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Philosophy and melancholy: Reflections on the role of melancholy in the Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's philosophical thought

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I would like to address the role of melancholy in Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger. I will show that both philosophers refer to ancient conceptions of melancholy and medieval acedia. It can be seen that Kierkegaard's conceptions of melancholy touch on Aristotle's Problem XXX, 1, on the one hand, and radicalize and universalize the concept of medieval acedia on the other. Likewise, references to the ancient thought of melancholy can also be found in Heidegger's work, and implications of his *Daseinsanalyse* can be linked to the medieval concept of acedia. A large-scale search of Heidegger's work on the concept of melancholia (as it is still new in the literature) also provides an important overview of the thematic field in Heidegger's work. I would like to argue that thinking about melancholy in connection with the philosophy of Kierkegaard and Heidegger helps to understand melancholy as a possibility of reaching a new understanding of self and world — a reflection on actual values and an opening of philosophical thinking. So, I will show that Heidegger is right in assuming that melancholy is a basic mood of philosophy.

KEYWORDS

transcendence; self; world; meaning; suffering; authenticity

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INTRODUCTION

Melancholy has been considered a distinct condition since antiquity: "Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile?" (Foster, 1927: 132) — Aristotle is said to have asked, and this is what emerges from the famous Problemata XXX, 1. The answer of antiquity was, as is well known, a medical one: the predominance of black bile, itself unhealthy, enables us to achieve special feats by balancing the temperature. If a mean value is exceeded, manic states occur; if too much cold, sadness is forced. As is well known, Hippocrates and Theophrastus established a connection between the four humours (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile) and the personality types of humans (sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic) (Tellenbach, 1980: 4–12; Klibansky, Panofsky, & Saxl, 2019: 55–65).

In late antiquity and the Middle Ages, on the other hand, the detrimental qualities of melancholy were perceived, up to and including the connection of Saturn (a planet with a problematic influence on man) to melancholy in medieval astrology. Melancholic moodiness then appears as acedia in writings on the existence and practice of monasticism, for example in Bonaventure, John Cassian and Thomas Aquinas. The sluggishness of the heart, the preference for an unpleasant (worldly) distraction, keeps one from the rest in God that is to be sought and sought with disciplined practice. In Cassian, melancholy, understood as acedia, becomes a mortal sin and a tool of the devil. In Thomas Aquinas, it is understood as weariness of the soul and guilt of the heart (Theunissen, 1996: 25–35; Flüeler, 1987; Bellebaum, 2016: 37–42).

In the Enlightenment, melancholy is equated with hysteria and weakness of the nervous system. Immanuel Kant is an exception, for whom the melancholic is more open to the sublime. Thus, the experience of the sublime (like the power of nature) leads to the experience of transcendent morality as "humanity in me" and provides the melancholic with access to an "immanent transcendence" (Kant, 2007: 92). In the Romantic period, melancholy was then placed in the vicinity of depression and, at the latest after the Second World War, began to be rehabilitated. Since about 1970, it has been clear that depression is an illness, while melancholy is a state of mind, a character trait.

Broadly speaking, the melancholic is considered sad, gloomy, introverted, lonely, anxious, brooding, inhibited in making decisions, but also on-the-go, restless, overly active, with a fertile imagination and generally out of balance. The melancholic knows that he or she is dominated by the past. He or she turns away from the world (turning away from the world can also lead to melancholy, as the Middle Ages experienced with the "monk's disease", acedia). The future is hidden from the melancholic. His or her problem is the

imbalance of longing and fulfilment compared to one's hope of reaching the goal. The greater the longing and the less hope for fulfilment, the greater the melancholy. This unbalanced relationship between longing and hope can also be related to philosophy.

Philosophy, as metaphysics, seeks the unifying ground of all being.[1] From the pre-Socratics to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, philosophy has always shown a tendency to want to think as a whole, to want to trace everything back to a principle or to integrate it into a system. It was not until Søren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche that this tradition was significantly broken up. It was not until Martin Heidegger that another attempt was made to return to the tradition of the pre-Socratics. Until the modern age, philosophers dreamt home, of oneness, eternity. In view of the finite, imperfect, uncertain, transient world, he or she shifts his or her hopes to a world beyond. In the world of this world, there is only disruption for him or her. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling already found the reason for melancholy in the dependence of human being, whose striving for perfection remains unfulfilled, a point also to be found in the work of Kierkegaard. All existence — including God's existence — demands a condition God, however, has the condition within himself and connects with it, becomes one with it. Human being, however, never gets hold of the condition, never becomes one, always remains dependent on a natural condition, on meaning, being, his or her thrownness (*Geworfenheit*). Understood in this way, the human being always remains dependent on an external condition of which he or she is not master. It is precisely in the knowledge of this and in the admission that human being is dependent on precisely this external condition and can never fully overcome it that a feeling of powerlessness, a mood of melancholy, emerges. This fact can be understood as the sadness clinging to all finite life, as the veil of melancholy spread over all nature, the deep indestructible melancholy of all life. Two philosophers who have dealt intensively with melancholy are Kierkegaard and Heidegger, Heidegger having been significantly influenced by Kierkegaard's thinking, particularly in his analysis of existence (*Daseinsanalyse*).[2]

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[1] Novalis writes: "Philosophy is actually homesickness — the urge to be at home everywhere" (*Heidegger Gesamtausgabe* [GA] 29/30: 7/5), cited in Heidegger *The fundamental concepts of metaphysics* (GA 29/30). As is common in academic works on the work of Martin Heidegger, I cite the German primary editions as they are available in the German *Heidegger Gesamtausgabe*, Verlag *Vittorio Klostermann*, Frankfurt am Main, are numbered and are usually cited in specialist literature. The number indicates the page number in the German edition and the second number the page number in the relevant English translation (see bibliography).

[2] Kierkegaard's influence on Heidegger's philosophy has been analysed many times and has produced remarkable evidence, for example in: Hall, 1984: 179–197; McCarthy, 2011: 95–126; Welz, 2011: 265–284; Carlisle, 2013: 421–439; Thonhauser, 2014; Kuder, 2016; Thonhauser, 2016; Wyschogrod, 2021. I have not been able to find any scientific work specifically on the influence of Kierkegaard on Heidegger in matters related to melancholy.

For this reason, it also seems plausible to me to relate the two philosophers to each other, especially when it comes to the concept of melancholy. For it will then become clear, to anticipate somewhat, that in Heidegger's work melancholy is further developed from a secular point of view, as was already the case with Kierkegaard. In addition, it will be shown that such a comparison is not merely of textual or exegetical interest, but is of existential significance in better understanding the phenomenon of melancholy from a philosophical point of view.

MELANCHOLY IN THE WORK AND THOUGHT OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD

Kierkegaard has been considered both a melancholic thinker and a thinker concerned with melancholy. Two terms are used for melancholy in his oeuvre:[3] firstly the Danish *Tungsind* (from Danish *tung* "heavy", "sad" and *sind* "spirit") and secondly *melancholi*. *Tungsind* is comparable to the German word *Schwermut*[4] and describes a persistent or recurring state of mind characterised by sadness, depression, despair, despondency, hopelessness or melancholy.[5] The Danish term *melancholi* is derived from the Late Latin *melancholia*, based on the ancient Greek medical term μελαγχολία (formed from μελαν- "black" and χολή "bile"). Hippocrates used the term to describe a condition characterised by irascibility and depression. He believed that these symptoms were caused by an excess of black bile in the body. While *tungsind* (*Schwermut*) and *melancholi* (*Melancholie*) are often both translated as "melancholy" in English translations of Kierkegaard's work, the difference between the two terms is usually preserved in German translations. There is also a recognisable pattern in the use of both terms.

Kierkegaard seems to use *tungsind* primarily when describing his own psychological and religious development, such as when discussing his relationship with his father or when referring to the events surrounding his failed engagement to Regine Olsen. In this context, *tungsind* then seems to transcend states of sadness or low mood and rather indicate something like clinical depression. Although the term *melancholi* is also sometimes used in these contexts, it is more often used when Kierkegaard talks about music or when he devotes himself to poetic descriptions of particular moods and atmospheres. When used in this way, it often has the same meaning as the Danish *veemod* — sadness. If the Danish *melancholi* is deliberately used by Kierkegaard to describe psychological

[3] This was also based on the article by Emmanuel, 2014: 137–141.

[4] See also Nielsen, 1966: 466.

[5] Dahlerup, 1918–1956, 24: 1056. See also the entry on *melancholi*, Dahlerup, 1918–1956, 13: 1233–1234.

states, its use points more to the description of a contemplative mood than to a psychological disorder. *Melancholi* can then be associated with romantic longing, with sadness about the transience of youth and beauty, longing for the past or with a feeling of dissatisfaction regarding the present.

According to an analysis by Vincent McCarthy, Kierkegaard's use of both terms can also be understood as follows: melancholy stands for man's unconscious longing for the religious, which man sometimes repeatedly avoids. *Tungsind* (*Schwermut*), on the other hand, stands for man's resolute, reflected religious longing. Although Kierkegaard does not always follow this distinction consistently, it nevertheless provides a good starting point (McCarthy, 1977: 152–165).

Two approaches to melancholy can be found in Kierkegaard's thought and work: On the one hand, he considers melancholy from a sin-theological point of view and thus remains entirely within a long tradition of interpreting melancholy and acedia. On the other hand, Kierkegaard views melancholy as a constitution of the physical soul. With this interpretation, Kierkegaard ties in with the conception of humours and personality types that has existed since Hippocrates and, even more essentially, ties in with the Aristotelian interpretation of melancholy as a characteristic of genius. Let's start with the first interpretation.

Kierkegard's concept of melancholy under the influence of sin theology

In the past, Kierkegaard's entire thought has repeatedly been placed in the tradition of acedia and melancholy.[6] Extensive studies by Michael Theunissen, Alfred Bellebaum, Brandt and others (Theunissen, 1996; Bellebaum, 1990; Bellebaum, 2012; Bellebaum, 2015) have successfully and impressively demonstrated that Kierkegaard is a legitimate heir to the tradition of acedia,

[6] Extensive research but without any claim to completeness yields the following picture. Studies dedicated to acedia in Kierkegaard can be found in: Theunissen, 1996; Bellebaum, 1990; Bellebaum, 2012; Bellebaum, 2015. Studies dedicated to melancholy in Kierkegaard can be found in: Warmuth, 1917; Grimsley, 1956; McCarthy, 1977; Guardini, 1983; Khan, 1985; Ferguson, 1995; Podmore, 2011; McCarthy, 2012; Venable, 2014; Câmpean, 2014; Câmpean, 2016; Ciomoş, 2021. Studies dedicated to acedia in Kierkegaard from the perspective of boredom can be found in: Erfani, 2004: 303–317; Svendsen, 2005; Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006; McDonald, 2009; Gilliam, 2013; Hüsch, 2014; Große, 2016; Waldhams, 2020. Studies that consider acedia and melancholy in Kierkegaard from a more psychological point of view can be found in: Hell, 1992; Emrich, 2009; Podmore, 2009; McCarthy, 2015; Kemp, 2021; Benning, 2023. See also: de Madariaga, 1954; Goulet, 1957; Ansbro, 1967; Tellenbach, 1983a; Clark, 1990; Graham, 1990; Sheppard, 1991; Tellenbach, 1991; Rocca, 2000; Nalepa, 2009; Fremstedal, 2023.

initiated by the desert monks in the 4th century, then condensed by Cassianus, Climacus and Gregory the Great and processed by Thomas Aquinas. And an important passage in *Either/Or* itself shows that Kierkegaard's thinking follows the long tradition of the Church, counting melancholy among the cardinal sins. It says:

> Nero's nature was depression (*tungsind*). In our day, it has become somewhat prestigious to be depressed; as far as that goes, 1 can well understand that you find this word too lenient; I hold to an ancient doctrine of the Church that classifies depression among the cardinal sins. If I am correct, this is certainly a very unpleasant bit of information for you, for it turns your whole outlook on life upside down. By way of precaution, I shall promptly point out that a person can have sorrow and care — indeed, this can be so deep that it may follow him his whole life, and this can even be beautiful and true — but only through his own fault does a person become depressed (Kierkegaard, 1987b: 185).

Another key passage can be found in Kierkegaard's journals. It reads:

> What a certain tendency among us calls by the name of "spleen," [sic!] what the mystics know under the title: moments of dullness, the Middle Ages knows under the name: acedia (ακηδία, lethargy). Gregory moralia in Job XIII, p. 435: "virum solitarium ubique comitatur acedia... est animi remissio, mentis enervatio, neglectus religiosæ exercitationis, odium professionis, laudatrix rerum secularium." Gregory reveals his experience when he highlights *virum solitarium* since it is a sickness which the pers. who is isolated to the highest degree (the humorous) [is exposed to], and the sickness is altogether accurately described and accurately emphasized as odium professionis and if we take this symptom in a somewhat more gen. sense (not relating to the ecclesiastical confession of sins, whereby we are also compelled to take solitarius as applying to the ordinary member of the Church) as being about self-expression, then experience will not leave us in the lurch if one were to demand examples.
> 20 July 39.
> [A]nd it reveals a deep insight into hum. nature that the old moralists reckoned "tristitia" among the septem vitia principalia. Thus Isidorus Hisp., cf. de Wette translated by Scharling, p. 139, note q. supra, cf. Gregory and Maximus the Confessor in the same comment (Kierkegaard, 2008: Journal EE: 115–117, 1839, 39–40).

These entries in particular show that Kierkegaard advocates and seeks to justify the moral condemnation of melancholy by the Church Fathers and at the same time sharply criticises Romanticism, which turned melancholy, spleen or *Weltschmerz* into a fashionable disease. In his examination of the existential phenomena of anxiety, melancholy and despair — with his walk from doubt to defiant despair inspired by Goethe's *Faust* — Kierkegaard was able to continuously emphasise the individual stages of the potentiation of sin, always moving beyond the long tradition of acedia.

In his first work, *Either/Or*, he already characterised melancholy as *sin instar omnium*[7] and in his last philosophical work, *The sickness unto death*, despair — in which melancholy is expressed — is understood as the sin par excellence (Kierkegaard, 1980: 75–85). According to Kierkegaard's first interpretation, the melancholic does not know the reasons for his own melancholy and is therefore unable to specify them in more detail.[8] Melancholy thus has no specific reference to the world that could be identified from intentional content and is therefore to be regarded as a mood. However, moods evidently have causes and antecedents. And explanations of melancholy can certainly be given from an external perspective. One of Kierkegaard's central attempts at interpretation is the interpretation of melancholy as self-failure and sin *instar omnium*.

For Kierkegaard, melancholy arises in this attempt at interpretation when a person misses the moment in which he/she is confronted with a transformation that he/she does not want to or cannot perceive.[9] Kierkegaard makes precisely this attempt at interpretation in many of his works, especially in *Either/Or* and *The sickness unto death*. Seen in this light, melancholy is a mood with which people react to more or less serious self-misconduct. Self-failure is a central theme in Kierkegaard's work, and it plays a role in particular in his various reflections on the aesthetic, ethical and religious stages of life. In short, the human being sinks into melancholy if he/she misses the moment when the spirit in him/her wants to break through. Thus everything remains undone to which the human being destined for the spirit is called (Kierkegaard, 1987b: 187–190). In this respect, he/she misses himself at this moment. The aspect in which the human being misses out the breaking through of spirit and thus feels deprived of his/her authentic self reappears in secular form in Heidegger, as will be discussed in the following sections.

Since Kierkegaard understands sin as self-missing, he can say from his point of view that melancholy, although formally conceived as a sin of omission, entails sin per se. In addition, Kierkegaard connects self-misconduct and suffering and sorrow, which can be understood to mean that the phenomenal content of melancholy is not dissimilar to that of sorrow and suffering. Melancholy

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[7] So it says: "But depression is sin, is actually a sin *instar omnium*, for it is the sin of not willing deeply and inwardly, and this is a mother of all sins. This sickness, or more correctly this sin, is very prevalent in our day, and it is under this same sin that all of young Germany and France are now groaning" (Kierkegaard, 1987b: 189).

[8] Cf.: "There is something unexplainable in depression. A person with a sorrow or a worry knows why he sorrows or worries. If a depressed person is asked what the reason is, what it is that weighs on him, he will answer: I do not know; I cannot explain it. Therein lies the limitlessness of depression" (Kierkegaard, 1987b: 189).

[9] According to Tellenbach, Kierkegaard sees melancholy as arising from a culpably neglected decision on the actuality of selfhood. Tellenbach further summarises Kierkegaard's concept of melancholy as a melancholy as a "stagnation in the spiritual life", as a "falling behind oneself remaining behind", as "remanence". Cf. Tellenbach, 1983b: 136.

becomes weariness, a "stagnation in the life of the spirit". Overall, it is clear that Kierkegaard still draws on the medieval acedia and counts melancholy among the cardinal sins. Moreover, Kierkegaard tends to see melancholy as the sin *instar omnium*, which includes all other sins in itself, as it prevents the spirit from breaking through and becoming active, a deep and inward volition.

In his first theological approach to sin, Kierkegaard thus goes beyond the medieval interpretation of acedia, such as the influential explication of Aquinas, who said that acedia is the *torpor mentis bona negligentis inchoare*,[10] the slackness of the mind that fails to begin with the good. Unlike Gregory the Great or Thomas Aquinas, Kierkegaard pursues an essentially radicalised and universalised attempt to interpret melancholy in the tradition of acedia, because with the emergence of the concept of guilt, man suddenly finds himself trapped in the unpleasant situation of having to take responsibility for his melancholy himself, which is now no longer a sin alongside others, but functions as the original sin, as a sin instar omnium, from which all other sins still arise and which itself inheres all other sins.

Melancholy understood as a constitution of the bodily soul

It is interesting that, in addition to the first attempt to interpret melancholy, melancholy understood as self-misconduct and sin, Kierkegaard also undertakes a second attempt to interpret it, one which not only decisively contradicts the first, but also draws on the ancient Aristotelian doctrine of types. It is important to note, however, that Kierkegaard primarily focuses on his own melancholy, which sometimes paralysed his creative will, and that his private writings, especially his diaries, are the main sources for this interpretation of melancholy as a bodily-mental constitution. In his second attempt at an interpretation, Kierkegaard considers an innate melancholy that is part of an individual's bodily-soul constitution and does not merely affect their body temporarily.

He finds this melancholy primarily among the highly gifted who stand out from the so-called average person.[11] Moreover, he perceives his melancholy as a kind of divine destiny and providence, in which he knew himself to be "bound [...] in the service of a higher power", and this through his "congenital melancholia" like an "excruciating thorn in the flesh" (Kierkegaard, 2012: Journal NB 11: 27, 1849, 19).[12]

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[10] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, 1895: II–II, 35, 1, c.

[11] Cf.: "I readily concede that in one sense being depressed is not a bad sign, for generally it happens only with the most endowed natures" (Kierkegaard, 1987b: 189).

[12] It is even possible to infer indirectly from this passage that Kierkegaard is thanking God for his own suffering, his melancholy. Cf. Kierkegaard, 2012: Journal NB 11: 27, 1849, 19.

In his melancholy he is "held" by "guidance" (Kierkegaard, 2015: Journal NB 20: 53 1850, 428) and it is also this that has successfully and humbly brought him into the category of the "single individual" (Kierkegaard, 2015: Journal NB 20: 53 1850, 428). And so he can then also describe it as his "most faithful mistress" (Kierkegaard, 1993: 20). The fact that Kierkegaard even softens and glosses over his melancholy, which he elsewhere closely associates with madness,[13] becomes clear when he says, for example:

> Yet it was indeed good fortune, an indescribable benefit to me, that I was as melancholic as I was. Had I been a happy type — and then experienced what I have experienced as an author — I believe a person would have gone mad. But I knew more frightful torments — inside, where I really [sic!] suffer. And what happened then? Ah, something amazing — even if it has not yet entirely happened, although it has done so to a certain degree and will do still further, I believe — this amazing thing: that it is precisely this outward tumult that has lured my melancholia out of its hiding place and to some extent has already rescued me from it, and will do so even more fully! Oh, the depth of riches, how unsearchable are your ways, O God, yet all fatherliness and grace! (Kierkegaard, 2015: Journal NB 15: 78 1850, 51).

Thus Kierkegaard himself tries to find a positive aspect to his melancholy and to exploit the possible creative potential that the mood holds.[14] The person with a tendency to melancholy is characterised by a deep sense of existence, manages to rise up again and again — driven by a longing for the lasting, the beautiful, an overcoming of death, as of all finiteness in general — and with their profound, metaphysical sense of reality has the strength again and again to dance along the great round dance of the cosmos and to create something lasting through their works. And this is not despite their inner structural laws of nature, which repeatedly put them in their place, but because of them. Kierkegaard is an heir to this long tradition.[15]

All this clearly identifies melancholy with ancient melancholy. Kierkegaard no longer understands melancholy, especially his own melancholy, as pure self-failure, but as innate. Kierkegaard thus also expresses doubts about the correctness of his sin-theological assumption that melancholy is culpable. Melancholy, as a natural bodily-soul disposition, can no longer be sin. However,

[13] "[T]he miserable melancholia that at one point was a kind of partial insanity" (Kierkegaard, 2012: Journal NB 11: 211, 1849, 128).

[14] Of interest in this context are Tellenbach's reflections on the Perittós, the ingenious type of person who falls into melancholy due to completely different constellations. In his essay, Tellenbach works out a total of five conceivable constellations, including the Perittós, through the fulfilment of the task of the Exallagé, which consumes such immense forces that nothingness announces itself as "stagnation of the spirit" and tears open the abyss of melancholy; for him, Kierkegaard falls into this "category". Cf. Tellenbach, 1991: 440.

[15] Cf. also Mitterauer, 2009: 53–54; Pretzsch, 2023.

Kierkegaard leaves open the matter whether the two, at first glance quite different, interpretations are compatible with each other. Overall, our findings lead us to the conclusion that the place Kierkegaard is looking for with the word "melancholy" is doubly occupied in his thinking: by the acedia of the Middle Ages and by ancient melancholy.

Overcoming melancholy

Melancholy — which in Kierkegaard can express itself in suffering, sorrow, pain and despair — in a sense offers exclusive access to transcendence. This is another important starting point for the later comparison with Heidegger's thinking on melancholy. In *The sickness unto death*, where melancholy expresses itself in various forms of (increasing) despair — melancholy becoming the undercurrent of despair — Kierkegaard offers as a "solution" the insight that "the expression for the inability of the self to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation" (Kierkegaard, 1980: 14). And this existential movement is famously described as "in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it" (Kierkegaard, 1980: 14) The establishing power, God, is presented as an inner ground, an inner transcendence, which in a sense "means" and "wills" the self. This "solution" must be understood quite literally in the sense of a "dissolution" and "liquefaction" of a hardening despair (such as when there was a defiance of self-empowerment). The solution consists in an intensification of despair, which takes on a form that sets in motion the existential-dialectical movement towards what one might call the true self.

With Kierkegaard, this is the discovery that the self has a ground outside itself. What happens, one could say, is a loss of power of the self that leads first and foremost to its identity, which is no longer dominated by melancholic despair (about one's own existence, about death, about the world). Theologically, this concept is modern in that transcendence is determined on the trajectory of a dialectic of existence. Speaking in an even more modern fashion: Transcendence is achieved in the course of a dialectical self-realization. This means that although for the theologian Kierkegaard it is a matter of "real", i.e. divine, transcendence, it is in a certain sense already thought of post-metaphysically, for it is no longer formulated in the context of a dualistic-metaphysical model of the world — where one could still speak of an ascent of the soul to God or the like — but as a transcendent alterity in the depth of the self, a moment of its individual identity. Melancholy and seriousness provide access to this strong inner transcendence. The fact that Kierkegaard ultimately succeeds

in dialogically spreading out the suffering of his melancholy before God in transcending to the absolutely transcendent, i.e. towards God, is intimately connected to his conviction that suffering in finitude in the face of the infinite is a victory. So, it also becomes clear here how decidedly the melancholy in Kierkegaard's thought and being had been imbued with Christian substance. Overcoming melancholy, for Kierkegaard, only becomes possible when one comes to terms with its reality and at the same time is ready to fully accept God's forgiveness and grace.

MELANCHOLY IN THE WORK AND THOUGHT OF MARTIN HEIDEGGER

In Heidegger's philosophical thought, strongly influenced by Kierkegaard as is well known, neither the doctrine of character types nor melancholy as a disposition is addressed specifically.[16] And yet Heidegger refers to the famous Aristotelian problem XXX, 1 twice in his complete works, once in *The fundamental concepts of metaphysics* (GA 29/30) and again when he addresses Schelling's philosophy in *Schelling's treatise on the essence of human freedom* (GA 42). In his complete works, there is only isolated mention of melancholy, for example (the most prominent passages are listed):

> Not only fear and anxiety, but other moods, are founded existentially upon one's having been; this becomes plain if we merely mention such phenomena as satiety, sadness, melancholy (*Schwermut*), and desperation (GA 2: 345/395).

> But pain so touches the spirit of mortals that the spirit receives its gravity from pain. That gravity keeps mortals with all their wavering at rest in their being. The spirit which answers to pain, the spirit attuned by pain and to pain, is melancholy (*Schwermut*). It can depress the spirit, but it can also lose its burdensomeness and let its "secret breath" nestle into the soul, bestow upon it the jewel which arrays it in the precious relation to the word, and with this raiment shelters it (GA 12: 222/153).

[16] This certainly has also had has the effect that there have not yet been many philosophical works on melancholy in Heidegger's thought and work. Nevertheless, some examples can be cited, especially in the French-speaking world, and particularly in studies on Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein* or in studies on Heidegger from a psychiatric-psychological point of view. Examples include: Brito, 1999; Dastur, 2006; Dastur, 2016; Maldiney, 1976; Maldiney, 2003; Maldiney 2007; Richir, 1992; Richir, 2006. In the English-speaking world, there is also: Aho, 2016; Aho, 2019; Hammer, 2004; Hughes, 2020a; Hughes, 2020b. Finally, there is Stanley Cavell's tangential remarks on melancholy (the term is used only twice) when he discusses Thoreau and Heidegger (Cavell, 2000). My approach to melancholy, with focus on Heidegger, as an inability to "world", as well as the link with Kierkegaard and the ancient and medieval concept of melancholy, do not seem to have been taken in this way so far.

> Attunements — joy, contentment, bliss, sadness, melancholy (*Schwermut*), anger — are, after all, something psychological, or better, psychic; they are emotional states (*seelische Zustände*) (GA 29/30: 96/64).

> Creative achievement is a free formative activity. Freedom is only to be found where there is a burden to be shouldered. In creative achievement this burden always represents an imperative and a need that weighs heavily upon man's overall mood, so that he comes to be in a mood of melancholy. All creative action resides in a mood of melancholy (*Schwermut*), whether we are clearly aware of the fact or not, whether we speak at length about it or not. All creative action resides in a mood of melancholy, but this is not to say that everyone in a melancholic mood is creative. Aristotle already recognized this connection between creativity and melancholia [...] As a creative and essential activity of human *Dasein*, philosophy stands in the fundamental attunement of melancholy (*Schwermut*). This melancholy (*Schwermut*) concerns the form rather than the content of philosophizing, but it necessarily prescribes a fundamental attunement which delimits the substantive content of philosophical questioning (GA 29/30: 270–271/182).

> If beings are at all, there must be creation. Creation is self-presentation emerging from itself in the ground. Creation presupposes the will to self-revelation (existence) and at the same time that in which it presents itself as in another. This other is the ground, the basis. Letting the ground operate is necessary in order that a creator be able to be a creature. Of course, the Absolute makes the ground independent of its self its own. The creature, on the other hand, never gains complete control over the ground. It shatters itself upon it and remains excluded from it and thus burdened by its gravity. Thus, the "veil of sadness which is spread over all nature, the deep, unappeasable melancholy (*Melancholie*) of all life." [...] Thence all creators, creative people, the poets, thinkers , and founders of the state, are "melancholy spirits" (*Melancholiker*) according to Aristotle. What comes from the mere ground does not come from God. But evil is the insurrection of the ground's craving, as the ground not to be one condition, but the sole condition. Because evil comes from the ground and yet the ground belongs to the essence of beings, so evil is posited in principle with the Being of beings. Where beings as a whole are projected in the jointure of Being, where system is thought, evil is included and implicated (GA 42: 277–278/160).

When speaking of melancholy, Heidegger uses the German word *Schwermut* (dejection or gloom) almost throughout. Only rarely does he use the word *Melancholie*. Very rarely is there talk of *Wehmut* (plaintiveness or wistfulness), *Depression* (depression) or *Nostalgie* (nostalgia). *Schwermut* and *Wehmut* are almost consistently translated by the English and American translators into "melancholy" (sometimes also "sadness"), especially in the case of *Wehmut*. However, this does not take into account the fact that the dwelling on the past is a source of bitter-sweet joy, as is the case with *Wehmut*. The translation into "sadness" completely disregards the fact that the phenomenon of *Wehmut* also has a feeling of pleasure mixed in with the sadness. A short table gives an

overview of the use of the terms mentioned in Heidegger's oeuvre, whereby all works were consulted and examined:

Schwermut (dejection or gloom):	(GA 2: 345)[17]; (GA 8: 54); (GA 12: 54, 57, 184, 222, 223); (GA 13: 90); (GA 29/30: 96, 119, 128, 270, 271, 288); (GA 33: 76); (GA 35: 110, 230); (GA 39: 148); (GA 42: 278); (GA 46: 18, 206, 345, 375); (GA 50: 117, 156); (GA 70: 135); (GA 73.1: 260); (GA 86: 234); (GA 97: 182); (GA 99: 23)
Melancholie (melancholy):	(GA 29/30: 270, 271); (GA 42: 277–278)
Wehmut (plaintiveness or wistfulness):	(GA 13: 103, 105, 107, 108)
Depression (depression):	(GA 7: 159–160); (GA 50: 123); (GA 60: 13); (GA 89: 187)
Nostalgie (nostalgia):	(GA 75: 363); (GA 82: 366)

Similar to melancholy and despair in Kierkegaard, the fundamental attunement (*Grundstimmung*) of anxiety and boredom analysed by Heidegger, which can push us to the limit of melancholy (GA 29/30: 119/128), can be considered substitutes for melancholy in a philosophical-theological discourse that has abandoned melancholy as a doctrine of character types. And similar to despair in Kierkegaard, anxiety and boredom are welcomed by Heidegger in a certain way. Even if not in the context of an existential dialectic, they go together with a special insight and with special possibilities of existence: they release *Dasein* from its falling into the everyday world of life, the fallenness (*Verfallenheit*), and are thus elements of the liberation of *Dasein* towards itself (see GA 2: 187–202/213–215). Two things happen here: beings as such as a whole becomes conspicuous in its lack of self-evidence, in its precarious status and thus as such. And *Dasein* becomes aware of its complete indeterminacy, its existential thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) into freedom, i.e. it becomes aware of itself as a possibility of actual existence and can thereby ask for the moment of vision (*der Augenblick*) that makes existence and understanding of being possible. In the spirit of the first insight, it is said that anxiety reveals nothingness (in the withdrawal of beings as such as whole) (GA 9: 112/80–81), and since this reveals :beings as a whole in their slipping away, it manifests these beings

[17] At this point I am quoting the German primary editions as they are available in the German *Heidegger Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann), as numbered there and usually cited in the academic literature.

in their full but heretofore concealed strangeness as what is radically other — with respect to the nothing: (GA 9: 114/90). Already here, the attunement of anxiety grants insight into a post-metaphysically conceived transcendence, with the formal status of a negation: "Holding itself out into the nothing, *Dasein* is in each case already beyond beings as a whole. Such being beyond beings we call transcendence" (GA 9: 115/91). The second insight (into the possibility of self-determination and authentic existence) is developed in the course of analysing deepest boredom. In this attunement, according to Heidegger, "the dawning of the possibilities that *Dasein* could have, but which are left unexploited precisely in this 'it is boring for one'" (GA 29/30: 212/141). Which instance is it that makes this possibility (namely authentic existence) possible? Here, an exclusive access to a still very formal transcendence is revealed in an attunement (here: deepest boredom),

> an utterly unambiguous pointing to whatever it is that makes possible, sustains and guides all essential possibilities of *Dasein*, that for which we apparently have no content, so that we cannot say what it is in the way that we point out things present at hand and determine them as this or that. This strange lack of content to whatever properly makes *Dasein* possible should not disturb us (GA 29/30: 216/143).

In my opinion, by the moment of vision (*der Augenblick*) that makes *Dasein* possible, Heidegger here means being that is opened up by *Dasein* — in a sense that already points to thinking after his turn (*die Kehre*). The proximity to transcendence in attunements such as anxiety and deepest boredom is thus a proximity to being — an insight into the mysteriousness of being as well as into the enabling character of being for *Dasein*. For the fundamental ontology of the 1920s, a proximity of attunements such as anxiety and deepest boredom to being as the other (in the sense of ontological difference) of beings and thus a proximity to transcendence can be established. Admittedly, Heidegger's fundamental ontological concept of transcendence is quite formal and preserves neither the cosmological fullness of meaning of classical transcendence nor the existential richness of immanent transcendence in Kant or Kierkegaard. In contrast to Kierkegaard, Heidegger thinks being itself — and not just the existence of human being — in its temporality. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, still understands being quite traditionally as an eternity independent of time and temporality.

Melancholy as an inability to "world"

In *Being and time* (GA 2), §§ 14–18, Heidegger describes world as a structure of *Dasein*, as an existential (*Existenzial*). The concernful handling (*besorgende Umgang*) of the things of everyday life as the consummation of the understanding of being (see GA 2: 67/95) occurs non-thematically — it belongs

to *Dasein*. In order for equipment (*Zeug*) to be encountered in its unobtrusive availableness (*Zuhandenheit*), "a totality of equipment has already been discovered" (GA 2: 69/98). "This referential contexture is itself a closed totality" (GA 20: 252/186–187), Heidegger writes. And: "Such an environment of the nature of a closed referential totality is at the same time distinguished by a specific familiarity. The closed character of the referential whole is grounded precisely in familiarity" (GA 20: 253/187).

In *Being and time*, § 18, wholeness (*Ganzheit*) and antecedent familiarity (*vorgängige Vertrautheit*) are related to projecting (*entwerfendes*) *Dasein* itself:

> the totality of involvements which is constitutive for the ready-to-hand in its readiness-to-hand, is "earlier" than any single item of equipment [...] the totality of involvements itself goes back ultimately to a "towards-which" in which there is no further involvement: this "towards-which" is not an entity with the kind of Being that belongs to what is ready-to-hand within a world; it is rather an entity whose Being is defined as Being-in-the world, and to whose state of Being worldhood itself belongs (GA 2: 84/116).

At the origin of "world", then, are the daily goals and existential projects of *Dasein* as a "for-the-sake-of-which" (*Worumwillen*), that sets itself.

My thesis is now that "the interconnection by which the structure of an involvement leads to *Dasein*'s very Being as the sole authentic for-the sake-of--which" (GA 2: 84/117) — that the structure of the world in its dependence on the non-thematic understanding of being — is precarious or fragile in the experience of melancholy. The melancholic pain of existence, the deep feeling of meaninglessness, the uncertainty about the meaning and purpose of one's own existence, certainly also the structure of self-condemnation (the condemnation of one's own past, desires and plans) — all this does not allow melancholics to develop a solid "for-the-sake-of-which" (*Worumwillen*); they lack unquestionable self-projections and thus also familiarity with the totality of involvement (*Bewandtnisganzheit*). Melancholics are not capable of "world". For problem-free projecting, *Dasein* needs a centre, a central and vital force that is in itself an assertion of the meaning and legitimacy of this *Dasein* and its existential designs. This vital centre and the certainty of the "for-the-sake-of-which" (*Worumwillen*) that emerges from it are lacking in the melancholic's relationship to the self and the world. And with the for-the-sake-of-which", the prior determination of the totality of involvement is missing, so that the context of references (*Verweisungszusammenhänge*) becomes fragile or breaks. Therefore, it can be said: with the inability to "world", things lose their meaning.[18]

[18] Presumably, Heidegger himself would not speak of an inability, but rather of a disruption of the emergence of world, since *Dasein* qua understanding of being (*Seinsverständnis*) is always worldly (*welthaft*). In the lecture *Building dwelling thinking* it says: "Indeed, the loss of rapport with things that occurs in states of depression would be wholly impossible if even such a state

Melancholy, in relation to Heidegger's thinking, can thus be reconstructed as the disturbance or the non-occurrence of the totality of involvement (*Bewandtnisganzheit*) of the world in an existence in which the unquestioning "for--the-sake-of-which" (*Worumwillen*) of projection is disturbed by melancholic paralysis or self-reproach.

The proximity to the tradition of melancholy in Heidegger's philosophical work

In a certain sense, Heidegger is still connected to the detrimental qualities of melancholy propounded in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. This is already shown by Heidegger's reference to the Aristotelian Problemata XXX, 1. In particular, however, a connection with the medieval acedia becomes apparent:

Heidegger's reflections on the state-of-mind (*Befindlichkeit*), his analyses of the basic moods of anxiety, boredom and behaviourality, virtually conjure up the medieval acedia, especially where he characterises a "pallid, uniformly balanced moodlessness" (cf. GA 2: 134/173), which he does not wish to understand merely as one mood among others, but which, within the framework of his analyses on the state-of-mind, takes on a very special status and reminiscent of the acedia precisely in this respect. "The pallid, evenly balanced lack of mood, which is often persistent and which is not to be mistaken for a bad mood, is far from nothing at all. Rather, it is in this that *Dasein* becomes satiated with itself" (GA 2: 134/173). The being of *Dasein* is revealed as a burden in such disgruntlement. In indifference and the lack of mood, the "burdensome character of *Dasein*" is revealed for Heidegger (GA 2: 135/173), as he explains in *Being and time*. These words almost read like a characterisation of the monk's disease, acedia. At least if one understands acedia as a kind of sadness that robs us of the desire for any activity and can drive sufferers into a state of complete impotence. So it says in a later passage:

> Furthermore, the pallid lack of mood-indifference which is addicted to nothing and has no urge for anything, and which abandons itself to whatever the day may bring, yet in so doing takes everything along with it in a certain manner, demonstrates most penetratingly the power of forgetting in the everyday mode of that concern which is closest to us. Just living along (*das Dahinleben*) in a way which "lets" everything "be"

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were not still what it is as a human state: a staying with things" (GA 7: 159–160/157). Only in this way of 'human being can the things among which we are also fail to speak to us, fail to concern us any longer" (GA 7: 159–160/157). With my approach that the melancholic suffers from the inability to world, I choose a different approach than the one usually pursued in the current discussion on this topic (cf. Aho, 2016: 55–63; Aho, 2019: 215–217; Hammer, 2004: 277–295; Hughes, 2020a: 203–213; Hughes, 2020b: 223–225).

> as it is, is based on forgetting and abandoning oneself to one's thrownness. It has the ecstatical meaning of an inauthentic way of having been (GA 2: 396/346).

Remarkably, a kind of "transformation of acedia" can almost be discerned here: Thus, in a sense, Heidegger strips God away from the human being and shifts the burden of the world onto him. The important concept of the "burdensome character of *Dasein*" (GA 2: 135/173) fits in with this — whereby one's own *Dasein* is felt to be burdensome because the burden of being itself lies on it.

A COMPARISON OF THE TWO APPROACHES

A comparison of the two ways of looking at melancholy reveals astonishing similarities. Similar to melancholy and despair in Kierkegaard's thought and work, Heidegger's melancholic mood with its structural moments of anxiety and boredom, offers special insight despite all the pain and suffering. Melancholy points to a deeper meaning of our human existence. When in Kierkegaard's work, especially in *The sickness unto death*, the self wants to be something in itself in painful melancholy and despair, it is transparently grounded in the power that established it, the Absolute, God. The self finds self-determination, self-acceptance and actual existence when it succeeds in coming to terms with its melancholy. Recognising its own concrete and individual existence and mustering the courage to become a self, it adopts an authentic Christian way of life.

Heidegger thought is similar here, though it is more secular. *Dasein* in the mood of melancholy gets a sense of the enabling that carries and guides all the essential possibilities of *Dasein*. *Dasein* encounters, with Heidegger, the strange lack of content that makes *Dasein* possible in the first place — the Being of Being as a whole. More than that: in the melancholic mood, *Dasein* sees itself confronted with the mysteriousness of Being and the enabling character of Being for *Dasein* in an unpleasant and unsettling way places it in an existential relationship of dependence. And yet at the same time, the mood of melancholy releases *Dasein* from its lapse into the everyday world of life and thus provides a possibility of liberation.

A comparison of the two conceptions of melancholy also shows that melancholy is deeply ambiguous. A dialectical phenomenon in which fullness and emptiness, the total (*das Ganze*) and the nothing (*das Nichts*), in a strange way come into contact. It becomes interesting when melancholy leads to creativity and productivity. This depends entirely on whether the person concerned succeeds in crossing the emotional valley that sees itself spread out before him in melancholy. As a comparison of the melancholic in Kierkegaard and Heidegger could show, shaking off the melancholic burden and existential powerlessness can only succeed if a positive acceptance of one's own self (and thus of the

world) is achieved. Only when the self is accepted in its finiteness, as is the case with Kierkegaard, is an escape from melancholy possible. Kierkegaard notes this clearly in his diary when he writes:

> Ordinarily it is probably right to warn against self-love; still, I consider it my duty to say to every sufferer with whom I come into contact: See to it that you love yourself. When one is suffering and unable to do much for others, it is easy to fall prey to the melancholy thought that one is superfluous in this world, as others perhaps sometimes give one to understand. Then one must remember that before God every person is equally important, without reservation equally important; indeed, if there were any distinction, then one who suffers the most must be the closest object of God's care (Kierkegaard, 2009: 236).[19]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

All in all, it becomes clear that in melancholy, the human being recalls his or her enabling authority, as Kierkegaard and Heidegger have presented it in their respective works. Human beings who tend toward melancholy, have — as can be indirectly inferred from the analysis — a deep sense of existence. From time to time they feel depressed by their "being thrown into *Dasein*" (Heidegger), at the mercy of a finite fatum (Kierkegaard), against which they cannot seem to defend themselves. But they wants to defend themselves, driven by a longing for the lasting, the beautiful and the overcoming of death. The melancholy a human being draws from his or her deep metaphysical sense of reality provides the strength to dance in the round dance of the cosmos and to create something lasting through his or her works.

Ultimately, it is the melancholic reflection on the enabling instance, whether God or the being of being, that opens up philosophy and asks for its enabling reason. In this respect, it can be said that philosophy not only benefits from melancholy, but also becomes essentially possible through it in the first place. Philosophy needs the mood of melancholy. And thus Heidegger is right to say that philosophy is essentially in the basic mood of melancholy (GA 29/30: 270–271/182).

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[19] Equivalent to this in Heidegger's thinking is the liberation from "the they' (*das Man*) and the reflection on the actuality and an authentic self-determined existence.

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