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## **Death as a Value in the Meeting with a Dying Neighbour**

Death from the beginning of the world was a phenomenon prompting many questions in a human being. The answers that were given were immensely varied according to time and place. An unalterable element accompanying the death were fear and apprehension about the last act in a human life. Using observations, values and beliefs a man created his own hopes, fears and expectations. The death, as a disturbing and unknown phenomenon prodded human imagination into creative research into various fields of life thus forming an extremely rich set of rituals, beliefs and habits connected with death.

Along with the appearance of Christian culture the man received a new answer and new values hiding behind the death. This act stopped presenting itself as the worst misery of humankind. It became a moment in which a human ends his earthly living and starts a new one in a better world. The life on earth is only an in-between state preparing a Christian for an eternal life. Christian perception of death gave the man hope and faith that the death was not the end of life but an introduction to a better and fuller existence. Hence, a question arises how to raise people for perceiving death as a value, as an essential element of the next stage of a human life. How a man dying and in need of a meeting with his neighbours who are escaping him pretending he is not dying should be treated?

### **1.Meeting with thy neighbour – "you – I"**

At present it is widely discussed that education should be open, which means it does not limit a person to his knowledge of the world but makes him aware of the fact that he is something more than he knows about himself. This kind of education can protect him from closing inside historicism, biologism, sociologism, psychologism etc. Hence, there is a need of a good "you – I" relationship; however, what is it?

Interpersonal relations are substituted more and more by social interactions. The first and foremost task of education is restoring a human being constrained by the technology to

the ability to pursue an authentic relation with another person. It is an extremely hard task in a situation where sophisticated technical means have become intermediaries between humans in such a sublime way that not many are able to notice it. Although imperfection of a man will never allow entering a direct relationship with another person, he is meant to try to do so. The relation can only be direct when between you and I there is no other concept, no knowledge, no fantasy, no aim, no desire, and no prejudice<sup>1</sup>.

A fulfilling of the afore mentioned conditions facilitates a true love, a true friendship and a truly frank discussion. His distancing to the world, to himself and to another man is seen by many as a result of the original sin. It is possible that the role of education is to motivate a person to continuous attempts aiming at recovering a lost ability for a full relationship with another man.

In pursuing an authentic relationship "you – I" there is a need for thinking resembling Scheler's religious thinking. In a religious act there are no divisions between an inner and outer world, a subject and an object, etc. The religious act is not a psychological phenomenon that can be described because that would imply abandoning it and distancing from it. Condemned to continuous distancing from being in relation with himself, with another human being, a man feels a desire to return. Education should protect a human being from becoming "a stray mind" that has no possibility of returning. In order to facilitate it, a person must be protected from addiction to positivist theories, which attempt at taking away an eternal religious yearning. A danger resulting from positivist theories mostly "narrows down the sphere of recognisable to the sphere of knowledge displaying continuous development"<sup>2</sup>.

A relation of a man toward himself and another man as a person is a primal relationship; it precedes all descriptions and resembles a relation of a human being towards Scheler's God. In order to awake a desire to approach a direct relationship with himself, with another person, an educator should leave the claims to explain his behaviour in terms of "a pure empiricism". The very belief that there is a "precisely empirical" language is dangerous for educational activities. Leszek Kołakowski explains that there is no basis for our perception of reality in which there is a distinction between „factual” and „qualitative” matters<sup>3</sup>.

It does not mean that one should not pursue distinguishing between the two ideas. It would rather appear that one should keep a distance toward claims of creating a language free from any stipulations, an authentic and objective one. Those that believe that such a language

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<sup>1</sup> Bałus, W. *Zło pasywne*. 1986. in „Znak”, no 382, p. 26. Kraków. Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy „Znak”.

<sup>2</sup> Scheler, M. *Problemy religii*. 1995. Kraków. Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy „Znak”, p. 356.

<sup>3</sup> Kołakowski, L. *Jeśli Boga nie ma*. 1988. Kraków. Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy „Znak”.

exists narrow down a human life to a behavioural-empirical system of communication. A basis for an educational relationship should be such an attitude that would facilitate broadening the context in which a pupil exists, even if the educator is not capable of understanding it. This situation requires a kind of empathy expressed in allowing a human being to "be not understandable" or to "slip out"<sup>4</sup>.

Among many poverties of our world one of the most painful is an inability of humans to an authentic meeting. A man feels lonely, lost, although he lives in a crowd. And this lostness is even more painful since there are people existing next to each other not with each other. This situation causes, in a sense, more and more people dying alone and not while in a meeting with another man. There is a need for a new education then, the education about death as a value.

## 2. Models of relationship towards dying neighbours

**1. Dying as an object.** A dying man is served, nursed, given medical care but he himself has nothing to decide about. He is treated as if he were a small child, even if he is mentally healthy and capable of making decisions. A full power is executed on him by the medical staff and on a far smaller scale by his closest relatives. This model shows collective anthropology and we can find it in a literature of ancient Greece. For the Greeks a sick person was understood as someone needed for a community.

In Christian Europe along with the weakening of the belief in the eternal life it turned out that the Christians thought in this way. A manner of consequent hiding the truth about the situation from the dying person was a perfect example of this trend. Leo Tolstoy in his novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, in his genius, exposed the whole inhumanity of this manner, displaying that through deception we increase the pain of dying in our closest persons; the more comedy-like, less delicate, the more painful death becomes.

**2. Individualistic model.** Nowadays this model becomes more and more fashionable, which comes from a widely spread doubt in the ultimate meaning of life. According to the trend dying is an absolutely private matter and almost obscene thing. Everyone has their own problems, thus, if possible, one should not cause any troubles by dying; one should not be surprised that people do not have to have time even for a dying father or a mother. "Nursing"

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<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard, S. 1972. *Bojazń i drzenie. Choroba na śmierć. (Fear and Trembling. The Sicknes Unto Death)*. Warszawa. PWN.

Murzyn, A. 1999. *Filozofia edukacji u schyłku XX wieku. Wybrane kwestie*. Kraków. Oficyna Wydawnicza „Impuls”, p. 35.

homes, disposing of the ill from home to the hospital treated as a norm because obviously our closest relatives needing specialistic medical care die in a hospital, or even suggesting euthanasia are all basic features of the individualistic approach to the elderly.

Along with this approach it is postulated more frequently that a sick person should be fully informed about the advancements of the illness and entrance into a terminal state. Since an individualistic mentality weakens human bonds principally and does not appreciate mutual love, rendering this truth to the dying person is done without any proper delicacy, cruelly. The main contemporary ideologist of this kind of approach, Peter Singer, does not hesitate to claim that someone that is fully and irretrievably dependant on others' care is no longer a person, he is a human wreck, ex-human being, hence, there is nothing wrong in causing him to die. As a symbolical summary of this attitude to the human dying is a willingness not leave any grave behind, realised through a decision about the cremation of the body and throwing away the ashes into four sides of the world.

**3. Personalistic model.** An attitude model towards a dying person which is the most consistent with the Gospels, which is spreading thanks to a hospice movement. The main point of this approach is a deep understanding that a dying person is a true and full human being till the end of his days, our neighbour, and because of his terminal situation he particularly deserves love. A personalistic model says that a dying person, if capable, should co-create his situation of leaving. This approach results from a belief that human dignity cannot be quantified and partly that the time of dying is quite possibly the most important in our life.

### **3.Experiencing death as a value**

In education recognising death as a natural value is crucial to show human dignity and seriousness of death. Implementing this idea is extremely hard if a human life, while leaving the frames of our world, is deprived of a final meaning, even if this meaning is hard to be distinguished or it is not conscious. Denying that there is life after life, it is hard to avoid devaluation of a terminal part, reputedly more and more valueless and leading to nothingness.

It should be stated then that death is not an absolute evil. A condition to a proper attitude towards a human dying, in future also our dying, is to rely on the truth that death is not the greatest evil that can happen to a human being. Denying this truth would mean denying our humanity, which in consequence would mean that there would be no values that we could sacrifice our life for. It is by no means a mistake that an almost zoological fear of death and a willingness to wipe it out magically appeared especially in the civilisation that

preferred the attitude of "having" than "being". All bigger values than life are those that create our "being" and consumptive mentality is less than sensitive to them.

During education there should be focus on a particular value of a wise endurance of evil. A possibility of recognising an extremely important part of our life during a terminal situation is connected with understanding that a measure of our humanity is not a biological or psychical dexterity, or a social usefulness, or even a capability to do good. Even doing good, although very important in our life, is not the final aim of our life. In Christian tradition it was always underlined that a patient endurance of evil that cannot be evaded (also different evils that are not connected with dying) is even more important than doing good. It is essential because while doing good produces fruits of existence, a wise endurance of evil forms, purifies and deepens human beings. The wise endurance of evil connected with dying forms men finally. Late Rev. Józef Tischner left us a very clear and extremely instructive testimony of a patient passage through troubles of death.

In education towards seeing death as a value the importance of meeting, a unity with a dying person, should not be forgotten. There are two great reasons for which showing love and solidarity, serving a sick person, giving our loving presence is more binding and more needed to him than any time before. It happens because he is in a state of receding strength and sometimes even in a state of absolute helplessness. Moreover, it is his last struggle with fulfilling the meaning of his life, which is the most crucial struggle in his life. *Charter for Health Care Workers* (1995) by Pontifical Council "Health Pastoral Care" has a beautiful and deep description of the love that a dying person should be given, "Love means a contagious and inviting presence that establishes a communion with a dying person which consists of attention, understanding, care, patience, goodwill and should be gratuitous" (no. 132)<sup>5</sup>.

It is essential to care about the slightest particle of subjectivity of a dying person. There is no true love without respecting the subjectivity of a loved one. The situation of a dying person is special in terms of the fact that he has no longer full capability of displaying his subjectivity, creating the situation in which he is actively. The point is that it is crucial to facilitate it. Sometimes a sick person behaves like a child; sometimes the very nature causes objectification of a dying person, then he needs taking care in a suitable way. In any case it should not lead to infantilising or objectification of a dying person, or to deepening those states. The respect for the subjectivity of a person in a terminal situation is one of the most precious postulates of the hospice movement.

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<sup>5</sup> trans. by Dagmara Mathes-Sobocińska

It should be stated that human dying has also a social dimension. Overcoming a prejudice of the death being a final misery will help us in rebuilding a social dimension of a human dying. Because of an appearance of panic fear of death in our modern behaviour and a desperate denying of an upcoming death, ours or our closest friends' and relatives', death itself is deprived of many precious values. A parting drawing near might be, listening to Jacek Soplica, an unforgettable chance of reconciling the quarrelling and forgiving the wrongdoers<sup>6</sup>. Biblical descriptions of a truly human death, for example patriarch Jacob's (Genesis 48-49), his son Joseph's (Genesis 50, 24-26), king David's (1 Kings 2), or Tobias's (Tobias 2), exemplify the death as a particularly deep farewell; a blessing of the dying and his last words were accepted with unforgettable reverence. Between the dying and those whom he was leaving a special communion was created. All those positive dimensions of death will be non-accessible if we continue irrational pretending that death will not happen to us.

The death also has a religious dimension, at least, for a religious person. It should be pitied when because of a fault a man is deprived of a chance of reconciliation with God, before he will stand in front of His judgement. The afore mentioned *Charter for Health Care Workers* says about the need of "evangelisation of death, which means preaching the Good News to a dying person"<sup>7</sup>. (no. 131) and explains that in a specific situation of dying the evangelisation is done in three ways: with giving love, prayer and sacramental ministry. From my own experience I can give evidence that a terminally ill person who has no strength even for praying feels gratitude when suggested that in his situation a true prayer will be just looking at the image of Crucified Christ or at the picture of Virgin Mary or just by keeping a rosary in the hand.

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<sup>6</sup> Jacek Soplica is a hero of a Polish national epopei "Mr. Thaddeus" by Adam Mickiewicz (trans.)  
<sup>7</sup> translated by Dagmara Mathes-Sobocińska

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