Personalistic Bioethics and Human Corpse

Summary

The history of the humankind has always been a story of man's confrontation with passing or dying - and the material equivalent of the latter is a corpse. At different stages of the history the attitude towards the dead was expressed differently, some rituals were utilized, but basically and universally it was not an indifferent relation. The universality of the deadly passing, shared by every generation, nation and the human race, along with the peculiar complexity of the dead human body, caused the problem of what is left after death to be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Besides the substantial significance of the problem, it is also important that being engaged in the thanatological question forces oneself to conduct deeper auto reflection, to undertake not only an intellectual effort but, first of all, an emotional one to overcome the trauma connected with this dimension of human existence that is described as transience, contingency or finality. Furthermore, the life practice reveals how important it is to elaborate reflexive attitudes towards the bodies of the dead to make the undertaken actions deserving to be called worthy of a human – an object and a subject of such actions, even if he or she is dead.

One of the indicators of civilization and humanity is the way the dead are approached – both in the sense of their corpse and the memory of them. The lack of interest in the dead or care of them reveals an explicit crisis of culture and humanity. The treatment of the dead says a lot about the attitude of the living towards death and towards (their own) mortality first, but also towards other living members of the society. If there is a refusal of the respect to the dead, if a dead body is instrumentalized, the dying are at risk of being treated in the same way in the first place and subsequently are others, weaker members of the society. Moreover, the civilization that is not interested in their ancestors separates itself from the past and has no future. All those considerations caused the corpse, or more specifically – the actions undertaken towards the dead body, to become the object of the analysis in this book.

Taking up the question of the proper approach towards the human corpse appeared even more urgent and essential since it has been a marginal topic for the centuries and the breakthrough in the research on this issue dates back only to the last decades. The contemporary reflection on the corpse has to overcome not only marginalization of the topic of the dead body in the matter of the discussion, but also marginalization and technicalization of the corpse itself. The harbinger of such attitude is both pushing the dead body aside the “scenes of life” - to the
facilities of the funeral parlor, making the corpse an abstract phenomenon without any real reference in the never ending parade of the “media skeletons” and trivialization of passing away in computer games or virtual coverage. Adding that necrophobia – a fear of corpses – exists and is not a peculiar phenomenon and the corpse itself permanently remains the “greatest taboo” in the area of death, it is worth picking up such a research gauntlet dedicating the results to the modern man, possessed by the madness of activism; the man who lives as if no one dies anymore and who does not slow down the pace for a single moment, even when the close passes.

Recently, a new technical-pragmatic paradigm has been developed concerning the dead human body, which constitutes itself as a real “value” in the contemporary value system. Not without grounds the corpse is called „a treasure of the 21st century” and it means its variety of pragmatic utilization by science, research and industry. Human tissue, after processing, is of a considerable market price. Thus, it turns out that the new “value” of the corpse as the bare resource, economical or aesthetic – is far from the traditional symbolic, religious and emotional embedding of the respect towards the deceased.

To understand the contemporary approach towards the dead human body, it was necessary to reach miscellaneous attitudes towards the corpse, both in the human history and the history of the medicine because plenty of the old forms of handling the deceased find their repercussions in the attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes and valuing of the dead body to this day. The research of this field enables us to find with surprise that we have to do with unidirectional development of the attitudes by a specific scheme – from the religious-occult “darkness” of the ancient centuries to the enlightenment approach marked by the achievements of the medical knowledge. It seems that we deal far more with the peculiar coexistence of various grasps and points of view– often contradictory or excluding one another. In consequence, while discussing bioethical problems it is necessary to consider this fact, namely the cultural-historical factors that still function and irritate repeatedly, since the contemporary science has already clearly defined the phenomena and the social attitudes remain the reflection of the convictions from before ages.

The scientific milieus – Anglo-Saxon and German speaking ones – plainly notice the existing deficiency in the thought on the topic of the dead human body, which has been expressed in frequent taking up the problem of the approach towards the corpse and its status during the last two decades. Alike, the phenomenon of tabooing of the corpse and the social efforts to confront them as well as the sole attitude towards the human body after the death call not only for socio-psychological or historical-cultural reflection, but also for the ethical and theological-moral research. The pluralism of the behavior and valuing provokes the ethical analysis which in turn results in pluralistic intellectual models. Among the variety of the
intellectual streams, the task of the ethics is obviously not to prescribe the definite (the only proper) options of conduct, but to be of assistance in making individual choices and decisions for those who have to act responsibly.

The hereby account grew out of the conviction of the necessity to subject to the ethical reflection of the complex context of the references to the dead body – including the pluralistic approach towards the human corpse, the positive and negative intellectual schemes functioning in this area, as well as the active belief and magical mechanisms. The contemporary attitude towards the human corpse – not as much intuitive as conscious and reflexive one - constitutes the research subject of this study. Undoubtedly, we deal with the issue of the greatest degree of universality, since it is a common route of all human beings – the pathway to become a corpse, and before that, the path through incessant experiencing the death which takes away our dearest. Since it is really a universal question, various points of view and perspectives have been considered in the approach to the problem. Also with this regard, the personalistic bioethics perspective has been considered leading. Bringing the person to the center constitutes the unambiguous declaration considering the primary value and the fundamental reference point for all the findings – it is about the basic values for the person. In the light of the above, different approaches to the investigated question have been made, applying only the substantial limitation to the positions affirming the dignity of a human person, that is coming from the fundamental principle of a special position of a human in the hierarchy of living beings.

Analyzing and assessing the issues concerning the actions regarding the human corpse within the bioethics or the ethics of life, constitutes a well-considered effort. On the one hand, the analysis of the problem confirms that there is a surprisingly significant number of questions, problems and tasks which in an undisputed way belong to the bioethics and regard precisely the human corpse. Whereas, on the other hand, it is not about the “life of the research subject” alone, but about the actions concerning the (human) life, which shape the moral quality of the acting subject and concern the dead body.

The fact that the author is a theologian does not result in the dominance of the catholic perspective or in a priori favoring solutions determined by the certain world view. It is, however, about a dialog and a possibility to build up the ethical models that can serve in specific situation of making hard choices. At the basis of this approach there is a belief that the moral problems emerging in the contemporary approach towards the human corpse can be resolved using prudent arguments, resulting from the practical reason and not by the appeal to certain tradition. It does not mean, however, that one ignores or rejects the significance of the individual confessional or religious traditions in the pluralistic society. Hence – preserving the methodological openness to
the variety of ethical and legal options of the discussed problems – the substantial or normative syncretism was not applied and the author remained definitely a bioethicist of a catholic provenience, who exercises his right to present the own point of view.

In the reference literature one comes across more or less voluminous books discussing empirical experiences and cultural descriptions of the funeral rituals and the human corpse itself. There are, however, much less effort of normative reflection upon the proper attitude towards the body of dead man, which is a subject of this study. The endeavors to seize the problem relatively globally are even rarer. And the inaccuracy concerning the substantial range expressed with the term ‘relatively’ is intended, since a total and comprehensive elaboration of such a broad research subject is unfeasible.

The study, hence, constitutes a theoretical development of a multiple problem complex, focusing on the human corpse. Its multiplicity of threads caused the necessity to limit the essential range of the research to a few strictly specified areas. Ipso facto the remaining aspects of the question – merely indicated – still await undertaking, all the more because in the Polish literature the topic has not been sufficiently discovered and discussed.

The book has been divided into four chapters which can be described as follows: 1 – The status of human corpse; 2 – The burial; 3 – Medical utilization; 4 – The display of the corpse.

Chapter 1: Status of the human corpse. The answer to the question of the status of the human corpse has been phrased on the ontological, ethical, theological and legal as well as finally on the anthropological level, although we do not deal with – as it seems - a human any more. The awareness of the existing controversy and fundamental divergence in this field, induced me to confront the disputable points and beliefs with the method of approximations in order to determine the status of the corpse in the way sufficient for the research. Within the analysis of the status of the human corpse, the reference to the personal context, where the dead body remains and should be discussed, was still returning as a keynote. Since the dead body is a value of the circle of personalistic ones, every action towards the corpse calls for ethical legitimization and assessment. The corpse is not a “common thing” and even if ontologically such a classification is maintained, on the obligatory level it is required to be approached with respect. The legitimization of such an obligation is only possible if based on a proper anthropology or comprehending the position of the body in the whole of the living person that determines the ontological and ethical status of the corpse. As it turns out, only the integral anthropology – rejecting the dualistic approaches which antagonize the soul and the body – prevents the human corpse after death from the mean treatment. The norm or the attitude of
pietism, which regulates the proper way of approaching the dead body achieved many justifications and interpretations, both ethical and legal.

Chapter 2: The last offices towards the dead body. The key arranging the further stages of the research process is the burial of the human corpse. Regardless of the multiplicity of the detailed duties associated with pietism, the demand of a decent burial remains the first universal and fundamental obligation that is connected with a proper ethical attitude. Nowadays, they speak about the epoch transformations in the funeral culture or about the challenge for the personalism coded in the new burial trends. That is why the attitudes, forms and new directions within the burying were analyzed. A particular attention has been paid to the motivational, argumentation and interpretative domains – besides the very transformation of the burials - since only this perspective enables an insight on what really takes place in the funeral culture and to evaluate the truth of the thesis of the ongoing “revolution”.

Chapter 3: The human corps in the medicine. This constitutes the most comprehensive set of problems in the book. Pointing the historic roots of the contemporary problems and practices allowed us to understand the contemporary way of reasoning and acting. Disproportionate dimensions of this chapter result from the substantial multitude of issues demanding to be researched and valued. The undertaken, significant medical questions are as follows: the historical data concerning the position of the corpse in discovering the human body and in the therapy; presentation of the currently practiced ways of post-mortem examinations along with their meaning and with giving a consideration to the controversy that arose around the autopsy; the issue of social education in the matters of medical utilization of the dead body; a technical and ethical question of obtaining the corpse for medical purposes; particular research with engagement of the corpse in prevention of illnesses and in optimization of safety in the road traffic (crash-tests), as well as in the transplantation medicine; the analysis of the discussion concerning the didactic necessity of the dead body and farewell of the corpse that served for medical science and good of the ill. The mentioned medical situations and the ways of utilization of the human body after death seem to be often quite different. Yet, if one realizes that among all those cases it comes to total disintegration or partial violation of the corporal integrity of the corpse, the whole problem turns out to be homogeneous – despite the differences.

Chapter 4: The display of the dead body. On the opposite pole in relation to the funeral practice there is the omission of the services, precisely: an exchange of the burial for a more or less durable exposition of the dead body. As this type of trends and practice develops spontaneously nowadays, an attempt has been made to characterize them and to discover the mechanisms that drive them, as well as to evaluate them. The analysis of the historic
phenomenon of the anatomic theaters, which has been currently “raised from the dead” as public autopsies, constitutes the starting point. The whole buried bodies or their parts were displayed to the public in the form of relics (objects of cult) or as corpses whose decay was in particular cases inhibited (mummies), therefore those forms of exhibiting have also been analyzed. The dead body processed chemically (plastination) may remain indestructible for years, whereas instead of the burial it becomes the exposition object. The actions taken on the corpse in such cases have been discussed technically and ethically. For a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon of contemporary exhibitions of the corpse, one of them (“Körperwelten”) has been analyzed more vividly focusing on the raised reasoning.

A broad spectrum of ethical problems, concerns and questions not completely thought out, that appeared in the book, constitute a difficult legacy of the endeavors situating the human corps centrally. The research revealed that the problem rises wherever the instrumentalization or/and reification of the corpse threatens the material remains of a person. If it is true that a universal demand for pietism focuses on – unquestioned for ages – a duty to bury a dead body with the respect, then all attempts to withdraw this primary moral pledge demand legitimization. It also turned out that not every “use made of the corpse” responds to such sanctioning and certain actions violate directly the “human worthy” approach to the dead body. The existence of such procedures ought to be noticed with a concern and worry, since – as history lectures – not every revolution has a human face, and the “funeral revolution” that we watch seems to cruise from the very assumption towards questioning the groundwork of dignity of treatment of the human body and a person through the latter. The personalistic sensitivity urges not only to demand valuating various actions on the human corpse and watchfulness when new phenomena emerge but also the consequent educational – formative work with society, whose quality is to be recognized by the attitude towards the deceased and their dead bodies.

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