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A Note on Feld's *Remarks on Melancholy and the Otherness of God*

Tom Rockmore
Duquesne University
rockmore@duq.edu

Abstract: Alina Feld's recent study of melancholy is doubly remarkable, as one of the very few treatments of this phenomenon in detail, and as an excellent example of the application of philosophical sophistication to concrete human themes. It is frequent to encounter forms of humanism that turn on an interest in human being in the abstract. This is, on the contrary, a careful, detailed, informed, useful study of concrete human existence.

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The link of melancholy to happiness could hardly be more obvious. Happiness and unhappiness are never unrelated, never separated, never even far apart. Theories of unhappiness presuppose an understanding of happiness. In different ways, this concern goes all the way back in the Western tradition. Aristotle already understands happiness (Gk: *eudaimonia*) as following on proper action, which reaches a peak in the expression of rationality. This type of theory is as important as it has ever been for understanding unhappiness. I will come back to this point below.

The causes of unhappiness differ from its manifestation. Unhappiness manifests itself in many ways. In earlier times, there was much attention to the relation of happiness and unhappiness especially in Christianity. In our present historical moment, it is often increasingly linked to economic matters. Unhappiness, which I shall be using as a general term, comes in many forms. The ancients were already concerned with depression and what later came be called melancholy, as well as with *acedia*, which can be defined from a Christian perspective as "a state of restlessness and inability either to work or to pray."[1] As Alina Feld points out, other terms were in use as well. In the *Purgatorio*, Dante, echoing Matthew 22:37, defines sloth "as failure to love God with all one's heart, all one's mind and all one's soul."[2] And in the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas describes the same sin as "an oppressive sorrow, which, to wit, so weighs upon man's mind, that he wants to do nothing."[3]

Some observers detect important patterns in unhappiness. Many religious thinkers and more than a few philosophers draw attention to the human mood in relation to God. Kierkegaard famously speaks of a sickness unto death for which an appropriate remedy putatively consists in a leap of faith and the sacrifice of one's first born son. Others allude to similar phenomena in turning away from Christianity. Marx relates alienation to the economic structure of the modern world. Heidegger refers to *Angst* as supposedly characterizing the existence of Dasein, sometimes understood as human being, relative to being.

In her new book, Alina Feld reviews a selective series of "hypotheses concerning melancholy ranging

[1] See E. A. Livingstone, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

[2] See Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio, Canto Settimo*, fifth circle.

[3] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, Secunda*, secunda partis, q. 35.

widely from Greek antiquity until the present,"[4] as well as from Hippocrates to Jean Baudrillard, Gaston Bachelard, Robert Desoille and other recent observers, all the while charting a path through related and perhaps unrelated, even starkly opposing views of *acedia* and/or depression. Her central claim is that depression is not merely contingent but rather, as she says, "perduring," even intrinsic to the human condition. In her review and reconstruction of the debate around depression, Feld very usefully returns behind the modern Cartesian paradigm to enlarge our understanding of what we understand as being human. Her own view is only obscurely signaled in the title of the book: *Melancholy and the Otherness of God*. It is unclear whether "otherness" here refers to the difference between the human and the divine, each of which is other than the other, or if there is another intended message. Yet clearly she is taking the divine seriously as a central theme for finite human being in reconstructing the mainly unknown history of efforts to comprehend psychic depression.

It as important to go back behind recent debate to consider earlier theories of depression as it is to resist the temptation to engage in what Weber would call re-enchantment in resisting a reinvestment in religious solutions. Rather now as before the long Christian interregnum, there seems to be no better model than the ancient Aristotelian conception of human social flourishing as a necessary prerequisite to happiness. If this is correct, then human dysfunction in all its many forms, including melancholy and *acedia*, is ultimately explicable in social terms that may but need not rest on a religious basis at all.

Feld defines her threefold task as concerned with genealogy, hermeneutics, and the therapy of depression, surely already an enormous task, but, as she notes, without consideration of the medically pathological, which lies beyond the bounds of the present study. Her rich account is composed of a series of reconstructions of what should be seen as a veritable "cornucopia" of views of depression.

Her reconstruction of the pre-history of this phenomenon ranges far and wide into a literature she obviously knows very well. Feld reviews the materials in roughly chronological order, but with many learned asides. I feel no obligation to attempt to match her erudition in this domain. Since I have neither Feld's sure grasp of this material, nor the space to discuss it in detail, my remarks can only be selective.

Feld's review depicts human beings as struggling over a long period in different ways to come to grips with an important, even central aspect of the human condition, an aspect that Hippocrates, for instance, approaches through a humoral theory. In her account, a religious element emerges very early in the effort to come to grips with the phenomenon of depression. Already in *Timaeus*, Plato is working with three explanatory concepts: being, becoming, and *chora*—identified alternatively among other possibilities as the receptacle or as space—in grasping disease in terms of the rejection of god. Yet surely, since Plato is not a Christian, this is not a "religious" explanation in the sense this term takes on in the later monotheistic religious traditions.

The accounts of melancholy and allied phenomena continue to proliferate as we approach modern times. Feld points out that in the Middle Ages a palimpsest of melancholy emerged alongside the ancient humoral view now expanded through the theological conception of sin. Since writers were dealing with phenomena they understood less than well, we should not be surprised if we find directly opposing analyses in the debate. According to Feld, for Robert Burton the remedy lies in leaving idleness behind while for Pascal, on the contrary, we are left to contemplate the infinite void in waiting for salvation through faith. The sheer level of disagreement about melancholy, a common phenomenon, is surely surprising, indicative perhaps of the weak conceptual grasp on what is occurring.

Feld's remarks on three figures closer to us (G.W.F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers) are particularly interesting. The account of Hegel under the heading "On God's Otherness" picks out the unusual interest of Hegel's reflections on the soul. Feld points out that Hegel was affected by his friend Friedrich Hölderlin's descent into madness. It is perhaps less well known that he was also affected by the depression and subsequent suicide of his sister Christine.[5] Feld understands this complicated series of circumstances as leading to his view of depression in the space created by the death of God.[6] According to Feld the only Hegelian way to overcome melancholy is through total loss leading to spiritual resurrection that, one may

[4] See Alina N. Feld, *Melancholy and the Otherness of God: A Study of the Hermeneutics of Depression*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2011, p. iv. [Henceforth cites as *MOG*]

[5] See Jon Mills, *The Unconscious Abyss: Hegel's Anticipation of Psychoanalysis*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002.

[6] See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§ 782, 785.

speculate, is the functional equivalent of the decision to risk death for recognition in the master-slave relation. She points out that for Hegel we can only become aware of ourselves as finite beings, above all in the work that Pascal refuses, but we become unhappy in desiring to become absolute (*MOG* 110).

Feld dwells on Heidegger's account of profound boredom (*tiefe Langeweile*) that she describes as Dasein's fundamental attunement (*MOG* 127) pointing beyond itself toward being. Though the Heideggerian view has been influential on several Swiss psychiatrists, I regard this account as phenomenologically incorrect, as above all a "deduction" required by his theory of being. Similarly, I hold that his so-called last god is inseparable from his often-denied but obvious turning to Nazism, a turning explicable as his port of refuge as it were after his enforced separation from Catholicism, and after the manifest failure of real Nazism for which he continued to prefer his own idealized version.

In Feld's book, Jaspers enjoys pride of place as one of the few, even perhaps the only recent commentator satisfactorily equipped with both medical and philosophical competence to consider the phenomena of melancholy in detail. Jaspers stresses the distortion in melancholy with respect to time and self, more precisely a so-called time-experience of time as standing still, hence without a future but in which the past predominates. According to Feld, Jaspers' main insight lies in insistence that "the depressive-melancholy" lies beyond scientific theory, which is limited to psychic manifestations of the soul situated beyond cognition, hence pointing to the need for philosophical interpretation.

Her observation that Jaspers is continually focused on the nature, significance and role of otherness, understood as the non-rational and incomprehensible, is suggestive. "Otherness" for Jaspers indicates that psychic malady in general, especially melancholia, are linked to "the otherness of reason and Being" (*MOG* 166). Feld states that for Jaspers as for Friedrich Schelling being and reason are rooted in their opposites, presumably non-being and unreason. She suggests that Jaspers provides clinical evidence supporting but also demystifying Schelling's mythological construction. Yet what evidence can be there possibly be for what by definition lies beyond reason or beyond being?

Feld's remarks on Jaspers lie at the limit of her investigation. Feld, who provides this rich tapestry of views of depression, melancholy, *acedia*, and allied phenomena, does not attempt to impose an overriding structure on the many, often disparate theories. It is as if her central concern were less to theorize about than rather to describe a dark continent lodged in the human soul in recounting, often in vivid images offering contrasting approaches, the dark night of the soul linked to the human condition, and whose resolution is so hard to imagine. An important consequence is to focus the effort of human beings over the millennia to understand human finitude as it were through contrasting analyses vividly illustrating the very difficulty of coming to grips with human finitude. It is more difficult to discern her own view, which is mainly implicit and never brought before the reader in detail. Yet one can arguably identify both in the title of the book as well as in her choice and description of the various theories attention to the theological dimension of melancholy and allied phenomena.

Depression in all its forms is related not only to happiness but also to human finitude. I believe our claims about the world and ourselves are always limited by the historical moment, which we contingently happen to inhabit. In the absence of guidelines, what we can say about the human condition must be a function of our late modern world in which human finitude has neither increased nor decreased but only become more evident in an ongoing journey with ever fewer illusions, hence with fewer handrails. This contingent fact—contingent since it could have been otherwise, for there is no fatality about the modern decline of organized religion—bears on the possible solution to the human existential predicament. Organized religion is an experiment by finite human beings to give meaning in attaching human finitude to an absent infinite. For some this is an experiment that is still underway, but for others it has increasingly run its course in the ever-deepening secularization of the modern world. If as I suspect it is too late for re-enchantment, if we cannot somehow magically overcome melancholy by a return to allegedly divine origins as it were, there is no alternative, as Beckett vividly suggests, to struggling on, no alternative as Camus points out, to giving meaning to our lives through what we do.