

AN ELEMENTARY FORM OF MENTAL ADAPTATION TO DEATH

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The article describes one of the forms of mental reaction to the presence of death in the life of man, which can be denoted as the state of “not thinking about death”. This simple status is widespread among people. It is often the cause of careless, irresponsible conduct and therefore the challenges of the professional group which could generally be named “rescuers” are directed against such behaviour. These are the people whose job is to rescue other people from burning houses, drowning in rivers, crashed cars, seeking people under avalanches and ruins, protecting, guarding and reviving them.

There is an elementary form of mental adaptation to death which can be denoted as the state of “not thinking about death”. This causes a careless, sometimes even self-endangering conduct; therefore other people come to the scene as “rescuers”. This group tries to publish plenty of warnings and challenges in the mass media saying almost the same: do not forget about your safety and health, take care of your life. The challenges do not actually warn us only to think about our safety, health and life, but they also urge us to think about the possible forms of danger, about our potential injuries, diseases, and an infinite variety of potential deaths. Consequently, we should think about death daily. The situation is, however, quite the opposite: we do not think about death every day. This widespread phenomenon “no thinking about death” evokes a sort of permanent polemic between rescuers and those being rescued. The former are convinced that many problems could be resolved if people would do “just a little” and stop “to think about death”. The rescuers justifiably assume that the less man thinks about death, the more death thinks about man. This strife confirms, however, that the phenomenon “not thinking about death” is deeply connected with the existence of man and society and is worth noticing.

The rescuers seem to agree with philosophers in their conviction. The phenomenon of death has been the subject of philosophical self-reflection from time immemorial. The Greek philosopher Plato even says that philosophers deal exclusively

with dying and death. ([1] 735) We can agree with this thesis since the attitude to death implicitly follows from the concept of the relation between the body and the soul, between the physical and the mental. Most philosophers evaluate positively the idea that humans accept their finitude. They even consider the consciousness of finiteness to be one of the human characteristics (essential signs which differentiate humans from other living beings). They also point out that not to think about death is a sign of insufficiently developed consciousness, that the awareness of death is a common equipment of a mature individual and that if we think about death, a possibility of better understanding of being opens to us. According to P. Tilich, we even “philosophize” since we are finite and we know that we are finite. ([2] 13) Even such a philosopher as Epicurus who wants to save us from the fear of death and persuades us not to think about death because it does not concern us (when we are here, there is no death, and if death is here, we are not), assumes that humans are beings conscious of their finiteness. ([3] 54)

As is known from psychology, a child usually starts to realize its finiteness after the age of four. It follows from the ontogenetic context that the phenomenon “to think about death” is positive because it confirms the developmental maturity of the individual. Psychologists working in the field of thanatology perceive the mental state of “not thinking about death” similarly to the “rescuers”, as immature mental reaction to the phenomenon of death, and in opposition, they speak about the so-called “mature” attitude, which accepts death as an inevitable part of life. This attitude was for example presented by the known thanatologist E. Kübler-Ross [4]. According to her, death is, like birth, part of human existence, i.e. part of human maturing and development. Death is not an enemy but an integral part of our being; against its background we better realize the meaning of our life. Within this attitude, humans’ pondering on themselves and the world is more responsible, they weigh their personal goals, relations, actions and structure of their life values more consistently. One cannot deny that the mature mental attitude is socially and mentally very meaningful and necessary. For instance, it is known that if medical specialists come into contact with the phenomenon of death theoretically and mentally unprepared, they necessarily tend to deny the feeling of professional helplessness and to avoid contact with the dying patient; this reduces their quality of job performance and moral accountability. E. Kübler-Ross ([5] 11) recalls that the primary motive of her work with dying patients was the fact that in large and modern hospitals the dying persons often remain isolated and they have nobody to talk to in the last moments of their life. According to her, we should teach our children and young people to cope with the reality of death. She thinks that patients would not have to pass all the painful stages of the process of acceptance of their own deaths. Moreover, she emphasizes, the awareness of death provides life with a completely new value. Another psychologist, S.R. Covey, says that we should visualize our own funeral and write the obituary to ourselves in which we formulate what we imagine we have achieved and created in our life. This would help us realize what are our life priorities ([6] 14).

Demands and challenges to take a mature attitude can be interpreted as a reply to the question which primarily asks not what “is” – i.e. what we feel spontaneously or how we react to the phenomenon of death but what “should be” – what we should feel or what we should do. It concerns then the formulation of a certain ideal pattern of our understanding, feeling, and actions, which we should approach during the contact with death. There certainly are individuals who have achieved this composed attitude or they have no problem with acquiring it. In everyday life, however, the opposite reaction mostly prevails – people spontaneously avoid visions about the end of their life, if possible, and they live in the mental state of “not thinking about death”. The ideal of the mature attitude defined above can be inaccessible to many people. We have to “cope with” the possibility that “we are unable to cope with” death and that probably the only possible mental adaptation is not to think of it.

The phenomenon of “not thinking about death” is encountered for example in the so-called Alzheimer dementia. The causes of this disease are not known as yet [7]. The mental capabilities of the individual are gradually reduced backwards and the person returns to the original childish mentality with its particular “timeless” perception of the world. V. Smitka reports that some patients gradually resemble a sort of “spiritualized product of nature” and are not unhappy any more. There is no anxiety about death observable in their eyes, face or gestures. Fear is oriented towards the present, it rather concerns the individual stages of the development of the disease because patients experience deterioration of speech and memory. In counterposition to the traditional interpretation of Alzheimer’s disease as something bad and pathological, V. Smitka tries to understand its “wisdom” and sense. The “wisdom” of this disease can primarily be understood from the point of view of the fact that senility as the last stage of human life brings precisely the problem of the adaptation to death. Alzheimer’s dementia is such a radical form of adaptation which “guarantees” that the patient gradually does not realize death and “does not think of it”. The more the patient approaches his or her end, the more he/she returns back to the age when death did not exist for him or her yet because he/she had not realized it.

The phenomenon of “not thinking about death” has found its ally directly in the structures of society. For instance there is show business, i.e. the industry of dream production, production of a world full of magical, hypnotic and cunning illusions which jointly suggest an experience and conviction that the present moment has the dimension of eternity or the value of infinity, that one should sink into the present being and that the basic alternative of this world is the question: now or never. The need “to have a good time” also contains the motive “not to think of death”. One cannot deny, however, that the experiences of the “rescuers” are even more striking in show business. Death entering the world in which people think about life and living “here and now”, which is interwoven with drugs, sex and a variety of extravagance, has the shape of the HIV virus and the disease named AIDS. As E.

Višňovský says, the world of show business destroys not only many passionate consumers but also remarkable talents at the climax of their creative activity, e.g. Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain or Freddie Mercury ([8] 106). While the “rescuers” wrestle with this mental state and would like to eliminate it from the life of society or at least minimize it, the entertainment managers reckon with it in their work and therefore they constantly awake it to life as their ally either consciously or unconsciously. Through structuring our sensorial milieu and organizing experiences they help us control and distract attention from unpleasant aspects of life and thus also from the phenomenon of death. V.E. Frankl speaks in this connection about Sunday neurosis which pushes people – without the meaning of life – towards entertainment and forgetting during weekends. He also includes passive and mass sports among these forms ([9] 163).

From the psychological point of view this phenomenon has been analysed and is understandable. The process can take place at various mental levels. It can be a “superficial” manifestation of mental protection based on conscious control of attention. As is well known, we often divert attention from what is unpleasant, what is intimidating or what is aching. This phenomenon can also be understood as an event associated with deep emotions of human non-consciousness. Some authors even speak about the “primary trauma” and “archaic fear” experienced by prehistoric man when he realized his finiteness for the first time, which, however sounds too speculative ([10] 39). They also emphasize that in our efforts to adapt to the reality of death we are infinitely resourceful in thinking out ways to deny it or escape from it [11]. The reaction to the phenomenon of death is also determined by the need for a feeling of trust and security in the world. According to V. Rolo, this feeling is even a prerequisite of life and ability to live a normal life. ([10] 31) The state of a threat to life invokes stress and a vegetative “storm”, which leads to various psychosomatic disorders and weakening of the immune system, if it lasts too long. Within these intentions, one can also understand ontogenetic concept of the psyche of E. Erikson. According to him, the first developmental feeling which a child should experience in the first year of its life, is confidence in life and a feeling of security [12]. This is the basis for the second stage, during which child’s autonomy and independence should be shaped. I. Schenk-Danzinger provides an example from a large sucklings’ home in Vienna in the 1950s when sucklings, who were not in constant contact with the only person to give them a feeling of safety, lost weight, did not develop, even died [13] in spite of rich nutrition and careful hygiene. When they were transferred to smaller homes and a particular person cared for each of them, they developed much better in spite of poorer hygiene and nutrition. This feeling of safety must be fixed before about the age of four when child begins to realize the human cycle – childhood, adulthood, old age – and its finiteness. This consciousness of the acute threat and danger of death can stimulate a long-lasting emotional stress which weakens our immune system and the whole physical state. In this case the “idea of death” shifts us closer to death both really

and physiologically. In contrast, the state of “not thinking about death” can rouse subconscious feelings of security.

The mental reaction “not thinking about death” is also common to two contradictory attitudes toward the phenomenon of death, which have been symbolized by Epicurus and Plato since ancient times. Epicurus directly advises us not to think of death and he understands death as the absolute end. On the other hand, according to Plato, death is a word which denotes the separation of the body from the soul. This separation is not a sad event but it is the happiest moment in the life of man. The soul was imprisoned in the body, the body diverted the soul from its primary mission – from its direction towards wisdom and thus also from philosophy. According to Plato, real philosophers (which is, however, beyond our topic) long for wisdom and thus also for the separation of the soul from the body ([11] 735–739). This means that when we think of death in the Platonic terms, it is something like thinking about an event we are looking forward to in everyday life.

For Plato, death does not mean the absolute end and thus one cannot actually think about death in these terms. He tends towards fixation of the mental state “not thinking about death” indirectly, through his conceptual scheme of the “immortal soul”. Plato in principle influences our thinking in the same direction as Epicurus, because, if we accept Plato’s concept of the relation between the body and the soul, we stop thinking about death as about the absolute end. While Epicurus gives us direct advice to keep our thoughts under control and not to think about death, Plato says that the sort of death, about which we should not think according to Epicurus, does not actually exist and therefore there is nothing to think about. Epicurus’ advice and Plato’s conception can be interpreted as different forms of mental adaptation to the phenomenon of death. Epicurus relies on a “simple” mental control of attention and presupposes that man is able to affect this attention so as not to think of death. In spite of that, Plato’s approach is “more complicated”. He works out a conceptual scheme according to which – when man adopts it and believes in it, he or she does not automatically think about death as about the absolute end. Plato and Epicurus are both heading for the same thing but in different mental ways.

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