THE CULTURE OF DEATH

KIERKEGAARD'S CRITIQUE OF ESCAPISM

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Abstract

This paper explores the so-called culture of death and the tendencies of escapism as a reflection of the existential crisis of humans. The main aim is to analyse Søren Kierkegaard's influential work 'The Sickness Unto Death' and reflect upon questioning what it means to be oneself. The author focuses on pointing out Kierkegaard's original and incisive concept of despair in the context of contemporary human feelings of despair, anxiety, alienation and aloneness. One of the theses of this paper is to see escapism, though it can be justifiably criticized, also as an activity that creates, in its own way, opportunities to explore and experience human individuality.

Keywords: culture, Søren Kierkegaard, crisis, escapism, despair

> "Physically it is true that a man can fall by the hand of another; spiritually it is true that a man can fall only by his own hand — no one can corrupt him but the man himself."
>
> (Søren Kierkegaard)

1. Introduction

The title of the paper anticipates the existential crisis of humans in the context of the so-called 'culture of death'. Attention is paid to the phenomena that could be described as symptoms of the 'sickness' of the contemporary human individuals and society. In the 20th century, decadent features of modern society were critically analysed by several authors from different fields (Philosophy, Theology, Sociology, Psychology of existence, Literature, Cultural studies), many of whom were inspired and influenced by the Danish religious thinker, philosopher, social critic and intellectual par excellence, Søren A. Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kierkegaard (un)consciously initialised dynamic research activities and interests in his works and legacy, including collaboration between established Kierkegaard research centres worldwide. However, he gained a wider attention and respect just more recently, from the beginning of the 20th century until present. Kierkegaard is influential because of the key

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insights he provided for the subsequent philosophy of existentialism. Emphasizing issues of human subjectivity in the context of self-awareness, self-realisation and the experience of the world plays the main role in the existential approach in this paper.

Kierkegaard with his brilliant criticism of his present age pointed out specific maladies and threats in his most influential works *Either/Or, Fear and Trembling, The Concept of Anxiety, The Sickness Unto Death, Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* also *Two Ages: A Literary Review* and *Stages on Life ´s Way*. The author demonstrates the relevance of Kierkegaard's conceptual framework for the modern society, including despair, anxiety, alienation, boredom and aloneness, but also his reflection on the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages of existence.

What does it mean to be oneself? The proposed question refers to Kierkegaard's concept of despair and single individual, when not knowing one's self, not living in accord with one's self, means misrelation and creates "the sickness unto death", which is despair. As written earlier, the culture of death is explored in the sense of the human's being in a stage of crisis. It is proposed that the culture of death is related to the vicious circle of escapism as a result of the denial of the self.

Despite increasing contemporary evidence of the phenomena associated with the culture of death, this issue has only recently received proper academic attention, thus rendering the understanding of the term substantially limited, particularly from an ethical and religious perspective. The purpose of this paper is to address this gap in research and literature. First, however, it is necessary to review briefly selected concepts as a framework for the further analysis through the optics of Kierkegaard.

2. The culture of death - definitions and perspectives

Discussing the culture of death is less common either at the individual level or that of society. This general lack of a broader attention to this significant topic is a major drawback. Nevertheless, to suggest that the topic of the culture of death is totally absent from the contemporary public domain is to deny the pervasiveness of such collocation and its concerns within the mass media output.

The culture of death is often understood as the opposite of the culture of life, especially due to the nature of its portrayal by the Catholic church. The term was first coined by former pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life, 1995). Arguably, it remains the most cited study of the phenomenon. In general, however, his was not the first work to focus upon the certain decadent features of the modern society.

Previous paragraphs bring to surface that there are certain variations of how the term 'the culture of death' is used and understood. Importantly, academic debates include the question how can the term 'culture' in the sense of cultivation, refining, creation and life at the same time be associated with death, which represents the negation of life, decline and destruction?!

One of the most influential thinkers, the German philosopher Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), intended to understand the death of culture or the decline of culture as a conflict between the culture and civilization. It is a critical reflection of the Euro-American, Western culture that focuses on the death of the culture, the decline of the West in the context of Spengler's theory, who associated the death of the culture with its transition into the phase of the civilization "Civilization is the ultimate destination of the culture" [1]. Is it possible to reverse thus understood fate of the culture? Is the culture not heading towards the catastrophe, when we identify the symptoms "...of an internecine war in the process of spreading to the entire world"? [2] The answer is clear: "Culture dies when it exhausts the full sum of its internal possibilities. It merges into civilization that is, according to Spengler, an inevitable destiny of every culture, its end... Even though civilization can exist for several or more centuries, it is referred to just as 'soulless' passage that is devoid of creative power and spiritual meaning. Civilization does not create new forms anymore, it just reinterprets them." [3, p. 37]

In Spengler's view, the Western culture already ceased to exist since the 19th century, when we can talk about the beginning of civilization, which tends to an irreversible collapse and self-destruction. The argument about the death of the culture actually says a lot and opens up a debate about the crisis of the Euro-American civilization. In reality, it was not only Spengler who became concerned with cultural pessimism. In conclusion, considering Spengler's concept of the death of the culture, the term culture of death could be identified as twisted without a contradiction, because the phase of civilisation is defined equally as the culture of death – lack of the spiritual meaning and searching for one's self.

The culture of death is associated primarily with the problems of ethical nature. Resonating particularly in contemporary global discussions are attacks on the sanctity of life in the forms of euthanasia, abortion, death penalty, but also current research in the fields of birth control, artificial reproduction, genetics, cryonics, all of which are endangering human dignity and integrity of the human being as a person. In other words, the term cannot be reduced 'only' to human attacks against humanity, human dignity, human rights and life itself, although this attitude is taken by the Catholic Church.

As mentioned before, the former pope John Paul II presented a sharp criticism of the culture of death, which he understood as the opposite of the culture of life. He explicitly wrote about the culture of life and the culture of death "...In our present social context, marked by a dramatic struggle between the 'culture of life' and the 'culture of death', there is need to develop a deep critical sense, capable of discerning true values and authentic needs." [4] The inspiration for the rise of the culture of life could be also found in the revised understanding of the human being in the context of the philosophy of personalism, as well as Pope John Paul II's emphasis "...on the human being understood as both unique individual and a responsible member of society, and

so it avoids the simplistic casting of human beings as either isolated individuals or faceless members of mass society" [5].

The culture of death did not just happen, it is not new in history. In their recently published work *Architects of the Culture of Death* (2004), the American theologians, Donald DeMarco and Benjamin Wiker, draw attention to the so-called "architects of the culture of death". Despite the criticism of the authors' attitudes towards and interpretations of those architects, it is necessary to appreciate their efforts to identify the roots of the contemporary cultural maladies. The authors emphasize five major themes: militant atheism, the isolation of the will from the consequences of its choices, making freedom into an absolute, the obsession with sex and the erosion of the sense of human dignity [5]. The culture of life as an antidote "...depends, for its ultimate victory, on persons making actual choices carried out according to definite plans, choices made real by concrete actions..." [5]

From an interpretative perspective, attempts have been made to analyse specific manifestations of the culture of death in the context of the diagnosis of the modern society. One such attempt took place over one hundred years ago, when the British anthropologist, Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917), presented his approach that laid foundations for a future development of the concept of the culture of life. He defined culture in a broader scope with respect to the research method at the individual level, turning his attention towards the human individual's way of life, who is both a creator but also a part of the culture: "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." [6]

Due to this fact, our contribution to understanding the culture of death operates also with other concepts and approaches: sensual culture and spiritless culture. In the concept of sensual culture, the continuity of the specific culture is identified, reflecting upon the crisis and discontinuity of the culture of life, which was replaced by the culture of death. In his work *The Crisis of Our Age* (1941), the Russian American sociologist, Pitirim A. Sorokin (1889-1968), defined the sensual culture as one which is based on such thinking, feeling and acting, that is characterised by its empirical nature. Such a definition means that culture is empirical, profane and therefore sensual [7].

There is a resonance of this line of thinking found in the works of Kierkegaard who anticipated the detrimental effects of the phenomena of the culture of death. In Kierkegaard's *The Present Age*, which is as a part of his *The Literary Review* (1846), he argues "The present age is essentially a sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence." [8] Kierkegaard highlighted various symptoms and aspects in diagnosis of his own age 'passionless and reflective age' which he claims 'was going badly'. In his discourse, Kierkegaard distinguishes between the reflexive, rational and passionless age, and the passionate, revolutionary age: "As an age without passion it has no assets of feeling in the erotic, no assets of enthusiasm and inwardness in politics and

religion, no assets of domesticity, piety, and appreciation in daily life and social life. But existence mocks the wittiness that possesses no assets, even though the populace laughs shrilly." [8, p. 74]

Thus, Kierkegaard expounded on another concept that might be helpful in elucidating the culture of death and escapism. The author of this article claims that previous definitions and perspectives are related to Kierkegaard's concept of despair, showing, that his notion sits comfortably within related research in the twentieth century until present. When further exploring this theme, we may observe that the most influential in Kierkegaard's analysis of the culture of death is the concept of human being described as a state of desperate ignorance of the self with tendencies to escape and indulge in indifference: "Action and decision are just as scarce these days as is the fun of swimming dangerously for those who swim in shallow water" [8, p. 71].

3. The culture of death – denial of the self!

When discussing the culture of death, it is associated with the state of the present age which is defined by crisis, an existential crisis of human being. Kierkegaard in his approach focused on the confrontation of the human individual with the various crises of negative meaning, yet from a spiritual point of view, crises [9] may create new space, new opportunities for human's reconciliation with God.

The term crisis is in dictionaries defined as "a situation that has reached an extremely difficult or dangerous point; a time of great disagreement, uncertainty or suffering" [10]. We are thus prompted to explore from several angles that crisis is a space, an opportunity to make a change, to dare to make a decision towards the breaking point, which Kierkegaard describes as "The image of the Skillevei, translated as crossroad(s)...the Skillevei is the space..., between living and dying, and in the formation of the individual self that is challenged by society and in turn confronts society." [11] Life is full of constant streams of experience, including the crisis. By carefully identifying linkages between the crisis in the existential sense and Kierkegaard's concept of despair, there is a platform to grapple with the culture of death and other related issues.

Kierkegaard's pseudonym author Anti-Climacus described in his work *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) this sickness as a deeper expression of anxiety in the spiritual context: "Such is the nature of despair, this sickness of the self, this sickness unto death. The despairing person is mortally ill. In a completely different sense than is the case with any illness, this sickness has attacked the most vital organs, and yet he cannot die. Death is not the end of the sickness, but death is incessantly the end. To be saved from this sickness by death is an impossibility, because the sickness and its torment – and the death – are precisely this inability to die." [12]

In this companion piece to previous work *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), Kierkegaard provided his original and influential analysis of this topic, including a distinction between fear, anxiety and despair.

Some of his postulates invite further questions and problems to consider. Is the sickness unto death a limit or pharmakon? Is it a sickness which is related to some tragic circumstances in one's life and, therefore, rare or is it fairly common? According to Kierkegaard, the sickness unto death is despair and it does not have to mean only something negative (like in the case of crisis), although he explicitly did not call it as a cure "...once and for all may I point out that in the whole book, as the title indeed declares, despair is interpreted as a sickness, not as a cure" [12, p. 6]. Kierkegaard in this way continued to emphasize its function as a mediator in one's searching for the Self: "The subjective thinker's task is to understand himself in existence" [13]. One cannot but notice Kierkegaard's deliberate uncovering of the 'frequency' and thus true acuteness of despair in the life of humans. He even argues that "[e]ven that which, humanly speaking, is utterly beautiful and lovable – a womanly youthfulness that is perfect peace and harmony and joy – is nevertheless despair" [12, p. 25].

What does it mean to be in despair? "Despair is not only dialectically different from a sickness, but all its symptoms are also dialectical, and therefore the superficial view is very easily deceived in determining whether or not despair is present. Not to be in despair can in fact signify precisely to be in despair, and it can signify having been rescued from being in despair. A sense of security and tranquillity can signify being in despair; precisely this sense of security and tranquillity can be the despair, and yeti t can signify having conquered despair and having won peace." [12, p. 24]

When further considering what it means for humans to be defined by spirit, Kierkegaard claims: "...to be unaware of being defined as spirit is precisely what despair is" [12, p. 25].

Kierkegaard anticipated one of the most significant maladies in the current western civilisation, namely its fall into inauthenticity in searching for one's self – escapism which, in its very negative and unhealthy form, can be intertwined with the three forms of the sickness unto death: "Despair is a sickness of the spirit, of the self...in despair not to be conscious of having a self (not despair in a strict sense); in despair not to will to be oneself; in despair to will to be oneself" [12, p. 13]. What is the human being escaping from? The answer says a lot about both human and the contemporary society.

4. Escapism – searching for the self?

The hedonism of the narcist, materialism, hyper-consumerism, diversity of tastes, desires and wishes are characterized by human efforts for otherness, desire to be different than others, but also, paradoxically, to be like others – denying one's self! These negative tendencies and related problems and their impacts tell us about a significant striving of humans to escape from the reality, the grey everyday life and their own self. Who is this volatile, running human? The one who is, according to Kierkegaard, known as the "common man", as the "crowd" [14]. Kierkegaard then focuses his attention on the counterpart and that

is the single individual, whose only life's purpose should be self-awareness, searching for the self and the meaning, which would lead him to liberation out of the vicious circle of escapism and thus of despair. "But as yet there is neither the ethical nor the religious courage. Most become quite afraid when each by himself is expected to be the single individual... and then when the individual is to try it out in practise, the thought is much too big for him, too overwhelming." [15]

What is escapism? What are the motivations of an escapist? Escapism can have various interpretations and connotations. Escapism has been defined simply as habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine. Related to this description is the following thought by Kierkegaard: "A mirror, it is true, has the feature that a person can see his image in it, but then one must stand still. If one hastily hurries by, one gets to see nothing... the busy person hurries ahead carrying with him the possibility of understanding himself, but the busy one keeps on running and never comes to the understanding – indeed, for him it recedes more and more into oblivion – that he is carrying the possibility with him." [16]

The human being thus becomes a victim of the 'rotation method', which can lead him to despair, because anything he does seems like an eclipse of meaning and excitement, resulting into boredom: "I don't feel like doing anything. I don't feel like riding – the motion is too powerful; I don't feel like walking – it is too tiring; I don't feel like lying down, for either I have to stay down, and I don't feel like doing that or I would have to get up again, and I don't feel like doing that neither. Summa Summarum: I don't feel like doing anything." [17] Kierkegaard asserts such stage to be the outcome of the struggle between the materialistic, hedonistic, consumerist order and the true values within one's own Self. "When feelings of absurdity, despair and boredom with everything come to their culmination, man gets a strong desire for a meaningful life, and if it is not found he seeks new experience and once again lives through disappointment and despair." [18, p. 192] In one of his journals and papers entry Kierkegaard asked "Learn to be satisfied with little – will you deny that this is much?" [19]

As Kierkegaard distinguished between the 'empty and worldly diversion' and the 'godly diversion', it became clear that the one who chose the first 'master' ended up in despair and the vicious circle of escapism: "But if diversion is designed to pass away the time, the self-contradiction is clear: namely, the diversion, when it is most highly perfected in refinement, can pass away the time for only a few minutes – then the more appallingly it becomes patently clear how long the time is." [16, p. 185] Kierkegaard articulates the category of boredom in the context of one's relation to God. "The person who is without God in the world soon becomes bored with himself – and expresses this haughtily by being bored with all life..." [20, 21]

It is also important to note that escapism is also precisely the 'tool' by means of which one searches for the relief from boredom, melancholy and from the pressure of the self-project development. "To despair over oneself, in despair

to will to be rid of oneself – this is the formula for all despair." [12, p. 20] Kierkegaard likewise points our attention to the problem of indifference, which is a 'symbol' of today's world that goes hand in hand with passivity, laziness, and apathy even in the question of tolerance. "Indifference is often incorrectly deemed toleration. Indifference denies the importance of initial responses and reasoning." [22, p. 144]

Are there any positive consequences of escapism? It is not easy to detect the borders when an escape is healthy or unhealthy. For sure, escapism could be defined as a "mantra of the Western Society" [23]. Escapism can either be viewed as therapeutic, when considered as a way of breaking free from the mundane, or it can be perceived in its very negative, destructive meaning because of its extreme forms. Those are procrastination, denial, psychosis and addiction [23]. It is important to consider escapism also in relationships. Human preference of moral values and their connections with sexual behaviour have recently gained more attention of researchers, "[c]onsidering value diversity in the area of sexuality and partner relationships, as well as sexual and partner behaviour…" [24]

Escape into a virtual world connected with addictions, social isolation, or even resignation on the self and one's life in this world, is a particularly grave danger of popular E-personality in the context of one's self-alienation. Of course, there are many different motivations and forms of escapism but the crucial point lies between the ability of the escapist to return without difficulties and one's life-stage of being lost and trapped in it. In his search for life's meaning while considering one's contemporary existential questions, the human individual is confronted with human sagacity which leads to a new existential space in virtual reality and cyberspace. There is also the idea of post-humanism, as well as the idea of 'the last man' as we know him in the philosophy of transhumanism. Some of the popular expressions and their portrayals in mass media, which are a part of the seduction for the escapist to escape from the daily tensions or commonness, are: shock, horror, brutality, oddity, pornography, eroticism, perversion, show, tabloid (as signs or symptoms of the current culture of death).

This variety of the available diversions of our minds entails confusion and despair. Yet, Kierkegaard argues that "The more despair is thought through, the more rarely it is seen or the more rarely it appears in the world. This by no means proves that the majority have not despaired; it proves only that they have not gone particularly deep in despairing." [12, p. 57] Rather than being preoccupied with the question of being one's self in his everyday life, the human individual tends to let it slumber within him. For Kierkegaard, "[t]here are very few persons who live even approximately within the qualification of spirit; indeed, there are not many who even try this life, and most of those who do soon back out of it."; and, if they do turn inwards, "[t]hen, when they encounter their first difficulties, they turn away; it seems to them that this path leads to a dismal desert – *und rings umher liegt schöne grüne Weide* [while all about lie meadows fresh and green]" [12, p. 57].

People are becoming so reliant on escapism that it seems like the reality can no longer be faced without the Kierkegaardian 'leap of faith' related to aesthetical, ethical and religious stages in his *Stages on Life's Way* (1845). Escapism is an act of human nature, to be sure, but one leading to a hedonistic aestheticism, existential uncertainty and despair. The challenge for humans is "...a leap out of one's personal apocalyptic crisis into new state of being; out of one's dread and despair into a new ethical or possibly even spiritual dimension" [25-27].

5. Conclusions

Research in humanities of the culture of death has not witnessed an academic eruption over the past decades. Previous scientific study, as noted earlier, primarily conducted with a religious and/or ethical approach, has a profundity that undoubtedly contributed to broader social theories and to understand the culture of death in the context of the decadent features of the modern society. However, the paper suggested that the current research has been characterised by deficient interdisciplinary synthesis.

The author proposes, that although the criticism of human's escapism, especially in its pathological forms, is quite legitimate, it can also help individuals to address the issues of denial of the self. This may prove to be key to answering the question: what does it mean to be oneself in an existential sense. From Kierkegaard's perspective, there is an important distinction between a psychological and a spiritual sickness when referring to the concept of despair. It is argued, that Kierkegaard's writings explicitly elaborated this perspective back in the 19th century and the subsequent theories from various fields offer also empirical support for it.

We are led to the conclusion that the existential crisis of humans, their tendencies of escapism, which is related to despair in its three forms according to Kierkegaard, represent an alarming evidence of the culture of death. Obviously, there are variations of how to define the culture of death and this paper offered a preliminary discussion for a further research. The culture of death is often described as 'an opposite to the culture of life', primarily from the perspective of the Catholic Church; according to Spengler's theory of civilisation, the culture of death can be defined as the death of the culture; the culture in a state of crisis, especially an existential crisis of the human individual who is both its part as well as its creator; in connection to human's tendencies of escapism according to Kierkegaard's concept of despair; sensual and spiritless culture, the description and analysis of which was initiated by Sorokin and Kierkegaard; finally, as a culture of humans who suffer under the pressure of denial of the Self as they are compelled to honour the current order in modern society.

Hence, a number of questions remain unanswered. Scholars argue that contemporary man is no longer motivated to engage in self edification efforts and the self's search for meaning. Living in the third millennium involves

various tensions and difficulties on the level of the self but also that of society. When we understand these as dilemmas, the crucial one among them is the culture of death versus the culture of life or, as described with the above-used analogy, denial of the self, versus becoming oneself. Kierkegaard stressed the danger of losing oneself: "The choice itself is crucial for the content of the personality; through the choice the personality submerges itself in that which is being chosen, and when it does not choose, it withers away in atrophy" [17, p. 163]. For Kierkegaard, the responsibility of the choice between either/or was necessary in the awakening of man as a single individual.

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