



Theology as Therapy

Reflections on Alina N. Feld's *Melancholy and the Otherness of God*

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Abstract: Alina Feld's remarkable philosophical and theological exploration of the breadth and depth of human melancholy supplies invaluable resources for future scholarly conversation, not only in the field of philosophical theology, but also among psychologists and psychotherapists. Her psychoanalytic treatment of melancholy might fruitfully be compared with some of the insights generated by contemporary cognitive behavioral theorists studying depression. Moreover, by complementing her hermeneutical approach with Charles Peirce's semiotic perspective, it becomes possible to understand melancholy both as an interpretative response to the human situation and as itself an important sign demanding interpretation.

Keywords: Peirce, Charles; melancholy; semiosis; Beck, Aaron; cognitive therapy.

In the concluding remarks of my foreword to Alina Feld's book, I outlined some of the questions, at least on my own reading, that her remarkable study raises for further inquiry.¹ It is a combination of the first and third of these that I propose to address very briefly here, questions exploring the relationship between psychological and philosophical (or theological) accounts of depression on the one hand, between melancholy conceived as a meaningful sign and the "otherness" that resists all forms of signification on the other. I raise the first type of question, despite Feld's own careful disclaimer that she does not pretend in this

book to supply a "scientific investigation of a mental condition" (*MOG* xv). She does, of course, examine the resonance between certain philosophical ideas and their correlates in modern psychoanalytic inquiry (especially in chapter eight, focusing on various existential and phenomenological approaches to psychotherapy). But I want to suggest that her meditation on melancholy has a broader relevance for contemporary psychotherapeutic theory and practice than Feld herself may suspect. My additional concern is with exploring the general nature and limits of semiosis, a task facilitated by Feld's extended consideration of melancholy as a special case, that is, as an example of the sort of phenomenon that emerges only at the margins of what we can effectively conceive or meaningfully articulate.

Let me begin with Feld's insight that melancholy, in its multifarious forms and manifestations, is something to which we should carefully attend. Her own attention spans for nearly two hundred pages.

¹ Alina N. Feld, *Melancholy and the Otherness of God: A Study of the Hermeneutics of Depression*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011; my questions appear on pp. xi-xii. [Henceforth cites as *MOG*]

Moreover, the account that she supplies is sufficiently rich, both in nuance and detail, that it would be folly to expect a single, simple answer to the question about why we should pay this sort of attention to our darker moods. Feld's "afterthoughts" suggest that she is most interested in theological answers to this question, also psychological ones concerning what we might learn from our melancholy about the human psyche. In fact, both the title of the book and the religious ideas carefully woven throughout its fabric give evidence of the first type of concern. The latter is clearly displayed in assertions that "a melancholy-less world is no longer a human world" and "the self knows its light only by knowing its darkness" (MOG 194). This kind of knowing becomes a possibility, of course, only for the individual who understands about the experience of deep boredom or depression that "one must own it and assume it without remainder" (MOG 188).

Now her original disclaimer notwithstanding, it is interesting to observe how Feld concludes her book with a kind of prescription, insisting that "medicine and theology must join in the therapeutics of the human, the being whose body is subjective, whose soul is embodied" (MOG 193). I want to propose, without being able to argue it here, that the recent development of cognitive behavioral therapies (CBT) by certain contemporary clinical psychologists presents an intriguing opportunity for facilitating the marriage of medicine and theology that Feld encourages. This might seem counter-intuitive at first blush. CBT would appear to occupy an altogether different conceptual space from that surrounding the classical traditions of psychoanalysis, especially the existential and phenomenological approaches to psychotherapy (including Karl Jaspers') upon which Feld herself occasionally depends for insight.² At the same time, there is little risk in the practice of cognitive behavioral therapy of failing to take human embodiment seriously. From this perspective persons *are* bodies, albeit thinking ones, in fact, semiotic creatures who are continuously engaged in acts of interpretation. When those interpretations become problematic, anxiety or depression can sometimes be the result.

This terse statement of the cognitive behavioral

perspective is inadequate enough to be potentially misleading. The goal of Aaron Beck, and of clinicians shaped by his pioneering thought and practice, is to achieve in therapy a certain semiotic repair—a "cognitive restructuring" as he refers to it—but hardly in order to banish the anxiety or depression that may signal problematic interpretations.³ In fact, the rapid growth of "mindfulness based" cognitive behavioral therapies signals an increased tendency among practitioners to encourage depressed persons to lean into emotional states as they experience them (in Feld's terms, to "own" their depression), advocating nonjudgmental "acceptance," while warning about the dangers of suppressing or attempting to circumvent feelings regarded as unpleasant.⁴ Moreover, in recent clinical experience, one of the most demonstrably effective strategies for dealing with overpowering anxiety (of various kinds) is through "exposure therapy," designed not to alleviate anxiety but to confront it directly when it occurs; through exercises in imaginal exposure it becomes possible to induce anxiety even on occasions where it may not otherwise have been experienced. Importantly, the goal of such exposure is not to change the way that one feels, but rather, to change how one interprets such feelings, also what one habitually tends to do in response to them (for example, promoting the value of acceptance rather than avoidance).

Feld's work broadens considerably the perspective from which this sort of change might be understood, adding a theological dimension, as well as a more capacious philosophical anthropology, to the somewhat restricted "information processing" view of semiosis and human interpretative behavior that CBT typically presupposes. As a philosophical theologian, she stands in a long tradition of thinkers who have argued for the necessity of engaging rather than eschewing the melancholy that afflicts us, not in an arbitrary way, but

³ These maladaptive interpretations or constructions are typically about the self, its environment or the future, a complex of meanings that Aaron Beck refers to as the "cognitive triad." Two of the most general accounts of Beck's cognitive theory and practice appear in Aaron T. Beck, *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders*, New York: Penguin Books, 1979; and Brad A. Alford and Aaron T. Beck, *The Integrative Power of Cognitive Therapy*, New York: The Guilford Press, 1997.

⁴ Consider, for example, the material collected in *Mindfulness and Acceptance: Expanding the Cognitive-Behavioral Tradition*, eds. Steven C. Hayes, Victoria M. Follette, and Marsha M. Lineham, New York: The Guilford Press, 2004.

² Although I am willing to confess that there is a deep resonance between cognitive theory and the tradition of classical American pragmatism (Peirce, James, Dewey) that I deeply honor and to which my own work is clearly indebted.

in a decisively hermeneutical fashion. In addition to the numerous figures encountered in her study, I might mention here for further consideration the relevance of: Ignatius of Loyola's "rules for the discernment of spirits," identifying feelings of "desolation" as an important but multivalent sign for someone seeking to make progress in the spiritual life;⁵ William James' characterization of the "sick soul" as displaying a religious insight deeper than that of the "healthy-minded consciousness," and of genuine religious conversion as incorporating, never negating, the sick soul's melancholy awareness that there is a real wrongness in the world;⁶ the kind of graduated "imaginal exposure therapy" advocated by Buddhist thinkers who prescribe for religious devotees the practice of meditating on a rotting human corpse.⁷ Of course, interpretive insight can change the way that one feels, either in the short or the long run, but in all of these cases, as on Feld's account, one's hermeneutical response to certain feeling states is of greater significance than achieving the transformation of feeling. Moreover, from each of these perspectives there is nothing to be gained by the masking of melancholy, and the risk of great loss in doing so.

Feld understands melancholy to be both an existential/psychological condition and a complex symbol (*MOG* xviii). As a condition it arises in response to, and so can be regarded as part of the interpretation of, some perceived state of affairs. From my own Peircean perspective, every interpretant is also itself a sign inviting further interpretation. Consequently, melancholy is both an interpretive response and a symbol that requires our hermeneutical attention. At the same time, deep melancholy (as opposed to a more superficial and transient sadness), like profound boredom, is not a reaction to—and so does not signify—anything in particular. Rather, it signifies "no-thing," a nothingness that cannot be conceptualized or imagined,

so that the interpretive response that it, in turn, elicits is always already undermined, partially negated.⁸ For Feld, as for Schelling, this nothingness is primordial, the dark aspect of divinity, with the melancholy that it engenders in human experience best perceived as a broken symbol, nevertheless, as "the indelible trace of God's abysmal otherness" (*MOG* 194). While it is not a simple matter to identify how such religious insights might supplement and so help to transform the basic ideas shaping the development of cognitive behavioral therapies for anxiety and depression, my instinct is that this topic is an important one to explore.

Such a theological point of view, it seems to me, reveals both the necessity, indeed, the urgency of semiosis and its limits. Moreover, it suggests that "semiotic breakdown" is as crucial to the success of our interpretive activity as the occasionally clear and accurate articulation of what certain signs mean. Showing how and why this is the case would require more extended discussion. I want only to emphasize here the remarkable way in which Feld's work has exposed to her readers the sort of heightened awareness that melancholy can facilitate, similar to how immersion in total darkness urges a more careful attentiveness on the one thus immersed, often causing a sharpening of all non-visual forms of sense perception. This attentiveness can help to reveal many of those specific, determinate things that one might bump into in the dark. But it is also an attentiveness that can have no determinate thing as its object, reducing, in the midst of this surrounding darkness, the self to silence. Now this silence can be eloquent, therapeutically powerful, much like the silence that love speaks sitting bedside in hospital rooms, waiting for death. If love is indeed stronger than death it is only because of its ongoing exercise, not in denial, but always in honest confrontation with the otherness that death represents. This insight is at the heart of Feld's theological therapeutic, best understood (again, at least as it seems to me) against the background supplied by Schelling, in his metaphysical portrayal of love's perpetual wrestling with darkness at the heart of the divine being/nonbeing (see especially *MOG* 115-20, 172-3, 192-3).

⁵ See the "Rules for the Discernment of Spirits," pp. 313-36 in *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, ed. Louis J. Puhl, S.J., Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951.

⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1961.

⁷ Graduated, because it begins with the corpse of a stranger, moves to imagining that of a loved one, and concludes with the corpse being one's own. For a discussion of this Buddhist practice, consult Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual of Meditation*, trans. Mobi Ho, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), pp. 50-1, 91-2, 116-8.

⁸ I analyze profound boredom as a sign of "nothing," in Michael L. Raposa, *Boredom and the Religious Imagination*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press 1999, pp. 143-4.