The Question of the Sense of Life: History and the Present

The author considers the history of the question of the sense of life from Renaissance to our time. The period of Renaissance saw certain changes in value priorities which spread in the society in the subsequent centuries. The process of formation and propagation of new values meant the establishment of new culture the central figure of which was the Man, not God. The process of formation and propagation of new values meant the establishment of new culture the central figure of which was the Man, not God. However, this process gives rise to the feeling of vulnerability, making people search for the new sense of life which can give a foothold to an individual life.

European philosophers started an active search for the sense of life in the 16th-17th centuries. Influenced by the development of science, the European society becomes more and more convinced that the sense of life lies in the truth revealed in the process of cognition. The absolutization of reason found its maximum expression in Hegel’s philosophy. The reason builds up an algorithm of comprehending the truth, making a person submit to the necessity. So freedom, the central component of the sense of life in the New Age, becomes unreal.

The views of the 19th century philosophers, such as A. Schopenhauer, S. Kierkegaard, F. Nietzsche, can be regarded as a reaction to the absolutization of reason in general and for an individual in particular. This period in philosophy is a period of searching for a different sense of life, in which reason would not play a leading role. To a maximum extent this thought is expressed in S. Kierkegaard’s works who maintained that the task of philosophy is to break away from rational thinking and to cross the line of the impossible in the search for the sense of life. The leading role in this search is played by personal interest in salvation, giving an eternal sense of life. S. Kierkegaard’s philosophy opens a new phase in the search for the sense of life, which, starting with the 20th century, is less and less limited by mundane experience and achievements of the reason.

Starting with the second half of the 14th century there appears a thirst for individual freedom and a desire to get rid of the influence of authority. The image of the world and the pulsebeat of a person and culture determined by it which has prevailed until this time begin to collapse creating the pre-conditions for outlining a new picture of...
the world and of a new person. This new person is understood as the one who is feeling and thinking in a different way. An individual becomes interested in himself and turns into an object of observation and psychological analysis. This is especially true in case of exceptional people – geniuses and creators.

These changes are caused, in the first place, by the fact that the Renaissance and the New Age create new values. These values are the nature and the man and they become an object of comprehensive interest. Secondly, the nature and the man (especially a genius as understood by the Renaissance) carry a charge of creative energy, an ability to create something new. Thirdly, the nature and the man contain a mystery that cannot be comprehended by the human mind. In such a way the features that used to be the prerogative of God are shifted to the nature and the man. God loses the absolute right to creation, the absolute right to mystery and to comprehensive interest on the part of the man. This process of creation of new value orientations means the establishment of a new culture, which, undoubtedly, does not break with Christianity and its hierarchy of values with transcendence as its top, but unambiguously implements the idea of the value of a man (not related to the strength of his faith) and of the nature.

It is possible to speak about the general trend of the structure of Modernism that is formed based not on the opposition to the culture of the Middle Ages characterized by vertical spatial orientation: top – God, light, salvation / bottom – Satan, darkness, doom, but on complementing this orientation with another one – horizontal. For a person of the New Age, starting with the 16th century, the new picture of the world looks as a horizontally formed space, combining new values: the man and the nature. These values include each other: the man is the nature; the nature includes the man. Gradually the “old” vertical perception of the world is transformed into a new one – horizontal, though it is impossible to speak about the total disappearance of the former and domination of the latter not only during the New Age, but also nowadays. The thing is that the full acceptance of the horizontal spatial orientation means the loss of the necessity to believe in the Supreme, the Absolute, the Creator.

Space is limited to the material world (even though it is infinite) and a reference point for our evaluative judgments can be either the law of nature or the law of the society and nothing else. But the law of nature is universal in the sense that a person obeys the laws of nature in the same way as any other material unit. The laws of the society also establish a universal outline for people’s movements, feelings and thoughts.

Changes revealing the infinity of the material world cause ambiguous sensations. On the one hand, the man has acquired an ever-increasing freedom of personal activity, on the other hand, there has appeared a fear unknown to people living in the Middle Ages – a fear of being vulnerable and forlorn. There has appeared a Man-the-Creator for whom the sense of existence lies in creative work and who is rewarded by glory and fame. Naturally, none of the Renaissance and New Age geniuses denied the existence of God. But their real actions prove that the sense of their life was creative work, their success and failures in this sphere. It is the genial creators of the Renaissance who replaced the value orientation that dominated in the Middle Ages by a new one. The Renaissance creators concentrate in themselves a part of the sense that used to belong only to God’s creation. Human activity stops being devoted only to God and becomes free creative work, while a man is transformed from a servant to a creator.

Considering the world as the nature, a man transfers this world into himself. Understanding himself as a personality he makes
himself the master of his own existence and constructs it by himself. There appears an orientation that differs from the Christian one and which determines the further development of culture.

In such a way, at the beginning of the New Age several lines are formed reflecting the difference in the sense of life. The first one is the traditionally Christian line with vertical spatial direction. For a person of traditional Christian culture even in the 16th century the sense of individual existence is the creator for whom he is ready to sacrifice his life. The second line is the line of a Man-the-Creator for whom the sense of life lies in his creative work.

However the Renaissance and the beginning of the New Age form one more line—the third one the number of adherents to which is small at first. This is the line of those who doubt the divine sense of life but who are at the same time incapable of determining this sense on their own. This line is characterized by the absence of explicit sense of life and the necessity to look for it on an individual basis. If in the 15-17th centuries this line is almost invisible, by the 19-20th centuries it acquired its shape to such an extent that it got its philosophical embodiment in the works of such thinkers as S. Kierkegaard, F. Nietzsche and many others. S. Kierkegaard appears as the savior of those who are unable to guess the direction of the search and the number of whom is huge. Suggesting the road that each person has to cover independently Kierkegaard brings a person back to the origins of the Christian sense of life.

The successes of the science and the position of geniuses introduced to the society the idea of the possibility of individual sense of life and the ability of a person to reach it on his own. It was several centuries later when an attempt of subjective search for the sense of life had acquired a mass character that the man realized all the danger arising from the freedom of identity formation.

The process of identity formation as a search for the sense of life turned out to be quite complicated. The freedom of personal activity leads to the situation when a person loses the objective bearings that he used to have in the previous world and starts feeling forlorn and fearful, his fear being different from the fear of people in Middle Ages. The fear of the Middle Ages man was connected with being aware of the contradiction between the finite world and body and the aspiration of the soul to return to its transcendental motherland and the impossibility to get a guarantee of return and to acquire peace in the material world. The fear of the man of the New Age appears from the realization that he has no heavenly Motherland giving a sense to his earthly existence. The fear is increased by doubting the possibility to find the sense of life in the real world.

In the 16-17th century philosophy we can see an attempt to separate the existing lines of the search for the sense of life and the supreme value. The impulse is given by the Renaissance in the form of the emerging doubt regarding linear truth which manifested itself in F. Bacon’s theory of two types of truth: human and divine and in R. Descartes’s emphasis on the role of doubt. In fact, we can see here the formation of the position which in the context of philosophy acquires its final form in the works by Hegel who united belief and knowledge in the absolute idea. The principle of opposites loses its importance and the opposites can be reconciled in the supreme unity of thought.

The acknowledgment of the dominance of the absolute idea makes it natural for a man to get integrated in the pattern of the movement of thought and to refuse from personal freedom obeying the programme.

Influenced by the development of science and its achievements, the majority having no explicit personal sense of life became more and more convinced through-
out the New Age that the sense of existence is the search for the truth that is revealed in the process of cognition.

The development of the educational system and mass enlightenment are understood as a prerequisite for that. However reason discovers objective laws and the man understands that he, who has learned so much and continues to learn, cannot defy these laws because there is no escape. As stated above, the absolutization of reason got its maximum expression in Hegel’s philosophy¹, who thoroughly developed Heraclites’ idea of logos calling it the absolute idea and showing in his philosophy the necessary process of its development. Everything is predetermined by the progress of this objective reason and the development of the man and the mankind is a logical and historical necessity. S. Kierkegaard was the first to realize the consequences of Hegel’s philosophy, the ideas of which are spread in the European society much wider than can be assumed.

In fact the idea that the world is reason (idea), that reason governs the world, that reason is the road to the truth and the truth itself – these notions are spread not only among those who are familiar with Hegel’s philosophy, but also among those who have a very vague idea of it. The epoch of total rationality set in together with complete trust of the man in scientific knowledge and scientific (objective) truth. S. Kierkegaard’s fundamental thought can be formulated in the following way: the biggest misery of a man is his complete trust in the reason, while the origin of philosophy is not reason, not astonishment, but despair.² That is why almost in all the works by Kierkegaard one and the same thought is repeated as a leitmotif: the task of philosophy is to break away from the dominance of reasonable thinking and to find enough courage to look for the truth in what is generally considered absurd. Where all the possibilities for reason end and we face the wall of the absolutely im-

possible is the beginning of philosophy and its task is to fight for the impossible.³

S. Kierkegaard presents the road of knowledge as the road to horror since it discovers the law in front of which the man is powerless and doomed. The more knowledge we get the more doomed we feel. In Kierkegaard’s opinion, a person convinced that knowledge is a force expected freedom and power, but got slavery which he cannot overcome with the force of cognition. This in principle is a wrong approach, since striving to increase knowledge the man faces a dead end. Kierkegaard asks a question: can this process be stopped? The mechanism of cognition, its logic took shape already in ancient times. At the very beginning of the history of cognition there is a spring which the mankind keeps winding until now both in the science and in the philosophy believing that this is the only way to reach the truth. Traditional Christianity (e.g. Tertullian) proclaimed a different road – the road of unconditional faith for which reason is only an obstacle, but not an assistant. Reason builds a road that a man has to follow obeying a certain algorithm. Reason unifies people and the world; it does not need the subject whose emotions distract reason from its work. However reason throws the man to the kingdom of the necessity that has no exit and gives no chances. This thought found its maximum expression in Hegel’s words “What is reasonable is actual and what is actual is reasonable». For Hegel freedom is the understanding of necessity.

Hegel’s position is fundamentally different from Kierkegaard’s position, for which the understanding of necessity cannot be freedom, since it only reveals the meaninglessness of the existence, doom, chaos, absence of freedom. The time has come to say “no” to the necessity and to find courage to refuse from reason and accept absurdity. This act reveals real freedom because now everything is possible for a man. This act finishes the
road that led a man to horror and that began together with the original sin when a man decided to “know” and when he lost freedom thinking that he got it.

Until the middle of the 19th century philosophers maintained that the mankind and a separate individual had their aim. This aim was either God or the absolute idea, development of the man or the mankind or peace. Starting with Schopenhauer’s “The World as Will and Representation” there appears a motive of the meaninglessness of life. A. Schopenhauer and later Nietzsche are pushed to this conclusion⁴ by a man’s striving for knowledge which has not limits and is in fact “omnivorous”. This striving shows the absence in a man of an internal and external guiding centre.

Freedom is too heavy a burden for a lonely soul deprived of God, since it opens the door to the unknown and the unknown is filled with fear. This period in philosophy is a period of the search for the sense of life and one of the authors who put a question: What is my task on the earth? What is the sense of my life? was S. Kierkegaard.

We always need other people being sure that surrounded by them we are protected and safe. We suffer if these people do not accept us and we are isolated.

This suffering comes from lack of understanding that only in isolation we can rely on ourselves and be responsible for ourselves and our choice, since we are free from the crowd and its pressure. Isolation gives an opportunity to feel personal responsibility. His task as a thinker Kierkegaard sees in returning freedom to people, in returning them to themselves, i.e. to the state which they have lost.

Taking upon himself this difficult mission Kierkegaard follows the road of Socrates who tried to wake in people the memories of eternal values. Only approaching eternal values people acquire freedom from finite things. Longing for freedom is a characteristic feature of a man. This is the longing for the world of eternal values, the longing for God. It forces a man to start a search, but a search without a direction can confuse a man even more and throw him into despair and fear. A man often tends to look for the sense of life in this world, but this sensual chaos entangles him and he quickly loses the thread of search and rushes in all directions as a coursed animal over hedge and ditch. This humiliating state cannot be the sense of life for a man.

An attempt to live for others trying to find a sense of life in it also cannot be a solution to the question of the sense of life. A person giving himself away to his folk, in Kierkegaard’s opinion, falls into separate functions – responsibilities, depriving himself of individual life. Sometimes these people dream about creating ideal life on the earth – one that is kind and fair. In Kierkegaard’s works the carrier of such unrealizable earthly aspirations appears as eternal pilgrim Agasherus who can never find place for himself. A man cannot get rid of the illusory desire to find the sense of life on the earth, he cannot find the real road leading to the sense of life. Stating this fact Kierkegaard undertakes a task to find this road, to find this sense: something to live for, something to die for. At the beginning Kierkegaard does not set himself a task to reveal the road showing the sense of life for everyone. He speaks about himself, presenting himself as the one who has got lost, who has despair, who is perishing without the sense of life. Only later Kierkegaard shares his discovery with everybody, inviting, or rather forcing them to follow the road he discovered and called the road of the sense of life.

Kierkegaard maintained that we acquire the sense of life and real freedom only when we find belief in God.⁵ Kierkegaard understands freedom in a paradoxical way: to be governed by the finite is slavery, to be governed by God is real freedom. In his under-
standing of freedom Kierkegaard returns to the traditional Christian idea: freedom is the freedom from the world created, from the finite, from the emotions and even thoughts caused by this world. So Kierkegaard’s freedom is breaking free “of”: of the feeling of total helplessness in the labyrinth of mundane activities. It means overcoming their futility, breaking free of illusions that, in Kierkegaard’s opinion, fill our everyday life. A person experiences real life only when he tries to realize the eternal in the perishable (temporary). The understanding of the precipice between the eternal and the temporary revealing the truth about the futility of earthly activity simultaneously reveals the truth about the huge distance between a man and God giving rise to fear. Only unlimited faith helps to cover this distance and to overcome the gap between doubt and certainty. In such a way, freedom as understood by Kierkegaard, is breaking free of the feeling of helplessness caused in the person by earthly things. At the highest stage of religious life, when a man refuses from all finite things and when god as the universal moral norm becomes more important for him than his own ego, he encounters a miracle of absurd faith thanks to which he leaves for the sphere of infinity. A man meets God and in this contact God is the absolute power and a man is the absolute obedience. Kierkegaard’s call for “remaining oneself” means to refuse from the world and to wait in fear for the voice of God, this means to reject the slavery of things in order to acquire inner freedom with which ego responds to the call of God. This act means stopping the time and passing to the eternity.

In Kierkegaard’s philosophy the earth hides God for a man. The man’s task is to break all the obstacles put in his way by personal and social life. These are not only material obstacles, even reason and intellect are man’s enemies since he is unable to synthesize the eternal and the ephemeral. For reason this task is absurd and paradoxical. At the same time faith rests on the paradoxical: credo, quia absurdum (believe in this because it is absurd - Latin). The triumph of absurdity reveals the existence of God and liberates a person from the earthly. Kierkegaard, in the same way as Tertullian, who is assumed to be the author of this aphorism, believes in the absurd since only faith can save the sense of the imperfect world. If a person does not preserve faith he will be filled with fear. That is why love for God is the salvation of my personality as a value.

Kierkegaard’s treatment of faith does not coincide with the functions of the church, since for him there can be only individual faith, subjective conviction. In Kierkegaard’s opinion only subjectivity can support Christianity, objectivity kills it. From Kierkegaard’s point of view objectivity kills not only religion, but also philosophy, proclaiming objective truth as its aim, as it is done by Hegel. Existence is a living flow which continually creates an individual. The intellect can only fix the states, but it cannot grasp the continuity. That is why for Kierkegaard a person is the truth and the number of people equals the number of truths that are apprehended not by the intellect, but by the passion that cannot be wrong.

In this conviction Kierkegaard who so actively opposed Hegel is similar to him in that Hegel ascribes absolutely independent existence to the idea and Kierkegaard ascribes absolute independence to the existence of a person which is the only earthly reality. At the same time the independence of a man is related only to the earthly, where ego can choose everything and everybody, but not God. The life of ego does not depend on the society and in its turn does not exert any influence on the society. Thus, in Kierkegaard’s philosophy we do not meet the idea of social determinism. Kierkegaard’s philosophy shows an individual way
for my ego which suffers from “deadly illness of the soul” and which will destroy me if I don’t step on the bridge connecting and simultaneously separating me from God. Kierkegaard maintains that for changing his fate a person should not look for some external opportunities. The only opportunity to radically change the situation is the internal revolution of the spirit carrying the transformation of an isolated inimitable individual. The aim of such a transformation is a search for individual sense of life and only a person himself can be responsible for the result. For this purpose a person must create his ego, create it in order to sacrifice it to God, since the sense of life, according to Kierkegaard, is revealed to a person as the clarification of the only aim—reunion with God. This point in Kierkegaard’s philosophy is also paradoxical: a man is fighting for freedom in order to refuse from his newly acquired freedom in favour of submission to the Great Divinity. The process of struggle of an individual finishes at this point as well as his independence, since in the dialogue with God a man is a subordinated interlocutor.

Now a person cannot think about his ego, his interests, his truth. Now subjective cannot be true. All that a person was choosing and has chosen independently when creating his ego is a lie. Feeling his helplessness in front of the transcendental a person devotes his thoughts and feeling to the encounter with God, with the absolute power which he meets as the absolute obedience.

S. Kierkegaard gives only an individual, subjective direction for searching the sense of life. A. Schopenhauer, A. Toynbee and Z. Freud can be referred to an opposite school. In spite of all the differences in their views they proceed from the general understanding that the person does not choose his sense of life or its general idea, since it is already given to him by the nature or the culture surrounding him.

All Kierkegaard’s philosophy is based on a thought that something imposed from outside or originally given by the nature cannot occupy the central place in the soul of a man and make the sense of his existence. Real value can only be the one which is determined by the person himself who used his freedom as an opportunity for a choice. When choosing a person creates his ego, but this is not necessarily something noble and elevated, so the person is always unsatisfied with himself and is tormented by doubts. What is chosen by a man, what he determines as his sense of life, through what he perceives himself as a person depend on the subjective conviction in the truth. For some time a person can rely on it, but sooner or later he discovers the imperfection, relative character of the values of the society he is surrounded by and from which he assembles his ego.

Kierkegaard is convinced that new philosophy starts when rational philosophy speaks about total hopelessness and lapses into silence. Then the time comes for not reasonable, but unreasonable struggle for the possibility of the impossible. This struggle is existential philosophy that is looking for the truth not in the realm of reason with its limited possibilities, but in the realm of absurdity that has no boundaries. The new philosophy is based on passionate personal interest, because it is the salvation for a man giving to him an eternal sense of life.

New philosophy reveals the real freedom which is an opportunity. It is an opportunity of salvation where, according to our reason, there are no more opportunities. Kierkegaard is fully aware of the radical consequences of such a philosophy. Some of his pronouncements about his historical role if do not shock then at least can cause bewilderment of those who do not know the details of his works due to their provoking self-confidence as regards an outstanding mind destined and able to save mankind, but which is also destined to
aggravates the life of the mankind which is too serene.

Kierkegaard’s call for new philosophy is caused by the impossibility to find in the objective world the sense of life the loss of which is so painfully perceived by Europeans together with Kierkegaard.

Maybe today we do not understand the ideas of S. Kierkegaard, but the 21st century can be regarded as the century of paradoxical ideas. In spite of scientific achievements a man is less and less limited by earthly experience and the achievements of reason. Looking for freedom, values, sense of life, we more and more often resort to things beyond the sphere of science as to cultural values. In this connection an indicative position is taken by a well-known philosopher M. K. Mamardashvili who wrote the following in his article “Philosophy and Religion”: “Although the tasks of philosophizing normally exclude the religiousness of the consciousness and both philosophy and religion have one common point only after which they radically diverge... it lies in the postulate or assumption of some other life than the current everyday life”.

NOTES

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GYVENIMO PRASMĖS KLAUSIMAS. ISTORIJA IR DABARTIS

S ant rau k a


Renesanso laikotarpio ir Naujųjų amžių pradžioje susiformavo dar viena laikysena – tą, kurie abejoja dangišką gyvenimo prasme, bet drauge nesugeba pasiūlyti gyvenimo prasmės savito apibūdinimo. Šis aškios gyvenimo prasmės sampratos nebuvo ir būtų nebuvo jų išskoti individualiai apibūdina trečiąją nuostatą. 15–17 a. ji buvo beveik neregima, bet 19–20 a. išgavo pavaldą per filosofų – S. Kierkegaard’o, F. Nietzsche ir kitų – veikalus. S. Kierkegaard’as veikia kaip negebančių susirasti savo ieškotimų krypties gelbėtojas. O tokių žmonių buvo be galo daug. Pasiūlydamos kelią, kurį kiekvienas žmogus turi nepriklausomai nueiti, Kierkegaard’as sugražina Žmogų prie krikščioniškosios gyvenimo prasmės.

Mokslas sėkmė ir genialių žmonių nuostatos visuomenėi išteigė minčių apie individualios gyvenimo prasmės galimumą ir žmogaus gebėjimą pačiam ją pasiekti. Po kelių amžių subjektyvių gyvenimo prasmės paiešką bandymai išgavo masinį pobūdį ir žmogus suvokė pavoju, kylančį iš tapatybės formavimo laisvės.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: gyvenimo prasmė, krikščioniška gyvenimo prasmė, aškios gyvenimo prasmės suvokimas, S. Kierkegaard.

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