Peter Wessel Zapffe

Peter Wessel Zapffe (December 18, 1899 – October 12, 1990) was a Norwegian metaphysician, author, lawyer and mountaineer. He is often noted for his philosophically pessimistic and fatalistic view of human existence[1]—his system of philosophy in line with the work of the earlier philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, by whom he was inspired—as well as his firm advocacy of antinatalism.[2] His thoughts regarding the error of human life are presented in the essay "The Last Messiah" (Norwegian: Den sidste Messias, 1933). This essay is a shorter version of his best-known work, the philosophical treatise On the Tragic (Om det tragiske, 1941).

1 Philosophy

Zapffe’s theory is that humans are born with an overdeveloped skill (understanding, self-knowledge) which does not fit into nature’s design. The human craving for justification on matters such as life and death cannot be satisfied, hence humanity has a need that nature cannot satisfy. The tragedy, following this theory, is that humans spend all their time trying not to be human. The human being, therefore, is a paradox.

In The Last Messiah Zapffe described four principal defense mechanisms that humankind uses to avoid facing this paradox:

- **Isolation** is “a fully arbitrary dismissal from consciousness of all disturbing and destructive thought and feeling”.[3]

- **Anchoring** is the “fixation of points within, or construction of walls around, the liquid fray of consciousness”. The anchoring mechanism provides individuals a value or an ideal that allows them to focus their attentions in a consistent manner. Zapffe also applied the anchoring principle to society, and stated “God, the Church, the State, morality, fate, the laws of life, the people, the future”[3] are all examples of collective primary anchoring firmaments.

- **Distraction** is when “one limits attention to the critical bounds by constantly enthralling it with impressions”. Distraction focuses all of one’s energy on a task or idea to prevent the mind from turning in on itself.

- **Sublimation** is the refocusing of energy away from negative outlets, toward positive ones. The individuals distance themselves and look at their existence from an aesthetic point of view (e.g., writers, poets, painters). Zapffe himself pointed out that his produced works were the product of sublimation.

Zapffe was a prolific mountaineer and took a very early interest in environmentalism. This form of nature conservationism sprung from the intent, not of protecting nature, but to avoid human culturalization of nature. He is the author of many humorous short stories about climbing and other adventures in nature.

2 Personal life


3 Works

- **Om det tragiske** (En: On the Tragic), Oslo, 1941 and 1983.


- **Indføring i litterær dramaturgi** (En: Introduction to Literary Dramaturgy), Oslo, 1961.


Collections of his shorter writings

Barske glæder og andre temaer fra et liv under åpen himmel (En: Rough Joys, and other themes from a life lived under the open sky), Oslo 1969.


 Hvordan jeg blev så flink og andre tekster (En: How I Became So Clever, and other texts), Oslo, 1986.

Other works


External links

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See also

- Antinatalism
- Arthur Schopenhauer
- Biosophy
- Emil Cioran
- Existential crisis
- Herman Tønnessen
- Nihilism
- Philosophical pessimism

Notes


[2] Zapffe remarked that children are brought into the world without consent or forethought:

In accordance with my conception of life, I have chosen not to bring children into the world. A coin is examined, and only after careful deliberation, given to a beggar, whereas a child is flung out into the cosmic brutality without hesitation. (To Be a Human Being (1989–90); the philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe in his 90th year (1990 documentary, Tromsø Norway: Original Film AS)).

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