

THE EVOLUTIONARY CONCEPT OF HUMAN DEATH

ADAM ŚWIEŻYŃSKI

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Warsaw

Abstract. The natural sciences reveal the existence of a constant process of cosmic evolution, in which new forms of matter emerge. The continuity of the non-organic and biological evolutionary processes, their assignment to the laws of nature, as well as the fact that the appearance of a human being constitutes their culmination, all this shows that a human being is an element of the material structure of the world. From the evolutionary point of view, it could be argued that a human being is „the ultimate form of life,” a very interesting but, in many respects, still very mysterious idea.

I. Introduction

Modern philosophy puts man at the center of its attention. The most significant questions seem to be those about the essence of man, his own specific existence, genesis, the meaning and purpose of his life (Bollnow 1972, p. 19). Today's anthropological philosophy has a dynamic attitude. This is because man understands himself not only as a creature belonging to nature, but also as one who can create the reality around him, make it the scope of his historic deed and influence the form of the world. Because of this dynamic conception of the human being, we have to bear in mind his evolutionary origins, his nature, and consequently, to have an evolutionary view of death.

Man, who is at the top of the evolutionary ladder of coming into existence, is an eccentric being, as he leans out of the nervous-carnal constitution inherited from his animal ancestors. Such leaning out towards the spiritual is at the same time an anticipation of death, arousing in the eccentric *Homo sapiens* thanatal fears. This anticipation finds its expression in cultural

FORUM PHILOSOPHICUM 13(2008), pp. 119-126

interpretations of being, the so-called 'source metaphors'. Their function is to reduce these fears through organizing interpretations and reinterpretations of the finiteness of man and world. The evolutionary perspective offers a similar interpretation, but one in terms of philosophical thinking, of the end of a human life, and especially the essence (the moment) of human death. According to the evolutionary concept, death should not be seen as the moment of life's interruption, but as the moment of final fulfillment when a man reaches his ultimate and perfect form.

II. The question of death and resurrection

Biological evolution aims at the appearance of more and more advanced species and it finds its end in man, as the most perfect form on Earth. However, with the appearance of man, the passive phase of evolution is transformed into the anthropic phase, because man is able to channel it onto given targets (Heberer 1972, pp. 9-11). This was made possible because with man there appeared a new, more perfect level of being – the spiritual part of a human being, through which man opens himself onto transcendence. The main objective of evolution regarding man is his complete transformation and elevation to this higher, perfect form of being. Death, which seems to annihilate man, is simply a phase of growing and rising to the sphere of superhuman personal awareness (Chardin 1962, p. 130). T. de Chardin perceives death as a metamorphosis, where the energy of personalization reaches a certain limit of concentration in which personal elements go beyond this energy and enter a sphere of a higher order (Chardin 1962, p. 130).

When discussing the question of death, as seen from the perspective of the evolutionary concept of being, one assumes that every evolution leads higher in such a way that at crucial points it introduces a certain evolutionary novelty. This novelty always means „something more” in comparison with the starting form – it always goes beyond it.

In accordance with the concept discussed above, the moment of death is the key, and at the same time the ultimate limit of evolution, which concerns the whole man and not just his part. Such an understanding of the theory of death leaves no place for destruction, separation or disconnection of the elements of human nature. If one can speak of separating soul from body, then it is only the body „here and now,” which as a matter of fact, happens all the time in the biological process of getting rid of the cells that constitute a man. Neither does death diminish a human being's perfection, quite to the contrary it magnifies it. The evolutionary novelty acquired at the moment

of death will be the elevation of a human being's perfection through the transition to spiritual being (Wojciechowski 1979, pp. 86-87).

Two layers can be found in the human structure: spatio-temporal and aeviternal (*aevum*). The further evolution of man at the time of death will consist in transforming the spatial-temporal layer into the eternal one, and thus there will be a change in perfection and not in the human species. The process of such a makeover began at the moment of conception and will end at the moment of death. Man is the only creature that consists of the two layers already during his life on earth. Thus the evolution of man on earth may be understood as a task preparing him through development and perfection for entering life in the highest attainable dimension. At the same time, the moment of death does not interrupt, but is the fulfillment of this task.

The evolutionary conception doesn't see death as dying in the traditional understanding of the word, meaning disintegration and destruction. According to the evolutionary conception, death is not a regression or disruption of the evolutionary process, on the contrary it is the most positive moment for man in his life and development. „No matter what are the circumstances accompanying death, it is always a gate leading higher, to full perfection of being” (Wojciechowski 1979, p. 87). Death is also the moment when man is transferred from the category of existence of becoming to the category of existence of contemplating which is the state of full existence (Wojciechowski 1979, p. 88).

The moment of death, which is the moment of the transition of the human being from the immortality of the soul to the immortality of the whole man, is tantamount to the resurrection of the human body. The immortality of the whole man and resurrection combine at the moment of death in one evolutionary process of life. It is unfounded to use temporal terminology when discussing the existence on the eternal layer as it excludes a temporal separation of the moment of death and resurrection. Beyond the moment of death there is a duration „in which all the references and experiences happen simultaneously, that is beyond time” (Bovet 1977, p. 125). That is because eternity rules out time. Thus resurrection is a theological term describing man's evolutionary „exceeding of the self,” the evolutionary „something more” connected with elevating the bodily element to a higher stage of perfection of being. Consequently, the spirituality of the soul will be joined by the transformation into a spiritual body, which is the transformation of the whole man through material nature. At the same time, resurrection is the end of human evolution and the final transition into what theology calls the eternal happiness.

The most difficult obstacle in understanding and accepting man's death as the moment of resurrection is the remaining human corpse. In an attempt to solve this problem, we could use the metaphor of a transforming butterfly that discards its larval coating. Not only does it keep its full existence but it also enriches its being since it flies away as a fully constituted, ultimately perfect mature specimen (Wojciechowski 1979, p. 90). When it comes to man, his corporeal nature (or at least its vital part which is a certain part of the brain) moves upwards through death's door together with the spiritual element. This is possible when we presume that the aforementioned spiritual element is elevated onto a higher level of perfection of being. „At the moment of death, man gets rid of all the unnecessary parts of his corporeal nature and moves on as a full man, a full individual, with spirituality and the part of his corporeality that transformed at the moment of death...” (Wojciechowski 1979, p. 90, Wojciechowski 1976, pp. 340-352). From the above perspective, the phenomenon of man's death recovers its place in the economy of life and becomes its „servant.” From the evolutionary point of view, at the moment of death the aspect of defeat is subordinate to a broader plan – the master plan of life.

III. Consequences of evolutionary formulation of death

If we reject any form of duality (either explicit or concealed), we must admit that the immortal soul does not exist on its own. However, we can talk of a human existence that consists of both a material and a spiritual nature (Wojciechowski 1979, 91). Therefore it is justified to claim that man, living in today's world, is a being placed between two realities: material and spiritual, but who, at the same time, moves towards eternity and ultimate immortality. Thus, man's evolution on earth can be understood as the preparation for a full unification with the Omega. Such a preparation occurs along two evolutionary lines: natural and supernatural evolution. Both have the same direction and are manifestations of one evolutionary process „from beginning to end” although they take place on two different planes. In both lines death is a crucial point of transition to a full and ultimate perfection of being which is attainable by all people. However, the supernatural evolution – unlike the natural one that always leads towards a perfection of being – is subject to a different regularity.

The supernatural line of evolution involves the whole history of redemption, from the moment man appeared on Earth to the climax of this history,

which is reaching God and joining Him in the state of eternal happiness. The natural evolution towards the Omega, God, does not depend directly on human will, which is why every man may be sure that at the moment of death he will reach the full perfection of being on the eternal plane. Whereas, the supernatural evolution of man is a consequence of man's decision, since eternal happiness or its lack depend on man's co-operation with God and His grace, during earthly life. Thus it is possible that the line of the supernatural evolution of man will come to an end at the moment of death. No one can interrupt his natural evolution towards the perfection of being. However, his decisions and deeds may prevent his supernatural evolution, which leads man into the blissful vision of God. Consequently, death and resurrection could not elevate to the state of ultimate perfection something which had never existed in man. This might also explain, from the evolutionary perspective, the eternal damnation, linked to sin, mentioned by theology. The evolutionary point of view holds that an individual cannot perish in his natural evolution, but not every person must reach the ultimate, supernatural perfection (Toit 1994, pp. 35-36).

A further consequence of death from the evolutionary perspective is a new understanding of the problem of alienation. The self-alienation of a man from himself, from others and from the world is an everyday experience for many people. It concerns a choice or preference for „this” (earthly) rather than „that” (eternal) aspect of human life. A modern man sometimes sees a conflict between „eternal happiness” and the earthly here and now. Thus there is a danger of overrating the importance of the present and of visible activity to the detriment of the eschatological aspect of human existence, or seeing the eschatological dimension as the only value to the disadvantage of man's involvement in earthly matters. The aforementioned alienation is a consequence of the fact that a human being has a free choice and will take responsibility for his decisions.

On the evolutionary conception of death a full and authentic experiencing of one's own presence is the precondition for reaching the ultimate perfection at the moment of death (Wojciechowski 1979, pp. 92-93). This is due to the fact that both evolutionary lines (the natural and the supernatural one) are directed „from beginning to end” (Chardin 1959, p. 35). There is no conflict and there could never be any conflict between earthly and eternal life because the evolutionary perspective combines the present and the future into the one evolutionary line. Consequently, alienation is the rejection of both the two „sides,” because it is a denial of the evolutionary continuity of man's evolution.

From the evolutionary point of view, life on „this” and „that” side cannot be in contradiction since these constitute two indispensable stages of human evolution. Therefore, a full experience and involvement in the here and now is in a way an announcement of the future. The meaning of human life consists in an authentic and complete living through the earthly stage, so that a full experience of the eternal future can be achieved. The essence of human evolution is the fulfillment of the task of developing at every stage of life. Human life does not aim at a choice between alternatives: „earth or heaven” but at a conjunction of „earth and heaven” – both parts are true only when put together. And if somebody recognizes the authenticity and meaning only of the present time or only of the future, he mutilates humanity and joins in the process of dehumanization.

The process of the so-called desacralisation of the world has become a burning issue these days. According to some authors this process is inevitable. It is characterized by the strong and sometimes exclusive involvement of mankind in the remaking of reality based on scientific and technical development, and paralleled by the omission of the moral and spiritual sphere. This problem also looks a bit different from the evolutionary perspective. If we assume that the first cosmic material was „the incarnated thought of God” (Wojciechowski 1979, p. 95). than it has to include a certain sacrum. Man was the first to be made aware of this sanctity and with him it began its development in the history of redemption, whose main objective is perfecting man and leading him to God, the Omega. And in this respect death is the moment when man as a whole is lifted to a higher sacrum. The lines of sacrum and profanum interweave, starting from the creation of the first cosmic material. The sacrum realized in man continues its development in the moral sphere which is subordinate to man’s free will. The fulfillment of a harmonious development of sacrum and profanum is an important postulate of the evolutionary conception. Death is the moment at which the desire for human perfection is satisfied in the most complete and ultimate way, both in the natural and the supernatural spheres (Wojciechowski 1979, p. 96). Man does not move from his insecure and unstable life towards the full existence appropriate to him by chance or because of a process working irrespective of him. He is lifted owing to a metamorphosis for which he is prepared by deliberation on its necessity, and it is this metamorphosis that moves man, as if unexpectedly, into a completely different kind of life. Thus it could be argued that man’s history goes beyond the material world which is a creation of his will, and that it is longer than the life based on this will.

IV. Conclusion

According to the systemic point of view no scientific discipline can constitute an absolutely isolated system. There is a whole number of links and interrelationships between different disciplines. From the very beginning, the theory of systems made use of concepts existing in other particular sciences including the humanities, philosophy, or even art and religion, and thus incorporated them. For both science and philosophy, a living man is a subject of research, and his death and its consequences constitute a problem that cannot be solved solely in terms of science or philosophy. Despite the limited nature of scientific and philosophical cognition, their findings should become an inspiration in the broad understanding of the word, and should help us to reach „the very nature” of man’s existence in the world.

The evolutionary conception of death seems to be open to a contemporary, systemic view of reality. For it includes an image of man, who in time gradually reaches his objective in becoming. The systemic view of man (his creation, life and death) is based on such an understanding of development according to which we can speak of the evolutionary creation of qualitatively new systems. In the process, the opportunities for developing in the old way (i.e. according to regularities and mechanisms which ruled the earlier phase of evolution) are wearing thin. At the same time, there appear possibilities for a new way of developing, according to new rules, regularities and mechanisms that are the proper outcome of the earlier phases of evolution. The tension that arises in the process of the evolution of systems and subsystems should result in the ascending of both individuals and the whole, onto a higher level, as no real system is perfect. Perfection is an aim to be reached and not a state in which we are already. The ultimate objective aimed at by the evolution of man is the absolute perfection of the existence available to man. Such a perspective suggests that the evolutionary „something more” should mean moving to a new, higher and more perfect kind of existence. Thus man in his nature is an unstable system, which is characterized by the passing from animality towards spirituality and consequently which is subject to constant tension between death and life. The aim („task”) of death is to „take” man onto a higher level of existence i.e. to include him fully in the system of a „new life.” Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the functional rules of the higher system will in a way „test” us and „decide” whether we are able to integrate with it in a sufficient way.

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