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## **“To be” or “to have” in the Consumerist Reality of the Postmodern Society**

*,Biti' ali ,imeti' v potrošniški realnosti postmoderne družbe*

*Abstract:* The spheres of being and having constantly intermingle and condition each other. Is it possible to be and to have? Can a contemporary human be without giving up possessions, or have without losing the opportunity to be? Can an enterprising human being, capable of increasing his fortune, maintain a healthy distance towards his/her wealth? On the other hand, if he/she does not find himself/herself in the realm of the free market, does this automatically mean that he/she is heading towards pure existence? In order to respond to these important, existential questions, the author presents the challenges of the postmodern human being with their identity, then indicates the growth of consumerism and searches for the solution to the dilemma “to be” or “to have” from the perspective of Christian personalism, especially the contributions of Karol Wojtyła.

*Keywords:* Postmodern human being, identity, consumerism, personalism

*Povzetek:* Področji biti in imeti se nenehno prepletata in pogojujeta. Ali je mogoče biti in imeti? Ali lahko sodobni človek je, ne da bi se odpovedal imetju, ali ima, ne da bi izgubil možnost biti? Ali lahko podjeten človek, ki je sposoben povečati svoje premoženje, ohrani zdravo distanco do svojega bogastva? Ali po drugi strani, če se ne znajde na področju prostega trga, to avtomatično pomeni, da gre v smer čistega obstoja? Da bi odgovoril na ta pomembna, eksistencialna vprašanja, avtor predstavi izzive postmodernega človeka z njegovo identiteto, nato nakaže rast potrošništva in išče rešitev dileme ,biti' ali ,imeti' z vidika krščanskega personalizma, zlasti z vidika prispevkov Karola Wojtyły.

*Ključne besede:* postmoderni človek, identiteta, potrošništvo, personalizem

## **1. Introduction**

Is it possible to be and to have? Can we be without giving up possessions, or have without losing the opportunity to be? Can an enterprising man, capable of increasing his fortune, maintain a healthy distance towards his wealth? On the other

hand, if we do not find ourselves in the realm of the free market, does this automatically mean that we are heading towards pure existence?

These questions and various possible answers exemplify our never-ending existential dilemma. For the spheres of being and having constantly interpermeate and condition each other. Whilst being inseparably tied to the world of nature, we do feel that we are fundamentally separate from it. This bipolarity - which shows the richness of human nature - makes us aware of the opposing forces within us. For human beings are torn between their animal part (with instincts and sensual inclinations) and spirituality, rationality, and freedom. As Roman Ingarden wrote many years ago:

“Man lives on the border of two different worlds: one of nature and the other specifically human. He is, as if, compelled to live within Nature. And yet, thanks to his peculiar essence he has to exceed its limits, though he is incapable of fully satisfying his inner need to be a human being. In this way his fate is tragic. Thus, his true being is manifested, his genius and the finitude of his being.” (Ingarden 1987, 17–18)

Our conscious confrontation with this crack, rooted in the essence of human being and revealing its dynamic character, may be considered a decisive factor in our endeavors to give meaning to our lives. If, for various reasons, one does not take up this effort and does not try to understand oneself, one remains a being that is to a large extent tragic, constantly torn, and insecure, incapable of transcending the world of nature or facing the challenge of shaping one's humanity. Moreover, he is neither able to confront the dilemma 'to be or to have', which in the consumerist society seems especially difficult to solve.

## 2. The Challenges of the Postmodern Human Being with their Identity

The postmodern man professes the cult of success, pleasure, and vitality, and at the same time avoids reflecting on the meaning of his existence. As Martin Buber explained: “pondering over his essence overwhelms and exhausts him quickly so that he discreetly retreats to be engaged in all other things in heaven and earth.” (1993, 3) However, if he does not reflect on his nature or identity, we cannot admit that his life is meaningful, especially in the complex postmodern reality. When devoid of reflection, it is not balanced between animality and rationality, between corporeality and spirituality. 'Now' is the only area of his joy and responsibility, and his aim is to live his life in a pleasant way.

For such a person others pose a threat, so that he chooses selfish individualism that depreciates any action that requires sacrifice, devotion (including having a family or living in marriage). Moreover, he negates the existence of universal moral precepts. For if a man desires solely, or mainly, his own happiness, why

would he condescend to see the misfortune of the other? If one expects only pleasure in his life, then why should he help the weak, the poor, the sick or the handicapped? If he dreams of a life that is easy and light-hearted, then why would he engage in relationships with others which may be burdensome, demanding, and time-consuming? Perhaps that is why we constantly lack social workers and those working in hospices, psychiatric wards and in centers for people with disabilities. This, in turn, contributes to the inner emptiness of those who focus mainly on satisfying their own, especially material needs, which may be absurdly complex.

A significant number of postmodern societies are shorn of sensitivity to values that are the foundation of human morality. Instead, they have constructed a 'creative conscience' which does not interfere with the realization of one's 'dreams' or the smooth satisfaction of 'necessary' needs. Here, one may notice the evolution from the traditional system of values (where materialistic values for survival were dominant) to values that are to help one express 'oneself,' especially through what is materialistic. Even though a great number of societies live on an economically satisfactory level, many of their members feel unsatisfied and unhappy more than ever before. That is why in the most developed societies, the essence of human desires is no longer consumption but the accumulation of various kinds of experience, which entails the need for constant stimulation (Kristanova 2021b; 2021a).

It seems that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic should lay bare the fragility of our life thus making us more thoughtful of the needs of others. In societies where citizens have been educated in values, one could notice empathy, commitment, sacrifice, and nobility. Unfortunately, in other societies, the ongoing lockdown resulted in a still greater indifference towards others. The Human being of the pandemic era 'trapped' within his four walls would often enter the world of his electronic toys oblivious to the fact that there may be someone in need next door.

The role of magic, myths, 'mystical' practices, and above all emotions, feelings and scepticism grows in proportion to the decreasing significance of rationality. Postmodernity which rejects rationality born in the Enlightenment, is characterised by criticism, demystification, and demythologization of the teleological understanding of the world and man. Now it is passions and feelings that are our guide in life, and according to the mass culture, we should live our lives intensely and not waste our energy on understanding it. Nowadays man no longer desires to boldly make use of his reason. Rather, he refers to freedom understood negatively – as a lack of necessity or compulsion. Many people believe that the world is like a huge marketplace from which they may choose whatever they wish practically without restraint, become unthinking, passive, and virtually nihilistic consumers. While negating the foundation of what is, especially with regard to the existence of God, they agree to the absurdity and tragedy of fate. Pushing their way through the paradise of consumerism, they live bitterly aware that whatever they do will end up as the ultimate catastrophe. Józef Życiński aptly pointed out that postmodern thinkers quite explicitly state that the end of our lives is cold and musty. Thus, they claim that it is better to accept the brutal truth regarding our

world rather than to live in illusions as if our life was a bed of roses (Żyćński 2001, 54). With such a stance in mind, while trying to mask his existential limitations with consumption, a postmodern man heads towards nihilistic, sceptical, pessimistic, and catastrophic ideologies and attitudes. When all our desires are fulfilled by the market and our life boils down to earning and spending money, then, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, “we will become the most unhappy, lonely and absurd creatures in the world” (2004, 7).

In the postmodern world, the purpose of our pilgrimage is no longer the salvation of our souls, but the realization of possibilities of the tangible natural world. Here, man becomes “a nomad that goes astray,” a Dionysian vagabond to whom all meaning evaporated from things and relationships (Metz 2008, 111). Contemporary man does not have much in common with biblical Abraham who wanders in darkness through the steps heading towards the unknown, and yet promised a land, by God. The journey of the postmodern nomad has no aim; no Promised Land gives a sense of purpose to his efforts. He is no doubt tormented by numerous fears, and yet he does not want to listen to preachers discussing his weakness and sins, let alone suffering, death or passing. Thus, he rather feeds on the narratives which equate the meaning of life with subjective happiness, pleasure, climbing the social ladder, and increasing one’s income and power. Even if consumerism with its chaotic way of reasoning cannot serve as a worldview, it does offer an endless number of products through which it indoctrinates (as is the case with religion). While not imposing philosophical dilemmas, it attracts with a diversity of shapes, colours, and packaging inside of which there is the potential source of happiness (Stala, Osewska and Bochenek 2021a). Moreover, alternative ways of life do not shock anyone. In fact, they contribute to launching new branches of industry and thus expand the range of products. The investors may be rubbing their hands here (Osewska and Stala 2021).

### 3. Omnipotent Consumerism

Apart from the above ideological tendencies which, to a great degree, make it difficult for contemporary man to resolve the problem ‘to be or to have’, it is the deepening consumerism with its metaphysical form that is to blame. It is not easy to determine the exact time of the transition from the natural consumption to consumerism. However, one may agree with Zygmunt Bauman that it has rather been a revolutionary, and not an evolutionary, change. The productive society, typical of the first stage of modernity, was focused on stabilization, the accumulation of goods and the pursuit of the security of social status. Nowadays, the consumerist society is much more flexible and unsteady. It also lacks ‘attachment’ to goods. Whereas the beginning of consumerism may be seen in the separation of the productive function from consumption, its acceleration is due to the reversal of these two functions in the social hierarchy (Bauman 2000, 96). The postmodern society no longer needs producers but consumers, and the consumption is no longer a means to achieve various ends, but the end of human activity.

With the enormous economic boom which took place after World War II, an endless spiral of production and consumption began to wind up largely via mass culture. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century "consumer attitude has become not only one of many kinds of social stances, but a leading way of life in the majority of post-modern societies. Thus barriers (arising from time and space) that limit consumption may be removed. The previously unknown technological opportunities facilitate the free circulation of goods and capital and contribute to the growth of 'consumers' mobility. As a result, the scope of 'consumers' experience is virtually boundless. One cannot overlook the fact that the lack of moderation, as well as wastage, are no longer symptoms of some dysfunction. On the contrary, they are a sign of proper actions and the only principle that ensures the survival of individuals in the consumer society. Thanks to loans we tend to believe that there is no need to postpone consumption as the consumer way of life is crucial for the progress of man and society (Bauman 2004, 220–221).

As Jean Baudrillard noted *".../ the elated discourse on affluence is everywhere shadowed by a fmorose, moralizing, 'critical' counter-discourse on the ravages of consumer society and the tragic end to which it inevitably dooms society as a whole"* (1998, 195). Even if many postmodern people evaluate – with equal irony – the moralizing tone of the critic of growing consumerism, it is difficult to be indifferent to the euphoric pursuit of prosperity. The contemporary man has to face a huge challenge - the pointless desire to constantly increase consumption opportunities. The excessive disposability of all kinds of material goods transforms many people into beings devoid of broader horizons, interiorly empty slaves of possession and immediate satisfaction. What they focus on is multiplying the goods they possess and substituting them with others, more perfect.

Even though consumption is part of our nature, today it has dominated even science, morality, art and religion. The most significant trait of such a mode of being is unlimited consumption rooted in the client's permanent dissatisfaction. It is often stimulated by scientifically improved marketing and extensive advertising industry. As a result, many people simply copy the socially typified behaviour inertly accepting collective fads, representations and rules. By manipulating people in an invisible or, in fact, appealing way, advertising specialists become new wardens of our conscience. For it is they who produce, own and control the software of our civilization: books, movies, computer programs, magazines, CDs, commercials and television programs. John Paul II aptly put it: "unless one is shielded from the flood of publicity and the ceaseless and tempting offers of products - that the more one possesses the more one wants, while deeper aspirations remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled." (John Paul II 1997d, no. 28)

The global mass culture depersonalizes and stupefies man for it focuses on corporeality, impulses and emotions thus endorsing hedonism. As its sole purpose is to match the expectations and perception of consumers, by its very nature it chooses to deliver shallow pleasure and entertainment. In the models of identity submitted by the popular consumer culture, the body is the foundation of the 'self' of the contemporary man. While radically overestimating corporeality, the

culture focuses on showing youth and fitness, what is useful, aesthetic, pleasurable and verifiable from an economic perspective. A consumeristic lifestyle offers a 'good' and affluent life while determining the generally binding image of a perfect human body. When not subjected to corrective treatment, the body is the cause of frustration as various 'body regimes' are a chief element of the 'proper' way of life (Stala, Osewska and Bochenek 2021b).

One can hardly overlook the fact that the contemporary consumer civilization based on new information technologies (Osewska, Stala and Bochenek 2022), aspires more and more boldly to mould 'a new man' with an improved state of consciousness. In fact, the result is an enslaved creature devoted to consumption. Through various means which are hardly coordinated, the culture endorses a vision of man as a consumer who thoughtlessly submits to it. One can hardly be surprised for consumerism does not demand that we work on ourselves. It takes us as we are, the greedier, the better (Barber 2005, 180). A reluctance to whatever requires effort or reflection, together with a greediness inherent to every man (though to various degrees) translate into a growing number of people whom Daniel Quinn suggestively calls 'Takers.' Such people become engrossed by the will to possess to such an extent that they 'systematically destroy their competitors' food to make room for their own. Nothing like this occurs in the natural community. There, the rule is: Take what you need, and leave the rest alone (Quinn 1992, 72).

The above principle, which is both simple, sensible, and morally justified does not convince an increasing number of contemporary 'Takers.' Their way of thinking and acting is a challenge to classical ethics where man is a person – unique, endowed with reason and will thanks to which he may manage his life. Here consumption is also an important element of his mode of being for man, according to classical thinking, is also an animal forced to consume in order to survive. However, if he reduces his whole life to consumption and considers the search for pleasure to be the ultimate happiness, then he will severely limit his existence as a person (Reale 1999, 423). For regardless of circumstances, a person should control the emotions that govern their natural needs – contrary to animals, a person can make them comply with reason and will. However, it is not about 'subordinating' but 'ordering' as emotions that arise from our organism are governed by their own laws. This 'ordering' which enables us to face our complex and dynamic nature, is also crucial in the context of the 'to be or to have' dilemma. For it is an important element of our attitude toward the whole reality and reveals two potential hierarchies of values.

#### **4. "To have" and "to be": The Search for the Golden Means**

A sensible solution of the dilemma 'to be or to have' requires reference to the principle of the golden mean. The principle suggests that we follow neither the utopia of complete relinquishment of possessions nor the tendencies which al-

most completely ignore being in favour of having. Freedom from being attached to things does not imply the negation of things necessary for survival. In fact, it is not reasonable to make unambiguous declarations (that do not allow for polemics) that the profundity of 'being' is much more noble than gathering and producing. For in the pursuit of possessing material goods one may discern a positive phenomenon not only from an economic but also from a moral point of view. Thus, possessing does not have to mean flirting with 'the evil' and 'being' does not take everyone to their heights of existence. Antagonizing these two attitudes is not only wrong but risky as it divides the spheres that are actually one. For 'to have' represents the material and 'to be' the spiritual side of man. Thus, depriving someone of the possibility to have may result in their passive stance to life. On the other hand, an impressive material dynamism at the expense of the spirit dramatically impoverishes the interior life of a person.

Gabriel Marcel recognized that only adopting the attitude of 'being' makes it possible for real human communities to appear. However, he did not think that the problem lies in the mere possession of material goods. The crucial issue is the spiritual stance of possessing - not only things, but oneself, other people, nature, and the universe (Marcel 1984, 64; 117–118; 201). Thus, even if one does not have any material goods, one may adopt the attitude of 'possession,' just as one can 'have' while not possessing anything (Marcel 1986, 116; Jaroszyński 1999).

While radically criticizing consumerism, even Erich Fromm is certain that the dilemma 'to be' or 'to have' is a theoretical one as it is impossible to give up possession entirely (Fromm 1997, 130). Departing from nature is a taint of the modern society: an extremely expressive mode of possessing with the urge to appropriate, acquire, and possess which does not contribute to our happiness (1989, 66; 127).

Material goods are capable of changing and moderating human experience: they open up space for altruism and charity, though/but also for greed, anxiety, envy, depression, and the fear of loss. That is why, when John Locke acknowledges the right to private property to be inviolable, he also emphasizes that it is by its nature, limited, as its source is God. Since man is not the master of things, thus recognizing something as one's property entails constant justification in the form of work, need and values (Locke 1992, 184). Even liberalism ascribes an instrumental role to property.

The solution to the dilemma 'to be' or 'to have' may be sought in the precepts of Christian personalism which emphasizes the personal character of each of us. Karol Wojtyła wrote in *Person and Act* that "the community trait – or the social trait – is imprinted on the very existence of man" (Wojtyła 1969, 286). Every human being has their natural value and dignity, but they are not beings for themselves. Social life is the coexistence and cooperation of free persons guided by a specific axiology. This standpoint may be the key to resolve the dilemma whether 'to be' or 'to have.' Our conscious acknowledgment, both at the level of objective moral precepts as well as demeanour, that we co-exist with others, should set

limits for our natural tendency to possess. Thus, it is not possession but our egoism that is the problem.

From the Christian perspective it is worth referring to John Paul II's idea of the civilization of love that is a new humanism rooted in Jesus Christ and the Gospel. According to the Pope the civilization of love is marked by the fourfold priority: the person over things, ethics over technology, spirit before matter and divine mercy over justice (John Paul II 1997c, no 16; 1997b, no. 8–11). The core of the Pope's idea is the primacy of the person over the thing based on the principle 'to be more' rather than 'to have more.' For the real personalization of the human world will be possible when we acknowledge that the person is of prime value which is incomparable to the whole world of items. Then the person may evolve in all their inner truth, freedom, and dignity (John Paul II 1982, 310).

In a society devoid of values, it is all the more crucial to seek the truth about man, his life and spirituality (Osewska, Stala and Bochenek 2022). Also, to point out that material goods will not make us happy but, in the end, leave us disappointed and hollow. There are people who possess a lot of material goods and yet they are so unhappy that they commit suicide. The phrase "a golden cage is still a cage" confirms the truth that when devoid of liberty we are being destroyed. According to John Paul II, for us human beings to become more human, we need a balance between the love of one's self and the love towards our neighbours. Being not only with others, but also 'for others', showing them kindness and charity (John Paul II 2000, 130). This is explicit in the Christian principle 'to love one's neighbour as oneself' – not more as we do not want 'martyrdom' and not less so that we do not focus on ourselves solely. "Love your neighbour as you love yourself" – this requires equilibrium and wisdom (Dudziak 2022b).

The objective of the primacy of ethics over technology is ensuring the humanization of man and the world which is indispensable in the face of the threat of the technical model of culture. Thus, proper proportions between the development of technology and morality may be established and, what is even more important, limits to the predatory use of natural resources. Moreover, building a society in which ethics is superior to technology is the only opportunity for reestablishing the lost bond with nature. For it is the primacy of ethics over technology that is the necessary condition for the man being placed before the thing, preserving the natural environment, and restoring the ecological balance (John Paul II 1997b, no. 11).

By emphasizing the spiritual sphere of human life, the Pope wanted to oppose the consumer society focused on 'having more and more.' It was especially in his speeches during the travels around the world that he emphasized the opposition between the civilization based on materialism and the civilization of love. However, he stressed that the dividing line is not between capitalism and socialism but between the culture that highlights material values and the one that focuses on spiritual ones. While emphasizing the priority of the spirit over matter, John Paul II pointed to the anthropological error: contemporary man, who constantly



transforms the world, forgets that he is the unity of the body and the spirit without which he cannot exist. Instead of cooperating with God in His act of creation (Dudziak 2022a), man takes His place and tyrannizes nature (John Paul II 1997a, no. 37). At the same time, the ecological movements tend to take care more of plants and animals while treating man as a threat which they are trying to 'reduce.' There are some who proclaim the necessity of depopulating the world, treating human beings as unnecessary which, in turn, intensifies the pro-choice movements. According to the Pope, the new ecological paradigm should refer to the idea of a mother's womb which is the first *oikos*, that is home (Kornas-Biela 2000, 101–109).

## 5. Conclusion

By succumbing to the destructive tendencies of a dysfunctional consumption beyond measure, many contemporary people make it the purpose of their lives (Bauman 2009, 33-34; 2007). Through our bodies we are inseparably linked to the world of nature, which is also the sphere of consuming. However, thanks to our spiritual part, we do feel separate from it. If we do not endeavour to grasp who we are, we cannot face the dilemma 'to be' or 'to have' in a responsible way. Because of the transgressive character of our nature, we are incomplete, restless, and incapable of fulfilling all our needs. Nevertheless, it is only us who are fully aware of the necessity to seek not only to have but above all, not to cease to 'be.' Possessing items and goods in itself does not improve us, nor does it contribute to the maturation and enrichment of our being, which is to realize our human destiny which is, by nature, personal. Still, the relation between 'to be' and 'to have' does not have to be an antinomy. Since our social life is the coexistence and cooperation of free people who are guided by certain axiology, then it is quite obvious that we are not only beings for ourselves. We coexist with others, which sets the boundaries for our natural tendency to possess (Lowen 1995, 165–237).

The reflection on the dilemma 'to be' or 'to have' must involve our duty to grow. To have 'more' in order to 'be' more, that is to be of more personal value. The solution to the dilemma, therefore, does not lie in our ability to abandon possessions in favour of being. It is not about choosing the path of giving up possessions, which is illusory and inconsistent with our nature, but about not losing the sense of our being for the sake of possessing. For, if we are only what we have, then what will we be when we lose it?

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