IV The anxiety (Sorge) of the human self: Paul’s notion of μέριμνα

1. Paul’s ultima verba on anxiety in Philippians

In ancient and modern discourse, the phenomenon of “anxiety” and “care” is much debated.1 In the Greek-speaking world, μέριμνα primarily reflects human ‘anxiety’ and ‘worry’, and, as such, the Septuagint writings as well as early Christian literature tend to adopt a relatively uninformed or critical view of human anxiety and care: Matt 6:25-34, the passage “often etitled ‘On Anxiety’”,2 contains the strong Jesuanic imperative “do not be anxious” (μὴ μεριμνᾶτε: Matt 6:25).3 In combination with Jesus’ admonition of Martha – “… you are anxious and troubled about many things (μεριμνᾷς καὶ θορυβάζῃ περὶ πολλά)” (Luke 10:41; cf. also: Luke 21:34)4 –, μέριμνα is generally seen as an expression by which (the Matthean and Lukan) Jesus devalues and criticizes the attitude of “anxiety,” and New Testament researchers have devoted little scholarly attention to investigating this phenomenon.5

The Latin expression cura, in contrast, is considerably more ambivalent in its meaning. It can mean anxiety and worry as much as ‘care’, and it is therefore largely equivalent to the German expression “Sorge,” which is a central term in Heidegger’s existential philosophy. From Hyginus’ myth (fabulae 220)6 about

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2 H. D. Betz, Sermon, 460.
3 Μεριμν-: Exod 5:9; Esth 1:1; Ps 54:23; Ps 37:19LXX; Prov 17:12; Sir 30:24; 31:1f.; 42:9; Dan 11:26. To the Hebrew lexicon and terminology, cf.: T. Muraoka, Index, 78. – On only related Greek expressions for taking care or being anxious: Ps 12:3LXX; 39:18LXX; 126:2LXX; Sir 30:26; 34:1. Cf. also: Or Sib 2:316; 2:326; 3:89; 5:440. – References among the writings of the Apostolic Fathers are limited: Herm 19:3 (Vis III:11); 23:4 (Vis IV:2); 25:3 – cf. H. Kraft, Clavis, 287. Cf. only few instances in Patristic literature: G. W. H. Lampe, Lexicon, 843. – Translations of NT texts in general follow NRSV.
4 Instead – Jesus continues – “one thing is needful, Mary has chosen the good portion …” (v. 42).
5 Cf. D. Zeller, Brief (on 1 Cor 7); in general: R. Bultmann, “Μεριμνάω κτλ.”; R. Bultmann, Theologie, 242 (on 1 Cor 7); M. E. Thrall, Epistle (on 2 Cor). See also H. D. Betz, Sermon, 460-465.
6 “When Cura {‘Worry’} was crossing a certain river, she saw muddy clay, picked it up, pondered for a moment, and then molded a human. While she was thinking about just what she had created, Jupiter arrived on the scene. Cura asked him to give breath to the human, and Jupiter readily agreed to do it. But then, when Cura was about to name this
the origin and nature of human anxiety (cura) to Heidegger’s philosophy, it is thus possible to see how anxiety and care are two sides of the same coin; since they refer to human temporality, they are simply basic human reactions to the experience of time and mortality, in which the attitudes of fear and concern cooperate. In this article, I will show how such a broadening of the semantic field of μέριμνα and cura inspires our reading of Paul and provides fundamental insights into Paul’s understanding of selfhood.

Near the end of his letter to the Philippians (4:6), Paul analyzes human existence by admonishing his readers: “Have no anxiety about anything ...” (μηδὲν μεριμνᾶτε ...). At first, it may appear as though Paul simply rejects various kinds of daily-life “anxiety” that could occupy or even worry the Philippian community; we might imagine that Paul is recalling Jesuanic language here (Luke 10:41 – s. above). And indeed, most New Testament scholars take this path. Some argue that, in his admonition in Phil 4, Paul practices “pastoral care.” Other scholars see a direct connection to Jesus traditions here – depending on the overall interpretation of Philippians. In fact, in Matt 6 (= Q; Luke 12:22ff.), Jesus teaches more comprehensively about “anxiety” and “care”; he says: “... do not be anxious about your life ... (v. 25: μὴ μεριμνᾶτε τῇ ψυχῇ ὑμῶν) ...; do not

Cf. Heidegger’s description of “Selbstauslegung des Daseins als ‘Sorge’” (Sein, 197f.). In § 41 of “Being and Time” (1927), Heidegger explains how being in the world in its existential dimension is characterized by “fear”, “anxiety” and “care”: “... Weil das In-der-Welt-sein wesenhaft Sorge ist, deshalb konnte ... das Sein bei dem Zuhandenen als Besorgen, das Sein mit dem innerweltlich begegnenden Mitdasein Anderer als Fürsorge gefaßt werden” (193). – S. also Heidegger’s earlier reflections on “Bekümmerung” in GA 60: “Phänomenologie,” 52-54. In the frame of his lecture on “Einleitung in die Phänomenologie der Religion” (1920/21), Heidegger also presents his reading of Pauline letters, in particular: Gal, 1 Thess, 2 Thess (§§ 14-16; 23-29). Foucault’s idea of the Socratic concept of ἐπιμέλεια (e.g. M. Foucault, “Ethik”) can be viewed less as existentialism and more as a polemic against Heidegger’s existentialism.

U. B. Müller, Brief, 198.
9 Cf. J. Reumann, Philippians, 635f.; W. Schrage, Brief, 177f.
10 Lohmeyer’s martyrology interpretation in E. Lohmeyer, Brief, 169, has Matt 10:19 in the background here.
be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself ... (v. 34: μὴ οὖν μεριμνήσητε εἰς τὴν αὔριον, ἢ γὰρ αὔριον μεριμνήσει ἑαυτῆς) ... But seek first his (= God’s) kingdom ... (v. 33).” In the Sermon on the Mount (Q-Text: 12:22, 25f., 29; cf. also: 12:11), Jesus’ final commandment is: “... seek first (ζητεῖτε) his kingdom and his righteousness ...” (v. 33).

So, in Phil 4, does Paul adhere to Jesus tradition – a tradition that even echoes the Stoic critique of “anxiety?” Indeed, Epictetus also devalues “anxiety.” For him, “anxiety” is ἀγωνία (Diss 2:13); it arises when a man looks for something that is outside of his control: “When I see a man in anxiety” – Epictetus states –, “I say to myself, What can it be that this fellow wants? For if he did not want something that was outside of his control, how could he still remain in anxiety?” (2:13:1).11 Paul surpasses such a general critique of “anxiety” reminiscent of sapiential teaching, which tends to focus on stereotyped concerns and principles, and instead he proposes an individual approach to “anxiety” and “care” that reveals the existential dimensions of μέριμνα. This becomes clear if we study Philippians in its entirety.

First, in chapter 2, Paul presents his co-worker Timothy as the perfect example of anxiety to the Philippians: “I have no one like him” – Paul says –, “who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare” (v. 20: τὰ περὶ ὑμῶν μεριμνήσει); they all “look after their own interests (τὰ ἑαυτῶν ζητοῦσιν), not those of Jesus Christ” (v. 21). In the Greek tradition, μέριμνα is an expression for the type of anxiety that tends to completely occupy a person.12 Timothy is fully occupied with “anxiety” for the Philippians. Paul does not criticize μεριμνάω; instead, he proposes it as a crucial attitude in the ministry of Christ. Second, Paul’s reflection on “anxiety” in Phil 4 exceeds any sapiential teaching about overcoming the concerns of daily life, because Paul interprets anxiety as biographical and existential experience. In this last letter(s), Paul is a prisoner in Caesarea or Rome; he is facing his impending trial and expecting his imminent death (Phil 1). The admonition not to be anxious should be viewed in the context of various personal remarks about Paul’s internal state of mind as well as his eschatological hopes: Paul wishes to participate in Christ’s resurrection or to be transformed into the “Gestalt” (μορφή) of Christ. Ernst Lohmeyer has even suggested a martyrlogical reading of Phil 4 and, as such, reads v. 6 in relation to Matt 10:19.13 Irrespective of whether we agree with Lohmeyer’s reading, Phil 4:6 remains an admonition in light of existential danger.

11 Translation according to: W. A. Oldfather, Epictetus, 291. For Epictetus and ἐπιμέλεια, s. above.
13 Cf. E. Lohmeyer, Brief, 169f.