

*Maxim Goryunov*

DEATH FROM NATURAL CAUSES  
AND CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE:  
WHERE IS HAPPINESS?

In 1903 in Paris a piece by the future Nobel laureate in medicine Ilya Mechnikov was published about death from natural causes. He maintained that he had discovered a way to solve humanity's chief philosophical issues through sexual freedom, diet, hygiene and surgical extraction of superfluous internal organs. Mechnikov believed that his method would shield humanity from suffering, and offer a true meaning to life: the preparation for exalted pleasure in death by natural causes. In Russia, the publication raised quite a mayhem. Mechnikov was accused of gross materialism and abuse of biology exploited to solve challenging social, political and psychological issues. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Mechnikov's materialism became part of the Communist arsenal of arguments against religion. Today, however, his piece is nearly forgotten in Russia. The publication hasn't seen new editions for decades. Academic studies dedicated to Mechnikov philosophy are scarce and largely descriptive.

Despite its eccentric nature, Mechnikov's approach to human salvation isn't altogether novel. Similar ideas had been voiced before. This article compares Mechnikov's ideas on death and the meaning of human life with those of Kant. The vantage point the two share is a perception that human beings are imperfect creatures. Yet they reach opposite conclusions and offer opposite recommendations.

## Disharmony

Mechnikov begins with a division of living things into the harmonious and disharmonious.<sup>1</sup> Harmonious living creatures are those well-suited to the demands

---

<sup>1</sup> Мечников, И. И., *Этюды о природе человека*, Москва 1961, 50.

of their environment. In contrast, those unsuited or poorly suited are deemed to be disharmonious. Mechnikov regarded human beings as disharmonious. Human bodies are burdened with inadequacies that hinder proper adaptation. In the foreword to the 5th edition of his book, he offers an example of laboratory observation he made early in his career of how a dog instructs its puppies. He was quite impressed by the ease with which the puppies internalized their lessons. The dog would demonstrate how to behave, and the puppies would instinctively follow the bitch, quickly acquiring the skills required for adaptation. Mechnikov the microbiologist compared this easy path with the lengthy, complex and unpredictable process of human maturing and concluded that the latter was inferior.

In his account of the inadequacies in human biology – many rudimentary organs, inability to distinguish between edible and inedible, for instance – Mechnikov mentioned death separately. He was certain that the inadequacies of human body, taken together, make death painful and fearsome. The persistent anticipation throughout one's life of the approaching throes of death lead to a pessimistic view of life. Prior knowledge of the suffering in store inclines people to accept Schopenhauer's idea that our situation is pitiful and that there is not and cannot be a reason to rejoice.

## Two examples of disharmony

In his early article *Marriageable Age* which he referred to in his *The Nature of Man (Études sur la nature humaine)*, Mechnikov concludes that marriage conventions in developed countries did not, for the most part, align with the natural rhythm of the human sexual urge.<sup>2</sup> He argued that most marriage conventions were based on economic logic. Young people have no right to marry before being economically self-sufficient, and that is reasonable. The problem is that the urge appears well in advance of self-sufficiency and is quite independent of it. Young people who are physically ready for regular sexual relations, are forced to restrain themselves. Mechnikov addressed masturbation separately and, deferring to contemporary medical opinion, regarded it as a harmful perversion. When forced to deny themselves satisfaction, young men and women may be unable to resist the pessimistic ideas of Schopenhauer and his followers. Citing what he saw as positive examples from primitive societies, Mechnikov insisted on relaxing marriage conventions. Less strict rules would allow young people to engage in sexual relationship in a way that is compatible with the natural rhythm of sexual

---

<sup>2</sup> Мечников, И. И., *Сорок лет искания рационального мировоззрения*, Москва 2017, 49–99.

urge and incompatible with pessimism. Pessimism would have no place in a world where young people can engage in unrestrained relationships, and no one would have any idea what Schopenhauer was lamenting or what Byron's characters were suffering from.

Mechnikov found a connection between sexual urge and genius. His view was that genius directly depends on fluctuation in urges. Referring to memoirs of writers and composers he had studied, Mechnikov asserted that their most striking ideas arose in periods of turbulent passion. To prove his assertion, he analyzed how Wagner created one of his operas which Mechnikov regarded as a work of genius. When composing the opera, Wagner was in love with the wife of his close friend. The deep emotions associated with being in love allowed the composer to write a masterpiece. If genius is not possible without urges, then humanity would have to access an inexhaustible source of inspiration by changing the marriage conventions.

Alongside problems with urges, humanity also has problems with food and digestion. Mechnikov believed that they caused the greatest damage. First, human beings lack an instinct for always selecting the right food. Primates, our closest animal relatives, also make mistakes in choosing their food and consequently suffer from repeated food poisoning. Second, human beings have an archaic digestive system. Our large intestine, Mechnikov thought, is best suited to digest coarse vegetable material. The difficulty here is that, long ago, human beings ceased being herbivores have become omnivores. Moreover, human beings eat very little uncooked food. Food that has been processed with heat is absorbed much more quickly than raw vegetables. Therefore, digestive waste is retained much longer than necessary. He regarded that as a cause of permanent internal toxicity which undermines our health and shortens our lives by accelerating senile deterioration. Mechnikov saw the solution in hygiene and decontamination. By avoiding poisonous foods and decontaminating edible ones, humans would prevent poisoning. Moreover, eliminating waste substances from the body should also be facilitated, for example by regular consumption of fermented milk products. Mechnikov went even further to advocate surgical shortening of the bowel so that it would suit our diet. He thought that this, along with boosting helpful bacteria and avoiding inedible material would lead to significant improvement in health.

These and other steps – for example, avoiding heavily populated cities, which Mechnikov thought were even less suitable for human beings than the marriage conventions – would allow living in a natural rhythm and avoidance of suffering.

## Natural death

In his approach to death, Mechnikov relied on the observations made by physicians in care homes for the seniors. He focused on those rare cases in which a person died not from the advance of any disease but, as it seemed to the physicians and to Mechnikov, from natural causes. Mechnikov considered death to be natural, if it were a consequence not of any contingent cause, but of “fixed properties of the organism itself”. In contrast with contingent death, natural death is inevitable, similarly to growing up and aging. Natural death is a natural need of human body. Mechnikov insisted that it would be the basis for rejecting pessimistic view of life. Contingent death is full of suffering and terror; its anticipation is disheartening. Natural death is, on the contrary, filled with pleasure. The nature of that pleasure, Mechnikov asserts, is like that of any other satisfaction resulting from the fulfilment of a natural need. He summed up the observations of physicians by saying that natural death is like lying down to sleep.<sup>3</sup> Prior to natural death, just like prior to sleep, a desire for stillness comes over us, and we feel pleasure as we fall asleep. Mechnikov argued that those whose souls are departing the body for natural causes are experiencing something similar. According to descriptions gathered from physicians, one distinction is that the intensity of the pleasure experienced during natural death should be greater than that of falling asleep. Hence, when approaching death, we are not nearing pain and despair: we are nearing pleasure. To reaffirm his argument, Mechnikov offered his own experience during a bout of typhoid. When he felt on the threshold between life and death, he experienced pleasant lightness and peace. There was nothing fearful in either feeling. Death seemed welcome like sleep after a long day. Therefore, Mechnikov asserts that we have no reason for pessimism. The issues associated with disharmony can be dealt with by means of diet, hygiene and surgery. Once physical impediments are removed, humans can have a significantly longer lifespan than they currently enjoy. As they contemplate death, which remains inevitable, they will understand that what is ahead is a quiet and peaceful transition full of pleasure. Mechnikov assured his readers that the combination of long life, activity and anticipation of pleasurable death would forever ward off pessimism for all mankind.

## Morality as a gift

The imperfection that Mechnikov as a microbiologist tried so steadfastly to counteract was, for Kant, the foundation of exceptional status of humans. Like

---

<sup>3</sup> Мечников, И. И, *Очерки о природе человека*, Москва 1961, 112.

Mechnikov, Kant regarded human beings as imperfect: "... For all the actions it has to execute toward this aim, and the entire rule of its conduct, would be prescribed to it much more precisely through instinct, and that end could be obtained far more safely through it than could ever happen through reason..."<sup>4</sup> Through instinct, animals are better adapted than human beings to the necessities of survival, but Kant, unlike Mechnikov, subscribed to the Cartesian theory of human nature that opposes categorizing human beings as one among many other imperfect beings. For a confirmed Darwinist like Mechnikov, intellect as Kant described it would be a prime example of imperfection. Human beings encumbered with intellect are as unhappy as other disharmonious beings. For Kant, the imperfection of humanity is special and incommensurable with anything else. On one hand, intellect reduces the odds of survival. Yet, on the other hand, it gives rise to the vision of moral conduct. For Mechnikov the Darwinist, the vision of moral conduct as described Kant it would be one of the side effects of weakened instincts, perhaps no less harmful than any of the rest. For Kant, morality is a sublime gift. It enables humans to respond to the exalted beauty of the starry sky and the nobility of ethical principles. Both are so important that they may – and should – constitute the true meaning of our lives. Acting in accordance with the categorical imperative and with respect of the night sky substitutes – at least it should – for the happiness derived from satisfying the demands of their surroundings. While all other living creatures are subject to the harsh and unjust demands of natural selection, and are involved in the struggle for survival, humans stand apart permeated with the vision of morality. According to Kant, the more deeply they are permeated with it, the closer they come to moral conduct; and the happier they become. Mere survival as described by Mechnikov, cannot grant us happiness. Genuine human happiness consists of alignment with the objectives made possible by human imperfection.

## The exalting affect of morality

Kant held that morality, like the star-filled sky, elicits special respect from us. Respect is an affect in the Kantian theory of human nature. Kant's definition of affect is "a surprise derived from sentiment that disrupts the soul and incapacitates reflection"<sup>5</sup>. Driven by affect, a person cannot reflect. Thinkers of the Enlightenment, as defenders of reason against the sentiments of religious exaltation, insisted on counteracting strong sentiments by reining them in. Kant's view of

---

<sup>4</sup> Kant, I., *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, New Haven – London 2002, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Kant, I., *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, New York 2006, 150.

affect somewhat differs. When he wrote the essay *What is Enlightenment?*, he was explicitly on the side of reason. That said, he also held that there were different kinds of affect. Some affects, such as the wonder produced by apprehending natural landscapes, are quite valuable. Kant clearly condemned such affects as vanity, on which he wrote extensively and severely when he criticized sentimental moralists. Nonetheless, affects that are related to the objectives of reason are unconditionally valuable. He considered the wonder inspired by landscape to be valuable: although it blocks reason momentarily, it also invigorates reason and prompts reflection. In view of the difficulty of accommodating reason, we should not reject its facilitation by wonder and similar affects.

In the affect of respect for morality, Kant believed, we encounter an exceptional affect that is distinct from all other affects. He describes it as follow: “The latter may arise inclination and, if they are animals (e.g. horses, dogs, etc.), even love or fear, like the sea, a volcano, a beast of prey; but never respect. Something that comes nearer to this sentiment is admiration, and this, as an affection, astonishment, can apply to things also, e.g. lofty mountains, the magnitude, number, and distance of the heavenly bodies, the strength and swiftness of many animals, etc. But all this is not respect.”<sup>6</sup> The wonder prompted by the sight of spectacular scenery certainly makes us speechless. Yet the experience that overcomes us when we encounter moral behavior is loftier and stronger. The experience awakened in us by the “speed” of animals also impresses and engrosses us, but it is too mundane to compare with our sentiment of morality (höchsten Achtung). Elaborating his ideas, Kant offers this image: “Fontenelle says, ‘I bow before a great man, but my mind does not bow.’ It may be added: before a humble plain man, in whom I perceive uprightness of character in a higher degree than I am conscious of in myself – my mind bows whether I choose it or not, and though I bear my head never so high that he may not forget my superior rank. Why is this? Because his example exhibits to me a law that humbles my self-conceit when I compare it with my conduct: a law, the practicability of obedience to which I see proved by fact before my eyes. Now, I may even be conscious of a like degree of uprightness, and yet the respect remains.”<sup>7</sup> Kant thus maintained that the feeling which we experience regarding a moral person who has enough courage and commitment to act in accordance with the categorical imperative is a loftier and more exalting

---

<sup>6</sup> Kant, I., *The Critique of Practical Reason*, 2015. [online: <[https://books.google.com.cy/book?id=NJInCwAAQBAJ&pg=PT398&lpg=PT398&dq=%E2%80%9CI+bow+before+a+great+man,+but+my+mind+does+not+bow.%E2%80%9D&source=bl&ots=5GFTWrq9cu&sig=R8OtnXEuYB8InSA4It9UjEZI\\_6E&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjR69-HoIXZAhXFZ1AKHVxnBWkQ6AEIJTAA#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9CI%20bow%20before%20a%20great%20man%2C%20but%20my%20mind%20does%20not%20bow.%E2%80%9D&f=false](https://books.google.com.cy/book?id=NJInCwAAQBAJ&pg=PT398&lpg=PT398&dq=%E2%80%9CI+bow+before+a+great+man,+but+my+mind+does+not+bow.%E2%80%9D&source=bl&ots=5GFTWrq9cu&sig=R8OtnXEuYB8InSA4It9UjEZI_6E&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjR69-HoIXZAhXFZ1AKHVxnBWkQ6AEIJTAA#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9CI%20bow%20before%20a%20great%20man%2C%20but%20my%20mind%20does%20not%20bow.%E2%80%9D&f=false)>, cit. 2017-09-09]

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

sentiment than any other. Only moral righteousness, Kant affirmed, can arouse in us this special respect. The ultimate elevated nature of this feeling is underlined to a large degree by its universality. Kant asserted that moral behavior is so contagious that even hardened criminals must yield to the desire to engage in it: "Its voice forces even the most impudent criminal to tremble and feel ashamed under its scrutiny."<sup>8</sup>

## Happiness in sacrifice

It was evident to Kant that, parallel to an attraction to morality, a person would feel an attraction to the happiness described by Mechnikov. These attractions are opposed to each other and regularly come into conflict. A person is compelled to choose between the happiness from adaptation to nature and the happiness derived from respect for moral law. Humans, driven by the need to survive, will ordinarily choose adaptation. Even so, the attraction to morality remains undiminished. While choosing to adapt, a person continues to envisage moral action and feels respect for righteous agents. The reasons why people choose adaptation are clear. On the one hand, despite their extraordinary imperfection, human beings continue to be living creatures that must survive like any other creature on earth. On the other hand, moral conduct involves such forceful denial that Kant is uncertain whether it is at all possible. As he points out, "respect is the representation of a worth that infringes on my self-love"<sup>9</sup>.

The morality of an act is defined to a great extent by its divergence from the demands of nature. What is moral, is in principle unrelated to what is natural and has no relationship to the laws and functions necessary for survival. The respect that Kant discusses with bated breath is connected to the admiration of consciously accepted sacrifice for the sake of the moral law. Hence, to choose between morality and adaptation is to choose between sacrifice borne voluntarily and self-preservation. In view of the fragility of human life and the urge to live, it is not difficult to see why morality falters.

Yet despite the obvious danger and futility of the dream of moral conduct, moral law within us still captivates our imagination. Kant thought it did so to such a degree that juveniles and hardened criminals will respond to it, if they retain the capacity for thought and have not, according to the general doctrines of the Enlightenment, degenerated into animals.

Humans have a separate kind of happiness peculiar to them. The essential feature of this happiness is obedience to the categorical imperative. The difficulty arises

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Kant, I., *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, New Haven – London 2002, 7.

because the self-esteem that is granted by the moral conduct, which Kant discusses in such lofty terms, is grounded in a rejection of conduct necessary for survival.

## Natural death and moral sacrifice

It is not difficult to see that Kant's discussion of the relationship between respect, morality and sacrifice refers to Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross. A Kantian agent, acting morally and thus making sacrifice, is a secular replica of the main protagonist in the Gospels. Kant admires such agent and has respect for his resolve, an attitude akin to the admiration that the faithful have for the deeds of Jesus. In this context, human happiness – if we follow Kant's conception of human – consists in following moral law that imperils our self-preservation. A happy person, full of self-respect, is necessarily a martyr, or at least he or she must aspire to become one. Ideal human life, as Kant sees it, would have abundance of moral acts and martyrdom obtained by loss of adaptation. That loss is quite automatic: there is nature with its demands, and an imperfect human being. If a person does as Kant requires and aligns himself with moral law, then this person would necessarily violate the guidelines set out by nature. In violating them, a person becomes vulnerable, and it is not surprising that moral conduct puts one in harm's way. Therefore, human beings considered as rational may be happy only insofar as their conduct is moral. Alas, the desire to be moral conflicts with the need to survive. A happy death can be only the death of a moral person – and that means death as a martyr, the same death as Jesus suffered. If moral respect is proportional to the sacrifice made, then the death of Jesus is the greatest sacrifice of all.

Mechnikov's position is considerably less demanding than Kant's. This is because Mechnikov, as Darwinist, rejects the thesis that human beings are exceptional. Mechnikov's human being is one kind of living creature among others. That human beings are endowed with intellect and weak instincts is no reason to set them apart. The fact that moral conduct is dangerous and, at the same time, arouses strong sentiments within us, is also beside the point. Why not say that rationality and the Kantian urge to morality are just another capricious deviation? Mechnikov has no commitment to the thesis of exceptionality, and that makes his theory much simpler, so much so that he may consider medical issues exclusively and dismiss any moral component. He sees happiness as the elimination and diminution of inadequacies. His natural death is a logical consequence of the absence of inadequacies.

The difference between Mechnikov and Kant could be reduced to their assessment of our potential. According to Kant, human beings are incapable of changing the world no matter how much they wish. A person must adapt, and



that thwarts his desire to be moral. In Mechnikov's terms, Kant's theory would be utterly pessimistic. If a happy death is like a martyr's death, the pessimism is evident. But then would it have been natural in Kant's time to be as optimistic as Mechnikov? Their theories are separated by about a century, and one reason why happiness is so fleeting and unlikely for Kant and why it is so attainable and straightforward for Mechnikov could be the evolution of expectations – from visions of fate and death as martyrdom, to discussion of how adjusting the length of digestive tract could convert death into pleasure.

## ABSTRACT

### **Death from Natural Causes and Categorical Imperative: Where Is Happiness?**

*Maksim Goryunov*

The article revisits the ideas of reduction of human suffering and the resultant rise in happiness in face of mortality, as advocated by the Russian microbiologist, Nobel Prize Laureate Ilya Mechnikov. It compares his approach to human salvation, sacrifice, death and the meaning of life with some of Kant's categorical imperatives. Though the two share the vantage point in that humans are imperfect creatures, they present opposite conclusions and recommendations. Mechnikov, as Darwinist, rejects the thesis of exceptionality of humans among living beings, and thus moral component. That enables him to focus on medical approach. This entails, for instance, hygiene, surgical interventions with the gut, modifications in nutrition, and relaxation of marriage conventions to alleviate the pressure of sexual urge and reduce pessimism. These approaches help diminish inadequacies in humans and attain happiness. Given that century sets Kant and Mechnikov apart, the difference between their understanding of happiness – transitory and improbable for Kant, and attainable and straightforward for Mechnikov – may be attributed to the evolution of expectations.

**Key words:** Affect, Human Being, Categorical Imperative, Kant, Digestive System, Contingent Death, Natural Death, Disharmonious and Harmonious Being, Marriage Convention, Sexual Urge, Morality, Sacrifice, Self-Preservation.

**Maxim Goryunov** (folker64@mail.ru) is a Russian philosopher and journalist. His academic interests now focus on the analysis of contemporary Belarus.