense of sin and estrangement, but in the Holy *mysterium* of forgiveness. And as such, I maintain that the key to understanding this (implicitly Lutheran) transition from the consciousness of sin to the acceptance of forgiveness is also the key to the abyss.<sup>11</sup>

Kierkegaard's writings provide an outline of a theological anthropology of the self before God; but it is a vision that requires better contemporary elucidation than would be provided by a retrospective of Luther. As such, I read Kierkegaard's works in relation to a broader Judeo-Christian theological tradition that describes a disruption and healing of personhood via a theology of sin and forgiveness and which, in turn, establishes itself upon the otherness and holiness of God. This notion of "otherness" through "holiness" evokes another category which is of great importance to this present study: Rudolf Otto's theological category of the numinous. For reasons that will be examined in chapter 4, the affiliation of Otto and Kierkegaard may seem surprising and lacking in precedents. However, through the course of this work, I hope to demonstrate how Otto's sense of the numinous as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* and the self-abnegation of "creature-feeling" can supplement and articulate, along explicitly theological lines, a Kierkegaardian vision of the infinite qualitative difference and the self before God.

As outlined below, the central elements of melancholy, anxiety, despair, and spiritual trial also emerge from particular traditions and cultural milieus in Western philosophy and theology—particularly the historically contingent sense of religious loss and divine hiddenness. It is not my aim to universalize this narrow and harrowing path to faith via despair, but rather hopefully to illuminate a particular dark journey of the self to God, narrated by way of the theological terms of sin and forgiveness. The spirit of the Talmudic dictum, "We do not see things as they are; we see them as we are," holds particularly true in relation to the abyss of objective uncertainty in which, according to Kierkegaard's aphorism, faith swims out over 70,000 fathoms. This is also the abyss in which there is a hidden joy: in which the gaze of the self seeks to penetrate the darkness and behold itself within the mirror of God.



## THEMES AND AIMS

The theme of Kierkegaard's infinite qualitative difference between humanity and God—in both its negative and positive connotations—is employed throughout as the prime hermeneutical key through which to explore a Kierkegaardian vision of the self before God. Both the “infinite qualitative difference” and the “self before God” remain fundamental but under-examined themes in Kierkegaard's thought—themes that have not, as yet, received comprehensive treatment. It is this deficit that the present work aims to go some way toward rectifying.

In the present work, a perennial question of the relation between knowledge of self and knowledge of God is explored expressly via the evocative and often equivocal motif of “the abyss.” Within these pages, “the abyss” in question is taken as evoking, in general terms, the post/modern crises of self-knowledge and divine knowledge in Western philosophy and theology, while referring, in specific terms, to Kierkegaard's category of the infinite qualitative difference between humanity and God. The abyss thus provides an evocative and fertile metaphor for the epistemological and existential struggle of the self before God. As such, the often disorientating metaphor of the abyss is frequently used as a stand-in for ineffability: it designates an area of preliminary unknowing, of darkness and opacity. But more than that, the metaphor of the abyss denotes the existential and psychological anxiety evoked by the loss of grounding, by separation and estrangement from a distant Absolute that lies beyond its shores.

Beneath the expansive banner of Kierkegaard's infinite qualitative difference lie other thematic expressions of the divine-human difference that are central to Kierkegaard's notion of the journey to selfhood: namely melancholy, anxiety, despair, and the frequently overlooked notion of spiritual trial (Dn. *Anfægtelse*).<sup>12</sup> These themes facilitate an anthropocentric consideration of the consciousness of sin and express the external and internal rupture that sin causes for the task of becoming a self. Through consideration of these overlapping themes, I explore how selfhood is not only problematized by the consciousness of sin, but also by the difficulty in accepting the “impossible possibility” of divine forgiveness. As the work proceeds, it is the emerging theme of forgiveness and its relation to the consciousness of sin that becomes the key to the abyss and the gift of the self before God.

The emergence of divine forgiveness as a means of saving the self from despair inevitably conveys something decisive about the loving nature of God as perceived from the human side of the God-relationship. As such, I explore the proposition that the Wholly Otherness of God is best expressed through

a theology of the forgiveness of sins, rather than being articulated solely by way of self-accusation and the consciousness of sin. Essentially, the former perspective (forgiveness) delivers the self from the potential *mysterium horrendum* of the latter perspective (sin, despair). In this sense, I question the assumption that the “Wholly Other” is appropriate as a final designation for God in Kierkegaard’s writings. By moving from the despairing consciousness of sin to the acceptance of the *Holy* otherness of forgiveness, we come toward a more theologically “apposite” reflection of the infinite qualitative difference than sin and the Wholly Other can provide. When the name of the “Wholly Other” is applied to God solely from the perspective of sin, we risk being left with the remote God of despair rather than the intimate God of faith. Forgiveness is thus viewed as the means by which the estrangement of the infinite qualitative difference between self and God is reconciled and transformed into the relational possibility of the self before God. The consciousness of sin is, in this schema, a vital step on the road to faith. However, when despair of/over sin occludes the divine light of forgiveness, the self remains trapped in its “inclosing reserve” and God remains identified as the Wholly Other before whose wrathful gaze none can stand. True repentance and reconciliation of the abyss is discovered in faith’s acceptance of forgiveness, since the acceptance of forgiveness recognizes how morbid self-accusation can itself signify a final narcissistic grasp at the self—an attempt to “know thyself” internally through the consciousness of sin rather than through the relational endeavor to become a self before God.

#### SCOPE

Engaging with the themes of the self before God and the infinite qualitative difference, this work is based upon Kierkegaard’s authorship as a whole, although greater attention is inevitably given to more avowedly religious works and works in which the theme of selfhood is more explicit. As such, *The Sickness unto Death* from the crucial biographical period of 1848–1849 is undoubtedly the most significant single text for the argument.<sup>13</sup> However, I have endeavored to trace the central themes throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship, and hopefully I have been sufficiently vigilant against the temptation to homogenize Kierkegaard’s works via these themes. Nonetheless, I have found Kierkegaard’s writings—signed, pseudonymous, editorial, and personal—to be strikingly consistent with regard to the categories of the infinite qualitative difference and the self “before God.” As with the notions of anxiety and despair in particular, Kierkegaard appears to have attempted to remain fairly consistent with these terms throughout his authorship. This commitment to

“consistency” is evidenced by instances of cross-referencing between pseudonyms with regard to important themes and concepts.<sup>14</sup> However, this is not to say that Kierkegaard’s works provide a finished or comprehensively systematic theology of the self before God. This is neither Kierkegaard’s method nor his aim. Viewed as a whole, Kierkegaard’s works are frequently too fragmentary, poetic, or ironic to provide a theology that does not require further explication and consolidation. Nonetheless, his works provide a wealth of thematic inspiration, tone, and insight into the psychology of faith which can be successfully applied to contemporary theological anthropology. It is in lieu of any single comprehensive work by Kierkegaard or his interpreters on the notions of “before God” and the “infinite qualitative difference” that the present work aims to articulate a Kierkegaardian theological anthropology of the self before God.

Rather than being a straightforward interpretation of Kierkegaard, however, this book is intended to be an original theological development that employs Kierkegaard’s works in order to introduce and explore the theme of the self before God in relation to a theology of the forgiveness of sins and the *Holy* otherness of God. As well as drawing out these themes in Kierkegaard’s writings, the vision of the self presented herein is supplemented, but hopefully not distorted, by being placed in dialogue with the theological and philosophical contributions to the question of the self-God relation from such relevant figures as Augustine, Luther, John of the Cross, Hegel, Feuerbach, Barth, Otto, Levinas, and Derrida. In particular, I have sought to give a broader and more thorough theological grounding to this Kierkegaardian vision of the self before God through reading and applying the insights of Rudolf Otto’s notion of the numinous and the reflections on various forms of spiritual anxiety, melancholy, and despair in Christian mysticism and the Lutheran notion of spiritual trial (Gn. *Anfechtung*). As such, in addition to exploring themes in Kierkegaard’s writings, this work also contains extended treatments of such figures as Augustine, Luther, and Otto on the relation between self-knowledge and knowledge of God. Some of the thinkers that Kierkegaard is placed alongside are here examined in this context or in such detail for the first time in English-language Kierkegaard research. As such, it is also hoped that this book will stimulate further debate on the continuing relevance of its themes.

The themes of the work are further elucidated through imaginative theological reflection on particularly resonant biblical motifs such as the revelation at the burning bush (Exodus 3), Jacob wrestling with the stranger (Genesis 32), Isaiah’s vision of the throne of God (Isaiah 6), and Christ’s passion at Gethsemane (Matthew 26 and parallels). These motifs are read as allegories

for the themes of knowing God (Exodus 3), the struggle for recognition between self and God (Genesis 32), the numinous (Isaiah 6), and spiritual trial (Genesis 32; Isaiah 6; Matthew 26).

I have also sought to describe the wider historical developments of the themes of selfhood and religious melancholy in Western thought. By doing so, I hope to indicate the historical contexts of contemporary debates and how these ongoing debates reflect and continue aporias that derive from a long and expressive genealogy. Accessing major themes in modern and contemporary philosophy and theology—illustrating these themes through biblical, cultural, and literary motifs—I hope to identify analogies to key debates that predate the modern era. As such, I relate modern debates on melancholy, anxiety, and despair to previous theological treatments of *acedia*, *Anfechtung*, and *desperatio*. Such an approach is, I suggest, consistent with Kierkegaard's own method of approaching the modern manifestation of despair and selfhood from within an established theological tradition of sin and salvation. This approach is particularly evident in Kierkegaard's own attempts to rehabilitate—via the “older and better devotional literature” (JP 4:4384 / Pap. XI<sup>2</sup> A 132)—the spiritual pathos of spiritual trial within the “spiritless” ambience of modernity. Indeed, the very idiom “before God” derives from the Lutheran endeavor to exist *coram Deo*, and Kierkegaard's adjunct of the term “self” signifies an attempt to rehabilitate older theological truths without undermining orthodox biblical Christianity (as he perceived Hegelianism to be doing), while at the same time speaking within and critiquing the lexicon of modernity.

#### CLARIFICATIONS: KNOWLEDGE OF SELF AND GOD

Although, in Kierkegaardian terms, the self can only become “transparent” to itself in relation *before God*, it should be maintained that the human self is not a straightforward analogue of the divine “self.” In fact, Kierkegaard is emphatic here: “There is only One who completely knows himself, who in himself knows what he himself is—that is God. And he also knows what each human being in himself is, because he is that only by being before God.”<sup>15</sup> God alone knows what God is and who each individual truly is. The self-knowledge of every individual is therefore only attainable before God; but knowing oneself before God is not tantamount to “knowing what God is in Godself.”<sup>16</sup> From the perspective of the infinite qualitative difference, any anthropomorphic projection of self-knowledge into the metaphysical or divine realm would fail to amount to knowledge of Godself. God-in-Godself remains unknown and inaccessible to metaphysical reasoning alone. The infinite qualitative difference does not separate us from nothing, or from an infinitized/

divinized version of the self; it separates the self from the Holy Other. As such, in the course of this work I invoke Otto's notion of the numinous in order to further assert the *objective* reality and *otherness* of God, which the self must nonetheless come to terms with through the *subjective* and relational activity of becoming itself *before God*. In fact, from this perspective, it is the prior reality of God's otherness that actually forms the basis for the suspension of human ontotheological<sup>17</sup> claims about God. The otherness of God thus provides the basis for a theological distinction between *anthropomorphism* (the attribution of human characteristics to God) and *anthropocentrism* (a relational understanding of God within the limits of human perspective—as opposed to metaphysical interpretations of God-in-Godself). The infinite qualitative difference denies the possibility of anthropomorphic projection of a prior notion of the self onto “God.” By denying the possibility of detached metaphysical speculation concerning God-in-Godself, it also asserts that our limited knowledge of God is anthropocentric: that is, known in relation to our (God-given, or *theocentric*) selves.

#### ORGANIZATION

Chapter 1 broaches our “anatomy of the abyss” by introducing the central hermeneutical theme of the infinite qualitative difference as it appears at various points throughout the course of Kierkegaard's authorship. It outlines the centrality of this divine-human *alterity* to Kierkegaard's descriptions of the self's relation to God, while also describing how the motif of “the abyss” (*Dn. Dyb / Afgrund*) in Kierkegaard's writings is employed to evoke depth, distance, and groundlessness, as well as pointing toward its evocative relation to the integral themes of the self, the Wholly Other, guilt, repentance, dizziness, nothingness, anxiety, despair, melancholy, and spiritual trial (*Anfægtelse*). This introductory chapter concludes by outlining the central principle of this work that the true meaning of Kierkegaard's “infinite qualitative difference” for the “self before God” is to be found *initially* through the consciousness of sin, but *ultimately* through the divine possibility of forgiveness.

Chapter 2 initially outlines a Kierkegaardian reading of “despair” as the failure of isolated modern self-authentication and eternity's primal obligation upon the individual to become a self “before God.” This vision is placed in relation to a reading of the modern turn toward the “know thyself” and its arguably inevitable collapse into the postmodern “death of the self.” The relation between the “death of the self” and the “death of God” is hence considered in critical relation to Kierkegaard's insistence upon the infinite qualitative difference between humanity and divinity: a difference that disrupts the

possibility of both anthropocentric projection and ontological deductions concerning knowledge of God-in-Godself. In considering God in Kierkegaard's writings as initially Wholly Other, comparison is made with Jacques Derrida's influential reading of the wholly other as referring to the alterity of *every other*—a reading which is itself critiqued via Rudolf Otto's theological view of the Wholly Other as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. In doing so, I further explicate the central argument that the difference of sin is most appositely understood as “estrangement” between self and God; and that “forgiveness” expresses the transfigured and authentic meaning of the infinite qualitative abyss between humanity and God.

In chapter 3 the theme of melancholy, which has emerged in chapter 2, is elucidated as an existential response to the difference/distance between self and God and the characteristically modern turn inward in Kierkegaard's thought. The Kierkegaardian impulse toward a specifically *religious* melancholy is then traced and illustrated through the antecedent monastic notion of *acedia* (“carelessness”) to the secularized boredom, or *ennui*, of the modern aesthete. By way of an anatomy of melancholy in Kierkegaard's writings, this chapter ultimately proposes a narrative progression of self-knowledge from the “aesthetic” to the “religious” which directs melancholy's disillusionment toward a curative awakening of religious longing within the self (articulated as the metamorphosis of *Ånd*: spirit). This melancholy is epitomized conceptually by the ambivalent desire to behold the face of God, though to see God means death—an anxiety which is acutely and lyrically expressed in Augustine and John of the Cross.

The elemental theme of melancholy, which chapter 3 discerned as a symptom of self-alienation and the modern loss of God, is further developed in chapter 4 with more explicit reference to the self's longing to stand before a God who appears—at least initially—as “Wholly Other” to itself. Here a religious melancholy is primarily characterized by a rise in the restless and antagonistic longing of “spirit”—a religious longing which the self is unable to consummate for itself. Ultimately I question the extent to which a theology of the Wholly Other (as epitomized by Rudolf Otto) effectively expresses a historically contingent response of a modern *horror vacui* (in this context the “empty space” created by a loss of the sacred) to the melancholy consciousness of a *deus otiosus* (“withdrawn god”). Ultimately, I argue that the Wholly Other, as read in both Kierkegaard and Otto, rather creates the space in which the gift of the self can be realized—albeit a self which, in fear and trembling, enters into an initially anxious struggle with the *mysterium tremendum*.

In chapter 5 we turn to the symbolic motif at the heart of our anatomy of the abyss, considering the image of Jacob's striving with the stranger

(Genesis 32) as an allegory for the anxiety and spiritual trial that is evoked by the endeavor to know oneself before God. As well as illustrating such anxiety, however, this allegory evokes the reconciliation of the self by gesturing toward the reception of the divine gift of a God who, by a giving of Godself in the relational tangibility of divine-human struggle, negates Wholly Otherness while also creating the relational space for the self to become itself *before God*. It is through Kierkegaard's notions of spiritual trial (*Anfægtelse*: a Danish cognate of the German *Anfechtung*) and the stigmatic motif of the "thorn in the flesh" that I proceed to discuss certain vertiginous descriptions of the anxiety of the God-relationship, the dangerous intoxication of the "imagination," and the analogy of the Kantian sublime—a category which, in the context of the self before God, I contend is more appropriately supplanted by Otto's theological category of the "numinous."

As the self's journey to know itself before God becomes increasingly "intensified," chapter 6 progresses to a more specific anatomy of Kierkegaard's decisive and under-examined dialectic of spiritual trial and its critical relation to the Lutheran tradition of *Anfechtung*. The essential difference between Kierkegaard and Luther at this point transpires in Kierkegaard's decision to situate the tension of spiritual trial between the self and God, rather than self and the devil. Both thinkers are, however, united in looking to the trial of Christ's God-forsakenness as exemplary for the individual's struggle with *Anfechtung*. It is here, when forgiveness and the love of God are themselves cast into doubt (*Tvivl*), that the struggle of prayer emerges as the means for the self to transcend the despair (*Fortvivelse*) over human *impossibility* through the leap of faith into divine *possibility*: namely, faith in the thought that for God all things are possible.

Chapter 7 constitutes both a reprise and a conclusion of the work's narrative vision of the self before God. In order to further illustrate and elucidate the theological anthropology explored in this study, I condense and focus the previous anatomization of the self's relation "before God" through an examination of the optical motif which suffuses the work. From this ocular perspective, the struggle of the self before God is appraised through a hermeneutic of "the gaze": the "gaze of the abyss" by which the self beholds the chasm of infinite difference; the internalized "gaze of despair" by which the self, in "offence" against its consciousness of sin and the apparent *impossibility* of forgiveness, severs itself from any relation to the other; and ultimately the downcast gaze which, in humility, manages to behold God—whom "none may see and live"—through the "eyes of faith" by which the self comes to accept the divine *possibility* of forgiveness. It is this final sense of the gaze that penetrates the darkness of the abyss and which allows the self to behold

itself, reflected through the “divine mirror,” as a forgiven and relational self becoming “transparent” (*gjennemsigtigt*: “see-through”) to itself in freedom before God. The infinite qualitative difference is therefore defined in the preliminary terms of the consciousness of sin, and in ultimate terms, as the *mysterium* of the divine *possibility* of forgiveness. Finally, the chapter concludes with an exploration of how the self before God entails the Kierkegaardian paradox of “inverse resemblance” between the human self and God. This conclusion offers a transfigured reinterpretation of the motto which begins the first chapter of this work: “Precisely because there is the absolute difference between God and man, man expresses himself most perfectly when he absolutely expresses the difference” (CUP, 412).

The final chapter of the work is a reflection in which the ultimate meaning of the infinite qualitative difference as “forgiveness”—which constitutes the emerging central argument of this work—is employed as a lens through which to view the relation between being forgiven by God and the *im/possibility* of forgiving “the other.” In this concluding exploration, the key notion of the “impossible possibility” of divine forgiveness is read as a model for the “suspension” of offence by which the self remains open to the possibility of forgiving the “unforgivable.” This finally gives rise to the more expansive question of what it might mean for the self to “forgive God” in the struggle of faith. It is with this final, yet open and provocative question mark, that the work concludes.



# Introduction

## *Anatomy of the Abyss*

*Precisely because there is the absolute difference between God and man, man expresses himself most perfectly when he absolutely expresses the difference.*

—Concluding Unscientific Postscript

This striking assertion, from the pen of Kierkegaard and the perspective of Johannes Climacus, could be claimed as the sacred motto for the “anatomy of the abyss” that will follow in this work. Human nature, Johannes Climacus (and elsewhere Kierkegaard) claims, is most legitimately expressed through an absolute expression of our difference from the divine. In other words, it is by expressing its difference from God—this infinite qualitative abyss—that humanity will come to its most legitimate self-knowledge. As such, it is by way of an anatomy of this difference, or this abyss, that humanity will come to a deeper understanding of its own nature. But is this to say that self-knowledge is attained by expressing one’s difference as nothing else but one’s separation from God: as *sin*? Is it by expressing one’s own sinfulness, one’s utter darkness in contrast to the unequivocal light of the divine, that one comes to authentic self-knowledge? Are we then only known to ourselves as we express our irremediable *unholiness* before the Holy? Does humanity therefore only come to know itself truly through “fear and trembling,” through melancholy and despair? How can one’s nature be expressed via absolute difference? And how can one then come to know oneself in relation before the God who is Wholly Other? Such questions decisively shape and motivate the present exploration of the self before God.

In this work, I maintain that the Kierkegaardian notion of the self before God has its origins and expression in the infinite qualitative abyss between God and humanity and, as such, the answer to the foregoing questions resides in an exploration of the abyss as it pertains, not only to the *alterity* of human sinfulness, but also to the *mysterium* of divine forgiveness. Ultimately, this work will argue that it is the paradox of an “impossible” forgiveness which holds the key to the paradox that one will express one’s own nature most adequately when one expresses this difference absolutely. However, prior to

this “absurd” endeavor to unlock one paradox by another, it is necessary to introduce and outline one of the most enduring and under-examined themes in Kierkegaard’s writings, and the hermeneutical key to this vision of the self before God—namely, the “infinite qualitative difference” between humanity and God.

#### GAZING INTO THE KIERKEGAARDIAN ABYSS

Any attempt to explore Kierkegaard’s writings in search of a theological anthropology will find itself on the edge of an abyss, and it is this Kierkegaardian motif of the “infinite qualitative difference” which I shall initially broach in its various permutations throughout Kierkegaard’s works. The abyss which one inevitably gazes upon in Kierkegaard’s writings cannot simply be subsumed under nothingness; it is not fundamentally a void, though at times it may resemble one and may at all times threaten to become one. This abyss may be spoken of as nothingness, as an absence; but it also designates a discernible, albeit infinite, space between humanity and God. For how could one anatomize nothingness? And, for that matter, why an *anatomy*? All anatomy involves a dissection (from the Gr. *anatome*: “dissection”), and dissection requires a cutting-apart (from the Lat. *dissecare*: “to cut into pieces”); hence the *severance* of the abyss is implied in its very anatomization—the infinite severance between God and humanity. This anatomy requires that one speak not only of divinity and humanity, but of the severance between them: divinity and humanity on two sides (as it were) of a chasm. But this anatomy of a “spacious nothingness” (to echo Augustine) is no detached science. Inescapably, it is a *self-examination* involving the “*autopsy* of faith” (PF, 70).

Although there is no unified concept of “the abyss” in Kierkegaard’s writings, its image is one that Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms persistently evoke with stylistic flourish and existential pathos. The pseudonymous author of *Repetition* for example, Constantine Constantius, writes of “the abyss of anxiety” (R, 155)—a dictum which recalls the vertigo of anxiety’s gaze into the abyss in Vigilius Haufniensis’s *Concept of Anxiety*: “Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss [*svælgende Dyb*] becomes dizzy” (CA, 61).<sup>1</sup>

Despite this vertiginous horror, however, one who is “educated by anxiety” discovers what Haufniensis calls “Anxiety as Saving through Faith.” Such a person, though they may sink in the abyss, in turn emerges “from the depth of the abyss [*Afgrundens Dyb*] lighter than all the troublesome and terrible things in life” (CA, 158). It is not the abyss that is dreadful in itself; more precisely it is in the *relation* of the individual to the abyss that anxiety is located. The dizziness of anxiety is essentially derived from the subject’s *gaze* into the

abyss. “But what is the reason [*Grunden*: ‘the ground’] for this? It is as much in his own eye as in the abyss [*Afgrunden*: ‘without-ground’], for suppose he had not looked down” (CA, 61).

As the above references to *The Concept of Anxiety* demonstrate, the English word “abyss” translates both the Danish *Dyb* and also the more horrifying *Afgrund* (literally “without-ground”) in Kierkegaard’s writings. While *Dyb* often denotes empty space or depth, *Afgrund* evokes the intangible and paradoxical presence of something exceeding mere “emptiness” (*Tomhed*). As such, “abyss” can refer not only to spatial separation but also to that which is *dramatically* groundless, bottomless, fathomless, inscrutable (*uudgrundelige*)—hence Johannes Climacus’s invocation of the word when describing, in *Philosophical Fragments*, how “humanly speaking, consequences built upon a paradox are built upon the abyss [*Afgrund*]” (PF, 98). One may thus be tempted to suggest that *Afgrund* is employed to denote “groundlessness,” while *Dyb* denotes “distance” or “severance.” In the Christian discourse titled “The Joy of It: That One Suffers Only Once But Is Victorious Eternally,” Kierkegaard explains how “just as there was a chasmic abyss [*svælgende Dyb*] between that rich man in hell and Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom, so also there is a chasmic difference [*svælgende Forskjel*] between suffering and sin” (CD, 102–103). Yet when a more psychological phenomenon is to be described, the abyss is invoked as something horrifyingly “without-ground” (*Afgrund*). Hence, when implying the vanity of the maxim, “Let us eat and drink, because tomorrow we shall die” (1 Corinthians 15:32), Kierkegaard detects: “This very remark echoes with the anxiety about the next day, the day of annihilation, the anxiety that insanelly is supposed to signify joy although it is a shriek from the abyss [*Afgrunden*]” (“The Care of Self-Torment,” CD, 77). The *Afgrund* thus designates not only the vacuity and implicit despair of decadent or hedonistic indulgence, but also its inherent anxiety of non-being.

However, one must be careful not to infer too firm a distinction from what is also the poetic-rhetorical choice of a highly stylized author—hence Haufniensis’s emphatic combination of both terms in evoking “the depth of the abyss” (*Afgrundens Dyb*) (CA, 158).<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard writes in his discourse on “The Care of Loftiness”: “The eminent pagan with his care belongs in the abyss [*Afgrund*]; he actually is not lofty but in the abyss [*Afgrund*]” (CD, 58). And yet this image is also developed spatially, according to a sense of untraversable distance: “Over this abyss [*Afgrund*] [of paganism] no bird could fly; it would have to perish on the way” (CD, 59). One may recall the elegiac lament of Kierkegaard’s aesthete A when describing the abyss of his boredom in *Either/Or*: “My soul is like the Dead Sea, over which no bird is able to fly; when it has come midway, it sinks down, exhausted, to death and destruction” (E/O I, 37). Indeed it is the image of the sea—deep, dark, and boundless—that

perhaps provides the consummate motif for the anxious abyss of existence. “Just as the shipwrecked person who saved himself by means of a plank and now, tossed by the waves and hovering over the abyss [*Afgrunden*] between life and death, strains his eyes for land, so indeed should a person be concerned about his salvation” (“We Are Closer to Salvation Now—Than When We Became Believers,” CD, 220). Here one cannot help but invoke the abyss resounding in the evocative horror of what Kierkegaard identifies as “one of my favourite phrases, which is attributed to another author [viz. Frater Taciturnus]” (BA, 107–108):<sup>3</sup> that is, to be out over 70,000 fathoms of water in faith’s struggle with inexorable objective uncertainty. And indeed, the abyss (*Dyb*) commonly refers to “the deep.”

Kierkegaard’s favored phrase encapsulates the anxious dual-nature of the human condition: “man is a synthesis of the temporal and of the eternal, every moment out upon ‘70,000 fathoms’” (JP 5:5792 / Pap. VI B 18). More specifically for Johannes Climacus, the phrase signifies “the martyrdom of believing against the understanding, the mortal danger of lying out on 70,000 fathoms of water, and only there finding God” (CUP 1:232). This suffering, which is the essential expression of the God-relationship, “is, to recall Frater Taciturnus’s words, the 70,000 fathoms of water upon whose depths the religious person is continually” (CUP 1:288). It is Frater Taciturnus’s “Letter to the Reader” in *Stages on Life’s Way* that devises the term which so pleases Kierkegaard and his other pseudonymous conspirators: “Spiritual existence, especially the religious, is not easy; the believer continually lies out on the deep [*Dybet*], has 70,000 fathoms of water beneath him” (SLW, 444). And yet, despite this anxious abyss (*Dyb*), hovering over the deep (*Dybet*), repentance is itself an infinite opening of *possibility* in the religious life which is the pathway to salvation, “for repentance has specifically created a boundless space [*uendelig Plads*], and as a consequence the religious contradiction: simultaneously to be out on 70,000 fathoms of water and yet be joyful” (SLW, 477).

The “boundless space” of repentance (which, as will be explored later on, helps to clear an opening for the decisive “impossible possibility” of divine forgiveness) begins to convey the sense in which sin induces a profound severance between humanity and God—a rupture that also affects a related internal fracture within the self. Fundamentally, in the task of becoming a self before God, the decisive abyss that faces theological anthropology throughout the Kierkegaardian oeuvre is the insurmountable difference/distance between humanity and God which is initially diagnosed as *sin*. The god whom Johannes Climacus describes in *Philosophical Fragments* is decisively “absolutely different” (*absolut forskjelligt*) (PF, 46) from any person who may wish to relate to it. “What, then, is the difference?” Johannes ponders. “Indeed, what else but sin, since the difference, the absolute difference, must have been caused by the

individual himself” (PF, 47). While Johannes Climacus is fond of reminding us that between God and humanity “there is an absolute difference” (CUP, 412), it is also an insistence he has in common with his “higher” namesake Anti-Climacus: “God and man are two qualities separated by an infinite qualitative difference [*uendelig Qualitets-Forskjel*]” (SUD, 126). Furthermore, at the risk of ostensibly homogenizing Kierkegaard’s authorship according to this “qualitative difference,” it must be emphasized that this idea is not exclusive to the Climacean works. For example, in *The Book on Adler* Kierkegaard asserts with his own hand how “between God and a human being there is an eternal essential qualitative difference [*evig væsentlig kvalitativ Forskjel*]” (BA, 181). The difference is one which also presents itself in Kierkegaard’s *Discourses*: for instance, “The Gospel of Sufferings” relates how the Christian knows that, as far as suffering is concerned, between God and every person there is “an eternal difference” (*evig Forskjel*) (UDVS, 287). This difference is described, variously, as “absolute” (*absolut*), “eternal” (*evig*), “essential” (*væsentlig*), “qualitative” (*kvalitativ*), and “infinite” (*uendelig*). While each word in itself is far from synonymous with the others, there is a case to be made that these substitutions and embellishments represent stylistic permutations more than crucial deviations from the central idea of the abyss. This is not to say that Johannes Climacus’s understanding of the “absolute difference” is identical with Anti-Climacus’s understanding of the “infinite qualitative difference” (indeed, I intimate that the understanding of the former is not resolved to the same depth as the latter concerning the expression of the infinite qualitative difference through the forgiveness of sins).<sup>4</sup>

However, to infer too much from the choice of one word over another is the constant temptation of the non-native speaker—a particular danger in the case of so poetic and stylistic a writer as Kierkegaard. So, for instance, there is an insistent string of these words in Kierkegaard’s *Journals* when describing “the law of the relations between God and man in the God-relationship”: “There is an infinite, radical, qualitative difference [*uendelig svælgende kvalitativ Foskjel*] between God and man” (JP 2:1383 / Pap. X<sup>1</sup> A 59). Added here is an instance of another deeply evocative adjective for this difference: “radical” (*svælgende*). The translation as “radical” does not fully convey the evocation of this word which, one might say, is decidedly abyssal. As the Danish word *slugt*—which denotes a “gorge”—is close to the verb *sluge*, “to swallow,” so too can *svælg* denote “abyss” in a manner close to the verb *svælge*—also a verb for “swallowing.” Hence, it might be more apt to talk about “an infinite, swallowing/yawning, qualitative difference” which threatens to devour the self. The benefit of suggesting this image is that it prompts the very anxiety of annihilation that is inherent to relating to a Wholly Other and concomitantly to oneself across such a yawning abyss (*et svælgende dyb*)—as is translated in

the above reference from *The Concept of Anxiety*: “He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss [*svælgende Dyb*] becomes dizzy” (CA, 61). Anti-Climacus also summons just this image when he writes in *The Sickness unto Death* of how: “As sinner, man is separated from God by the most chasmic qualitative abyss [*Qualitetens meest svælgende Dyb*]” (SUD, 122).

In attempting to define one’s existence *before God* one must come to terms with the abyssal distance which separates humanity from divinity. Any attempt to bring together those between whom there is such an abyss will inspire a vertigo of the understanding: “We warn the person who stands on a ship which ploughs ahead with the speed of the storm that he should not look into the waves, for he will become dizzy; thus does the comparison between the infinite and the finite make a man dizzy” (WL, 180).<sup>5</sup> It is across such a seemingly impassable abyss of sin that one must come to relate to God. It is not in attempting to possess myself, or to speculate upon God, that I become known as a self; it is first of all through coming to terms with the infinite difference—that is, the apprehension of the abyss itself as the consciousness of sin: “the yawning abyss [*svælgende Dyb*] is *here* where Christianity posits man’s cognition as defective on account of sin, which is rectified in Christianity” (JP 3:3245 / Pap. I A 94).

But one must be careful not to become lost in looking down, for one will become dizzy; or, appropriating Friedrich Nietzsche’s celebrated warning, “when you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.”<sup>6</sup> And yet, to a point, this is what Kierkegaard proposes *must be done* with much fear and trembling and spiritual trial. Nietzsche’s philosophical anthropology itself evokes the abyss when he writes: “Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman [*Übermensch*—a rope over an abyss [*Abgrund*: again, literally ‘without-ground’].”<sup>7</sup> The existential difference, according to Hoberman, is that “Nietzsche situates man over the abyss, while Kierkegaard situates the abyss within man.”<sup>8</sup> This is true in relation to the internal vertigo of Kierkegaardian anxiety; but where the God-relation is concerned, Kierkegaard also inscribes the individual *over* “70,000 fathoms” of a deep that separates them from God, namely sin: an internal abyss which nevertheless severs one from an *other*. Authentic self-consciousness is contingent upon consciousness of God, or self before God; but this is itself only initiated through the consciousness of sin—the gaze of the abyss. But our gaze into the abyss, during which the abyss also penetrates the eye that looks into it, may become an entrapment of *self-reflection* that loses sight of the other (God) whom the abyss severs us from. Such abyssal guilt may come to signify “the demonic”: what Vigilius Haufniensis calls “anxiety about the good” which is self-incarcerated in an “inclosing reserve” (*Indesluttethed*) (CA, 123). The task then is to break guilt out of its anxious self-communion with the abyss. But this hypnotic

introversion is not easily ruptured, since: “Guilt has for the eye of the spirit the fascinating power of the serpent’s glance” (CA, 103). Therefore the internal contemplation of the abyss of sin itself, the gaze of guilt, becomes a narcissistic dizziness. “The continuity that inclosing reserve has can best be compared with the dizziness a spinning top must have, which constantly revolves upon its own pivot” (CA, 130). One might call this the dizziness of the internal abyss—it is, in one sense, we ourselves who own this abyss between self and God since we are the cause of it, though, inevitably, the abyss will come to own us when the consciousness of sin becomes all-consuming. Anxiety (*Angst*) is therefore both vertiginous and claustrophobic or narrow (*trang*).

But more of anxiety in due course. Suffice it to say for now that the anxiety of this self-oriented “inclosing reserve” (*Indesluttethed*) must ultimately deliver its gaze toward the (Holy) other. Sin must be understood authentically, not through guilt’s introspective and serpentine self-fascination, but *relationally* as the distance that separates the sinner from God. Only through such a relational understanding of sin can one come to accept a relational understanding of *forgiveness* that transfigures the meaning of the infinite qualitative difference between humanity and God.

And still, the central paradox—or unsurpassable chasm—is such that the self must become known to itself in relation to that which is infinitely differentiated from it. It is in this sense that Johannes Climacus initially calls the god, simply, “the Unknown.” This anxious and despairing task is one of becoming an authentic self before a God whose absolute otherness apparently defies any such relation. Yet how can I know myself in relation to that which is wholly unknowable? “[I]f a human being is to come to know something about the unknown (the god) [*det Ubekjendte (Guden)*], he must first come to know that it is different from him, absolutely different from him” (PF, 46). Yet, as Johannes Climacus ponders, how can one come to know anything about this God since “the understanding cannot even think the absolutely different” (PF, 45)?

Here is the abyss of an apparently unassailable *alterity* and alienation which this theological anthropology must confront if it wishes to define itself before a God who is understood, at least initially, as Wholly Other: “At this point we seem to stand at a paradox,” Johannes Climacus rightly insists. “Just to come to know that the god is the different, man needs the god and then comes to know that the god is infinitely different from him” (PF, 46). In other words, the *alterity* of the absolutely different is not something I can come to know of myself, even though I myself as sinner am apparently the cause of this abyss of absolute difference. Consequently, the consciousness of sin, which is also the consciousness of human-divine *alterity* conceived as alienation, cannot come by way of introspection, but only through the gift of God. And it is in

the consciousness of sin via divine revelation, rather than introspection, that the self receives also the gift of forgiveness: the hand that reaches out across the impassable abyss. As Kierkegaard decisively formulates “the law of the relations between God and man in the God-relationship”:

#### DIVISIO

There is an infinite, radical, qualitative difference between God and man.

This means, or the expression for this is: the human person achieves absolutely nothing; it is God who gives everything; it is he who brings about a person's faith, etc.

This is grace, and this is Christianity's major premise. (JP 2:1383 / Pap. X<sup>1</sup> A 59)

However, the challenge which will be explored is the danger that the consciousness of the infinite qualitative difference is always at risk of transmuting into a dreadful yawning abyss: an irremediable darkness into which one's gaze may fall continually. Unremitting contemplation of the abyss of sin may itself induce the very despair that Kierkegaard's writings strive to alleviate. Standing before God, the Wholly Other against Whom one had previously been defended by the distance of the abyss, may seem more like losing oneself in crushing annihilation than becoming oneself in loving relation to one's Creator and Redeemer. This is reflected by the crucial warning in Kierkegaard's “SUBDIVISIO” to the above “DIVISIO”: “If the *Divisio* is everything, then God is so infinitely sublime [*uendelig ophøiet*] that there is no intrinsic or actual relationship between God and the individual human being” (JP 2:1383 / Pap. X<sup>1</sup> A 59). As this work will contend, therefore, when the infinite qualitative abyss is understood only in part or is received in “offence,” then God may appear so Wholly Other, so “absolutely different,” so “infinitely sublime” as to seem irremediably and essentially a God of despair.

The abyss (*Dyb*) describes our severance and distance from God; but it is also, I suggest, an abyss (*Afgrund*) into which one can fall, in which one loses any ground (*grund*) on which one might stand before God. In the endeavor of the God-relationship, God can become so dreadful, so “infinitely sublime” to the mind's eye that, adopting Rudolf Otto's theological idiom, the awe of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* plunges into the awfulness of the *mysterium horrendum*.<sup>9</sup> The danger is that God becomes so dreadfully and irrec-  
oncilably Other to the self that one is swallowed up by the horror of this infinite qualitative abyss. God becomes the God of a fantastic despair that cannot reconcile itself to the *mysterium* of divine forgiveness: God is thought of as irrevocably, absolutely, and Solely Other. The gaze into the infinite abyss of sin has thus become an intoxication in which standing as a self before God



is thought of primarily in terms of the abyss itself. This fatal abyss is a form of what Anti-Climacus calls “the second severance” (SUD, 109).

It is this edge that the present work reaches in its concluding chapter. The question of the self before God is a question of receiving the revelation of the infinite qualitative difference between self as sinner and God as the Wholly Other in such a way as to come to terms with the healing grace of *forgiveness*—the divine gift by which one becomes a self in *relation* rather than annihilation. Such a task involves theological anthropology in a painstaking anatomy of the abyss: not simply in terms of a doctrine of sin and forgiveness, but also a mutual interrogation of and by the infinite abyss which separates the sinner from God and which holds the paradoxical secret of our forgiveness. It is here that the gaze of the abyss hopes to see with “the eyes of faith”: the gaze by which the self begins to envision itself through the eyes of God as healed and forgiven, as called to realize the gift of its selfhood—that is, to become itself before God. However, before the self can behold itself in this divine mirror, it must first recognize its solipsistic disintegration—its failure to know itself according to its own powers, and consequently a need to orient self-knowledge in relation to a divine *other*. It is this initial dissolution of the egocentric self, diagnosed in Kierkegaardian terms by way of an anatomy of despair, that allows the anatomy of the abyss to which the next chapter turns. There, I will explore how the recognition of one’s hidden despair (sin) becomes the dialectical key to becoming a (forgiven) self before the Holy Other God.