

*Rent asunder: anxiety, ambiguity, and temporality in Kierkegaard's  
The Concept of Anxiety*

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There is an ambiguous passage on temporality in Søren Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* that has been subject to numerous interpretations over the years. Past interpreters have tended to treat the ambiguity of the passage as something negative that is to be overcome. In doing so, those who adhere to this tendency have been forced to reach beyond the work itself in order to find a basis from which the ambiguity of the passage might be resolved. I note that this poses several interpretive problems. Against this tendency, I propose to give a reading of the passage on temporality in which ambiguity is treated as a positive phenomenon. More specifically, I ask: what does ambiguity disclose, insofar as it is present in the passage on temporality as ambiguity? Over the course of this reading, the question of whether the ambiguity of the passage was intended comes to the forefront. Moreover, the manner in which anxiety makes possible the posing of the problem of temporality in *The Concept of Anxiety* is elucidated.

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Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), published under the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis, is known for being difficult and, at times, confusing. Indeed, Bartlett has noted that past scholarship has often deemed *The Concept of Anxiety* to be “nearly impenetrable,” “notoriously difficult to read,” “vile,” and “laboriously academic” on account of its ambiguity, which perhaps reaches a climax in the passage on temporality [*Timelighed*].<sup>1</sup>

The ambiguity of the passage on temporality is perhaps made clear from the fact that it has been subject to numerous attempts at interpretation over the years. But why, precisely, is it seen as ambiguous? First, it seems strange that temporality is treated within a “psychological treatment of the concept of ‘anxiety’ [*Angest*]”.<sup>2</sup> Further, it is not immediately clear why temporality is treated specifically at the outset of the third chapter, titled “Anxiety as the Consequence of that Sin which Is Absence of the Consciousness of Sin.” As such, it is hard to situate the passage in relation to the work as a whole. In addition, the author is quite cryptic with his language. He sometimes uses words that suggest multiple possible meanings at once, which means that it is not always clear how these words are to be taken. Clarifications are often absent. The most prominent example of this is ‘the moment’ [*Øieblikket*]. This can be frustrating because the moment would seem to be precisely the backbone of the passage on temporality. Another example is ‘spirit’ [*Aand*]. This word immediately suggests a meaning drawn from either Hegel or Christian theology. However, perhaps deliberately, the reader is left to guess at how the word should be taken. Since the meanings of these words are not stated clearly by the author, the statements that

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1 L.C. Barlett, “Vigilius Haufniensis: Psychological Sleuth, Anxious Author, and Inadvertent Evangelist,” *Volume 17: Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms*, ed. Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 259.

2 Soren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings, VIII, Volume 8: Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*. ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), IV 286, 14.

are constituted by them seem ambiguous. And because the passage seems to be comprised only of such statements, it appears to be ambiguous, too.

How, then, is this ambiguity to be dealt with? There is a tendency in the literature to take the ambiguity of the passage on temporality as something accidental and, on that account, to be quickly overcome.<sup>3</sup> Often, the presence of ambiguity in the passage has not been explicitly noted by past interpreters.<sup>4</sup> This negative attitude towards ambiguity encourages interpreters to reach beyond the text itself in order to find a ground from which the meaning of the passage can be clarified. As such, past interpreters have drawn on Kierkegaard's personal life and works, including those authored under his other pseudonyms. For example, Bedell<sup>5</sup> and Dreyfus<sup>6</sup> take the doctrine of the Incarnation, mentioned in Kierkegaard's private journals, as a basis for clarifying the meaning of the passage on temporality despite it never being mentioned in *The Concept of Anxiety*. Taylor<sup>7</sup> brings in the concept of selfhood as the basis for his interpretation by drawing on descriptions of the self found in *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) and *Practice in Christianity* (1850), both authored under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus. However, the self is only touched upon once in *The Concept of Anxiety* – in order to remark on the very unthinkability of the self.<sup>8</sup>

In doing this, these interpreters have overlooked the potential problems raised by such an approach. For it remains open whether, how, and to what extent the

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3 See George C. Bedell, "Kierkegaard's Conception of Time" (1969); Mark C. Taylor, "Time's Struggle with Space: Kierkegaard's Understanding of Temporality" (1973); H.L. Dreyfus, "Human Temporality" (1975); Arne Grøn, "Spirit and Temporality in *The Concept of Anxiety*" (2001).

4 With the exception of Grøn although he still moves to quickly dispel the ambiguity.

5 George C. Bedell, "Kierkegaard's Conception of Time," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 37, no.3 (1969): 266.

6 H.L. Dreyfus, "Human Temporality," *The Study of Time II: Proceedings of the Second Conference of the International Society for the Study of Time Lake Yamanaka-Japan*. ed. J.T. Fraser & Nathaniel Lawrence (Springer-Verlag, 1975), 152.

7 Mark C. Taylor, "Time's Struggle with Space: Kierkegaard's Understanding of Temporality." *Harvard Theological Review* 66, no.3 (1973): 318-325.

8 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, IV 347-348, 78-79.

standpoint of each pseudonymous author is differentiated from each of the others as well as from Kierkegaard's personal view – assuming that it is even possible to speak of a 'stable and consistent personal view held by Søren Kierkegaard' in the first place. One could very well ask: how can we be sure that Anti-Climacus viewed the self in the same way that Vigilius Haufniensis did? It also remains open whether, how, and to what extent the passage on temporality in *The Concept of Anxiety* may be taken as a direct expression of Kierkegaard's personal life.<sup>9</sup> One could ask: if Kierkegaard wrote about the Incarnation in his private journals, can we be sure that the use of the word 'the moment' in the text was intended to signify 'the moment' of the Incarnation? These questions are generally overlooked in the past readings of the passage on temporality.

But, in addition to this and more importantly, such an attitude towards the ambiguity of the passage tacitly presupposes that the disclosive power of the passage lies only in what is explicitly stated. In this view, the statement is the *only* locus of meaning. Under the sway of this presupposition, any instance of ambiguity becomes a shortcoming where the author always *could* and *ought* to have stated things more clearly. Interpretation is then called upon to clear up the ambiguity by explicitly stating what it thinks that the author 'really' meant. It is tacitly assumed here that what is left unsaid in the text cannot possibly be disclosive as *something unsaid*.

Against this view, I propose to give a reading of the passage on temporality in *The Concept of Anxiety* in which the ambiguity of the passage is treated as a positive phenomenon. By doing so I maintain that the statement is *not* the only locus of meaning. This reading will respect and retain, for as long as is possible, the ambiguity of the passage as something to be kept present instead of eliminating it as

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<sup>9</sup> Again, assuming that there is such a thing as a 'personal life of Søren Kierkegaard' that is separate and distinct from his authorship.

something to be made absent. However, insofar as ambiguity is only present in the first place on account of the absence of something, namely, clarification, this amounts to keeping absence present as absence. Furthermore, this reading will treat *The Concept of Anxiety* as a closed and complete work that is sufficient unto itself. As such, I will not be venturing into Kierkegaard's other works or the details of his personal life in this reading. The central question that will guide this essay throughout is: what does ambiguity disclose insofar as it is present in the passage on temporality as ambiguity?

To delve into this question, it will perhaps be best to consider the intention of the ambiguity of the passage. We will begin, then, by recalling some of the crucial remarks on ambiguity made by the (pseudonymous) author of *The Concept of Anxiety*, Vigilius Haufniensis.

### I. Explicit remarks about ambiguity by the author

If it could be shown that the ambiguity of the passage on temporality was intentional, then the task would simply be to disclose what Kierkegaard, by intentionally writing ambiguously, intended to communicate by this very ambiguity.

Upon taking stock of *The Concept of Anxiety* as a whole, we see that its author makes explicit mention of ambiguity [*Tvetydighed*] several times. In his rejection of desire (*concupiscentia*) as an explanation for the Fall, the author states the following: "This intermediate term, *concupiscentia*, is not ambiguous either, from which it can be seen immediately that it is no psychological explanation... The psychological explanation must not talk around the point but remain in its elastic ambiguity..."<sup>10</sup> Recalling now that the author has set himself the task of a "psychological treatment of the concept of 'anxiety,'"<sup>11</sup> thus identifying himself as a psychologist, it would appear

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10 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, IV 312, 40-41.

11 *Ibid.*, IV 286, 14.

that he is aiming to maintain a certain ambiguity in his explanations.

This leads into the subsection titled “The Concept of Anxiety.” Here, importantly, the author characterizes ambiguity as the hallmark of anxiety. Anxiety is described by him as “a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy.”<sup>12</sup> Anxiousness is simultaneously repelled and attracted by what it is anxious about. In other words, the anxious person feels ambiguous. Anxiety feels ambiguous about something, but as Haufniensis says, this something is, for the anxious person, “nothing.”<sup>13</sup> Anxiety relates itself ambiguously to *absence*, but absence that has made its presence felt as *absence*.

Later on, in his description of the transition of the human being from innocence to guilt, the author writes: “the transition that is to be made from innocence to guilt will be so dialectical that it can be seen that the explanation is what it must be, psychological.”<sup>14</sup> Here, we can take ‘psychological’ to mean ambiguous, as we noted above. From this, he goes on to say that the individual who becomes guilty through anxiety is innocent but not innocent. Moreover, the individual is guilty but not guilty. For Haufniensis, the individual is innocent insofar as anxiety, which they fear, grips them and forces them into sin – but they are guilty insofar as they secretly love their anxiety, and it is ultimately they who commit the sin. He is evidently quite pleased with this formulation, declaring that “there is nothing in the world more ambiguous; therefore this is the only psychological explanation.”<sup>15</sup> Again, we see here that Haufniensis is aiming to achieve ambiguity.

There is another crucial mention of ambiguity by Haufniensis found – remarkably – in the passage on temporality, whose very ambiguity this reading is asking about.

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12 Ibid., IV 313, 42.

13 Ibid., IV 313, 41.

14 Ibid., IV 314, 43.

15 Ibid., IV 314, 43.

It has to do with ‘the moment,’ which, as we said earlier, seems to be the centrepiece of the passage despite being left unclarified in its meaning. About it he writes: “The moment is that ambiguity in which time [*Tiden*] and eternity [*Evigheden*] touch each other, and with this the concept of temporality [*Timelighed*] is posited, whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time.”<sup>16</sup> Here, the moment is explicitly described by the author as something ambiguous. ‘The moment’ is ambiguously described as ambiguous. Moreover, cryptically, at the beginning of the third chapter, anxiety is described as the moment.<sup>17</sup>

From these remarks it is clear that *Haufniensis* gives ambiguity a privileged role in this work. However, from this, we cannot necessarily conclude that Søren Kierkegaard – the ‘real’ human being behind the pseudonym – laid down, at the outset of this essay, as the object of our interpretation. Nevertheless, despite being unable to conclusively address the question of Kierkegaard’s intent, we have been able to establish that *Haufniensis* claims to be using ambiguity as a methodological instrument in his self-proclaimed role as a psychologist. This raises the question: does the claim of Vigilius *Haufniensis*, to the effect that he is deliberately deploying ambiguity as an explanatory technique in his capacity as a psychologist, necessarily entail that Søren Kierkegaard intended to write ambiguously?

Leaving this question open for the time being, we will now turn to the passage on temporality itself – keeping these reflections on ambiguity by *Haufniensis*, as well as our own reflections on the ambiguity of authorship, up our sleeves, as it were.

## II. The Passage on temporality

The third chapter of the work begins with a mention of synthesis: “In the two

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, IV 359, 89.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, IV 350, 81.

previous chapters, it was maintained continually that man is a synthesis of psyche and body that is constituted and sustained by spirit.”<sup>18</sup> The psyche-body-spirit synthesis is then echoed by a problem of synthesis that is still to be solved – the problem of temporality. In addition to being a synthesis of psyche and body, man is supposed to be a synthesis of the timely and the eternal. However, the third element in which these two elements are reconciled has not yet been pinned down.<sup>19</sup> We will now turn to what ‘the timely’ and ‘the eternal’ refer to.

Strictly speaking, the first element of temporality is a passing-by. The second element is the tripartite tense-structure (past, present, future). The problem, as Haufniensis initially remarks, is that if temporality is nothing but an “infinite succession” of moments, then stable and constant divisions between past, present, and future are not possible:

If in the infinite succession of time a foothold could be found, i.e. a present, which was the dividing point, the division would be quite correct. However, precisely because every moment, as well as the sum of the moments, is a process (a passing by), no moment is a present, and accordingly there is in time neither present, nor past, nor future.<sup>20</sup>

The passing-by is something that never *is*, insofar as ‘being’ is thought as subsistence. The passing-by is always becoming, never being. On the other hand, the tense-structure *is* in the sense of constancy. It is always being, never becoming. Insofar as the one is always being, and the other is always becoming, a chasm, an absolute (‘qualitative’) difference, appears to lie between the two. The two elements appear to be irreconcilable. And yet common sense includes both of these elements in its understanding of temporality and appears not to have any issues with their unity. The problem for the author, then, is how these two absolutely irreconcilable elements are to be reconciled, since everydayness would seem to testify to their harmony.

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18 Ibid., IV 350, 81.

19 Ibid., IV 355, 85.

20 Ibid., IV 355, 85.

Let us return now to asking about the ambiguity of the passage. Might Vigilius Haufniensis' understanding of anxiety, in which the anxious person relates themselves in the mode of ambiguity to an absence that has presented itself as absence, shed any light on the ambiguity of the passage at hand?

In recalling the passage mentioned earlier in which Haufniensis declares that his explanation of the transition from innocence to guilt is the most ambiguous one, we might begin by noting that, for him, ambiguity is expressed in speech by a kind of doubling into contradictories. The individual who sins in the state of and because of anxiety is both guilty and not-guilty, innocent and not-innocent.

But the same doubling happens when Haufniensis puts forth the problem of temporality. The passing-by shows itself as the contradictory of the tense-structure insofar as becoming is the contradictory of being. Temporality is becoming and yet not-becoming, being and yet not-being. What does this doubling, which the author holds to be the very expression of ambiguity, show us?

What shows itself in the contradiction of temporality is, as we noted above, a chasm. The appearing of this gap, which appears to be internal to temporality, is precisely the coming-to-presence of absence. However, it is not the contradictory expression that precedes the presentation of this absence. Rather, I would say that it is the very experience of this absence, this disjuncture appearing within temporality itself, that precedes and first gives rise to this doubling-into-contradictories.<sup>21</sup> It is the presence of this unfathomable 'nothing-that-is-nevertheless-something,' the presence of this absence as absence, which grounds the possibility of speaking in

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21 The essential point here is that, viewed chronologically, the experience precedes the word. While it is certainly the case that the experience of an absence within temporality itself is equiprimordial with an experience of its doubledness, what I would like to emphasize here is that *speech about temporality*, and more specifically, contradictory speech about temporality, comes after such an experience of the phenomenon itself. Thank you to Aman Sakhardande and Radheesh Ameresekere for pointing out the need for clarification on this point.

cotradictions, i.e., ambiguously. But insofar as it is precisely absence that is the object of anxiety,<sup>22</sup> this can only mean that he who speaks in contradictories in the passage on temporality, namely, Haufniensis – and perhaps Kierkegaard, too – is himself anxious. It is in and out of this very anxiousness that one is first thrust into the face of absence. For the anxious person, temporality appears as comprised of contradictory elements – as something incommensurate with itself.

In the face of the “nothing” that shows itself in anxiety, what does the anxious person desire? As we saw earlier, in the passage on temporality, the author calls for a synthesis. This synthesis is supposed to get rid of the void that has shown itself in anxiety, and thus anxiety itself, by uniting the two elements of temporality that appear to be incommensurable. It is a synthesis that is at the same time a reconciliation, an ‘at-one-ment.’ Thus, insofar as temporality appears as incommensurate with itself to the anxious individual, it is the anxious individual for whom the synthesis of temporality becomes a problem to be taken up.

How, then, does Haufniensis reconcile the irreconcilable? How, for him, are the passing-by and the tense-structure united? The answer, cryptically, is: through the interpenetration of time with eternity.<sup>23</sup> This interpenetration, as we noted earlier, happens in the moment. Thus ‘the moment’ is the third element that brings about the synthesis. But this is basically a non-answer, a *deferral*. All that we have gained is that, for him, time is affiliated with the passing-by and eternity is affiliated with the tense-structure. The ‘how’ of the synthesis and the ‘what’ of the moment elude our grasp. But we can go no further than this.

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22 It is not by accident that Heidegger says that the object of anxiety is “completely indefinite” and that in anxiety the “nothing and nowhere” arises (*Being and Time* 1927). The same can be said for Freud, who says that anxiety has “a quality of indefiniteness and a lack of object” (*Symptoms, Inhibitions, and Anxiety* 1926, 20, 165).

23 Kierkegaard, IV 359, 89.

This is because, as we have noted earlier,<sup>24</sup> spirit and the moment are left unexplained by Haufniensis. But we might be able to intimate now that this is not simply an arbitrary oversight on his part. The two ideas correspond to each other: “As soon as spirit is posited, the moment is present.”<sup>25</sup> Insofar as the two are only posited in the qualitative leap, and insofar as the qualitative leap is absolutely unexplainable,<sup>26</sup> spirit and the moment cannot be explained. To ‘go further’ by over-interpreting the meaning of ‘the moment’ and of ‘spirit’ in the passage on temporality is to fall into the very tendency that he himself rails against in the work – namely, the tendency to treat ambiguity as something negative that is *always* to be avoided in favour of clear, unambiguous statements and explanations.

Thus, it would seem that the absence of clarification regarding the meaning of ‘spirit’ and ‘the moment’ in *The Concept of Anxiety* is not without intention. However, at the same time, it seems to be going too far to say that the refusal to explain ‘spirit’ and ‘the moment’ is intentional. This ‘neither-nor’ can perhaps be attributed to the author’s anxiety, which we hypothesized above. If we stay in line with the remarks about ambiguity that Haufniensis makes throughout the work, we can only say that the ambiguity of the passage on temporality is, with respect to its ‘real’ author (Søren Kierkegaard), both intentional and unintentional. Admittedly, this is a dissatisfying conclusion. And yet, at the same time, it is perhaps the only one that does not push interpretation too far. As such, the inquiry into the question of authorial intent needs to end where it began, namely, with ambiguity. And yet, perhaps, a deeper understanding of the passage on temporality in *The Concept of Anxiety* has been gained along the way.

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24 Refer to the introduction of this essay.

25 Kierkegaard, IV 358, 88.

26 Ibid., IV 320, 49-50: “To want to give a logical explanation of the coming of sin into the world is a stupidity that can only occur to people who are comically worried about finding an explanation.” The leap is that in and out of which sin comes into the world.

## Conclusion

This essay began by proposing to give a reading of the passage on temporality in *The Concept of Anxiety* in which the ambiguity of the passage was to be retained and interrogated as a positive phenomenon. It aimed to reach a deeper understanding of the passage by paying attention to what the ambiguity of the passage might disclose as ambiguity. This endeavour has now been, perhaps, performed. By asking about ambiguity, we were able to learn something not just about ambiguity, but also anxiety, temporality, and their relations.

Asking about what the ambiguity of the passage on temporality discloses as ambiguity does not mean that this ambiguity must be explained. Rather, this only means that it needs to be taken as a clue, as a launch-point. As such, we have tried to leave the ambiguity of the passage standing in its very ambiguity. Yet, at the same time, there is no doubt that some of this ambiguity has been cleared up.

At the outset, we attributed some of the ambiguity in the passage on temporality to the absence of clarification for the words 'spirit' and 'the moment'. In the course of this reading, we found that these two were held to be unexplainable by Vigilius Haufniensis due to their being posited in the leap. As such, 'spirit' and 'the moment' appear to have been clarified to an extent. And yet it still remains open why the leap was held to be unexplainable by Haufniensis. As such, an essential ambiguity ultimately still remains at the root of the passage on temporality and *The Concept of Anxiety* as a whole.

But should we ultimately allow the ambiguity that still remains to stand there in all of its 'thatness', in all of its sheer ambiguity? Is our paradoxical conclusion, namely, that the ambiguity in the passage is both intentional and unintentional, suitable to philosophical interpretation, even if a deeper understanding of the passage is arrived at along the way to such a conclusion? What, after all, is the role of refusal in philosophy? Can it really be possible that the refusal to explain certain phenomena is the best way of disclosing them? Or is the very act of refusal ultimately an abandonment of philosophy itself?

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