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A possible way of saving the human being from the pessimism of the Western philosophical thought

Abstract. Our paper analyses the solution offered by Mircea Eliade to the crisis in which Western philosophy of the twentieth century finds itself. Its fundamental themes: existence, being, nothing, death are set for the contemporary human being seen as an individuality bearing the burden of an irreversible historical time, and of a destiny shadowed by the terror of death. Eliade offers us an alternative way for understanding man, in the light of his religious behavior. Exploring the religious dimension of the human being without prejudices and "superiority" – this could be a possible way of saving ourselves from the pessimism in which Western philosophy installed the human being.

Mircea Eliade believes that the Western philosophy of the twentieth century finds itself in a great impasse. Its fundamental themes: existence, being, nothing, death are set for the contemporary human being seen as an individuality, bearing the burden of an irreversible historical time, and of a destiny shadowed by the terror of death.

This way, the contemporary individual, historicized and hyper-technicized, condemns itself to a sterile existence. Because he distanced from the natural and efficient springs of his thought, he doesn't have access anymore to a complete, multilateral existence.

If contemporary existentialism is experienced in an individual way, the mythical tradition valorizes it in the collective dimension, by integrating the individual into cosmicity. Man appeared in archaic times in an anthropo-cosmic image, and this way he represented himself as an existential being. This way he had the capacity to represent himself in his own way in time and space, and to experience in his own way life and death. Thus, the individual could not become a stranger to himself: "On the contrary, he affirmed his essence due to his possibility of drawing a correspondence between the different levels of existence."¹

The man of the primitive cultures, totally different than the modern one, had, in the rituals of initiation, the chance to experience death as a living experience, and thus to understand its meaning: the

possibility to accede to other ways of existence: “Opposed to our Western culture, which is characterised by the anxiety caused by Nothing and Death, the primitive cultures have other types of valorising these experiences, qualitatively superior”ⁱⁱ. Death causes them, too, anxiety. But this anxiety is not the one of the modern man: for the primitive man does not see death as an absolute ending (as nothing), but as a “way of passing through”, to other ways of existence. In Eliade’s opinion, anxiety is not a situation in which a human being can install and remain forever.

The anxiety of the modern individual resides in an imprecise fear, a crisis of knowledge and an existential limit. This anxiety of man is secretly relied to the conscience of his historicity, letting us see the real causes of it: the Death and the Nothing. But modern man thinks he has already explained himself death, by considering it rationally. So, there would be no reason that death could cause him this anxiety. He denies that this “existential disease” par excellence could be simply caused by death. Eliade sees the hidden resorts of this behaviour: whilst, in the archaic world, anxiety is caused by the fear of death and it is acknowledged and experienced as any other disease, in the Western culture the link between cause and effect is veiled by extreme theorising and conceptualising. The main cause of this so-theorized anxiety is the fact that, for the modern world, Death is deprived by its religious meaning and therefore assimilated with the Nothing; and before this Nothing, modern man is paralyzed.ⁱⁱⁱ

Since Death has become a concept, since human being itself has become a concept, the individual is not aware anymore of the real sense of his existence and of the gravity of this final act of his life. The Western thought preference for reason, concept, and history and the beloved action of theorising that defines it act as a veil between existence and the way the human being perceives it; in order to save himself, man must see them as fulfilling the role of *maya* – the cosmic illusion. Man must find in himself the power to overcome this condition. What Western thought has done can be undone: human condition must not be considered anymore as a purpose in itself; man must stay in this world, take part in History, with the necessary and sufficient condition of not according History anymore an absolute value.^{iv}

In *Myth and Reality*, Eliade describes the essential difference between the space experienced as profane and the space

experienced as sacred. Sacred space is homogenous in that a single meaning of the highest sort becomes the ground for the people's understanding of reality. The most important consequence of this is the actual experience of the fullness and richness of the space. On the contrary, the experience associated with the profane space is that of heterogeneity: "Here one moves about as if they were lost in a seeming infinite number of possibilities whose values vary without consistency. Kierkegaard calls this the essential condition of despair, and for Eliade it is the condition of the modern world"^v.

In the *Sacred and Profane*, Eliade gives a different perspective, exploiting the duality homogeneity/heterogeneity of the sacred and profane space: he explains that sacred space is heterogeneous, which means that certain places are special, and give an orientation to the person living in this world. By contrast, the profane space maintains homogeneity and relativity – as a consequence of this homogeneity. Geometry, that rules our way of thinking, teaches us that, in space (*the profane space*), all places are equal in value – which can be translated by: *have no value*: all spaces are identical to each other. "An experience in such a space is disorienting and indeed does not constitute a world at all since all spaces are neutral."^{vi} Here we have our modern human being without a world – how can this unfortunate person not abandon herself to anxiety and despair?

The same happens in the case of time: the profane time, being linear and continuous (as our modern algebra teaches us), does not privilege any of its moments – so, it gives no orientation possible for the human being. Here we have, once again, our unfortunate modern man with no point of reference in his life - a prisoner of modern thought (since, from Descartes till nowadays, these two mathematical disciplines give us the rules of understanding the space and time we live in).

Since the modern man is condemned to live an initial moment of birth and a final moment of death, and within these boundaries, to wander all his life having no privileged places or moments, no wonder he abandons himself to despair. No wonder he has the conscience of his meaningless existence. For this is all that Western science and philosophical thought – the main "gatekeepers" of the world we live in – allow him to experience, by postulating this "fabricated" world as the ultimate reality.

It all happens as in a perverse screenplay: Western thought creates modern man and gives him a “world” imposing him the “unique” tools for understanding his world, thus transforming him in the “object” of its reflection. What an interesting toy becomes this poor human being for the Western philosophical thought! And what an interesting playground has found philosophical thought: a world tailored by its own size and measured with the tools it invented!

Eliade offers us an alternative way for understanding man, in the light of his religious behavior. Exploring the religious dimension of the human being without prejudices and “superiority” – this could be a possible way of saving ourselves from the pessimism in which we installed ourselves thousands of years ago.

Eliade had done this. For him, the religious experience is, at the same time, the total crisis of existence and the exemplary solution to this crisis. As Douglas Allen says: “Eliade (...) endorses a view of cultural and philosophical creativity and renewal in which our encounter with essential symbolic and mythic structures is a catalyst allowing us to burst open our self-imposed cultural boundaries and experience in new ways of knowing, relating and being.”^{vii}

After all, and above all, Eliade teaches us a lesson: human being is not the one created by Western thought; human being has its own existence, different than the one prescribed by the Western thought, an existence in which man is not condemned to pessimism and anxiety in the view of his limits. These “boundaries of existence” can be overcome in reality – in a different reality than the one “imagined” by modern Western thought. Thus, if man is taught to think differently and to acknowledge the reality - that Western thought has “confiscated” him, replacing it with a “fabricated” reality ruled by Western science – there will be no reason for him to experience the meaningfulness of his existence. This is an optimistic lesson.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Petru Ursache, *Camera Sambô: introducere in opera lui Mircea Eliade*, Editura Coresi, Bucuresti, 1993, p. 68;

ⁱⁱ *Ibidem*, p. 95;

ⁱⁱⁱ According to Mircea Eliade, *Mituri, vise si mistere*, in vol. *Eseuri*, Editura Stiintifica, Bucuresti, 1991, p. 158;

^{iv} *Ibidem*, p. 162;

^v Allan W. Larsen, *The phenomenology of Mircea Eliade*, in Bryan Rennie (ed.), *Changing Religious Worlds. The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2001, p. 52;

^{vi} *Ibidem*, p. 53;

^{vii} Douglas Allen, *Mircea Eliade's View of the Study of Religion as the Basis for Cultural and Spiritual Renewal*, in Bryan Rennie (ed.), *Changing Religious Worlds. The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2001, p. 227.