

Controlled Melancholy: How to Purely Love Political Power

Marc De Kesel

ABSTRACT

Put on the throne by the vicissitudes of history, the Spanish king Philip V, youngest grandson of the French king Louis XIV, never stopped feeling that throne to be not his and to be himself a “usurper”. And all the comments of his former preceptor and teacher, François de Fénelon, reacting on the impasse Philip has arrived at, advise a kind of melancholic attitude as the best way to deal with the situation. A lot of Fénelon’s analyses can be read as application of his mystical theory of *Pur Amour* (Pure Love) to the domain of politics. After describing the Spanish king’s melancholic character and the melancholic situation he is in, the article explores Fénelon’s comments and advices. The question imposing itself here is whether this advice does not come down to a practice of ‘controlled melancholy’. Or does it conceal a theory of the act similar to the one Žižek will formulate three centuries later? Controlled melancholy or revolutionary act? A reflection on a ‘political’ fragment in Pascal will help to orientate this dilemma – a dilemma, which in a way summarizes the problem modernity’s politics still has to face nowadays.

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‘For you have but mistook me all this while:
I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends – subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a king?’
William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 3, 2

In his essay, “Melancholy and the Act”, Slavoj Žižek criticizes the common understanding of the psychoanalytical definition of melancholy.¹ Whereas mourning slowly ‘consumes’ the lost object and at the end enables overcoming its loss, melancholy allows the lost object to keep on haunting. This is what the usual interpretation states. The melancholic feels and behaves in such a way that the lost object remains so to speak saved from its loss. Or, in Hegelian terms, he refuses to ‘sublate’ the negative that traumatizes him. This is why the anti-Hegelian mood of postmodernity rejects mourning – for it does sublimate the negative – and prefers the melancholic position which acknowledges the negative, i.e. the lost object.²

Žižek criticizes this kind of postmodern preference. By privileging melancholy over mourning (i.e. keeping the reference to the object, despite its condition of being lost), postmodernism remains blind for the fact that

1 Žižek 2001, pp. 141-189.

2 Žižek 2001, p. 143.

the object *always already* has been lost (as Lacan states).³ By doing so, it speaks in favour of an attachment to that very object. In the name of that object, the attachment allows the claim of a proper, untouchable identity. Here, against its own intuitions, modernity falls in the trap of what Adorno has called the “jargon of authenticity”, a discourse claiming the possibility of a fixed identity – thus denying the ‘difference’ and ‘lack’ any identity is founded in.⁴ By preferring melancholy to mourning, postmodernity promotes in the end moral cultural conservatism, nationalism and other kind of right-wing identity policy.

Žižek puts forward a more correct understanding of melancholy. If, in the eyes of the melancholic, the object is present, it is *present in its very absence*. In Graham Green’s novel *The End of the Affair*, so Žižek explains, the object lost is not a phenomenon occurring *after* the wife’s decease. The lost object is there when the wife is still alive, but not at home, and the husband gnawed by suspicions about where she is, why she is late (is she with her lover?). Once the wife is dead it is her overwhelming *presence* that the apartment devoid of her flaunts: ‘Because she’s always away, she’s never away. You see she’s never anywhere else. She’s not having lunch with anybody, she’s not in the cinema with you. There’s nowhere for her to be but at home’. Is this not the very logic of melancholic identification in which the object is overpresent in its very unconditional and irretrievable loss?⁵

Žižek quotes Giorgio Agamben who claims that melancholy is not so much a failed mourning as “the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object”. And Žižek comments:

That is the melancholic’s stratagem: *the only way to possess an object which we never had, which was lost from the very outset, is to treat an object that we still fully possess as if this object is already lost.*⁶

Possessing an object, you never *really* have it, and you treat it as if it was always already lost: is this definition of melancholy not applicable to the field of the political as well, more precisely to the way one possesses political power? To possess power and to have to treat it as if it is not yours: is this melancholic state (in the Žižekian sense) not simply the condition of any man of power, regardless whether he is an antique emperor, a medieval king or the prime minister in a modern democracy? Is, then, the melancholic mood the condition of political power?

3 Lacan 1992, p. 52. Lacan supposes this to be a genuine Freudian thesis, which it is not; see: De Kesel 2009, pp. 87-88; Fink 1996, p. 93.

4 Adorno 1973.

5 Žižek 2001, pp. 143-144; Žižek quotes from Green 1975, p. 169.

6 Žižek 2001: 146; Žižek’s italics.

If this suggestion makes sense, than power implies a kind of melancholy, at least formally. On the place of power, one always already has to mourn over the loss of that power, without being able to ‘accomplish’ that mourning, which is to say that one has to stick to one’s power in an explicit melancholic way. Melancholy not only supposes the psychological condition of power, but even to the ethical attitude required by it.

This article reflects upon a man of power from early modern times, who was not only a genuinely melancholic person, but to whom a ‘melancholic’ attitude explicitly was advised with regard to dealing with his political power. Put on the throne by the vicissitudes of history, the Spanish king Philip V, youngest grandson of the French king Louis XIV, never stopped feeling that throne to be not his and to be himself a “usurper”. And all the comments of his former preceptor and teacher, François de Fénelon, reacting on the impasse Philip has arrived at, advice a kind of melancholic attitude as the best way to deal with the situation. A lot of Fénelon’s analyses can be read as application of his mystical theory of the *Pur Amour* (Pure Love) to the domain of politics.

After describing the Spanish king’s melancholic character and the melancholic situation he is in, the article explores Fénelon’s comments and advices.⁷ The question imposing itself here is whether these advices do not come down to a practice of ‘controlled melancholy’. Or do they conceal a theory of the act similar to the one Žižek will formulate three centuries later? Controlled melancholy or revolutionary act? A reflection on a ‘political’ fragment in Pascal will help to orientate us in this dilemma – a dilemma, which in a way summarizes the problem modernity’s politics still has face nowadays.

Philip V

Philip V, king of Spain from 1700 till 1748 was born in the bosom of the French royal family, as the second son of the ‘Dauphin’, the brother of Louis XIV, and he was only indirectly linked to the Spanish royal family as the great grandson of Philip IV, who had been king of Spain from 1621 till 1640. In 1700, Philip, the seventeen years old Duke of Anjou, was indicated as the heir of the Spanish king Charles II, who died childless. This made him ruler of Spain (including the Spanish Territories: Spanish America, the Spanish Netherlands and parts of Italy). Only shortly for his death, Charles II had changed his mind, annulling a former testament that respected the equilibrium in Europe.⁸ And certainly since Louis XIV refused

7 For the development of my argument I rely heavily on the French Fénelon scholar Jacques Lebrun (Lebrun 2009).

8 The former testament indicated the German Prince Elector Leopold of Bavaria (of the Habsburg House, the house of Charles himself). The reason why Charles changed his mind was his fear for a weak king, unable to keep the Spanish territories united in one strong kingdom. Having his

to delete the new Spanish king from the list of possible heirs of the French throne, that equilibrium was now definitely disturbed, since a 'vassal' and heir of the throne of the most powerful man in the Western world now became king of the gigantic Spanish empire. No wonder that occurred what everyone feared: England, Holland and Austria started what would become known as the War of the Spanish Succession. When Philip's older brother, the Dauphin, died and Philip himself became the first in line for the French throne, the allies were even more motivated to continue waging war. The war lasted more than a decade, and brought France a whole series of economic depressions, a starving population, and an almost bankrupted state.

In the midst of all this was Philip whose melancholic nature prevented him from feeling comfortable in his position of power.⁹ In the first years of his reign, he was supported – and even forced – by his grandfather to hold that throne. But when the war turned out to be disastrous for France and the allies required the immediate abdication of the ruling Spanish king, Louis XIV tried – without saying it in so many words – to push Philip in the direction of abdication. And even when Philip refused, he kept on being considered as just a pawn in the political game of Louis XIV. The allies negotiated with Louis XIV, not with Philip: in their minds it was clear that, if the grandfather would agree with the abdication, the grandson would obey immediately. To save the last remnants of self-respect, Philip now had to resist what he always wanted: abdication. He only felt able to fulfil that wish when he did what his grandfather had been unable to do: putting his *own* son on the throne – which he did in January 1724. However, fate was against him: after only a few months on the throne, his son died, and Philip was forced, so to say, to abdicate from his abdication and to become king again for another few decades.¹⁰ An unhappy nature like his needs less to become deeply melancholic. Although we have no direct sources about it, it is very probable that the king must have been very sensitive for Fénelon's ideas concerning the difficult situation his kingship was in.

Fénelon

François de Fénelon knew the young Spanish king very well. As priest connected to the French Court in Versailles, he had been responsible for the

grandfather behind him, the Duke of Anjou was supposed to guarantee that.

⁹ The duke of Saint-Simon, author of thousands of pages direct report of the time of Louis XIV and 'la Régence' after him, gives a penetrating portrait of Philip. See: *Memoires of Louis XIV*, by the Duke the Saint-Simon, Volume VIII, Chapter CX, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3875/3875-h/3875-h.htm#link2HCH0055> ; original text: Saint-Simon 1958, p. 1079-1081.

¹⁰ This is, so to say, Philip V of Spain "reigned twice": see Kamen 2001.

education of the young Duke of Anjou.¹¹ To that responsibility we owe one of Fénelon's most famous books, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, admired in the next century by almost all French Enlightenment writers. Fénelon's reflections on the son of Ulysses waiting for his father and preparing himself to become once his successor, was in fact conceived as a kind of educational guideline for the one who, after Louis XIV, might become the king of France.

At the time the Duke of Anjou became king of Spain, his relation with Fénelon was no longer what it used to be. In the midst of the nineties of the seventeenth century, the "*Quérelle du quiétisme*" – a public debate at the Versailles Court and in Paris on Fénelon's thesis of 'pure love' – had ended with the condemnation of some of Fénelon's doctrinal theses and in 1697, Louis XIV had banished him from the Versailles Court by nominating him archbishop of Cambrai (in Northern France). So, since then, Fénelon followed the politics of his country from a distance, which is not to say that his interest in it had diminished. On the contrary, Fénelon, a genuine writer, never stopped expressing his political opinions by means of letters to numerous persons in the heart of Versailles' political battles, by reflections and dissertations, even by a "letter to Louis XVI" (which remained unsent). It was his way to continue his political commitment to Versailles.¹²

Immediately after the Duke of Anjou had accepted the Spanish kingship, without – important addition – renouncing the claim on the French throne, a league of European nations declared war against France. Already in the same year, 1701, Fénelon writes his first "Memory on the means to prevent the war of Spanish Succession".¹³ It is a plea for peace, for maintaining Europe's equilibrium, and consequently for negotiations instead of violence and war. The *Mémoire* is not without criticism denouncing the absence of a clear goal and strategy on the side of France, but neither the King nor his decision to put his grandson on the Spanish throne are hinted at directly. "France" is Fénelon's main concern. Inspired by God's goodness, France and its king can generously support Spain by providing a good leadership for its people by means of one of the 'sons of France', the Duke of Anjou, but it should not "needlessly sacrifice" itself for that foreign country. His second *Mémoire* (early 1702), written after Louis XIV's recognition of James III as king of England (against William III, the 'president' of the Dutch Republic of the Low Lands, who had become king of England in the Glorious Revolution, 1688), expresses

¹¹ On September 3, 1789, the Duke of Beauvillier and 'abbé' Fénelon were sworn in as "précepteur" of the grand-son of Louis XIV; Melchior-Bonnet 2008, p. 107.

¹² "Few priests and spiritual men were so engaged in the political debates of their time", Melchior-Bonnet writes about Fénelon (Melchior-Bonnet 2008: 319).

¹³ "Mémoire sur les moyens de prévenir la guerre de la Succession d'Espagne", in: Fénelon 1997, pp. 1013-1027. For the entire collection of Fénelon's writings on that war, see: Fénelon 1971, pp. 149-181. For the first "Mémoire", see Fénelon 1971, pp. 149-156.

Fénelon's unchanged position.¹⁴

Things do not change until 1710, when France looks back on more than a year of humiliating military defeats and an increasing demoralisation of both the troupes and the population threatened by famine. The allies have conquered back all cities recently occupied by France and require the immediate abdication of Philip V from the Spanish throne. They address their requests not directly to Philip but to Louis XIV, adding that, if his grandson will not listen to his grandfather, the latter has to wage war against his grandson.

In this context Fénelon writes a few more *Mémoires* on the political situation of the French state after ten years of war. It is in those *Mémoires* that one can read Fénelon advising Philip V to abdicate from the Spanish throne. Those reflections bring the author to the conclusion that power requires an attitude of what one may call 'controlled melancholic'.

3. Royal sacrifice

Why Philip V has to abdicate? The answer is simple: his position as king of Spain is the cause of a war that lasts for more than a decade and is ruining the entire French nation. This opinion is not Fénelon's alone. The allies share it, as well as many members of the French court. Even the French king seems to be not entirely against it. Philip's abdication would solve the entire problem at once.

What is interesting in Fénelon's *Mémoires*, however, is that this opinion leads the author to a profound reflection on what it means to be king as well as to perform political acts. Classic medieval logic underlies his reflection. Yet, an opening to modern logic of power is made, precisely where he reflects on Philip V and the abdication the allies (and Fénelon as well) ask from him.

Relocated to Cambrai, Fénelon is no longer allowed to intervene openly in political discussions. This is why he writes in private and addresses the political *Mémoires* to one of his nobleman friends: the Duke of Chevreuse. In a reaction to one of Fénelon's *Mémoires* (one that has been lost), Chevreuse defends the then classical argument: since Philip is a descendant from the two Spanish royal families of Castile and Aragon who started the *Reconquista*, and since he is indicated by the last Spanish king as heir of his throne, he cannot be forced to abdicate his power, even not by Europe's most powerful man, who is his grandfather.¹⁵ He can only do it out of free will. No other reason than his own sovereign freedom is valid here.

Fénelon clearly disagrees with this argument. In a way, he is

14 Fénelon 1997, pp. 1028-1033.

15 Fénelon 1997, p. 1059.

more realistic than Chevreuse, since he pays more attention to the concrete political situation, which tells him that Philip is obviously a pawn in a broader game. According to Fénelon, the question is not only what it means to be king of a nation, but also what it means to be king *among kings*. For Philip is not simply king because his father or grandfather was; he is *actively made* king of a foreign nation by a foreign king. His position of king depends entirely on other kings, which *via negativa* is also made clear by the fact that other kings (or dukes, or presidents of a Republic as were the Dutch leaders) deny his kingship and wage war against him. His kingship is rooted in what other kings say about it.

Here, one can notice the principle of equality slightly penetrating the old feudal discourse of legitimate power. Kings are equal with respect to one another, and when other kings do not accept your kingship, when this refusal threatens the people whose king you are, then you lose the legitimacy of your kingship and have to abandon it. This argument is the background of Fénelon's line of reasoning and it shows a first emergence of modernity in the political discourse of the early eighteenth century.

But, of course, Fénelon himself does not put the problem in these very words. The grammar in which he puts it is still highly dutiable to the feudal logic, although it takes into account the reality of the situation. Why then, according to Fénelon, Philip has been nominated king of Spain? Not simply because he is an ascendant of the Spanish house. Fénelon understands very well Charles II's concern, which is to avoid the disintegration ("démembrement")¹⁶ of the Spanish empire. Spain, the empire "where the sun never sets", needed a strong king or one supported by another strong king. This is what Ludwig of Bavaria, the heir indicated in Charles II's first testament, could not guarantee. And this is what Philip of Anjou was exactly able to do, since the strongest man of Western Europe, his grandfather, stood behind him. The disintegration of the *Spanish Empire* did not take place.

However, what did take place was the disintegration of *Europe*, and from the very first moment, Fénelon was aware of that. Yet, during the entire period of war, it never came to his mind to blame his king for that, although the latter knew from the beginning that the European leaders would not accept Spain to be ruled by someone who could at the same time become king of France. It was Louis XIV's decision to put Philip on the Spanish throne that had destabilized Europe as it was settled since the Peace of Westphalia (1648). Fénelon was fully aware of that, but none of his analyses go in that direction. Louis XIV seems to be untouchable for him.¹⁷

16 "... empêcher le démembrement de la monarchie espagole", Fénelon 1997, p. 1013.

17 It is only *here* that Louis XIV appears to be untouchable to Fénelon. A few years earlier, he had severely criticized his King, especially for the wars he continued to wage during "more than twenty years" – wars he waged because of his thirst for honour and his addiction to flattery. See his

This is not to say, however, that according to Fénelon, his king does not have to accept the abdication of his grandson from the Spanish throne. Fénelon is even so clever to find a way in which Louis XIV's can do this even without giving way to his royal honour. In his third *Mémoire* he writes:

The unique glory that the French people may wish to the king is that, in this extreme situation, he turns his courage against himself, and that he generously makes a sacrifice in order to save the kingdom that God has given him. He does not even have the right to take risks in this, because he has received it from God not in order to expose it to its enemies as something he can deal with as he pleases, but in order to govern it as a father and to transfer it, as a precious deposit, to his posterity.¹⁸

The king can make a “sacrifice”, he can “turn his courage against himself”. It is Fénelon's expression to say that he can undo his decision to put his grandson on the Spanish throne. And why can he do this without dishonouring his kingship? Because his kingdom is not simply his: it has been *given* to him. In the next *Mémoire*, he is even clearer about it:

... the king is not free to put France at risk for the personal interest of his princes-grandsons, juniors of the royal family. He is the legitimate king of his kingdom, but only for his life, he got the usufruct of it but not the ownership, it is not at his disposal, he is only its deposit- or, he has no right neither to expose the nation to foreign domination nor to expose the royal house to lose entirely or partially the crown that belongs to him.¹⁹

It is not the person of the king that counts. Precisely not. He has to sacrifice what is personal to him in favour of the defence of his cause. Despite the extraordinary character of Fénelon's request (the king must revoke his decision and bring about the abdication of his grandson), it is based on an entirely valid and traditional logic: the one of the medieval “two bodies” theory, as famously explained by Kantorowicz.²⁰ As royal body, the king is eternal, his power untouchable and his decisions un-

famous *Letter to Louis XIV*, most probably to be dated December 1793 (Fénelon 1983, pp. 541-551). The real addressee is not the King (who never received the letter), but most probably his 'unofficial wife', Madame de Maintenon, in order to provide her with arguments in case she would have the opportunity to influence the King in the right direction (interpretation of Jean Orcibal, see: Fénelon 1983, pp. 1409-1410).

18 Fénelon 1997, p. 1038 (my translation, MDK).

19 Fénelon 1997, p. 1051 (my translation, MDK).

20 Kantorowicz 1997.

changeable. But his personal body is not. To that body belong his personal interests, and those may not be taken into account when the royal body is in danger. Louis XIV's sacrifice Fénelon pleads for exemplifies this. The cause of the French nation requires the sacrifice of the king's personal interest of having his grandson on the Spanish throne.

The sacrifice required from Philip is of a different type than Louis XIV's. According to Fénelon, Philip's kingship is not a completely genuine one. It has not been given by God. Philip is only asked to do a job that first has been predicted to someone else. Although God's grace is not absent, his kingship is nonetheless the result of contingency. This is to say that, for Fénelon, the distance between king Philip's royal body and his personal one is larger than in the case of Louis XIV. The latter unites the two bodies in one human being; Philip does not, according to Fénelon. The royal body Philip is united with is the French royal body, and to the Spanish royal body Philip is only *lent*. This is why Fénelon never doubted that Philip is legitimately able to abdicate from that throne. His ultimate loyalty is not to the Spanish people, but to the French throne. For the same reason, his ultimate sacrifice cannot be meant to be in favour of the people whose king he is, but he has to sacrifice himself in favour of the French nation. If Louis XIV has to make a sacrifice, as Fénelon pleads for, if he has to approve the abdication of his grandson, it is to deliver the latter from the sacrifice his (Spanish) people could require from him.²¹ The sacrifice Philip has to make is in favour of France.

4. Royal abdication

In the background of Fénelon's argumentation, there is yet another logic which differs from the one of the king's two bodies theory. That logic, too, is profoundly religious, but contrary to the former, it is already penetrated by *modern* premises. Implicitly, it operates at the background of almost every page in Fénelon. At the end of the fifth *Mémoire*, it comes to the foreground more obviously. In the first years of the war, he might have had some hesitations, the author admits, but now

I see nothing that allows any doubt about the prince being obliged to renounce his right – be it good or bad – on Spain in order to save France, given the fact that we are in a situation of ultimate extremity. Rather than dishonour the prince, this voluntary disposition would be through him a heroic act of religion, of courage, of gratitude to the king and Monseigneur the Dauphin, of passion for France and its House. It would even be unforgivable to refuse this sacrifice. It is not a matter of ruining Spain, for leaving it, he will leave the country as complete and peaceful as he has received it. The depot he has been given will lack nothing. He will but sacrifice his personal grandeur. So, does he not have to prefer, to his personal

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Lebrun 2006, p. 213.

grandeur, the grandeur of both his fathers and his benefactors to whom he owes it, along with the salvation of entire France that seems to depend on that sacrifice?²²

The heroism, requested from the “prince” (i.e. the Spanish king, Philip V), is called an “act of religion”. According to Jacques Lebrun, this is more than a detail.²³ It indicates that, according to Fénelon, the ultimate reason why Philip has to abdicate is not merely political, but ‘spiritual’ as well. In the end, the advices he presents to Philip illustrate a typically Fénelonian spirituality: a mental state and attitude required by the one who, in his love for God, wants to go that path until its ultimate state, until it is ‘*pur amour*’, ‘pure love’.

Let us first recall what is said in the quote. Philip has to become a “prince” again and to renounce his right on the Spanish throne, this “right – be it good or bad – on Spain” (“son droit bon ou mauvais sur l’Espagne”). Even if he has the right to remain king of Spain, he has to abandon it. This is due to the “situation of ultimate extremity”. Which is not to say that he has no choice. On the contrary, he has to do it fully *voluntarily* (his “disposition” is “voluntary”). Even if his grandfather, the French king, and his father “Monseigneur the Dauphin” would not ask him to abdicate, or even if they would ask it for wrong reasons, he nonetheless should abandon his kingship: *voluntarily*. This is the way to show his real “gratitude” to his father and grandfather, his real “passion for France and its House”.

A “situation of ultimate extremity” that nonetheless appeals to radical freedom, a freedom that cannot but result in an “act” sacrificing all that one is, oneself, one’s “personal grandeur” – this being precisely the highest grandeur one can get: the “act” Fénelon asks from Philip is indeed an act of *pure love*.

What is *pure love*, according to Fénelon who coined the term? It is the final phase in the mystical way to God, the phase in which the mystic’s love for God reaches its ultimate shape. This requires a “situation of ultimate extremity”, which Fénelon often evokes with the following hypothetical situation. Suppose that God has condemned you from the beginning of time and that this divine decision is irrevocable (a pure hypothesis, Fénelon emphasises, for thinking that way is as such already sinful): is there any reason left then to love God? At first sight, that “extreme situation” renders love for God senseless, for the loving believer is condemned anyway, whatever he or she does. Fénelon’s conclusion, however, is the opposite: If God will give me nothing in turn for the love I give him, and if, in that condition, I nonetheless do give love to him, then *and only then*, my love is pure, unconditioned, *pur amour*. If I love God for the beatitude he promises, my love for him makes sense, of course, but it is not entirely

22 Fénelon 1997, p. 1073; my translation, MDK.

23 I follow his arguments in: Lebrun 2006, p. 231-235.

pure. Really pure is my love only if I love him without receiving anything back from him, even if I got a hell of eternal pain in return.

This paradigm seems to underlie Fénelon’s reflections about royal power. In *Télémaque*, in a passage evocating the position and function of the king, he writes:

It is not for himself that the gods have made him king; he is only king to be the man of his people: it is to his people he has to give his affection, his time, and he is only worth to his kingship to the extend he *forgets himself* and *sacrifices himself* to the public good.²⁴

Lebrun quotes this sentence and is responsible for the italics.²⁵ For in those words lays the difference with the old legitimization of kingship. The medieval king, too, has to sacrifice himself for his people (“the kingdom is not there for the sake of the king; the king is there for the sake of the kingdom”, Thomas Aquinas writes)²⁶, but he did not necessarily have to *forget* himself. He was the representative of God for his people, and he represented his people to God. His sacrifice for his people glorified his people but himself as well. His people’s glory was visible in the glory of their king. The direct link between *natura* and *supranatura*, between man and God, as supposed in medieval logic, allowed the royal glory to be the visible face of God’s blessing addressed to the king’s people.

Modernity can be defined as the cutting of that link: nature was considered independently from its divine creator. And if one wanted to connect nature to God and his *supranatura*, this was solely possible on the base of one’s own natural, free will. He could *choose* to belief in God, just like he was free to choose *not* to believe in him.

Despite its content, which shows no real difference with medieval spirituality, the one Fénelon defends differs decisively from it on a *formal* level. What, more precisely, does differ is the position of the *subject* in his relation to God. In the Middle Ages, the human subject defined himself as dependent from God. Since modernity, i.e. since the rise of the Cartesian subject, man is *free* in his relation to God. Fénelon’s spirituality is profoundly modern in the sense that he puts that freedom in the very heart of genuine religiosity. Even if God will not glorify me when I love him with the purest intentions I am capable of, even if God will leave my adoration for him without any reward, even then my love for him depends solely on myself. It is me who decides to love him, whatever he does. And, of course, I am totally dependent on my creator and would be nothing without him, but even if I know he had decided to reduce me to nothing and to destroy

24 Fénelon 2006, p. 59; my translation, MDK.

25 Lebrun 2009, p. 233.

26 “Regnum non est propter regem, sed rex propter regnum”, quoted in Lebrun 2009, p. 233.

me forever, I nonetheless am able to love him; or, what is more: *only then* – only in that “extreme situation” – can I prove that what I feel and do for him is *pure love*.

In a way, the Fénelonian ‘*experimentum mentis*’ of the *pur amour* is a religious translation of that other *experimentum mentis* founding modernity: the Cartesian doubt. The latter puts forward human consciousness as the grounding platform for our relation to the world. The former puts forward the human will as the ground for our relation to the world’s creator. The underlying paradox of Fénelon’s *experimentum* is that, in order to prove that God is the grounding principle of my existence, I deliberately accept the possibility of my eternal destruction by him. And the heart of that paradox is that it supposes my freedom, my independence from God, whatever he decides with regard to me.

This abysmal subjective position is assumed by Fénelon’s demand to Philip V, king of Spain. In the extreme situation he is in (together with war waging Europe), his royal honour requires the radical position of a modern religious subject. To acknowledge his kingship, he has to forget himself as king.

It is true that Fénelon does not dare to address that request to Louis XIV. He still thinks his *own* king within the framework of medieval logic: the sacrifice he asks of him, is one that visibly glorifies his kingship, his nation and God. According to Fénelon, the king of France is indissolubly connected to his nation. He fully takes for granted the king’s dictum: “L’état, c’est moi” (“The state, that’s me”), without reading this “moi” in the radical sacrificial way as he understands it in his writing on the spirituality and mysticism of his day.

The case of the Duke of Anjou becoming king of Spain seems to have inspired Fénelon to apply his mystical theory to an issue that at first sight has not much to do with it: royal power. The melancholic mood of the Duke may have given him hope to see his theory confirmed in reality. He must have presumed that Philip was able to sacrifice himself without any return, without a nation that assumes this sacrifice as its glory, without a God guaranteeing him the sense of his sacrifice. According to Fénelon, it was precisely in that absence of any guarantee where the greatness, the honour of Philip’s act, lays. A “religious” greatness, we know now: “Rather than dishonour the prince, this voluntary disposition would be through him a heroic act of religion.”²⁷ In the eyes of Fénelon, Philip’s act should have been religiously heroic because the actor would have sacrificed even his heroism, his honour or any other personal positive effect.

In terms of the conceptual difference between mourning and melancholy, one can define the attitude Louis XIV should have, according to Fénelon, as mourning. The French king, too, has to sacrifice himself for his nation, but his sacrificial labour is not without positive result. In it, the

27 Fénelon 1997, p. 1073; my translation, MDK.

loss is sublated and constitutes the greatness of both the nation and his king. However, what Philip is asked to do is an act, not of mourning, but of melancholy: an act unable to sublimate its loss. Lebrun describes this act as a “destruction” [“anéantissement”] that occurs “within the voluntary act itself in which man, in an extreme situation, is able to exercise his will and disappear in his act”.²⁸

An act in which the very subject of that act disappears: it is the definition of the “act” as we find it all over the place in Žižek.²⁹ Even the feature of changing the coordinates of the situation in which the act intervenes fits with the request addressed to Philip: his abdication would change at once all the coordinates of war waging Europe and bring again peace.³⁰ Like Žižek emphasises, such an act requires a self-sacrifice that does not appropriate the loss of the act’s very subject. The subject must disappear in its very act. And, embracing the desired ‘object’ it wants to establish, the act at the same time confirms that object in what it really is: a radical lack. Consequently, a real act supposes a truly *melancholic* disposition.

Fénelon asks from Philip such an act, and he asks it *solely* from Philip. Fénelon has still in mind an extraordinary, “extreme” situation – France on the edge of being ruined – as a necessary condition for an act like that. Yet, in fact, what he thinks through is the way *any* king at *any time* should relate to that power. Philip’s extreme situation reveals the situation a man of power in general is in: by taking that power, he at the same time has to abdicate it. Exercising power over the people is to sacrifice yourself in that power, to exercise it without the slightest benefit for yourself – in Fénelonian terms: to *purely* love the power. And, not unlike Žižek will develop centuries later, that love is only possible in an act, an inherently extreme, self-sacrificing act.

Of course, it is incorrect to read in Fénelon a defence for *revolutionary* politics. No doubt his political position was extremely conservative. Nonetheless, his reflections on the desirability of Philip V’s abdication brought him to a theory of power which inscribes abdication in the very center of power. Being in power, the ruler is always in the position that power is not his and that he can give it away and/or must give himself away. Being the subject of power, the ruler has to sacrifice himself precisely in his position of being the subject of power. Or to put it in terms Claude Lefort would have used: occupying the place of power, one has to acknowledge that that place is in fact empty, that it is not one’s own, that

28 Lebrun 2006, p. 233-234.

29 “... an act of negativity, ‘cleanse the plate’, draw the line, exempt myself, step out of the symbolic in a ‘suicidal’ gesture of a radical act – what Freud called the ‘death drive’ and what German Idealism called ‘radical negativity’”; in: Žižek 2000, p. 149; 2005, p. 140; 2008, p. 304-3011.

30 “An act proper is not just a strategic intervention into a situation, bound by its conditions – it retroactively creates its own conditions.” Žižek 2008, p. 311.

one just occupies it – and consequently just occupies it *temporarily*.

The clearest way to acknowledge the emptiness, on which power is based, is the revolutionary act as such – an act changing the very coordinates of the situation that made this act possible. Fénelon's reflections conceal a theory of the revolutionary act as base of political power. The generations after him, whose reflections will give birth to the French Revolution (Voltaire and Rousseau among others), rejected the Christian mysticism Fénelon defended, but they all appreciated him – or at least the “myth” they created about him³¹ – because of his *Télémaque* and the political dimension of his entire oeuvre.³² In both his plea for such an act and for a melancholic – even ‘abdicalional’ – position towards power, they must have heard modernity's call for a new revolutionary base of politics and its power.

5. A King's Double-Sided Thought

A few decades before the turbulent times that forced Fénelon to write his *Mémoires*, another monument of French seventeenth century thought, Blaise Pascal, has reflected upon the same topic. The first of his *Three discourses on the condition of the great* (i.e. of the noblemen, the men of power) starts with a story that has much in common with the one of Philip Duke of Anjou, be it that his act goes in the other direction: instead of abdication, accepting the power.

A man is cast by a storm onto an unknown island, whose inhabitants were at a loss to find their king, who had gone missing. Bearing a great resemblance, both in face and physique, to this lost king, he was taken for him, and recognized as such by all the people of the island. At first, this man was unsure what action to take, but he eventually resolved to give himself over to his good fortune. He accepted all the respect and honors that the people sought to give him and he allowed himself to be treated as a king. But as he could not forget his natural condition, he was aware, at the same time that he received these honors, that he was not the king that this people sought, and that this kingdom did not belong to him. In this way, his thought had a double aspect: one by which he acted as a king, the other by which he recognized his true state, and that it was merely chance that had put him in the position where he was. He hid this latter thought and made manifest the other. It was by the former that he dealt with the people, and by the

31 Hogu 1920: 4-15.

32 Riley 2001, pp. 78-93.

latter that he dealt with himself.³³

Pascal's king, too, has two bodies, but unlike in medieval times, the one (mortal) is not the incarnation of the other (divine) body. On the contrary: it is mere accident that puts a human body on the royal throne. This, however, is not to say that the one on that throne is there illegally. The king, his power and the entire political order as it is, are entirely legitimate, so Pascal argues, but that legitimacy is based on pure contingency. That “the great” possess the power to which the lower people are subjected, is right in his eyes, but they must admit that their power is “the result of an infinite string of contingencies”. Addressing himself to “the great”, Pascal writes:

... the whole title by which you possess your property is not a title of nature, but of human establishment. Another turn of imagination in those who made the laws would have rendered you poor; and it is nothing but this fortuitous confluence of circumstances – which brought you into this world, with the caprice of laws favourable to you – that puts you in possession of all these goods.³⁴

And what, then, does all this imply for the men of power once they are aware of it? How should they deal with that ‘ideology critical’ knowledge?

What follows from this? That you must have, like this man of which we have spoken, a double-sided thought; and that if you act externally with men according to your rank, you must recognize, by a more hidden, but truer thought, that you have no quality that is naturally above them. If public thought elevates you above the common man, may the other humble you and keep you in perfect equality with all men; for this is your natural state.

The populace that admires you knows not, perhaps, this secret. It believes that nobility is a form of real greatness [*grandeur*] and practically considers the great [*les grands*] as being of a different nature than others. Do not reveal to them this error, if you wish; but do not abuse your superior position with insolence, and above all do not deceive yourself by believing that your being has something higher in it than that of others.³⁵

Here, too, a self-forgetting act is in play, but it is contrary to the one Fénelon discusses. In the last paragraph of Pascal's first *Discours*, we read:

33 English translation by Samuel Webb; see <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/pascal/1630/three-discourses.htm>; for the original text, see Pascal 1963, p. 366-367 (also for the quotes that follow).

34 Ibidem.

35 Ibidem.

How important this insight is! For all the fits of anger, all the violence and all the vanity of the great comes from the fact that they know not what they are: it being difficult for those who would regard themselves internally as equal to all men, and were persuaded that they had nothing in themselves that merited the little advantages that God had given them above others, to treat them with insolence. One must forget oneself for that, and believe that one has some real excellence above them, in which consists the illusion that I am trying to reveal to you.³⁶

On the level of nature, all men are equal, but in the political situation of the day, some have the luck to possess power. This is what the combination of historical vicissitudes and “the sole will of the legislators” have decided. And those lucky ones, those ‘kings’, how should they deal with it? They should accept this with a “double sided thought”. They must accept that they are ‘kings’, that the power is theirs. *And* they must accept that, as kings, they are equal to their subjects – or that, in terms of Philip V’s melancholic consciousness, they are “usurpers”. And how must this “double-sided thought” be given shape? By keeping silent, certainly to those who are subjected to power. Yet, that silence cannot be the silence of forgetting. The silence they keep must at the same time be a way to remember who they are, remember that they are equal to their subjects and that power is theirs only by accident.

In a way, the attitude Pascal advises to the men of power is as ‘melancholic’ as the one Fénelon advised to Philip. Possessing power, they must realise power is not *really* theirs, that it could be as well *not* theirs and that, consequently, its status is marked by ‘loss’. Unlike Fénelon, however, this insight does not bring about the slightest “act”. On the contrary, they must do nothing. Their melancholy is only a matter of consciousness: their power is marked by fundamental loss, it has no ground and it could as well be the hand of their subjects, but they have to keep that awareness of lack and loss strictly inside the boundaries of their individual consciousness.

6. The melancholic nature of modern political power

What is at stake here, is the subject, and more precisely the *modern* version of it. The medieval version – i.e. the supposed grounding support (*subjectum*) of both world and man’s relation to it (his *being-in-the-world*, Heidegger would say) – was God: the one in whom the ‘facticity’ or ‘givenness’ of the world had its ‘giver’, and who had given us to the world. This is why a nation was given to its king just like a king had to give himself to that nation. The king’s ‘double body’ was the ‘incarnation’ of that gift-giv-

36 Ibidem; Pascal 1963, p. 367.

ing relation. His mortal body was the incarnation of the royal body, which in its turn was the incarnation of the divine *subjectum* in which the entire political order had its ground, its ontological foundation. Here, political power is far from being melancholic by nature: every experience of loss is supposed to be once redeemed by the fullness of a divine presence.

Since modernity, however, the nature of political power is marked by structural melancholy – at least if one defines modernity as the loss of man’s and world’s grounding connection with the ontological *subjectum*, i.e. with the grounding gift that unites man and world, king and people, the ones possessing power and the ones subjected to it. That *subjectum* called God is ‘dead’, and henceforth it is up to us humans, and only to us, to play the role of *subjectum*, i.e. of ‘ground’ and starting point for our relation to the world. This is to say that we have become ‘free subjects’: we relate to the world as if we were free *from* it. So, it is our freedom, our disconnection from the world, which makes the modern subjects we are inherently melancholic – in the Žižekian sense of a loss that always has been present as loss. It reshapes the basic condition of our desire. Playing the role of ‘ground’ without really being or possessing it, the modern subject keeps on longing for that ontological – or, as we have learned to name it, metaphysical – ground, which is and will be only present in its very absence.

Pascal’s *Discourse about the great* illustrates Early Modernity’s discovery that the general loss of metaphysical ground affects political power as well. The nobleman in power is not in that position because of his “nature” but only by accident. According to Pascal, the anxiety felt by modern man when paralyzed by the infinity of the universe – “an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere”³⁷ – has its counterpart in the way political power reacts to the discovery of its lack of ground, its radical contingency, its ‘usurpatory’ nature. As is the case in any other reaction of anxiety, the still feudal power of Pascal’s time is paralysed and literally immobilized. The Pascalian politics only makes that anxiety operational. Noticing that nature does not legitimize the existing political inequality of the day, and confronted with the abysmal lie it bases itself on, power’s sole answer is to remain what it is and to lock up this new insight within the closed interiors of consciousness. The man of power has to keep his melancholy controlled in a strictly private way. For Pascal, it is the only way to guarantee the control over all kinds of “insolence” which power can cause. The melancholy characterizing the modern man of power allows him to keep that power and, consequently, to keep the inequality of the existing order, obliging him nonetheless to treat the ones subjected to his power as *if* they are equals – just like he is only allowed to do as *if* he is their master.

37 Pascal, *Pensées*, nr. 199 (Lafuma).

Fénelon's ideas about politics are as 'conservative' as Pascal's. He, too, does not consider any change of the system as such. And yet, the "extreme situation" the politics of his day is in – the Spanish Succession War ending up ruining France – forces him to reconsider the political *subject*. The inherent melancholy of that subject requires an inner distance with relation to the power it is given, not unlike to the way explained in Pascal's text. But instead of keeping itself paralysed in its present condition, the Fénelonian subject is forced to action. In this case, the melancholic condition of power forces a king to abdicate, to leave his throne and to give the power back to the people. Here, controlled melancholy can lead to a situation in which the king proves the honour of his power by giving up that very power. It is true that Fénelon does not recommend this to *all* kings; it is not what royal power should *always* do. But his reflections on one particular case, the one of Philip V of Spain, opens a way of thinking which is new within the political theories of his days. The loss of a 'natural' (ontological) foundation for political power and man's necessity to be himself his own political *subjectum*, forces the power to action in stead of paralysis: this distinguishes Fénelon's from Pascal's political thought.

It is strange to notice that not Pascal's analysis of the *modern* condition the politics of his day was in, but Fénelon's basically *Christian* reflections has brought about the idea of a political 'act.' The ultimate love for God is a love that embraces our annulation by God: only then our love is *pur amour*, which requires a radically free act by the subject. The ultimate power is the one that abdicates all power: this is the *pure* (love of) power, only possible in a similarly radical act.

Pascal's modernity is basically theoretical and, hence, Cartesian. "Larvatus prodeo", Descartes said somewhere: I enter the scene of the world in a hidden way (*larvatus*).³⁸ The same way, the man of power must enter the world, knowing it is not as it looks like but leaving everything untouched. As already noticed, Fénelon's modernity is, unlike Pascal's, a voluntaristic one. Here, the 'Cartesian' subject, escaping the hyperbolic doubt, is the subject of a *will*. Even the certainty of God's condemnation cannot keep the Fénelonian subject from loving God, a love that has the shape of an act, sacrificing in that very act its own subject.

The melancholy about the lost ground for politics finds its Pascalian solution in a radical non-act. The Fénelonian solution, on the contrary, suggests the possibility of a radical act. Yet, even the latter does not change anything in the political framework of his day. Both melancholies legitimize a conservation of the existing system. This is why their melancholy easily risks to turn into cynicism. Both Pascal's advices to keep all political inequality unchanged, as well as Fénelon's act asking a king to abdicate and sacrifice his kingship, does not touch contemporary absolutistic monarchy neither kingship as such.

38 Descartes 1963, p. 45.

The problem of both Pascal and Fénelon is that they take the *existing* subject of politics simply for granted. But if politics has no ground neither in the real nor in God and therefore it is up to us, humans, to be the political subject, then the question is: who is that 'us'. 'Us', 'we': this is what both Pascal and Fénelon do not think through – contrary to their contemporary, Thomas Hobbes for instance. If humans are the subject of politics, then this accounts for *all* humans *equally*. Pascal and Fénelon lack the notion of what a century later will be called the "general will" ("la volonté générale").

So, does this notion of 'general will' contain a remedy against the melancholic nature of the modern political subject? Is a people, acknowledged in being itself the subject/agent of the ruling power, also marked by a melancholic relation to its own power – not possessing it while having it? It absolutely is. The problematic melancholic relation to power noticed by Pascal and Fénelon has basically not changed in the centuries after them. The Fénelonian act has been politically practiced in the most concrete way during the revolutions replacing the *Anciens Régimes* and giving birth to modern societies. Those who took the power in the revolution they gave rise to, have often lost both themselves in it and the revolution itself, in turning it into regimes of 'terror' (remember Robespierre's *Régime de la Terreur*).

And yet, nonetheless, modern societies have emerged from it – societies that acknowledge the melancholy of their relation to power in several ways. First of all, there are ceremonials and other practices that commemorate – seldom without some nostalgia – their 'lost' revolution. But there is also the realm of democratic practices. For what else is democracy than a way of making operational precisely the moment in which the subject of the revolution (i.e. 'us', the people) has lost itself in the very act of revolution? This is the way in which, for instance, Claude Lefort defines democracy: a way of organising the impossibility of the 'general will' to be present with itself and its own will. Or, to put it in Lacanian terms: the subject of democracy is a split subject and democratic politics operationalizes precisely that split. It splits power in legislative, executive and juridical power, each of them independent from the other. It obliges the ruling legislative and executive powers to accept all kinds of 'opposition', constantly criticizing what the government decides and/or realizes. On election day, it splits the totality of the people in an abstract quantity of separate individuals each of them allowed to vote freely the ones he/she prefers as rulers. This dissolved voice of the people articulates its 'impossible' condition, its melancholic longing for its unreachably lost 'self'. Democracy is the organized split between the people and itself. This is why it is inherently melancholic. It is only within the operationalization of that split – and, so to say, with controlled melancholy – that a democratic government is possible. For democracy is not a system in which a people is present to itself but a system in which it can only *desire* to be so; the

entire system organises the people's melancholic relation with its 'self' – acknowledging that 'self' in its very loss.

Within the context of early modern *Ancien Régime*, Pascal and Fénelon, each in his own way, introduced that melancholic split within the center of their reflections on politics. It has not left modern politics since.

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