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ILLNESS AS A HUMAN POSSIBILITY IN THE KNOWLEDGE BASED SOCIETY

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Review of Király V. István, *A betegség - az élő létlehetősége / Illness - A Possibility of the Living Being*, (Pozsony: Kalligram), 2011.

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As one could easily guess from its suggestive subtitle, Király V. István's book entitled, *A betegség - az élő létlehetősége / Illness - A Possibility of the Living Being*, issued in 2011 at Kalligram Publishing House, Pozsony and written in Hungarian, but also comprising an unusually detailed and comprehensive summary in English represents a prolegomena to the philosophy of human illness.<sup>1</sup> The purpose set out by the author is to offer an explanation of the illness as a possibility of the human being, or, even more precisely, as an existential possibility. The author does not understand illness as something that is external to the human life or of life itself, but as a possibility which is intrinsic to it, in that it cannot be avoided or rejected, but it can only be integrated, in some manner and to a certain extent, in the wholeness of human possibilities. Both illness and health are, thus, mainly, possibilities of the living human being. Consequently, both illness and health should be philosophically treated by the means of this concept. Illness is therefore preliminary defined as a "possibility of living being, not only of human life, but of life itself".

In the first chapter of the English summary of the book, the author presents his method, which is one close to the existential method, obviously influenced by Heidegger's fundamental ontology from the period when he was writing *Sein und Zeit*. Király V. István makes use of several concepts derived from the fundamental ontology, such as possibility, being-here, living being, modes of being and finitude in order to apply an existential method to the phenomenon of illness.

Assuming as a starting point the idea that the understanding of illness has historically eschewed real philosophical inquiry and that one of the main historical distortions induced to the philosophical analysis of illness was – and still remains – its discussion through the single perspective of the medical approach, one of the remarkable contributions of this book consists in drawing out the human, or rather existential implications of illness. A completion of our understanding of illness becomes more and more necessary, for illness is still conceived nowadays through the limitative looking glasses of medicine. The limitative paradigm which approaches the phenomenon of illness mainly in connection with healing, prevention, alleviation and study of the diseases and not with the way in which the living human being authentically relates to it is unable to seize the proper, that is, according to the author, the existential meaning of the phenomenon of illness. Referring to illness only through this medical perspective seems to completely blur the essence of illness; thus, the illness conceived as a possibility, as an existential mode of the human living being, i.e., of the being-here, or if one chooses to use Heidegger's original terms, of the *Dasein*, becomes totally opaque to the view of the philosopher.

Within this book, along and between the lines one discovers the essay to think about illness as one of the living being's modes of being, or, more

precisely as an existential, presupposes an entire ontology, a kind of fundamental ontology which is similar to the one carried out by Martin Heidegger. According to this type of ontology, the human living being is conceived as essentially determined by its own possibilities and, moreover, by the possibilities which are directly related to its finite character.

Being revealed and described by the author in a similar manner with the way death is conceived in *Sein und Zeit*, illness is evidently one of these existential possibilities.

The living being can neither escape illness, nor can it escape death. As illness resembles death and as it reminds us of death and of the possibility of the end of existence as being-here, illness is, or at least should become important as a philosophical theme.

The next chapter of Király V. István's book is dedicated to the Christian perspective of conceiving illness as related to the original sin and, therefore, as something external to the living human being. With respect to illness and healing, Christianity has marked a break with an entire European tradition based on the initial Greek and Jewish beliefs and ways of thinking. If the Greek and Jewish traditions had determined that direct healing of the illness was possible only through medical interventions and approach, Christianity, on the other hand, established that illness was a consequence of the original sin, and therefore, healing was no longer directly possible without divine intervention.

Thus, the Christian conception is criticized firstly because according to it illness cannot be assumed as a possibility intrinsic to the human being and, secondly, because this conception has also radically changed the way medicine was conceived.

If the first chapter of the book only introduced and outlined the meaning of the concept of possibility for explaining illness, the third chapter aims at explaining it further and deeper, by appealing to the Aristotelian notion of dynamis. Besides this notion, several key concepts present in Aristotle's metaphysics such as *ousia*, *energeia*, *entelecheia*, *physis* are taken as a means for better understanding the concept of illness and that of health.

As a possibility, illness is a force which can threat or endanger the living being. Therefore, as a limitative life experience, it announces, presets and, in a way, shapes the possibility of death. Illness is more than the simple absence of health, as the latter is also more than the simple steresis (lack) of illness. The author refers to a particular understanding of the Aristotelian term steresis as he conceives illness in itself, as a possibility, and not just a simple absence. For the author, the absence i.e., the steresis does not mean that illness represents only the total absence of health, but rather it stands for a possible actualization of illness. That means that illness is not the absence of the possibility of an actualization of health, but it is rather an actualization of the possibility of illness itself.

Király V. István conceives health and illness as reciprocal possibilities, in the sense that the *energeia* of health contains the *dynamis*, the possibility of illness and the other way round.

Illness and health are therefore viewed not as states of being alive, but as modes of being alive, that relate to the whole of possibilities of the human beings as beings-here. Conceiving illness in its elementary sense, as the possibility of a certain absence (or as the absence of the health) refers to what the author calls a deficiency of the wholeness of the human being's possibilities. This deficiency means, in fact, a narrowing of the possibilities of the living being. Thus, illness, as a mode of being, affects the framework of the existential possibilities of the living being as being-here, it affects its ability to live a normal life, such as it is defined by the concept of health. In this particular sense, illness reveals the absence of health, but in an indirect manner.

Yet, the actualization of illness can also create other possibilities. The impact of illness on a human being is related to that of the meaning of its existence as a living being in the world: it represents the manifestation of its finitude. Moreover, the actuality of illness raises, within the human being, the question of its own meaning and purpose as a being-here, as a *Dasein*. In this respect, illness reveals something ultimate about the human being i.e., its relation with its own end. Through illness, the human being is forced to assume its own finite character.

Another important aspect which is underlined by the author is the historical dimension of illnesses. This historical dimension is set forth by people following different patterns of understanding which change over time, according to the progress of medicine or according to religious belief and dogma. Therefore, the historical dimension of illness changes through the course of time as different conceptions and beliefs appear and disappear along the ages. Such a conception is exemplified by the author when mentioning the relation of illness with the Christian idea of the original sin. Even though a historical account of the way illness excluded - and still does - people from the public sphere is overleapt throughout the book, thereby excluding a series of social as well as personal possibilities of the human being, the author lays stress on the phenomenological possibilities brought about by the condition of illness.

From the same phenomenological point of view it becomes equally important that illness also carries a public dimension which resides in the fact that it constrains the ill person into a sphere of other persons who are the only ones in the position of identifying her/his disease, of healing him or of offering palliative care. Hence, if it is clear that illness reveals the living-being's introspective dimension, orienting the human being towards self-examination and self communion, it also seems to lead one to assume the status of a patient who is treated by others, who, at their turn, have their specific modes of relating with illness as a possibility, but also and more specifically as an actuality. The ill person enters a public sphere

in which the others view disease or physical affection as something that has to be determined and then cured.

In the last chapter, illness is discussed in relation to freedom, which, at its turn, is not understood as a state, but as the possibility of questioning. Illness challenges human freedom, and yet, is also conditioned by human freedom. The task of the philosopher is to analyze the relation between illness and freedom as well as the ontological-existential status of illness.

As the ontological-existential perspective had already proved resourceful for answering difficult philosophical questions such as the status of temporality, of the finitude of the human being, Király V. István's book entitled *A betegség - az élő létlehetősége / Illness - A Possibility of the Living Being* raises, in its entirety, the question of illness from the same affluent and far-reaching point of view.

#### Notes:

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