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PASCALIAN THEMES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD

Pascal and Kierkegaard belong to those most outstanding Christian philosophers for whom explaining what the essence of faith is constitutes a fundamental problem. For Pascal as well as for Kierkegaard the dialectical opposite of faith is despair, without which one cannot understand the human condition as it is.

One should add that the concept of dialectics constitutes a method allowing to discover the truth about man and provides them with a category necessary for the description of human personality. Despair and faith are ways of existence for the human personality in relation to God.

Such a point of view appears for the first time in the works of Pascal, then Kierkegaard takes it up and analyses the phenomenon of despair in detail, making it the second philosophical category along with faith. Thus those interpretations which consider Pascal's views as an anticipation of the philosophy of "the father of existentialism"¹ are correct. Kierkegaard knew Pascal's philosophy and many times made reference to his thoughts. They shared many views on Christianity and one of them, a fundamental one, was the understanding of the concept of humility. Kierkegaard wrote in his "Diary":

*Pascal says: it is so difficult to believe because it is so difficult to be obedient.*²

Humility is here not only an affirmation of one's own self, the I in confrontation with the greatness of God's Thou, but also a response to the

¹ A. Siemianowski, *Wielkość i nędza człowieka. Rozważania o Pascalu (Greatness and misery of man. Reflexions about Pascal)*, Wrocław 1993, p. 85.

² S. Kierkegaard, "Dziennik" (Wybór), (*Diary (Selection)*), translated by Antoni Szwed), TN KUL, Lublin 2000, (757), p. 461. All passages from Kierkegaard's *Diary (Journals)*, quoted here, were translated into English from the Polish translation, which somewhat differs from the English one (A. Dru, 1838) in this and possibly other places.

value which the other, another man, constitutes for us.³ Referring to the French philosopher, Kierkegaard describes humility in the following way: *Pascal says, at some point, that it would be ridiculous to be shocked by Christ's humility, as if that humility was of the same kind as the Majesty which He reveals. One could also say that it would be ridiculous indeed had Christ come in earthly splendor and majesty, since the Majesty that He was to express was in fact the opposite. Existential transparency requires that one be what one teaches.*⁴ The philosopher warns, however, against false humility, typical of lay mentality, present in protestant thinking, which we find in the attitude: *I am too humble and modest to aspire to being extraordinary.*⁵

The Danish philosopher remarks that what Protestantism avoids so much and what it calls something extraordinary is nothing else than taking up the reality of the cross. He asks: *What is that extraordinariness? Is it not living in poverty and misery, being hated, cursed, and finally killed?*⁶ In order to understand well the concept of humility one should see it through the model of Christ, who shows us fully what transparency identical with the truth of existence is. That is why Pascal wrote: *True religion shows us our duties, our weaknesses – pride and covetousness, it also indicates the medicine – humility and mortification.*⁷ Noticing the difference between his own and Pascal's conception of humility, the Dane stresses this existential theme. He writes: *Pascal says that very few people speak humbly of humility, not many innocently about innocence, few express doubt when speaking of their doubts – it is only a lie within us, a duality, a contradiction. It is an expression of that to which I attach a greater significance – duality. For Pascal they seem to have still an almost aesthetic character, I strongly stress their existential aspect.*⁸

It seems that the opinion quoted above is too radical, since, following Pascal's train of thought on this matter we notice that the French philosopher also sees in humility a state that reveals the truth of existence. The

³ P. Bartkiewicz, *Rola pokory w kulturze myślenia (wokół "Veritatis splendor" i "Fides et ratio")* (*The role of humility in the culture of thinking (commenting on "Veritatis splendor" and "Fides et ratio")*), [in:] *Polska filozofia wobec encykliki Fides et ratio (Polish philosophy in relation to the Encyclical Fides et ratio)*, ed. by Marian Grabowski, Toruń 1999, pp. 214–215.

⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *Dziennik*, op. cit., p. 461.

⁵ S. Kierkegaard, *Dziennik*, op. cit., p. 359.

⁶ S. Kierkegaard, *Dziennik*, p. 359.

⁷ B. Pascal, *Myśli (The Pensées)*, Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, Warszawa 1972. (435), p. 183. This Polish edition of Pascal's *Pensées* was used as a source for translating quotations into English.

⁸ S. Kierkegaard, *Dziennik*, op. cit., p. 462.

realism of man consists in seeing himself as he is. His natural state is misery and greatness. Knowing the former brings despair, knowing the latter brings pride. Despite the awareness of his misery man has instinct which lifts him up. He suffers from a lack of power to learn the truth, yet he has an indestructible consciousness of what the truth is. He seeks truth, but finds uncertainty. His rational self fights an endless battle with his emotions and passions. We possess truth and goodness only partially, always mingled with evil and falsehood. For Pascal there is no liberation from these contradictions in any other way than through faith, since, according to him *all contradictions come together and are united in God and through God alone*.⁹ That is why humility is a way of existence for man confronted with the mystery of God who is a reality beyond human understanding. Infinity, being an attribute of His nature, is difficult to grasp for a finite mind limited in its capacities. Being aware of the human mind's limitations is, for both philosophers, a trait of man's wisdom.

John Paul II took notice of this characteristic of the Frenchman's and the Dane's philosophy referring to it in his philosophical encyclical, in which he writes that in Christian philosophy one can see its subjective aspect *which consists in the purifying of reason through faith. As a theological virtue, faith frees the reason from presumptuousness, a temptation to which philosophers tend to surrender. It had been condemned by Paul and the Fathers of the Church, and in times closer to us by philosophers such as Pascal and Kierkegaard. Thanks to humility the philosopher finds courage to take up certain problems which would be difficult to solve if he did not take into consideration knowledge attained through Revelation. As examples one can indicate: the problem of evil and of suffering, God's personal identity, the meaning of life, and in a more direct way – the metaphysical question "why does something exist?"*¹⁰

Lev Szestov who analyzed the philosophy of Pascal and even more so that of Kierkegaard claims that whoever has full confidence in his own wisdom, sense of justice, and counts totally on his own power will not be saved since such an attitude is a symptom of the biggest of sins: pride. Pride means being absolutely certain of where to go and how to get there, counting only on one's own judgment and abilities. He wrote: *Who has hope in himself renounces God. Because between ways in which man saves*

⁹ M. Tazbir, *Świadomość heroiczna (Heroic consciousness)*, "Życie i Myśl" 1962, No. 9–10, p. 7.

¹⁰ "Fides et ratio" (in) *Encykliki Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II (The Encyclicals of The Holy Father John Paul II)*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2005, pp. 1164–1165.

himself from his troubles and the way in which God saves man there can be nothing in common.¹¹ Speaking about humility, both philosophers have in mind the many meanings it can have. One of them consists in a realistic assessment of oneself, that is because *the majority of people are subjective towards themselves and objective towards others, sometimes frighteningly so – but the correct goal should be to have an objective attitude to oneself and a subjective one towards everyone else*¹² – wrote Kierkegaard. In order to obtain a proper evaluation of oneself it is absolutely necessary to keep an objective distance to oneself.

In a different meaning, humility consists of feeling one's own nonentity in relation to the greatness of God and the awareness of sin as being the constitutive principle of life. This type of humility makes one conscious of the fact that, as Kierkegaard wrote, *we can never be right about anything in relation to God, that is why It is necessary to have three qualities, those of the pyrrhonist, of the geometrician and of the humble Christian. These unite with and temper one another, so that we doubt when we should, we aim at certainty when we should and we submit when we should.*¹³ That is, one must have a powerful, lucid, mathematical mind, know where its borders lie, and then with a child's trust subject oneself to Revelation. In a yet different meaning, humility is accepting one's own suffering. The attitude towards suffering was a theme linking the two philosophers as some commentators of Kierkegaard's thought pointed out.¹⁴

The conviction that suffering is a natural state for a Christian because it is the best way to imitate Christ was what Pascal and the Dane had in common. The fact that after the resurrection He allowed to touch his wounds was, for Pascal, equal to showing that man's duty was to integrate oneself with His suffering.¹⁵ Accepting one's own suffering is therefore the most perfect form of human obedience. Kierkegaard develops this theme in Pascal's thinking when he writes *Only suffering prepares us for eternity, because the essence of eternity is faith, faith consists in obedience, and we learn obedience through suffering. There is no obedience without suffering,*

¹¹ *Tylko wiara. Antologia tekstów Lwa Szeszowa (Only faith. An anthology of texts by Lev Shestov)*, (ed.) Patrycja Wyligala, Wydawnictwo M, Kraków 2004, p. 255.

¹² B. Alex, *Soeren Kierkegaard: życie prawdziwe. Życie i dzieło chrześcijańskiego filozofa (Soeren Kierkegaard: true life. Life and work of the Christian philosopher)*, Oficyna Wydawnicza "Vocatio", Warszawa 1998, p. 122.

¹³ *Pensées, fragments et lettres de Blaise Pascal*, edited by P. Faugère, Paris 1844, p. 347. English translation of this passage is given here after W. F. Cobb, *Pascal*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, part 18, 2003, p. 657.

¹⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *Dziennik, op. cit.*, footnote 604.

¹⁵ B. Pascal, *Myśli (The Pensées)*, *op. cit.*, (734), p. 323.

*no faith without obedience nor is there eternity without faith. In suffering – obedience is obedience, in obedience – faith is faith, in faith – eternity is eternity.*¹⁶

For both philosophers suffering is the only way to perfection for man and the character which best embodies this road to self-improvement is the biblical Job. *Salomon and Job knew and expressed human misery better than anybody else: one being the happiest, the other the most miserable of men: the former knowing the emptiness of sensual bliss, the latter the truth of suffering*¹⁷ – wrote Pascal. Kierkegaard added that suffering takes place in the solemnity of silence because *silence hides suffering within itself like a mystery which nobody dares to disclose.*¹⁸

For Kierkegaard, Job is a man of trial. Trial, in this sense, is God's obverse, that is, a sort of way of discouraging the believer, of making him disappointed in relation to God. According to the Danish philosopher, trial occurs every time *when someone decides to exist in a religious manner, as an actual, definite, concrete man.*¹⁹ Job receives his misfortunes with a religious acceptance expressed in the words *The Lord gave, The Lord took away, may His name be blessed*, at the same time through his lamentations he demands of God the returning of what he has lost. Job takes up a crazy struggle to achieve what seems impossible because he is convinced that nothing is impossible to God. And it happens that everything is returned to him, against all rational judgments of his friends.

Since suffering is a factor furthering mental concentration, it allows man to achieve spiritual depth, which is a condition of discovering his true nature. Lack of thoughtful deliberation *leads nowhere, outwards, towards what is objective, whereas what comes from faith is mysterious, directed to that which is internal, what makes man more himself. This "being oneself" is oftentimes called "pessimistic" realism, renouncing the shallow joys of this world in return for the depth of Christianity.*²⁰ That is why for both philosophers suffering is a necessary condition of being a Christian. Achieving spiritual depth allows man to discover his true nature which is tantamount

¹⁶ S. Kierkegaard, *Rozprawy (Dissertations)*, [in:] B. Alex, *Soeren Kierkegaard: życie prawdziwe. op. cit.*, pp. 108–109.

¹⁷ B. Pascal, *Myśli (The Pensées)*, *op. cit.*, (169), p. 86.

¹⁸ S. Kierkegaard, *Powtórzenie (Repetition)*, Translation and introduction B. Świderski, Fundacja Aletheia, Warszawa 1992, p. 117.

¹⁹ S. Kierkegaard, *Dziennik*, *op. cit.*, p. 392.

²⁰ J. A. Prokopski, *Postłowie nad Szestowem i egzystencjalizmem (Postscript: on Szestov and existentialism)*, [in:] L. Szestow, *Kierkegaard and existential philosophy*, Wydawnictwo ANTYK, Kęty 2003, p. 249.

to reaching the state of authentic existence, this being the main task of man. Kierkegaard looked at Pascal from the perspective of the French philosopher's sufferings, both these that fate ordained and those that were a result of ascetic practices deliberately chosen by him. The Danish philosopher was irritated by the fact that many scholars separate the thoughts of Pascal from the life of the author. He writes with quite a bit of bitterness: *Who, in our times, has been more often used by preachers and professors than Pascal? They adopt his thoughts, but leave out the fact that he was an ascetic, he wore a hair shirt and performed all actions connected with it and that is not mentioned today.*²¹

One as well as the other philosopher realized that truth is found in subjectivity, which, through suffering and despair becomes refined spirituality. This spirituality is characterized by a specific duality which is a result of revolt and humility coexisting, since only such an attitude can accept faith. Particularly since faith is not a conviction but a mode of existence and life in faith suspends moral norms, as well as norms of rational thinking because it accepts paradox. That is so since paradox is born always from the link between the one who exists and the eternal truth. Therefore, the highest form of paradox is the absolute paradox of God-man, which goes beyond human understanding and so one can only believe in it.

When trying to define paradox Kierkegaard writes: *Paradox is not a concession but a «category» – an ontological statement which expresses the relation between the existing, knowing spirit and the eternal truth.*²² Paradoxical thinking is present in Pascal's thought, even though the expression "paradox" is not used by the philosopher. He describes it as a situation of two extremes attracting each other or a concordance of two contradictory truths. Inability to think of reality as contradictory, according to him, is the root of all heresies, of which the Arians are the best example since they cannot understand that Christ is God and man. Pascal wrote: *Therefore there exists a large number of truths of faith and of morality which seem to be repulsive to each other and which in fact continue to exist together in perfect order.*²³ For both philosophers, being "above reason" does not mean complete cutting of connections with rationality. Truth defined as paradox does not stop to be truth; it does, though, go beyond the border of reason and only as such can it be given to man. That is why only by way of the category of paradox could one describe human condition full of contradictions

²¹ S. Kierkegaard, *Dziennik, op. cit.*, p. 463.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 240.

²³ B. Pascal, *Myśli, op. cit.*, (788), p. 347.

and only this way through the intermediary of God-man similar to people in His subjectivity could man receive the fullness of truth. The category of paradox applies also to knowing God, who, for both philosophers, is a reality going beyond human understanding since the infinity of His nature is difficult to grasp for the mind, which, being finite, is limited in its capacity.

Thus, on an intellectual-philosophical level it is impossible to know God, who is, at the same time, hidden and undetectable directly in His creation, and revealing himself, not so much in the world, as within human spirituality.

For Pascal, as well as for Kierkegaard, God is and, simultaneously, is not hidden, *His immanence coexists with transcendence*.²⁴

Both thinkers consider God, as well as many other problems, from a dialectical point of view. Kierkegaard refers to that in his *Diary*, in which in turn he refers to a letter of Pascal to Mademoiselle Roannes, where we can find the thought that God in his mysterious nature reveals himself to only a few and up to the moment of Incarnation he remained behind the veil of this mystery.

*But in this way He hides himself even more by wrapping himself in being in its human form. Because He was more knowable when He remained invisible. Now He has hidden himself even more deeply in the sacrament (...) We have here a dialectic which is given meaning by Johannes Climacus – that is, that there is a revelation recognizable through its opposite, that is, through mystery.*²⁵

This is difficult to understand for somebody who makes use of his reason alone, since the logic of a religious man differs from his logic. Because God cannot be grasped by reason, rather He makes himself known to man who calls on Him from his bottomless despair. Man will not address his prayers to an immovable subject for philosophers, neither could God thus conceived be an inspiration to prophets and apostles. Thus, the God of Pascal and Kierkegaard is not a God of philosophers understood as an abstract, universal law.

Kierkegaard repeats after Pascal, that the Christian God is the living God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, not the God of philosophers and scholars. For Pascal, *the God of Christians – is the God of love and consolation: a God who fills the hearts and souls of those He possesses; it is the God who makes them feel their misery and His endless*

²⁴ S. Kowalczyk, *Bóg w myśli współczesnej (God in contemporary thought)*, Wrocław 1982, p. 388.

²⁵ S. Kierkegaard, *Dziennik, op. cit.*, p. 463.

*mercy; who becomes part of their souls interior, who fills their souls with humility, joy, trust, love, who makes them incapable of having any other goal than Himself.*²⁶

That is why it is the duty of man to reciprocate this love. Kierkegaard referring to his predecessor remarks that, according to Pascal, *the knowledge about what is divine remains in a reverse relation to the knowledge about the human. One has to first know what is human in order to, as the next step, start loving. One should first start loving what is divine and then know it. What Pascal means by this is that the knowledge about what is divine, is in fact a transformation of human personality: he must become another man in order to know what pertains to God. This has been completely forgotten in our times*²⁷ – he wrote in his *Diary*. According to Kierkegaard, God reveals the truth about Himself to a given man in proportion to this man's existential transformation. In no other philosophy, it seems, do the old and constantly used religious expressions: conversion (being reformed) and revival (being born again) become so clear, as in the philosophy of the Dane. Conversion, for him, means going through despair in order to return to the state one was in from the moment of birth. That is, a self relying clearly on the Might that created it. Thus, in Pascal's philosophy, God who values human freedom remains partially hidden so as to give man the opportunity to search for him, whereas in Kierkegaard's philosophy, man in his liberty has to make the effort of becoming born again, since his personality is seen as a gift and a requirement at the same time, a requirement which he must fulfill. Finding God as well as discovering one's own personality does not depend on man alone. On the contrary, on the part of man there can be only a great thirst for God and such a deepening of one's own personality which will lay the ground for resolutions having eternal significance. For both philosophers the road to these leads through suffering and despair.

The objective of my paper was, not so much to show similarities and differences between the two philosophies, even though it is evident that Kierkegaard is a continuator of Pascal's thinking in the matter of the dialectical opposition of despair and faith as elements of the human condition, as to demonstrate those themes in Pascal's reflections to which Kierkegaard makes direct reference.

²⁶ B. Pascal, *Myśli, op. cit.*, (602), p. 285.

²⁷ S. Kierkegaard, *Dziennik, op. cit.*, p. 462.

S U M M A R Y

The paper analyses Pascalian motifs in Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy. The Danish philosopher can be considered the follower of Pascal in respect to the dialectical concept of human condition. For both philosophers, despair and faith constitute two categories which are inseparable from human existence. Therefore, the views that the French philosopher's concepts anticipated the thought of "the father of existentialism" seem well-grounded. However, the paper does not aim at indicating the similarities and differences between the two philosophical theories. Instead, it focuses upon those aspects of Pascal's reflections and also his biography, to which the Copenhagen philosopher directly referred. Kierkegaard knew the philosophy of his predecessor and highly appreciated it. He emphasized that Pascal's interpretation of humility, suffering, God-man paradox, and the importance of paradoxical mode of thinking were crucial for Christian approach. What is significant is the fact that Kierkegaard wrote about such problems in his *Journals*, addressing these issues directly, without using pseudonyms, which were typical of his other writings.

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