



Comments on Alina Feld's *Morbid Psyche and Apocalypse*

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Abstract: In my comments to Alina Feld's paper I exercise a hermeneutical approach to problems discussed—the nature of melancholy, its relation to the death of god, and the collapse of the world as it is explicated by Karl Jaspers, Thomas Altizer, and Jean Baudrillard. I extend Feld's two major forms of melancholy—melancholia per se and apathy—into four: romantic, spiritual, tragic and dreadful melancholy applying the criteria of status of Self, its reflexive functions, and level of conscious engagement in experiencing any condition a person finds himself in. This allows me to deconstruct the content of the end of the world and answer the question why in Nietzsche the death of god yielded an authentic strong and creative man whereas in Altizer and Baudrillard the same cultural event led to the total destruction of man and his world. I came to conclusion that in contrast to the common European ways of understanding the meaning of falling out of being, seizing to be, vanishing reality Buddhist ways of handling emptiness and non-existence is more productive since they treat the Self as more complex entity within which emptying Self on one level leads to a stronger reflective Self on the other level.

Alina Feld recognizes the complexity of the phenomenon of melancholy, which involves many profiles—psychological, psychiatric, artistic, medical, social—and in her paper concentrates on one of them: the theological. However, she places melancholy not among elements of religious sentiments, feelings, articles, or provisions of a particular faith, confession, or denomination per se—Christianity, Judaism, or Taoism; or Calvinism and messianic prophetic Judaism—but rather she treats it as a underpinning general mood, psychological condition, disposition of consciousness which contributes to the formation of certain kinds of religious experience common to many religions, and constitutes a more comprehensive world outlook. The focus of her direct analysis is the contemporary religious experience and theologies developed after Nietzsche's notorious proclamation of

the death of god. She looks at the human post-modern condition portrayed in Karl Jaspers, Thomas Altizer and Jean Baudrillard, i.e. as the end of an ontological paradigm that secured both the possibility of transcendence as well as a meaningful application of all human faculties in transcending any given state of affairs—mental, cultural, or religious. In other words her analysis is not reduced to the content of religious doctrines or religious experience as such (the relation of man to god), but includes the consequences of human withdrawal from god, or god's liberation (or abandonment) of humans.

In talking about any analysis of a particular philosophical concept one can talk about how close or far an interpreter is to the original text or takes both the primary and secondary lines of arguing and look through both of them into the meaning of the concept

under investigation in the attempt to unfold it further. I believe that the second approach is more applicable to Alina Feld vs. Jaspers, Altizer, Baudrillard because each of these thinkers is phenomenologically inclined and therefore would welcome a hermeneutical approach to ideas. After all, these issues open the new ways and horizons of meaning related to the death of god, collapse of transcendence, and appearance of immanence as a new total horizon for the overall human spiritual habitat which can be further developed, built up, or reinterpreted once again.

I introduce three groups of cluster concepts which generate a wider context for a phenomenological interpretation of these problems: (1) melancholy, sloth, and dread; (2) death of god, border situation, and the end of self-consciousness; (3) non-being, not existing, and nothingness.

Melancholy – A Source of Creativity and Richness or of Dullness and Emptiness?

For Altizer and Baudrillard, the human mental condition called melancholia used to be perceived until the beginning of the twentieth century as metaphysically and artistically rich and loaded with all kinds of implications for authentic human existence and provided fertile psychological soil for creative minds, and has now turned into something which robbed humans spiritually and intellectually, exhausted their culture, deprived them of any religious and existential hope, and made them victims of their own technological development for the entire twentieth century. Feld analyzes what has changed and explores whether it is due to a change inside humans themselves—their souls or minds—or the nature of what humans now call spiritual entities and values, or something in the cultural conditions that changed human self-perception. It might be a combination of all these factors that contributed to a fundamental shift of the Western cultural paradigm, the move away from the transcendental world of eternal essences into the phenomenological immediate experience.

Feld treats Jaspers, Altizer, and Baudrillard in different ways, sometimes putting their answers to the same questions very closely, almost in a parallel manner, sometimes juxtaposes them, and sometimes views them as complementing each other.

One needs to look into Jaspers' understanding of melancholy more in detail to contrast it more sharply with Altizer's and Baudrillard's views on the subject and following treatment of the problematic related to

the death of god. For Jaspers it is not crucial whether or not madness and melancholia are diseases; they could be a medical condition. But the important point is that they are something else; they expand standard human capacities and allow humans to move close to their outmost potentials: to sense absurd as such, like in religious faith, or to glance into the yawning of the abyss, or to feel total emptiness and anxiety. Humans are basically incomplete to grasp foundation of their lives and only when they find themselves close to the margins of live itself—in the so called border situation when the customary ideas of meaning of life are exhausted, uncertainty penetrates into every inch of the mind as one faces Angst—their psyche begins to generate authentic awareness of one's own existence. Moreover, the border situation resulted either from an individual's overworked psyche or from an implosion of all collective cultural landmarks calls on human mind to exercise reflections endlessly and therefore constitutes the danger of diffusing rationality of human spiritual quest. Here the leap into pure transcendence must be performed in order to curb the run-away psyche.

According to Jaspers, transcendence does not constitute a rational move, an inference from a given dead-end psychological state to a place or level in human mind which would provide a person with metaphysical clarity and security. It is a complex inner effort which involves various human faculties and which leads through a radical transformation of entire matrix of human being into the depths of something fundamentally other than a solid foundation of human life, into authentic freedom and unrestricted creativity of the Self. In other words melancholy, no matter how heavy on a human psyche it could be, was a rather positive, enriching, heuristic, and basically rewarding experience. Jaspers claims that the inner core of humanity that is revealed through transcendence in Existenz can serve humans well in the time of cultural upheavals, religious crisis, or social and political terror.

Feld continues that Altizer sees melancholy in a more pessimistic perspective. Melancholy is a state of torn consciousness, all-comprehensive paralyzing depression, inner emptiness, a state of innocence "of the amnesiac murderer of God and self"; it has lost self-identity and self-responsibility and has transgressed itself into flat transcendence and blind immanency. It seems that melancholy in Jaspers was capable to engage Self, make it work harder, and lead to its ultimate integration in transcendence; while in Altizer, melancholy would disintegrate Self and deprive it of its complexity, its major reflexive capacity, and the sense

of history as such. The stripped Self does not have an ability to see historic perspective and therefore cannot experience sense of guilt and cannot gain awareness of or assume conscious responsibility for whatever the Self is involved in.

Feld describes Baudrillard's views even more tragic: melancholy is a profound systemic boredom, the psychic disposition characterized with disappearance of the meaning of not only social and historic reality, but the individual who sinks into apathy, lacks any complexity, and inability to experience guilt. Baudrillard describes melancholy with adjectives such as total collapse or implosion of all meanings, a desert like psychic state with no pathos, emptiness to the point when there is no energy to feed even nihilism or any kind of denial.

Such a drastic change in appreciation of melancholy's spiritual and cultural role is related to the death of god. The Christian god who used to provide a foundation for spiritual and intellectual endeavor in the West has ceased to exist and the basic psychological and reflective mechanisms have stopped functioning as well. This begs the question, what role did god play in making melancholia to be the source of creative energy? Jaspers himself never associated a human faculty of transcendence entirely with a religious faith; rather he shared the traditional Enlightenment views on religion though he admitted its complexity, deep roots in human psyche, and significance for the whole Western culture. To answer this question, a closer look at the meaning of Nietzsche's pronouncement "God is dead" is in order. However, let me first make a couple of points that would, in my opinion, considerably clarify Feld's argument.

Following a common pattern, Feld divides all forms of melancholy into two major sub-groups. The first one includes those forms of melancholia associated with a symbolic depiction of melancholia such as depicted by Albrecht Dürer—a devastated and desperate but not indifferent mental state which could lead to certain creative efforts and which could yield some creative results. The second embodied in Lucas Cranach's painting is an apathic condition which leads to stagnation of mind, sinful sloth, disintegration of the psyche, and eventually to existential disaster. The three philosophers Feld deals with—Jaspers, Altizer and Baudrillard—need more sophisticated classification of various mental dispositions traditionally called melancholy that lead to the contemporary theologies based on the absent god. I suggest putting major forms of melancholy into four categories applying the status

of Self, its reflexive functions and level of conscious engagement in experiencing any condition, as criteria for such a classification. They are as follows:

Romantic Melancholy. Is considered the most common form of melancholy. A person experiences sadness, disillusionment, frustration over the fact that all the outside options that make life livable seem exhausted, such as society, upbringing, education, religion, culture. Life is slipping away in endless elegiac regret, but it still would make sense to stop it; one just has to really engage in creativity. Such disposition makes one's Self stronger and motivates psyche and mind to find new existential possibilities for oneself. Jaspers operates with this meaning of melancholy a lot. The outside world is a dead-end.

Spiritual Melancholy. Such as desperation and sinful sloth, it is more radical and overwhelming frustration than romantic melancholy because it penetrates deeper into human psyche and touches on capacities of one's Self to generate the meaning of life, to unfold interests, or to discover the value of and exercise potentials of the Self itself. The inside world is a dead-end. The person's inner gaze is empty.

Tragic Melancholy. Takes place when both the outside and inside existential options reach the point of exhaustion. Life as such has no meaning, not because a person has not discovered it yet or has lost it for a while. Essentially, everything is in vain. But a person cannot give it up yet and, having gathered all his potentials, having put his mind in total concentration, and having focused all his talents, engages himself into a deadly struggle for meaningful existence. It is a very active state spiritually and intellectually.

Dreadful Melancholy. Occurs when a person becomes aware of not only profound indifference of the world, but its intrinsic destructive potentials directed toward him. Now the being discloses itself not only as emptiness and nothingness, but as aggressive occurrence which threatens to annihilate a human both spiritually and physically. The dread torments and ultimately paralyzes the Self precisely because the Self strongly and passionately resists it. All apocalyptic world paradigms presuppose the doomed world and the defeated Self. When the Self gives in to any condition, both outside and inside, which overpowers it, swallows it or diminishes its presence and its identity

down to zero the world as making sense and having meaning also disappears.

In each form of experience, the Self goes through significant transformation; there is a long way from feeling lonely, elegiac, and indifferent to being frustrated with basic vanity of life and loosing the Self in the apocalyptic millstones. Bu now I return to Feld's analysis of the postmodern mind in Altizer and Baudrillard who operate with the meaning of dreadful melancholy.

The Death of God

Human history can testify to the fact that gods have been dying all the time, even the most powerful ones like Odin or Tiamat, and death in various mythologies and religions was used as means of delivery of very important points. Christianity as no other religion in the world has been building its most basic messages around the meaning of death. Christians of any kind are fascinated with all kinds of death. Death is a major event in the Christian narration; a human death by crucifixion is a real physical and historical event; death as conquered via resurrection; various apocalyptic visions of the future calamities; human death vs. life-after-death; death as neutralized by eternal life, etc. But the Christians vehemently opposed any hint or slightest possibility of death of the God, the all-mighty, eternally omnipresent, and infinitely omniscient.

However, first Hegel inadvertently, by postulating that religion in general and the Christian god in particular were visual and sensuous, alienated and immature, forms of the Spirit engaged into the process of self-actualization and unfolding itself in human history, and were supposed to be overcome by philosophy as a conceptual, more advanced, form of self-presentation and self-recognition; and then Nietzsche explicitly, by announcing the death of god from the hands of people themselves when they realized that they do not need him any longer, challenged the existence of the Christian God.

Some historical developments of the twentieth century among which are two world wars, numerous accounts of ethnic cleansing, diminishing economic and political dominance of the West, increasing awareness of the horizons of other cultures also seriously contributed to the profound shattering of the absolutely secured status of God in Christianity. Theologians and philosophers began intellectual appropriation of these

events and came up with new formulations, conceptions, and theories about what has happened.

For Thomas Altizer the death of God is a logical continuation of God's kenotic pouring himself out into the world in creation, incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. God gave everything he had to humans, sacrificed himself for humans' sake, and relinquished his powers to humans. Furthermore, God will reach complete fulfillment in Apocalypse, in his total opposite, and thereby will complete transformation of the transcendence into immanence, dissolving the grounds both for absolute truth as objective, universal and apodictic knowledge about the world and for the mere subjectivity and inwardness of an autonomous individual mind. The results are rather devastating—the apocalypse for a future Self, all-comprehensive flat depression, inner emptiness, absence of self-dividedness, all actors in the drama of the good and evil have left the scene. Finally the world itself, according to Baudrillard, has lost its characteristics of physical reality; it became de-realized and turned into hypo-reality. Indeed, the world now has transformed into the dead body of God, void of divine presence, the god's total Other; what was supposed to be god's creation and outreach became destruction and inversion.

Altizer and Baudrillard were not the only ones who would think along these lines. There were other intellectual attempts to explore the state of metaphysics, human condition, and transformation of Christian religion after the death of god. Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Heidegger, Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo, Jean-Luc Marion—they all took a challenge of the loss of ultimate security blanket as a result of weakening reason in post-theistic world and managed to turn a seeming spiritual tragedy into an intellectual and even religious gain for the West. They do not have such a gloomy dead-end picture of Christendom after the death of Christian god. Just the opposite, this event would bring another chance to even deeper appropriate the Christian message, widen the space in which interaction between God and man takes place, make human psyche more complex and further integrate human morality.

I submit that philosophers pursued the issues of human religiosity and reflexivity in the post-theistic culture in such opposite directions due to the fact that their views on the structure of human psyche and the effects of the loss of god as an absolute authority in truth, beauty, and the good on human life and human

mind significantly divert. The outcome depends on how deep this impact penetrates into human psyche, which states, forms, layers, and profiles of consciousness it touches, and how humans can experience and intellectually work through the loss, absence, non-existence, and other negative indicators of presence in general.

Likewise, the death of god for Nietzsche was a precondition of the birth of a true authentic man—in his view, it brings forth a strong self-reliant man, thriving, and full of life and creativity; while for Altizer and Baudrillard the death of god is an instrument of psychological devastation, cultural exhaustion, spiritual pauperization, and ultimately the ontological annihilation of modern man. Is the death of god a gift or curse for the Western humanity?

Non-Being, Not Existing, and Nothingness

If we approach the death of god as an event in Western spiritual life in the similar way as we would approach a human death we have to deal with experience of the loss. Obviously, experience of the lost god or absence of god is not the same as the absence of experience of god. Grieving or feeling devastated, left behind, robbed of something dear, violated, depressed, empty are normal elements of mourning and express the fact that there is a void in the world which a human soul has to deal with and makes an effort to fill it with something meaningful. One could easily take Freud's line here and distinguish between the mourning and melancholic states of the psyche following the event of death. The first one is normal, temporary, and leads to repairing and reestablishing the wholeness of the shattered world; the second, according to Freud, is abnormal, longer or even permanent and leads to the damage of the psyche itself. In other words, there is a wounded Self behind melancholy; a piece of the Self is missing, a certain capacity to react, sustain, and articulate emotions is negatively affected. That, in turn, generates all kinds of occurrences in the human psyche as a whole: denials, defense, repression and suppression, transference, substitution, compensation, development of alternative Ego, guilty consciousness, sublimation, etc. The state of melancholy mobilizes all levels of the psyche—the conscious, semi-conscious, and subconscious, and all layers of the Self structure. Emotions, reason and the will are summoned to work harder to reflect on the damage and bring to positive awareness the very fact of loss, the meaning of absence, and the presence of void. Within the human psyche

various reflective mechanisms begin to reshape themselves and relationship between them is becoming more complex. For example if an experiential emotional Self is damaged and if the trauma is clarified and understood by a rational Self in the process of becoming aware of the event, the thirst Self, having received cathartic experience as a result of understanding by the rational Self, becomes repaired and the rational Self expands the scope of its conscious experience.

In my opinion, a philosophical analysis of the Self stricken by the strongest and most radical form of melancholy, the dreadful melancholy, which is associated with deprivation of a man of god and following deprivation of life in the apocalypse, would yield richer results once analyzed by means of hermeneutical and phenomenological conceptual apparatus precisely because of its similarity to phenomena which are essentially given only in part, ambiguous by nature, buried-in-history, anything which is not-said-but-suggested, non-explicit, other-sided. These are elements of reality that are not immediately given, but still are participating in the constitution of meaning of reality. Missing parts of the Self lost to melancholy, holes in damaged Ego, shaken and vanished gods, down-prized essences and emptied banks of secured moral values, de-naturalized and de-realized things without shadows, over-stocked hyper-realities and deity as past-away superfluous entity are not short of presence; rather their presence is dynamic, pulsating, and constantly changing. Their presence is real inasmuch as it is appropriated as meaning. They do not make us and our lives paralyzed with apocalyptic horror of triple nihilism —no god, no Self, no reality. All these are just challenging experiences that call on human creativity and will. Each person comes of short of something; each one is in this or that way crippled and has to adapt to oneself and to a world that is crippled as well. Deformity in melancholy is not a disease; deformity of the world without god, i.e. without order, certainty, and security, is not a curse.

Based on what Altizer and Baudrillard wrote about melancholy one can say that the difference between existentialist and the postmodern concepts of the death of god is how and to what degree a Self has been affected. For existentialists the end of metaphysics led to the beginning of the authentic Self; to become real a person in nearly mystical religious or other inner experience of transcendence was supposed not only re-appropriate lost objective meaning of the truth, values, and beauty, but firstly and mostly create himself. Those

efforts would be successful for existentialists and in vain for post-modernists.

But once viewed in the light of the newest European paradigm which started spreading in European world with such philosophers as Gadamer, Vattimo, and Marion the characteristics of god as absent from being add something to being rather than take away. Emptiness which could be experienced by a person as a result of death of god, does not mean the psyche which is cleared of everything, but realization that our consciousness is capable of fixating something as real without attributing it with some kind of features, mostly finite. Non-being can be a positive characteristic; it might imply ontological modalities as well as. Empty mind is not one which lost all meanings and is left with ontological displacement, but rather the one which is the outcome of constant reflective work toward the Self's emotions, volitions, fantasies and other instances of engagement. Empty god or the other god, the god who went beyond good and evil, the one who is seemingly is not interested in human affairs could be the reflection of complete thorough work of consciousness. Buddhist meditative practices which allow a person to clear up his psyche and obtain higher level of his consciousness are full of all kinds of emptiness which can be experienced positively without generating bitter and devastating states of loneliness, disparity, melancholy, sloth, and so on.

Alina Feld presented views of three European thinkers who were concerned with disappearance of god from European cultural horizon and as a result the ultimate destruction of the European world. She carefully analyzed terms and conditions of each conception and sided with Altizer in what humans have to go through the death of God and what it brings in order to reach "a new heaven and a new earth." Meanwhile what is needed is a slow tedious job of unfolding the dead-god-paradigm. It generates and brings to the table the whole temporal or historical aspect of any human phenomenon. Also, god has died not by himself; it is people who lost touch with god; who do not see and feel his presence. Why did the Christian god stop satisfying humans; how did it happen that his capacities are no longer those they want for themselves to rely on; they do not need to preserve and maintain ultimate determinacy outside of the world as well-articulated and eternal value. Perhaps the way humans relate to God—faith in Christianity—has stopped to satisfy people because their connection with god became more intricate and complex. Perhaps cultural conditions are such that believe in one god

does not make any sense; plurality of gods are more in demand, ways to connect with him or her, ways to receive divine blessings are multiple. Perhaps traditional Christian faith needs drastic editing before its death is permanent.