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Homo Consumens versus Homo Patiens **(The Dilemmas of Postmodern Reality)**

Abstract

The contemporary „homo consumens” does not want to accept that his ontic status is still best defined by the words „homo patiens”. Today’s attempts to eliminate suffering through constantly stimulated consumption may be considered as an act of the „degradation” of humans and humanity who by rejecting the truth about their nature as suffering creatures, paradoxically also lose the meaning of their life. If one denies suffering, then – at the same time – one closes oneself before life. For the escape from suffering is anything but the escape from life, at least the one that is experienced in a conscious and sensible way.

Keywords

human, consumerism, suffering, postmodernity, meaning of life.

1. Introduction

The permanent dream of a human being, regardless of the era one lives in, is the existence in some paradise-like reality in which nothing disturbs one’s happiness. The desire to live in such a reality occupies also the minds of postmodern

people, who despite possessing greater possibilities than their predecessors in this area, are not able to cross the limits set by suffering and death. Even the huge technical progress is not able to put an end to the diverse kinds of suffering, terminal diseases, and above all (even if considered distant) -the inevitable necessity of dying, being preceded by usually arduous and tremendous journey of old age. The contemporary 'homo consumens' does not want to accept that his ontic status is still best defined by the words 'homo patiens'. Despite the obvious experience of contingency, lots of people try to escape from this truth, striving to avoid the awareness of their human limitations at all costs. Suffering and death being the inevitable parts of human life, are today „censored” in a specific way and rejected as completely useless and meaningless. Even if humans are not prepared to confront these facts nowadays, life invariably confronts people with them anyway. This often results in the existential fear that is no less than in the pre-modern past. Actions such as the escape into consumerism, creating a permanent „party-time” mood or leaving little space for reflection on difficult issues are not a remedy for this fear.

2. Meaningless Suffering in a Post-Modern Consumer Society

It is difficult to ignore the fact that post-modern man exists in a reality which could be called the „metaphysics of consumerism”, no matter how ironic the term can be. The phenomenon of affluence, which is defined as the dysfunctional approach to consumption with its similarity to influenza in terms of contagiousness, is growing within the societies and as a result, consumption has little to do with maintaining the biological existence of man.¹ Getting away from the classic human anthropology, human being is no longer perceived as being both material and spiritual, natural and able to create a culture, finite and yet wishing for infinity, free but also a responsible, individual and community member, active and meditative, directed towards the future but also immersed in the past. The post-modern anthropology is based primarily on the worship of a beautiful and almost eternally young body, overestimating its value.

A consumption-focused society makes its elders feel that they are unnecessary and their life experience has lost any significance because in the areas mentioned above they have deficits resulting from the nature of old age. In western

¹ Cf. Z. Bauman, *Konsumowanie*, Wyd. UJ, Kraków 2009, pp. 33–34.

cultures, which highlight the economic efficiency of a human being, the so-called third or fourth age is often disregarded, and older people are forced to wonder if their life still has any meaning. The unambiguous affirmation of life, devoid of any exclusivism, is replaced with the approval of euthanasia that is seen as a solution to difficult life situations related to old age and terminal disease.² While until recently suffering and death were the day-to-day, integral life situations shared within entire communities, nowadays they are more and more often experienced by an individual who feels lonely and abandoned. The people who are suffering, old and are dying seem to be isolated from a society that is trying to consume its goods and is not „believing” in their existence. Even if elders appear in the media, they are almost only presented as those who experience a second youth and are full of energy, of course thanks to the use of various types of advertised specifics.³

The human body is often perceived only as a set of organs and functions that can be used, using the criteria of efficiency or pleasure. The body that does not undergo certain nursing and corrective treatments, including plastic surgery, becomes the object of frustration and disgust. In this aspect, different types of „body regimes” may be a vital element of one’s lifestyle which influences the way a man is viewed. Ironically, the aforementioned regimes are often associated with great suffering, which one wants to avoid at all costs.

A person who cares about gaining and using the greatest possible amount of material goods in the first place, as well as the one who avoids reflection on the suffering that is related to his existence, is increasingly becoming a slave who is unable to face his instincts, passions and natural deficits. He replaces the Cartesian motto: „I am because I think” with the postmodern „I am because I feel”, and the rational thoughts on existence are replaced with achieving pleasure and arousing strong emotions. By following their instincts and ignoring their free, conscious, personal nature in numerous ways, many people inertly indulge in the habits of a consumer lifestyle, even when those habits are harmful to their spiritual and physical health, completely ignoring the context of morals. Consumerism is the promise of a happy life with no demands and devoid of all suffering, and this is possible only through consumption. Happiness must

² John Paul II, *List do ludzi w podeszłym wieku*, 1 X 1999, https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/jan_pawel_ii/listy/do_starszych_01101999.html, 13 IX 2019, 9.

³ Cf. M. Głowacka, *Etyka reklamy: operowanie konwencją czy jej przekraczanie*, in: *Etyczny wymiar odpowiedzialnego biznesu i konsumeryzmu na początku XXI wieku*, eds. L. Karczewski, H. Kretek, Racibórz 2013, p. 82.

be experienced immediately and by consuming the best branded products possible. It is hard to avoid the impression, as pointed out by Z. Bauman, that lust in the post-modern world seems to desire only oneself, wants to be satisfied here and now, without considering what will happen in the future.⁴ If this is not possible, in spite of all efforts undertaken, then in this failure one can see the source of the basic „suffering” of contemporary consumers. Chasing the satisfaction of all their desires blindly, they are condemned to the eternal lack of fulfillment and the suffering related to it.

It is also difficult not to notice, as suggested by Pope Francis, that many people in this seemingly happy world without distress look helplessly at how others share the „cake of life”.⁵ While some celebrate and spend their lives on consumption, billions of others who are socially excluded, watch it only from the outside, and their life flows and ends miserably.⁶ All those who, because of suffering, cannot fully participate in the process of consumption: the poor, the sick, the elderly, the disabled are pushed aside, being treated as defective consumers, strangers, the rejected ones.⁷ However, as stated by Z. Bauman, even if society despises such people, it also secretly fears how easily its significant part may share their fate.⁸

The majority of contemporary people abandon the idea of seeking a superior meaning of life, vital to every individual which might be considered as the dramatic consequence of postmodern irrationalism. Along with the process of how the meaning of life is identified with subjective happiness, experiencing pleasure as well as striving to increase social status or possession, such „phenomena” as suffering or death, even if they remain the human existence reality, appear to be absurd. This phenomenon was thoroughly described by André Comte-Sponville, as cited further: „Nihilist barbarism has no program, no plan, no ideology. It doesn't need it. Nihilist barbarians don't believe in anything: they only know violence, egoism, contempt, hatred. They are prisoners of their own

⁴ Cf. Z. Baumann, *O pożądaniu*, in: Z. Baumann and others, *w rozmowie z Jarosławem Makowskim. Dziesięć ważnych słów. Rozmowy o dekalogu*, Kraków 2002, p. 151.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Adhortacja apostolska Gaudete et exsultate. O powołaniu do świętości w świecie współczesnym*, 19 III 2018, no.78, https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/franciszek_i/adhortacje/gaudete_19032018.html (22.10.2019).

⁶ *Ibid.*, no.101.

⁷ Z. Bauman, *Praca, konsumpcjonizm i nowi ubodzy*, translated by S. Obirek, Kraków 2006, p. 62.

⁸ Cf. Z. Bauman, *Życie na przemiał*, translated by S. Kunz, Kraków 2004, pp. 199–200.

impulses, stupidity and lack of culture. They are slaves to what they believe is freedom. Their barbarity comes from a lack of faith or a lack of fidelity. They are warriors of nihilism.”⁹

Additionally, along with the growing socio-cultural pluralism, the religion that used to „explain” suffering earlier, is now losing its status, and Churches must act in the free market within numerous lifestyles.¹⁰ In the post-modern era, these are no longer Churches, but shopping centers that attract customers (consumers) like temples with their magic and grandeur. The shopping centers are of a cosmopolitan nature, so as not to limit the group of potential consumers, and thus also the ones who are far from any religion. However, there is an atmosphere similar to the one taking place in the church during the service, except that the sacrament of sacrifice is replaced by the ritual of consumption.¹¹ The consumption is transformed into a quasi-religion, but as distinct from it, it does not lead a man towards existential prohibitions, because it is based on continual play and fun, frivolousness and it is believed to last eternally. „Just as the society of the Middle Ages found support for its balance in God and in the Devil, so ours is based on consumption and its simultaneous condemnation. At least around the concept of the devil the heresies and sects of black magic could have been formed. The magic we practice is white and there is no room for heresy in the world of prosperity.”¹² There also may be no space for the special heresy which is suffering, and which introduces dissonance into the consumers’ happiness. Therefore, suffering must be left unspoken about, or ignored so that it does not disturb the peaceful consumption of those consumers for whom suffering still remains something abstract.

⁹ A. Comte-Sponville, *Duchowość ateistyczna*, translated by E. Aduszkiewicz, Warszawa 2011, p. 40.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Mariański, S. A. Wargacki, *Płynne sacrum w społeczeństwie ponowoczesnym*, „Uniwersyteckie czasopismo socjologiczne KUL” 17 (2016), p. 7.

¹¹ Cf. M. Dziura, *Świątynie konsumpcji. Implozja granic*, in: *Spółczesność konsumpcyjna. Uwarunkowania społeczne i kulturowe*, eds. D. Markowski, P. Setlak, PWSZ Tarnobrzeg, Tarnobrzeg 2008, p. 176.

¹² J. Baudrillard, *Spółczesność konsumpcyjna. Jego mity i struktury*, Wyd. Sic!, Warszawa 2006, p. 275.

3. Human Suffering as An Ontic Category

In spite of the efforts of postmodern man, suffering is still the most common phenomenon included in life, as well as part of human nature that accompanies people from birth to death. Being one of the fundamental experiences, it touches the psychological, philosophical and religious levels of life.¹³ The peculiarity of human suffering, in relation to this well-known phenomenon in the world of animals is determined by the self-awareness of a human being who experiences it, and above all the issue of questioning its meaning. Whilst suffering in itself obviously has no objective meaning, it is common to attribute meaning to it depending on the individual context and type of preferred discourse. The very concept of „meaning” always refers to the categories such as the anthropological, ethical, and finally the metaphysical, which ought to be considered superior. The sources of postmodern human problems must be looked for within these categories while respecting the human status as a suffering creature. Preferring the bodily before spirituality, denying the existence of God and rejecting objective axiology, it is difficult for man to comprehend that he is a temporary, finite and temporal being, full of contradictions and this in itself intensifies his suffering. As Karl Jaspers noted, by nature man is a tragic creature and suffering as well as death is a part of his fate. One might try to mask them somehow, but in the end they are the ultimate reality for each individual.¹⁴ It is worth noticing, in this context, that within Christianity the cause of suffering as evil is the lack of perfection in created beings, which, at the same time, constitutes evil itself. The only absolutely perfect being, and therefore free from suffering, is God. Facing the negative nature of suffering in the ontological meaning, in the perspective of Christianity one points that its function is the sanctification of man on his way to God.¹⁵

¹³ Cf. T. Świdryowicz, *Problematyka filozoficzna w opiece paliatywnej*, in: *Problemy współczesnej tanatologii. Medycyna – Antropologia kultury – Humanistyka*, (ed.) J. Kobuszewski, Wrocław 1997, p. 170.

¹⁴ Cf. R. Radziński, *Jaspers*, Warszawa 1978, pp. 187–195.

¹⁵ Cf. Z. Orbik, *Historia filozoficznej refleksji nad cierpieniem. Przegląd wybranych stanowisk*, in: *Ból i cierpienie*, (eds) A. Makiełło – Jarży, Z. Gajda, Kraków 2007, pp. 114–115.

4. Post-Modern Homo Consumens in Search of Meaning for his Suffering

According to what Erich Fromm has noticed a few decades ago a contemporary homo consumens, possessing many anxieties within himself, tries to „make sure” that he really „exists” thanks to consumption.¹⁶ This is not possible, though, because post-modern culture may only offer a temporary relief due to the fact that it is focused only on the production of things and automating human actions.¹⁷ Man’s true liberation may only take place through a deeper participation in true reality, even if it means acknowledging the truth about the ontic weakness of human nature.¹⁸

The human life, as being filled with suffering, was most clearly defined in the 20th century by Viktor Emanuel Frankl, a psychologist and philosopher who experienced the tragedy of living in a concentration camp: „When placed above a chasm, man looks into the abyss at its bottom, and he sees the tragic structure of a human being. There, in the depths, the truth is revealed to man that human existence is ultimately suffering and that the essential destiny of man is to suffer: to be homo patiens.”¹⁹ This term, referring to the fact that every man has the fear of suffering, aging and death does not refer to random experiences but to the level of ontology, hence a philosophical analysis of his existence.²⁰ For Frankl, who combines psychoanalysis, existentialism and personalism, the initial assumption, derived from anthropological and philosophical reflections and clinical experience, claims that a man is a creature seeking the meaning of life in its being. Unfortunately, the post-modern lifestyle and today’s socio-cultural conditions can be described, according to Frankl as „emptiness” or „existential frustration”, „feeling of nonsense” and „neogene neurosis”. In addition, he pays attention to the post-modern common phenomena such as depression, aggression, addictions, discouragement, boredom, hopelessness, and finally, escaping into the world of illusion and forgetfulness, pleasure and nihilism. Frankl has looked for the antidote to postmodern human dilemmas in psychotherapy,

¹⁶ Cf. E. Fromm, *Rewolucja nadziei*, translated by H. Adamska, introduction: M. Chałubiński, Warszawa 1996, pp. 152–153.

¹⁷ Cf. E. Fromm, *Serce człowieka*, PWN, Warszawa – Wrocław 2000, p. 111.

¹⁸ Cf. E. Fromm, *Mieć czy być*, translated by J. Niziński, Warszawa 1989, pp. 199–203.

¹⁹ Cf. V. Frankl, *Homo patiens*, Warszawa 1984, p. 77.

²⁰ V. Frankl, *Homo patiens...*, p. 82.

which he defined as logotherapy. By promoting it, he tried to achieve a thorough picture of a human being, in contraposition to all sorts of determinism deforming this picture and having broad theoretical and practical implications.²¹

This great thinker pays special attention in his criticism to three types of determinism that has been spread in the twentieth century which are believed to distort and impoverish the image of man: biological determinism, psychology and social determinism. Frankl defined them together in the concept of „nihilism.”²² Biological determinism is a nihilism that restricts human existence only to physical and biological reality, psychology – to mental reality, and social determinism narrows it down to sociological reality.²³ As a result of such reduction, the whole complex human reality is considered almost only as a product of physiological, psychological or sociological phenomena. Another common feature of all the three reductionist anthropologies is the fact that they entirely ignore the spiritual dimension of a man.²⁴ A breakthrough in the process of understanding the suffering is associated with the necessity to stop deliberating on the human body but to take into consideration the spiritual sphere of the person, expressed in the pursuit of meaning and value. The definite meaning of suffering may only be grasped by referring to absolute values, primarily to God.²⁵

Within Frankl's logotherapy, the meaning of life is understood as something simultaneously „given” but also „set”. Man is a being who undertakes various missions, makes decisions and thus fulfills himself as an active, aware and responsible participant of life. A vital issue is to adopt suffering, accept it and give it an intention so that it ceases to be meaningless. If suffering is to make sense, it cannot be suffering in itself, but for something or for someone. It has to point to something or someone outside of suffering, which means nothing other than it must be associated with the victim. A conscious acceptance of suffering and giving it meaning by the victim leads to the development of human existence. By doing this, man undergoes the process of maturation, in which

²¹ Cf. K. Popielski, M. Wolicki, *Antropologiczno-filozoficzne podstawy analizy egzystencjalnej i niektóre jej aplikacje do teorii osobowości*, in: *Człowiek – pytanie otwarte: Studia z logoteorii i logoterapii*, ed. K. Popielski RW KUL, Lublin 1987, p. 101.

²² V. E. Frankl, *Homo patiens...*, p. 9.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

²⁵ V. Frankl, *Homo patiens...*, pp. 8–13.

he gains internal freedom despite being externally dependent. He also gets the deepest truth about life.²⁶

Among contemporary philosophers, G. Marcel also argues that every human being has to discover various provenance deficiencies in his existence, and above all, the obvious, although often camouflaged, experience of contingency and insufficiency. Along with this experience, there is a kind of internal appeal calling for man to be more open to other people. His lack of existence, which is a kind of ontological requirement, however, requires someone else to complement: the „You”, the Absolute – God – the fullness in comparison to human deficits.²⁷

Max Scheler views suffering in a similar way. He indicates that only when the fact of pain and suffering is placed close to the idea of sacrifice as well as love – as it is in Christianity – then it is possible to come to a deeper theodicy of suffering.²⁸ On the other hand, Karl Jaspers paid attention to terminal situations, i.e. existential situations of special significance to a man, evoking strong emotional experiences and causing a human being to move from an empirical existence to a higher spiritual dimension. In spite of the fear, man wishes to overcome himself and go beyond the world seeking Transcendence, making a personal „jump from himself to himself.” Nevertheless, it is also possible for man, and what modern homo consumens does, to step back from realizing and experiencing terminal situations, at the same time adopting an attitude that temporarily moderates the anxiety associated with them, but deprives him of the opportunity to become acquainted with himself as a person and the opportunity to open himself to Transcendence as well.²⁹

Inspired to some extent by the thoughts of the aforementioned thinkers, John Paul II directly says that, „Suffering seems to belong to man’s transcendence, it is one of the points in which a man is somewhat condemned to be above himself and he is called to it in a mysterious way.”³⁰ For that reason, suffering makes people wonder on the real meaning of human life and to realize the fragility

²⁶ Cf. K. Popielski, *Frankl*, in: *PEF*, vol. 3, Lubin 2002, p. 624.

²⁷ Cf. J. Konkowska, *Osoba w ujęciu Gabriela Marcela jako źródło inspiracji wychowawczych*, „Forum Pedagogiczne” 2 (2015), p. 100.

²⁸ Cf. M. Scheler, *Cierpienie, śmierć, życie wieczne*, Warszawa 1994, p. 12.

²⁹ Cf. R. Radziński, *Jaspers*, Warszawa 1978, pp. 187–195.

³⁰ John Paul II, *List apostolski Salvifici Doloris*, 11 II 1984, https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/jan_pawel_ii/listy/salvifici.html, 17 X 2019, no. 2.

of biological existence. It also teaches inner humility, encourages reflection on one's own contingency, and directs the thoughts of the ones who believe towards God and draws them closer to Him.³¹

The acceptance of suffering is based on the mindful agreement with the belief that it is pervasive in human existence. With non-believers, this attitude might be a source of life realism or moral obligation, while with Christians this attitude is shaped in relation to theological thought, suggesting a thesis that suffering is not a punishment for sins or God's response to man's evil.³² Accepting suffering as a creative force has nothing in common with dolorousness, which means cultivating suffering or even loving it. Suffering has no sense in itself, it is always a misfortune. It is only a specific person who, thanks to his personal ability for transcendence, may exceed the limits imposed by the fact of various sorts of suffering that afflict him.³³ The process of finding the meaning of suffering is undoubtedly extremely complex, and its course is determined by plenty of factors, among which the religious factor is particularly prominent, however the connection between the religion professed by a man and finding the meaning and the value of suffering is not at all accurate.³⁴

5. Conclusion

The universality of the question about suffering indicates that it always remains valid and still requires clarification and explanation. Providing the answer to the question of suffering is extremely crucial to man because as a result of being an intelligent and free creature, and having the knowledge of the full truth about his suffering, he can tackle the most arduous challenge of his own humanity and accept his mortal nature with all its consequences such as suffering, illness and ultimately death. Today's attempts to eliminate suffering through constantly

³¹ Cf. T. Świrydowicz, *Problematyka filozoficzna w opiece paliatywnej*, in: *Problemy współczesnej tanatologii. Medycyna – Antropologiakultury – Humanistyka*, ed. J. Kobuszewski, Wrocławskie Towarzystwo Naukowe, Wrocław 1997, pp. 170–171.

³² Cf. J. Iwaszczyszyn, *Tajemnica ludzkiego cierpienia w aspekcie niektórych religii*, in: *Ból i cierpienie*, (ed.) G. Makięło-Jarża, Kraków 2010, p. 64–65.

³³ Cf. A. Wierzbicki, *W poszukiwaniu sensu cierpienia, przemijania i śmierci*, in: *Rozumieć cierpienie? Wokół myśli Jana Pawła II i pytań o przyszłość chrześcijaństwa*, eds. D. Łukasiewicz, M. Siwiec, S. Warzyński, Bydgoszcz 2010, p. 32.

³⁴ Cf. J. Tarnawa, *Cierpienie. Umieranie. Nadzieja*, Kraków 2003, p. 78.

stimulated consumption may be considered as an act of „degradation” of man and humanity who by rejecting the truth about his nature as a suffering creature, paradoxically also loses the meaning of his life. If one denies suffering, then – at the same time – one closes oneself before life. For the escape from suffering is anything but the escape from life, at least the one that is experienced in a conscious and sensible way.

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