

SUICIDE AS A TOPIC OF THE ETHICAL THEORIES IN HUNGARIAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY UNDER
CONDITIONS OF THE POST-WAR MORAL CRISIS AFTER THE WWI

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However, the problem of suicide is a continuous problem of the ethical theories from the beginning of the history of the moral philosophy; it has usually just a secondary significance as an application of a moral teaching in marginal occasions. The extreme moral case of suicide can have a central position in a discourse in the times of moral and cultural crises, connected to the turning points of the theories, which interpret this situation. The texts of moral philosophy analysed below were written in 1921, in a typical situation of the post-war moral crisis. Experiences of the WWI have shocked the society, and provoked the common concepts of the human body and death. Killed humans and destroyed bodies have become a visible mass phenomenon for a significant number of people in forms never seen before: soldiers died of gas-attack, mass of veterans with amputated legs and hands, departments of psychiatry fulfilled with soldiers suffering of new kinds of “neuroses of the frontiers.” In the same time, at least in the Hungarian case, there was a tension in the intellectual life, concerning the influence of the different answers for the moral crisis offered in the same time by the anthropologies of the Positivism and the different tendencies of Neo-Idealisms. Significant figures of the Hungarian intellectual life have alienated from their ideals before the war that is the irrational tendencies of the *fin de siècle* “philosophies of life”, accused of the preparation for the war-hysteria of the European societies.¹ In this situation, under circumstances of the post-war trauma and a special turning point of the philosophical life the inauguration lecture of a correspondent member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Jenő Posch, focussed on the problem of the suicide was published on the pages of the most significant Hungarian literary periodical, entitled *Nyugat (West)*; and has provoked a vivid debate. Suicide is not a usual topic for an academic inauguration lecture, and a literary periodical is not a usual forum for an academic paper; circumstances of publication mirrors the actuality of the question in the Hungarian thought of this time.

The Intellectual Atmosphere

¹ A famous example of this intellectual trend is an essay of a significant figure of the Hungarian literature in the interwar period, Mihály Babits (1883–1941), entitled *A Dangerous Worldview* (Babits 1917). By the opinions of Babits, the anti-intellectual, irrational climate of the philosophies of the previous century has prepared the European thought for the war-hysteria.

Nyugat (1908–1942) was the most influential centre of the Hungarian intellectual life for three generations; its chief editor was in the period of the debate *Mihály Babits*. Its spirit was highly sensitive for the post-war social, political and cultural trauma, as it is mirrored both on the pages of the periodical, and in the individual works of its main contributors in this time. It is known that it was one of the few of the significant, consequently pacifist periodicals on the Hungarian scene in the years of the war-hysteria. However, the shadow of the war is visible everywhere in the analysed texts; direct references to the war-facts are under a special psycho-social inhibition. For example, there is an important sub-topic, the military self-sacrifice as a marginal case between an heroic and altruistic act and the suicide in its strict meaning. Instances of this important phenomenon come from the antiquity and from the national legendary of the Turkish wars, avoiding the war ended three years before. In the same time, the texts were penetrated by the indirect war-experiences, partly unconsciously. Suicide as the last remedy in the common thinking of this age appears in the metaphor of the “iron reserve,” the last conserved meat in the bottom of the soldier’s bag, which will be unmasked as an empty tin-box (*The Suicide from the point of View of the Psychology, and Ethics*; Posch 1921, 391).² A man after the amputation of his both legs in narcosis, and his experiences about his own body appear as a model of the painless suicide (*On Suicide*; Füst 1921, 468–469), and so on. Editors of the periodical have published a short cut selection of the discussion on the inauguration lecture. The only published opponent was *Milán Füst* (1888–1967), a significant contributor of the periodical. Füst’s style and intellectual horizon was not far from the “philosophies of life,” and in his articles he makes direct references to them. The main feature of his *œuvre* is a deep, precise psychical analysis of his characters, including the “dark side” of the psyche; and his personality was not free from psychical problems. In the time of the debate was prepared his book of collected poems entitled *Chorus of the Death*, published in the end of the same year, and several examples of this *poetical thanatology* were published in the days of the debate on the pages of the same periodical, with the same entitlement (Füst 1921a, 1921b).

A Protagonist of the Debate on Suicide: Jenő Posch

² Posch for the “iron reserve” used here the German expression “eiserner Vorrat” within the Hungarian text, referring to the vocabulary of the Austro-Hungarian army.

The initiator of the debate on suicide, *Jenő* (in his publications in German: *Eugen*) *Posch* (1859–1923) had a special position in the Hungarian philosophical life. In his lifetime the main trend of the academic life was a turn from the ideas of Positivism to the systems of Neo-Idealism, with an axiology and moral questions in its focus. The development of the thought of Posch has followed a reciprocal way: in the early publications he has focussed on the problem of time in a Kantian conceptual framework (*A Theory of Time*; Posch 1896–1897), than he later has developed a new theory of human being, rooted in Positivist ideas, and later recognised as the ancestor of the philosophical behaviourism (see McGuigan 1978). This unique way of the development of his thinking has been connected with scandals: the discussion on his early main work on the concept of time has touched the political life, several Parliamentary interpellations and Ministerial interventions have happened in his case, and, in the end he officially declared his departure from the Catholic Church because of the differences of the concept of time in his own philosophy, and the official Catholic opinions. He has never had a position in the universities. This entrance into the academic life and his distance from the university sphere has established the legend of an eccentric, solitary author in the margin of the intellectual life of his epoch. Actually he was always in the centre of cultural and academic life; his masters were central figures of the Hungarian philosophy; his articles were published on the pages of the best Hungarian academic and cultural periodicals of his epoch. Six years after the publication of his proto-behaviourist masterpiece (*Our Psychological Phenomena and Their Nature: A Plan for a Realist Psychology*; Posch 1915),³ in 1921, he has achieved the top of his academic career, the correspondent membership of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, after the vice-presidency of the Hungarian Philosophical Society in a time when his thought was an odd one out between the Neo-Idealist philosophies of his contemporaries, connected to conservative political ideas and circles. He has chosen the topic of the suicide as a psychical and ethical problem for his inauguration lecture in the Academy. This question has an actuality under conditions of the post-war moral crisis, and has fitted to his program after his masterpiece; what was a formulation of the *moral consequences* of his anthropology in details, from the question of the animal rights to the problem of suicide. Let see the main concept of his anthropology before the detailed analyses of his opinions on suicide.

³ For a short epitome of the ideas of his main work in German see Posch 1923. Posch's main work has appeared in the context of the intellectual war crisis. In a review on his book, published on the pages of *Nyugat* (Schöpflin 1915), it was emphasised that he is "the symbol of the rational character of scientists" in the context of the irrationality of the war. (It is symbolic that there is a picture of a wounded soldier on the neighbouring page of the book-review.)

Theoretical Background: An Anti-Metaphysical cleaning of the language

The main idea of his masterpiece is a systematic anti-metaphysical cleaning of the vocabulary of the philosophy of mind. In this critique of the language the terms of ‘soul’ and ‘mind’ are in the centre of his target. Posch defines his position amongst the recent philosophical systems by his radical linguistic analysis of the obscure scholar and common words for the human personality. By the example of his anti-metaphysical ancestor, Karl Vogt, to suppose the existence of a pre-existent soul is similar to a hypothetical theory of the ‘spirit of kidneys.’ Urine is a product of kidneys, and we can offer an explanation of the production of it based on physiology of kidneys, without any supposed ‘spirit of kidneys.’ Thought is a product of human brains, and we can offer an explanation of the production of it based on physiology of brain, without any supposed ‘spirit of brain,’ (=soul or mind. By Vogt’s argumentation, both the ‘spirit of kidneys,’ and ‘spirit of brain (= soul, or mind) are useless hypotheses. By the opinions of Posch, Vogt’s idea is not consequent, because of the usage of a separate entity called ‘thought.’ By him, we should use a new vocabulary, in which the word ‘soul’ can appear just as *cholera* in modern medicine. We know today that this illness is not caused by the black bile (*cholē*), and we use the word as a requisite of the school of Hippocrates. Similarly, we know that there is no entity called ‘soul,’ or ‘psyche’ as a cause of psychical phenomena, and we use the words ‘psychology,’ etc. just as requisites of old theories. Posch’s thought is close to a today radical form of the theory of ‘embodied mind,’ or ‘thinking bodies’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1999); by him the word ‘thought’ refers just several actual or potential body-motions, without any qualitative differences from other motions. His theory, called *realism*, in his main work was focussed on the epistemology and anthropology, without a formulation of the moral consequences. Hungarian fictions of the war-trauma, influenced by him, and written in the circle of the above-mentioned periodical, is full of the questions of human identity, connected to the body-mind problem. They are stories about the *escape of the bodies from the prison of the soul (à la Foucault)*; a falsification of the identity in our bodiless mind, only.⁴

An Application of Posch’s thought to the Phenomenon of the Suicide

⁴ For an example of this genre in German translation see the novel of Frigyes Karinthy (Karinthy).

In the inauguration lecture he directly applies his philosophical anthropology for the special topic of suicide, with its consequences for the moral philosophy. The actuality of this topic in the Hungarian intellectual atmosphere of his epoch is clear by his initial words. Founder of the Hungarian Academy and its headquarters, where the lecture has been read, has died of a ‘successful’ suicide.⁵ By Posch, probably all the members of the audience – that is the Hungarian scientific élite – and the reader himself had a suicidal idea, at least, one time in their lives.

After this emotional introduction, Posch offers an overview of the classical opinions on the suicide of the history of the ethics (Stoics, Hume, Kant, Schopenhauer; and the Church Fathers, especially Augustine); then he refers two important books on the suicide of the *fin de siècle*, that of Durkheim (1897), and Masaryk (1881). (The last one had a serious authority in Central Europe in this problem for several decades, not as a politician, but as a scientist.) A consequence of these new, sociological approaches for him was an evaluation of the phenomenon of the suicide is a part of the negative side of the modernity, which need a social solution. Posch has agreed with these approaches, especially with Masaryk’s diagnose what describes the suicide as a societal phenomenon, as a consequence of the *half-educated cultural level of the large mass*, between the prohibition of the suicide by the traditional morals, and a conscious, well-established resistance against the suicide as the last remedy. Posch, based on the above-mentioned sources, observes that in the present (1921) status of the European civilisation, suicide is an ambivalent cultural phenomenon; on the one hand, by the common opinion, it is the last remedy of the human fate, and a horrible idea and scandalous moral act, on the other. However, by him, the suicide is “an epidemic, which rages in the last centuries” (Posch 1921, 167); and he corrects Masaryk’s old statistic data about the small number of the Hungarian self-murderers (Posch 1921, 292); he does not discuss the suicide from a sociological, empirical, but from a theoretical point of view. His lecture’s aim is to show an analysis of the false thinking of humans with suicidal ideas, and to offer a remedy against the suicide by the demonstration of the logical absurdity of every possible suicidal idea. By the chain of the ideas of his lecture, the deepest root of the suicidal ideas is a kind of the requisite of the faith of soul, or, by a pejorative expression, ‘the faith of ghosts.’ This culturally embedded requisite of the human thinking is the main obstacle of the complete understanding of the nature of our death, a transition from *persona* to *res*. The simplest case is the person who thinks about his death just a radical amputation of the whole body from the

⁵ Count István Széchenyi (1791–1860).

soul; “who imagines that after his or her death [...], he or she will levitate in the space [...], and for him or her the fact of suicide [...] will be the equivalent with the amputation of his or her legs in a critical case” (Posch 1921, 172). By his thought there are cases when the amputation of the legs is better for the other parts of body; and there are cases when the amputation of the body is better for the remained part of the personality, called *soul*. By Posch, the recognition of the transition from *persona* to *res* is the only remedy for seeing the absurdity of these ideas. In his system there is no entity after death who could evaluate the qualities of the new circumstances, in comparison with the state of affairs before the suicide. All the forms of the suicidal ideas calculate with this non-existing entity; a human with suicidal ideas always projects her or his present personality into an imagined future, after her or his successful suicide, and this projected pseudo-ego can enjoy the lack of the sufferings of the present, which is a better condition – in the imagination of the person who plans a suicide. By the opinions of Posch, understanding of the absurdity of this projection of our today *persona* to the tomorrow *res* of our cadavers is a better remedy against the suicidal thought than any traditional religious maxima of morals, based on the prohibition: “do not destroy, which was not created by you.” By Posch, the ‘faith of the soul,’ which has been deeply penetrated in our culture, makes a double problem, concerning the suicide. At first, it tempt the believers to make suicide with the hope of the everlasting life, later this culturally embedded ‘last remedy’ must be prohibited by mere moral dogmas in the same culture. He recommend a more radical, and consequent solution that is the rejection of the ‘faith of the soul,’ and basing the concept of ‘person’ on his *realist philosophy*.

Epilogue: The Controversy of Milán Füst and Jenő Posch

Milán Füst in his reaction (Füst 1921) has used the vocabulary of the “philosophies of life,” and that of the “existential philosophy” transformed into a poetical essay. He requires the free choice of the individuals about their own death in extreme situations, and argues for the grounds of the subjective evaluation of the reality, saying that every world-view is a kind of *illusion*, without any privileged point of the objective observation. Füst’s notes about the illogical nature of the reality precisely mark his horizon on the scene of the *fin de siècle* irrational philosophies.

Posch in his answer has recovered the hidden philosophical roots of the thinking of his opponent: „the nowadays flourishing neo-Hegelianism [...] and its excellent representative, Bergson [...] replace the objective causes by sentimental emphases, [...] similarly to Milán

Füst” (*On the Suicide*; Posch 1921a, 642). It is clear that by his opinion the irrational tendencies and subjectivity of the discussion paper puts his opponent into the group of the people who are ‘faithful of ghosts.’ These features of the point of view of Füst offer a possibility for projecting the person of the present into the cadaver of the future in the mind of a person with suicidal ideas.

Füst in his last article (*Afterword for the Question of the Suicide*; Füst 1921c) seems to be recognised at least the requirement of an objective evaluation of the circumstances of the person who plans a suicide, but he does not give up the right for suicide in extreme cases. It is clear that they are thinking within the conceptual networks of incommensurable philosophical systems. By the “philosophies of life” of Füst, the supreme human right is a decision about the own life, including the suicide, by the anthropology of the “realist philosophy” of Posch the free decision-making is an illusion under conditions when at the crucial point the required thinking person is not exist, and the cadaver in the same place cannot substitute this person.

It is interesting to see that their only common term is the *euthanasia*, based on ideas of a recognised German medical writer of their age, Hermann Nothnagel (1841–1905).⁶ This word was typed by them always with Greek letters, as an antique scholar philosophical expression for the “good death.” In the following years of the twenties, after the death of Posch, the question of the suicide seems to be dissolved in the problem of the *euthanasia*, in a jurisprudential context. (For characteristic studies with references to Posch see the writings of Sándor Kéthely: *Suicide and Euthanasia: Study of Criminal-Politics*; Kéthely 1924); *Famous Suicides*; Kéthely 1927.)*

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⁶ A new edition of Nothnagel’s widespread work on death was published in the year of the debate (Nothnagel, 1921). His lecture on the same topic has several Hungarian editions (Nothnagel 1905, 1914, 1915).

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