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Angoasa – de la boala de moarte la revelația mistică

Rezumat

Întrebarea legată de moarte renaște și se metamorfozează continuu urmărind în mod necesar și organic evoluția și consolidarea mentalității fiecărei generații în parte până în punctul dramatic al confruntării acesteia cu propria impermanență, cu propria mortalitate. Ceea ce înseamnă că orice individ a unei generații oarecare, indiferent de cât de multe și sofisticate ar fi strategiile de ocultare a morții la care se apelează, trebuie să fie preocupat de ”problema” morții nu pentru că ea este prezentă în sfera de interes a gânditorilor ci pentru că toți cei din jurul nostru, precum și noi înșine, ne vom confrunta, mai repede sau mai târziu, cu moartea.

Complementaritatea moarte-nemurire a făcut ca acești doi termeni să fie aproape totdeauna amintiți împreună. Din cele mai vechi timpuri oamenii au căutat, cu înfrigurare, răspunsul la întrebările legate atât de moarte cât și de nemurire. Mai mult, putem afirma că în evoluția destinului ființei umane conștientizarea morții a marcat trecerea dinspre preuman la uman, constituind în același timp primul episod dintr-o îndelungată istorie a conștiinței de sine a omului. Din această perspectivă, a antropologiei filosofice, vom încerca în eseu de față să schițăm câteva posibile răspunsuri la neliniștile și angoasele omului atunci când se raportează la propria mortalitate.

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Anxiety – from Death Disease to Mystical Revelation

Summary

The question connected to death is continuously reborn and metamorphosed necessarily and organically following the evolution and consolidation of each generation's mentality up to the dramatic point of a confrontation with man's own impermanence and mortality. This means that any individual belonging to a certain generation, notwithstanding how many and sophisticated strategies of avoiding or circumventing death were used, has to be be preoccupied with the "problem" of death not because it is present in the thinkers' sphere of interests but because all those around us, as well as ourselves, will confront death, sooner or later.

The death-immortality complementarity has made that these two terms be almost always remembered together. Since ancient times, humans have anxiously looked for answers to questions connected with death and immortality. Moreover, one could state that in the evolution of humanity's history the realization of the idea of death marked the passage from pre-human to human, constituting simultaneously the first episode from a long history of human self consciousness. The present essay intends to give some possible answers from the perspective of anthropological philosophy to the human being's disquiet and anxieties when referring to one's own mortality.

Anxiety – from Death Disease to Mystical Revelation

Why is it that death still remains man's most anguishing and grave problem? One may answer that it is first of all because death induces the idea that, at a certain moment, our being will enter into a state of total dissolution. That is, it will "plunge" into nothingness...and thus, man is forced to admit his weakness and failure in the dispute with death, with the human being's nothingness. So, man's salvation may begin with his (natural, I would say) "defense" reaction: an unhesitating appeal to religion. In the very depth of one's being there resides a strong will to live. Only the grave and very hard experiences, accompanied by difficult to bear suffering could induce a serene acceptance of death. So that very few would be those who give up life. All the others will fight for every moment of existence. This will to live is intrinsically connected to our very being and is, in a way, an argument for our spirit's immortality. Since there is nothing after death, if there is nothing, and everything turns into nothingness, then nothing matters. Neither faith nor morals. No doubt that then, the ultimate question would be the following: why should one believe in a divinity that cannot offer man the most important thing, that is immortality, namely the negation of the human being's impermanence? Maybe this is the reason why the idea of immortality and religiousness have been forced to „sustain" each other, structuring in such a way a psychological mechanism so as to reject the idea of complete dissolution after death.

In the case of an authentic „shortening" of the phenomenon of death it is imperiously necessary to situate ourselves in a logical perspective, beyond any subjectivism, thus benefiting of the opportunity to perceive the existential sequences in an extremely rigorous way. Since in order to acquire any kind of faith implies, at least at the very beginning, to have a number of logical certainties, in other words, to have at one's disposal a series of irrefutable arguments. Modern man's ending in positivism and faithlessness is only natural, as a consequence of the fact that he stubbornly refuses religious life and the approach to divinity. The majority of positivist and materialist thinkers regard life as an epiphenomenon that dissipates instantly when its support, the human body, is irreversibly degraded.

In support of those who refuse the idea of immortality comes another argument, sufficiently pertinent, namely that of death's similarity with profound sleep. If during sleep one has no idea of the passage of time or about the external phenomena (which follow their due course), then why could not this state be extended to infinity after death? In this context, of such an argument, another point of reference could be the one that presents a symmetrical analogy with the time before birth. The way an eternity had passed until the moment of one's birth without knowing anything (in other words without existing), in the same way could be viewed, in the opposite direction, the development of the future after one's death. No doubt that, as a consequence of such a logic, naturally, question arises: where does this – induced by the vision of the future as nothingness – overwhelming tension come from and why is one not affected (in the same degree) also by the eternal nothingness of the past? The chance to escape from this existential dilemma comes from faith. Even though the idea that faith is a kind of self-suggestion is quite common, it comes as a support to avoid the fear of death, since there is no other, "more comfortable way". But nowadays, the too varied spectrum of creeds puzzles man, and makes it impossible for him to choose, being unable to identify his own way. And then, whatever remains is to follow the path of wisdom, of analysis and argumentation supported by one's own reason. Starting from this point, from reason, one should think of what could be brought in support of the idea of immortality. First of all it is important to consider the complexity and meaning of life. Understanding that if the daily events in anyone's life appear to make sense, progressing with an almost metaphysical coherence, then it is less probable to believe that life has none. In spite of the various arguments positivists sustain, the theological aspect is extremely important and quite credible. Since meaning can be found not only in man's physical deeds but also in the various manifestations of nature. Any natural law seems to have an aim that imposes a single and manifest coherence of the world. On the other hand, for example, one perceives as too various the complexity and rigor of the human body's functions so as that its guiding



Pomul vieții pe poarta maramureșeană; Foto: Felician Săteanu

force should be an ephemeral sparkle from nothingness. Life itself, thus limited, would have no end, no meaning, an implication in eternity. The human being's amazing complexity, the impenetrable structures of life in general, all these make one believe that there is a Creator. And then, if there is really one, should one ask why had He made us so ephemeral? One could sustain that life's meaning could escape us in order to fulfill a higher aim, of mankind or of Creation. One could even state that each man does not represent anything else than a tiny element in a huge succession of phenomena and events. But what makes one refuse such argumentation is the fact that this succession is nothing else than a temporal manifestation, that it does not represent a being in itself, and thus it has no conscience and consciousness. Any visible thing, as a succession of elements, as many as they be, is vulnerable as related to time. Though it is more than evident that both conscience and consciousness are qualitatively superior to any physical manifestation – including the biological ones –, of the sensible world. They appear as a divine “gift”, as part of a transcendental substance. It is highly probable that a Being, the melting pot in which conscience manifests itself should be perishable, the way it is the phenomenal world with everything that moves in it. If the phenomenal world develops its entire kinetics inside a time that passes and is extinguished simultaneously with it, the world of beings seems to move in the interior of a time that signifies eternity, and thus a spiritual time. This means that, if one refuses the idea of the existence of a Creator in whom to set one's hopes, one would never escape the anguish induced by death. In the hypothesis of the absence of a creator and of a creation the chances that a form of immortality exists are extremely reduced. But not impossible. Because, the way we perceive and have the conscience the entire sensible world with its logical determinism, with its theology one could, in the same way, conceive also the existence of principle having a superior nature that structures a more complex transcendental world. This is done exactly by Buddhism that does not accept a creator's existence in the sense monotheistic religions forward. In this context, it is necessary to remark, that if western philosophies and religions have the tendency to deny nothingness, thus imposing an evident consciousness of eternity, the Far Eastern religions seem to disagree with this, giving thus suffering and pain negative connotations, the conquest of nothingness representing the very adherence to the state of

eternal repose. Nirvana, the fundamental concept of Buddhism, comprises a great variety of states. More precisely, one could find states resembling the Greek ataraxia or the total acceptance of non-being that, by the exorcism of existential suffering, is loaded with positive connotations. We speak thus, of a strange slide towards non-existence, towards non-manifestation. But, first of all, manifestation, i.e. being, is the state that gives a real meaning to existence. In the dispute between Being and non-being the former has to get the upper hand, since only thus can the universe acquire a meaning. This is where one can identify also the philosophical meaning of immortality. It is immortality that supports the „strategy” of being.

If the ancient *Melete Thanatou* is an incentive that can be reiterated also nowadays, still, one has to ask why should one prepare for death and in what way. The philosopher's background is in a way different from that of the believer. Nevertheless, for both the first step is identical and very difficult. It implies the exorcism of fear, its acceptance and its annihilation through a courageous domination. The conquest of fear in front of death was an obsession, especially for the stoical philosophers; they sustained that as long as death is inevitable, one has to accept it without any fear as it is part of the human condition. The important thing is to use as well as one can the present moment. Death, the dissolution of the human being is only a natural act. As a rational being, man should not despise death and recoil in its presence, but wait for it as for a natural end. The meditation on death constitutes the extreme limit of the premeditation of evils. In comparison with all the other evils death is not only a possible fact, but one that is necessary or inevitable. It should not be regarded as an event with a certain gravity, since its gravity is absolute. In comparison, from the perspective of homo religiosus things become clearer, somehow simplified, and in the Sacred Books, the religious precepts offer the method that prepares man for death and salvation, for this is the true meaning, the fundamental aspiration of his existence. Salvation, that usually follows death and is eternal, appears as a state of ecstatic beatitude, of a permanent equilibrium, a miraculous state with which the believer's soul is unified when it is under the divinity's wings. The unhappiness and sufferings of life should always be correlated with the divine act of trial, proper to a spiritual education and, finally, with the process of salvation, the state of consuming faith. It is done also through the permanent remembrance of the act of death as a certitude and thus of its inevitability. The awareness of death means imposing a lucidity necessary in the act of faith. On the other hand, the one who philosophizes follows a completely different (spiritual) road. He has not the privilege of the calm peace and safety of boundless faith. Incertitudes, hesitations, the impossibility to change the desired answers will bring suffering, thus showing the limits and weaknesses of human reason. Despair and anguish will become the means of understanding reality. This is the case of existentialist philosophers who raise against the post-Cartesian intellectual essentialism and for whom truth is synonymous with subjectivism. For instance to Kierkegaard any authentic analysis should not start from the world regarded as perception but from the individual's self. Accordingly man does not really exist otherwise than as a solitary individual and only in his individual existence, and his positioning versus reality can be done only from this perspective. Anxiety (Angst) is the “engine” of this possible attitude, the key of life's meaning, a method through which genuine reality can be unveiled. Anxiety sets man above his everyday existence and lifts him up to the level of genuine reality. Anxiety is a disbalance of normal existence, but if one understands that normal existence is superficial and artificial, then anxiety appears as a real expression of “human nature's perfection”, and those who have learned to be really anxious “have reached the highest peaks”. For existentialists anxiety is the experience of real awakening, demonstrating that one can live, that there is a chance for liberty.

Even if the philosopher is not alien to a certain type of faith, one that is more difficult to attain than that of the believer, he remains in an attitude that is rather intellectual. As a foundation of his meditation, one finds reason and sometimes intuition, the latter as a state of grace offered by Divinity. He has to assume, like in ancient religions, a certain path of initiation that can reveal him the act of death, its imperative urgency and the state of conscience that should be behind this act (as another necessity of Being). His undertaking, in most of cases, cannot be other than that of a theist or deist, rarely that of a pantheist. The exceptional cases are of those philosophers who are engaged in the apology of a confession, such as St. Augustine, or, closer to our time, Jacques Maritain, a promoter of neo-Tomism.

The theist has only some certitudes: there is a Creator discovered intuitively and rationally rather than by means of an external particular revelation of a cultic type; there is a form of free will, a freedom of the human being. Anything else represents more or less significant details to be unveiled during this meditation by the one who meditates. For him, from this perspective, moral acts represent everything. The exercise of virtue, necessary also nowadays as it used to be two millennia ago, is the authentic preparation of the one who philosophizes. The philosopher's preparation for death consists in the acceptance and application of a morality, of a generally accepted ethics in his dispute with death. The result obtained through this exercise represents an exceptional and very strong guarantee in front of his impermanence. This should not induce the idea that the philosopher has no access to the sacred. He can accede, in truth more rarely and as a result of a special catharsis, from the state of a sage to that of a saint, as St. Augustine's life testifies. Thus theist philosophical meditation takes one, most of the time, in the field of a robust stoicism while meditative experience takes close to a state resembling ataraxia.

The conversion to Christianity was an essential moment in Augustine's destiny, producing a fundamental transformation not only in the philosopher's fate, but especially in his thinking. As in most of the cases, this change was not sudden but being preceded by a long period of suffering, anxiety and hesitations. One cannot truly understand what is happening in the depth of the soul of the one who converts, even if the convert himself records certain details of his conversion. But in Augustine's case one can say that he embraces Christianity only when he understands that such a faith is the road that will take him to his personal immortality.

In his monumental work *De civitate Dei* Augustine proposes to speak of God, but beyond this, the essential idea of the entire work is personal *immortality*. This immortality cannot be thought of only with the mind but with the entire human being, afraid of nothingness and desperately fighting to find a path to salvation. This is also true for any philosopher who ever dealt with the problem of immortality. But Augustine's is, probably, a privileged case. The fantastic joy of ascension and the sadness of fall are the spiritual states that permanently accompany his ideas. A fundamental concept in his philosophical doctrine is love, an evident distinction being made between the love of oneself and the love of God.

Augustine associates love almost always with death, but in each case love conquers death, representing the sole means of salvation from the nothingness of death. If one has in view Saint Augustine's overall vision, one cannot but remark the mystical, religious and philosophical substratum which structures the entire dynamics of his thinking. The religious mysticism out of which the philosophical has been also born, embodies the ambition and despair to achieve a (possible) direct way of communicating with divinity. In order to sustain the dynamics of mysticism he shows of a profound skepticism towards reason and, in the same time, a blind faith that slides towards ignoring all the conditions of human nature. The mystic desires to perceive divinity not via its external manifestations, but directly, either via feeling, or through other extra-rational means. The mystic often perverts feeling, overestimating its cognitive virtues. He begins with setting reason aside or at least subordinating it to feeling. In mystical visions using only extra-rational capacities, one can reach absolute knowledge, reason having the attribute of finitude and thus delusive. Mystics speak of inspiration that can be attained only through the complete disregard for the operations of intellect. Reasoning destroys inspiration. In order to attain the original spontaneity of the human soul it is necessary to "cut off" all the other means of knowledge and action. In the preponderantly mystical philosophical visions the mysterious act through which the spirit accedes directly to absolute truth is usually described in metaphysical terms. Most often truth is described as a light that reveals itself to the eye prepared to see it. In Augustine's case, similarly to Plato, divine illumination is accessible only to the chosen ones. Augustine makes a distinction between the uncreated or divine light and the created light that belongs to the sphere of human intellect. Human intellect is directed towards divinity through contemplation and ecstasy, which are specific traits of Saint Augustine's mysticism. God is the sole object of philosophical meditation, but these meditations have meaning only through the prism of the human being's immortality.

Instead of any conclusion, it is necessary to underline that, ultimately, for both believer and philosopher, the problem of life is death and immortality. The human being's positioning as regards death is effectively defined by the fact that, beyond the „empirical” recognition or non-recognition of

others' death, one's own life will reach, finally, a confrontation with one's own death. In the same time, man can meditate about death only while alive and only from the perspective of one's own mortality. This induces and fixates the "fear of death", even if one is obsessed by it and fears it in the same time, still without being able to avoid it, both the fear of death and the flight from it totally belong to the metaphysical facticity of death. Death is always present, not only when it spoken of, but also when one is silent about this subject or when one simply denies it. An authentic reference to death presupposes, before anything else, an understanding and assuming its certitude and, in other words, to think authentically of death (and its certainty) means thinking of one's own death.



Detaliu pictură biserica de lemn din Săliștea de Sus, Buleni; Foto: Felician Săteanu