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Existential Concerns in Anton Chekhov's Short Stories

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Abstract. Existential philosophy addressed questions that either had been overlooked by traditional philosophy for a long period of time (e.g. the individual's experience of anxiety in the face of death, the failure of rational thinking and science to inquire essential aspects of human life) or had resurfaced again following the disappointment caused by the destructions and absurdity of the two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century (e.g. questions pertaining to the meaningfulness/meaninglessness of the human endeavour and of human life in general). Russian realist novelists Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy are often invoked among the earliest existentialist thinkers, along with philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Drawing on the works of philosophers Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, this paper will examine how the existentialist preoccupation with death anxiety, ethics, and authenticity is represented in two short stories by Anton Chekhov, one of Dostoyevsky's and Tolstoy's younger contemporary writers.

Keywords: Chekhov, existentialist philosophy, science scepticism, death anxiety

Introduction

The term existentialism encompasses various philosophies flourishing in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, which emphasize the concreteness and context-embedded nature of human existence. Under the circumstances of uncertainty created by the two world wars, existentialism was moved to focus on the negative aspects of life: pain, frustration, sickness, and death come into the spotlight of philosophical inquiry.

Intellectual historians trace back the roots of existential thinking as early as fourth-fifth century theologian St Augustine's claim that there exists no

unbreakable truth out there waiting to be discovered and understood by mankind. Rather, finding truth is the result of an inner, self-exploratory journey, for it resides within the individual, not outside. Almost fifteen centuries later, in a somehow similar vein but tinged with pessimistic overtones, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche contests the divine origin of all values and argues that absolute truth is just an illusion.

Another nineteenth-century scholar, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard concludes that the most frequently employed truth-seeking instrument, human reason is inadequate to comprehend the mystery and meaning of life.

Although nineteenth-century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky did not leave behind straightforward philosophical works, philosophical reflections on the nature of truth and the meaning of life pervade his entire literary oeuvre. Dostoyevsky's existential nihilism arises from the conviction that God does not exist, moral is relative, life has no sense, and the most one can aspire for is living an authentic life.

Twentieth-century French writer Jean-Paul Sartre explicitly identified himself as an existentialist condensing his ontology in the following maxim: existence precedes essence. In Sartre's concept, in the absence of an omnipotent creator, "life has no meaning a priori. Before you come alive, life is nothing; it's up to you to give a meaning, and value is nothing else but the meaning that you choose" (Sartre 1947, 58). The freedom of choosing our own life meaning and values, however, comes at the price of total responsibility: we are fully responsible for developing our authentic selves, setting our own values, and for the actions resulting from our choices. Sartre emphasized the importance of death consciousness (i.e. a constant awareness of life's finitude) in guiding our actions and helping us to distinguish between the trivial and the essential.

Sartre's contemporary and compatriot novelist, Albert Camus, also focused his philosophy around existential problems although he rejected to be identified as an existentialist. His main preoccupations remained questions pertaining to the inevitability of death, individual freedom and responsibility, the absurdity of enduring life in spite of its fundamental meaninglessness, which led him to seriously consider suicide as a reasonable answer to the incongruity of life (Camus 1955).

In my paper, I will argue that several of the main claims of existentialism are strongly represented in Anton Chekhov's stories. Actually, contemplation on such questions plays a crucial role in many of his works – a point discussed in a respectable number of studies written on Chekhov (e.g. Senderovich 1987, Rayfield 1999, Regéczi 2000, Coptseva 2008, Corrigan 2011, Grevtsova 2011, Tabachnikova 2012, Nankov 2013).[1] The aim of this paper is to provide further

1 From the works mentioned above, Rayfield's book does not focus on Chekhov's existential themes, but it points out elements of existentialism in both Chekhov's plays and his short

support for the claim that the Russian author deserves to be considered among the forerunners of existential thinking.

Existential Psychology: Ernest Becker

In order to review some of the main tenets of existentialism, I will invoke American cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, more precisely his book *The Denial of Death* (1973), for which he posthumously won the Pulitzer Prize in 1974. Becker, who was labelled as a melancholic existentialist, outlined a psychoanalytic version of existentialism.

He starts his reasoning with the assertion that – contrary to Freud's view – consciousness of death is the primary repression, rather than sexuality. He deliberately uses graphic language to deliver the bare reality about the human condition:

> The creatureliness is the terror. Once admit that you are a defecating creature and you invite the primeval ocean of creature anxiety to flood over you. But it is more than creature anxiety, it is also man's anxiety, the anxiety that results from the human paradox that man is an animal who is conscious of his animal limitation. Anxiety is the result of the perception of the truth of one's condition. What does it mean to be a self-conscious animal? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms. (Becker 1973, 87)

This awareness of the gloomy prospects awaiting all beings gives rise to a basic need specific to the human species: the desire to contribute to something outside the individual, which will live on even after one dies.

In order to repress death anxiety and to render significance to their lives, humans develop denial systems in the form of different types of heroism: religious heroism (which essentially loses its significance in an atheistic world), cultural heroism (including art, science, social activism), personal heroism (manifesting itself in the way one manages his/her personal life, including family relationships, social status, but also in building one's character).

Becker invokes Sándor Ferenczi, one of Freud's closest disciples, who claimed that "Character-traits are, so to speak, secret psychoses" (Ferenczi 1950, 291). So, according to Becker and Ferenczi, personality is nothing but a mask that keeps

stories. Regéczy, Corrigan, Grevtsova, and Tabachnikova explore Chekhov's philosophical stance in general and his ties with existentialism in particular. Coptseva discusses the theme of "existence in the face of death" in Chekhov's dramas, while Senderovich and Nankov analyse several of his short stories from an existentialist perspective.

paralysing death anxiety at bay and gives the illusion of stability and coherence. All these defences support the grand illusion of transcending our physical reality, an illusion that we desperately need because "to see the world as it really is is devastating and terrifying" (Becker 1973, 60).

For Becker, the existential paradox consists in the discrepancy between the desperate human condition with all its creatureliness, its finitude, on the one hand, and the symbolic constructions of culture, science, and character designed to efface death anxiety, on the other. The big question is: how does one respond to this existential paradox? According to Becker, there are two options: we either ignore it, and conduct our lives as if this incongruity did not exist, or we become paralysed by anxiety, and develop neurosis. The first option makes it possible for humans to live a healthy, symptom-free life, but considering that this attitude is based on denial and distraction, it may be justified to enclose the word "healthy" in quotation marks. Becker evokes Kierkegaard claiming that to be a "normal cultural man" is to be sick – whether one knows it or not: "there is such a thing as fictitious health" (Kierkegaard 1941, 34). Fictitious health is the reverse of hypochondria: one looks and feels healthy, but in fact s/he is not. Denial systems, then, are adaptive means that spare us from total bewilderment and make life bearable and liveable despite the prospect of physical dissolution and sinking into oblivion.

Chekhov's Existentialist Short Stories

As many of his short stories testify it, existentialist themes like the ones discussed above were among Chekhov's main intellectual preoccupations. In her book written on Chekhov's relations with early existentialist philosophy, Ildikó Regéczi concludes that the writer regarded giving voice to the existentialist question with the deepest possible understanding as the main goal of literature (Regéczi 2000, 56).

The insoluble conflicts arising from the desire to be one's authentic self and the roles imposed by social games, physical and mental suffering, the cultural relativity of mental health, the inadequacy of scientific reasoning to address essential aspects of the human condition, science and philosophy as distractors and defence systems against the terror of looming death become the central themes of short stories like "The Black Monk," "A Medical Case," "Easter Eve," "An Actor's End," "A Nervous Breakdown," "The Man in the Case," "A Dreary Story," or "Ward No. 6." In order to yield a deeper and more thorough analysis, this paper focuses on the last two pieces of this list: the less cited "A Dreary Story" and the more widely known "Ward No. 6."

A Dreary Story (1889)

The short story subtitled "From the Notebook of an Old Man" recounts the end-of-life reflections of sixty-two-year-old medical professor Nikolay Stepanovitch. In the shadow of his impending death, the first-person narrator developed in himself the alertness of a hypochondriac and reacted in utter bewilderment to any sign of physical and mental decline. He was utterly perplexed by his experience of sudden estrangement from everything he had thought his whole life consisted in: his "honoured and distinguished" name (Chekhov 1918, 132) symbolizing the decent social status he had achieved,[2] his family of wife and two children, his colleagues, and the social circles he had previously frequented. Approaching death made him aware of the discrepancy between his symbolic self (his name and carefully moulded character) and his imperfect, failing flesh-and-blood self: "I am myself as dingy and unsightly as my name is brilliant and splendid" (Chekhov 1918, 132). But what alarmed him most was that he came to harbour feelings of contempt towards his wife, resentment against his children, and indifference towards his colleagues and students – all of which he interpreted as being signs of mental and moral disintegration. "I am full of hatred, and contempt, and indignation, and loathing, and dread" (Chekhov 1918, 177) – he confessed to Kathy, his adopted daughter, the only person he could open up to in his self-imposed isolation. Kathy's reaction was straightforward and shocking for him: "Illness has nothing to do with it […] it's simply that your eyes are opened, that's all. You have seen what in old days, for some reason, you refused to see" (Chekhov 1918, 178). And, indeed, from what the narrator reveals about the characters, the readers can conclude for themselves that the professor's wife was frivolous and hopelessly narrow-minded, his grown-up children were selfish and utterly inconsiderate of their father, who could hardly make ends meet while they were living an idle but extravagant life. So, from the reader's perspective, Nikolay Stepanovitch's emotions seem perfectly justified, the only problem being his suppressing his authentic feelings for so long that they bewildered him completely when they were finally released.

There was only one thing he managed to preserve intact from his previous life, namely his unflinching reverence of science, even if he had to admit the possibility of being deluded: "Just as twenty, thirty years ago, so now, on the threshold of death, I am interested in nothing but science. […] This faith is perhaps naïve and may rest on false assumptions, but it is not my fault that I believe that and nothing else; I cannot overcome in myself this belief" (Chekhov 1918, 148–149).

2 It is interesting to note that the original title of the story was "My Name and Me," which – according to Regéczi – was later changed by Chekhov as a gesture of making a clear distinction between the author and the first-person narrator (Regéczi 2000, 39).

This is the reason why he so desperately clings to his job as a university professor although his declining intelligence and physical frailty make him "feel nothing but torture" during his lectures (Chekhov 1918, 147–148).

But what stands behind Nikolay Stepanovitch's stubborn faith in science? Just as Ernest Becker regards science as a defence system against the fear of death, Nietzsche identifies fear as the source of scientific inquiry: "For fear is the original and basic feeling of man; from fear everything is explicable, original sin and original virtue. From fear my own virtue too has grown, and it is called: science" (Nietzsche 1978, 302). Amid the ruins of his crumbling life, after losing all certainty, Nikolay Stepanovitch's faith in science was the last shelter from this deadly fear. The narrator informs the reader on several occasions about the intense fear he was experiencing: "I was possessed by unaccountable animal terror, and cannot understand why I was so frightened: was it that I wanted to live, or that some new unknown pain was in store for me?" (Chekhov 1918, 206).

Paradoxically, as he was desperately grasping at his faith in science as his final hope for salvation, he was in fact embracing nihilism. Nietzsche warns us that the rules of reason are abstractions with a doubtful validity to the real world: "The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism. We have measured the value of the world according to categories *that refer to a purely fictitious world*"[3] (Nietzsche 1968, 13).

Nikolay Stepanovitch's lengthy and strenuous ruminations led him to the important revelation that his life as he lived it was but a collection of actions, ideas, and judgments lacking any inner coherence, and in his mind this deficiency rendered his entire life absolutely meaningless:

> However much I might think, and however far my thoughts might travel, it is clear to me that there is nothing vital, nothing of great importance in my desires. In my passion for science, in my desire to live, in this sitting on a strange bed, and in this striving to know myself – in all the thoughts, feelings, and ideas I form about everything, there is no common bond to connect it all into a whole. Every feeling and every thought exists apart in me; and in all my criticism of science, the theatre, literature, my pupils, and in all the pictures my imagination draws, even the most skilful analyst could not find what is called a general idea, or the god of a living man. And if there is not that, then there is nothing. (Chekhov 1918, 214–215)

In his book, Ernest Becker invokes Otto Rank, who found the perfect term for the behaviour that made the professor so disappointed with his life: "partialization" (Becker 1973, 198). The term describes our capacity to narrow down attention to a single aspect of life at a time, losing sight of the bigger

3 Nietzsche's italics.

picture charged with all the terrors of the world and inner anxieties, otherwise we would be impaired for action.

While partialization is an indispensable means of adaptation to circumstances, unconscious dependence on it leads to a vacuous and mechanical life. His illness and chronic insomnia compelled Nikolay Stepanovitch to face questions he had been unaware of during his "healthy" years. Kierkegaard's notion of "fictitious health" mentioned earlier in this paper (Kierkegaard 1941, 34) is a pertinent one when we envisage the professor's former, healthy self. He had been living his life in such a way as to meet the demands of his family and live up to the expectations imposed by society, simultaneously suppressing his emotions and genuine self. When approaching death put an end to his complacent slumber (he opened his eyes, as Kathy observed), he was deeply disturbed by his new reality: "everything is disgusting; there is nothing to live for, and the sixty-two years I have already lived must be reckoned as wasted" (Chekhov 1918, 190–191). He had the revelation that Shakespeare's King Lear had before him: he realized that he was nothing more than a barefoot biped animal (Regéczi 2000, 93).[4] The despair ensuing from this revelation is the beginning of authenticity. José Ortega y Gasset uses the powerful metaphor of the shipwrecked to demonstrate the necessity of experiencing utter despair for individual development to follow its course:

> The man with the clear head is the man who frees himself from those fantastic "ideas" and looks life in the face, realizes that everything in it is problematic, and feels himself lost. […] These are the only genuine ideas; the ideas of the shipwrecked. All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce. He who does not really feel himself lost, is without remission; that is to say, he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality. (Ortega 1957, 157)

However, there was no further development for Nikolay Stepanovitch; he remained paralysed by the dismal discovery about the senselessness of his existence. So, when his stepdaughter turned to him in despair to ask for guidance ("'Only one word, only one word!' she weeps, stretching out her hands to me"), he failed to offer any kind of support, just like in every crucial moment of Kathy's life. The story ends with the professor's mixed feelings of shame and pity for the girl's foreseeable misery: "I look at her, and feel ashamed that I am happier than she. The absence of what my philosophic colleagues call a general idea I have detected in myself only just before death, in the decline of my days, while the soul of this poor girl has known and will know no refuge all her life, all her life!" (Chekhov 1918, 218).

4 Regéczi is citing Lev Shestov, a Russian existentialist, who studied both Shakespeare's and Chekhov's works.

Ward No. 6 (1892)

The story is set in a provincial asylum and explores the philosophical conflict unfolding between Ivan Gromov, a patient suffering from paranoiac psychosis, and Andrey Ragin, the director of the asylum. Ragin, who was living a comfortable and relaxed life, was an advocate of stoicism, and he lectured Gromov about the non-importance of life circumstances: "In any surroundings you can find tranquillity in yourself," exemplifying his credo with the case of Diogenes, who "lived in a tub, yet he was happier than all the kings of the earth" (Chekhov 1921, 66).

He was not only a stoic but also a nihilist often contemplating on the meaninglessness of life. On one occasion, he cooled down Gromov's passionate speech about the wonder of life with the following words: "However magnificent a dawn lighted up your life, you would yet in the end be nailed up in a coffin and thrown into a hole" (Chekhov 1921, 65–66).

Gromov, who was suffering from starvation and beatings locked up in the asylum, indignantly refused Ragin's philosophizing, and he counteracted with his existentialist concept of life, in which suffering and death anxiety were unalienable parts of life: "to despise suffering would mean to despise life itself, since the whole existence of man is made up of the sensations of hunger, cold, injury, loss, and a Hamlet-like dread of death" (Chekhov 1921, 73). But, notwithstanding his wretched condition, he assumed the idealist position by giving credence to the existence of God and spiritual immortality: "I firmly believe that if there is no immortality the great intellect of man will sooner or later invent it" (Chekhov 1921, 66). It is interesting to see how the character living in misery was an advocate of idealism, while the one in the privileged position took the stance for nihilism.

The meetings and discussions with his patient gradually changed Ragin's life. His colleagues and his superiors started to regard him with suspicion, and eventually he lost his job and comfortable income. Curiously, this change for the worse in his social status and financial situation provoked a positive turn in the doctor's attitude towards life. While earlier he was unsatisfied and often complained about his being buried in an intellectually undemanding provincial area populated by boring people totally absorbed in their day-to-day chores and petty interests, losing his existential security made him much more interested and involved in the events of everyday life such as peeling potatoes with his housekeeper or listening to the mass on Sunday – activities that he had despised so much previously.

As he was growing more authentic in his life, he became increasingly irritated by the fake care of his former colleague and the pretended joy and forced laughter of his former friend. Surprisingly, this mood totally changed his perspective on his nihilistic vision upon human life. At this point, the meaninglessness of all

human endeavour and concern, which he found so disconcerting and anxiety-provoking earlier in his life, became a soothing and comforting idea:

> To stifle petty thoughts he made haste to reflect that he himself, and Hobotov, and Mihail Averyanitch, would all sooner or later perish without leaving any trace on the world. If one imagined some spirit flying by the earthly globe in space in a million years he would see nothing but clay and bare rocks. Everything – culture and the moral law – would pass away and not even a burdock would grow out of them. (Chekhov 1921, 94)

Eventually, Ragin was locked up in the very same institution he had managed for more than twenty years, was beaten by Nikita, the guard, and died of apoplectic stroke the next day.

The story reflects a rather bleak outlook on life, and Chekhov does not come to the reader's rescue with any comforting explanation of Ragin's tragic destiny. Was there anything he could have done in order to avoid his dreadful demise? If we look closely at the cause of Ragin's downfall, we make a surprising discovery. His problem was not that he was indifferent or heartless, as we could have suspected – quite the opposite is the case.

Ragin's fault was that he was too agreeable, and for this reason "he was absolutely unable to give orders, to forbid things, and to insist" (Chekhov 1921, 47). His excessive agreeableness prevented him from confronting his inferiors although he knew too well that they systematically abused the patients by stealing their food, beating and mistreating them in every conceivable way: "When the patients complained to him of being hungry or of the roughness of the nurses, he would be confused and mutter guiltily: 'Very well, very well, I will go into it later . . . Most likely there is some misunderstanding . . .'" (Chekhov 1921, 47; ellipsis in the original). Another positive human ability that went awry in Ragin's practice was empathy. He became professionally paralysed by the sight of pain and suffering, and so his expertise was side-tracked from offering real medical assistance to getting rid of the patient by hastily prescribing some medicine and sending him/her away.

These two qualities, agreeableness and empathy, which are considered to be positive human traits, were distorted by the doctor to such an extent that they triggered a chain of events leading to disaster not only for his patients but even for Ragin himself. His misplaced empathy induced him to neglect his duties as a medical doctor, while by not confronting the debased personnel he enabled abuse to continue and perpetuated misery.

Although Ragin's sins were apparently rooted in his virtues, the narrator of the story reveals that he knew all too well what damage he was causing all along. In order to suppress his feelings of guilt, he recurred to such tactics

as self-justification and blame shifting. For not offering proper medical care to his patients, Ragin justified himself by making reference to the ultimate inevitability of death and the utter insignificance of ordinary people's lives: "why hinder people dying if death is the normal and legitimate end of everyone? […] Pushkin suffered terrible agonies before his death, poor Heine lay paralyzed for several years; why, then, should not some Andrey Yefimitch or Matryona Savishna be ill, since their lives had nothing of importance in them, and would have been entirely empty and like the life of an amoeba except for suffering?" (Chekhov 1921, 49).

The argument of insignificance was invoked once more by Ragin when he tried to explain away his choice of non-action in the face of evident abuse in his environment exempting himself from all responsibility and shifting the blame to society in general: "I am not honest, but then, I of myself am nothing, I am only part of an inevitable social evil: all local officials are pernicious and receive their salary for doing nothing … And so for my dishonesty it is not I who am to blame, but the times … If I had been born two hundred years later I should have been different" (Chekhov 1921, 60; ellipsis in the original).

By reporting on Ragin's innermost thoughts and ways of reasoning, the omniscient narrator makes it clear for the reader that it is not the aforementioned agreeableness and empathy on their own that rendered him impotent as a doctor and as the manager of the asylum but rather his decision not to take any action and turn a blind eye to the personnel's despicable deeds against the patients for twenty years. It was only when Nikita, the guard, struck him in the face while locked up in the same institution, and he felt the taste of his own blood in his mouth, that he came to realize the falsity and absolute worthlessness of his entire life philosophy, which crumbled in the first instant of suffering, just as his former patient, Gromov, had predicted. How phoney it had been from him to preach about ignoring physical pain and remaining content in all circumstances, to cite Diogenes and Marcus Aurelius to his patient undergoing constant torture and humiliation, and then go back to his cosy life crammed with mundane distractions, numbing his feelings of guilt with self-exoneration and nonsensical reasoning? His last conscious thoughts revolved around the realization that by avoiding pain and discomfort all his life he became insensitive to other people's suffering: "How could it have happened that for more than twenty years he had not known it and had refused to know it? He knew nothing of pain, had no conception of it, so he was not to blame, but his conscience, as inexorable and as rough as Nikita, made him turn cold from the crown of his head to his heels" (Chekhov 1921, 107). At the very end of his life, he finally understood what Ragin had known long before: that pain, suffering, and looming death are indispensable parts of human life, and that avoiding first-hand experience of these at all cost equals to avoiding life itself.

Ironically, the philosophical discussions with his mentally ill patient, which triggered Ragin's awakening to the true nature of life, also brought about his falling into misery and untimely death. His tragedy lies in the tardiness of his awakening: he came to understand his situation only a few hours before his death, when he could not do anything about it anymore.

Despite the protagonist's tragic demise, the story does not end in a nihilistic tone. In fact, Ragin's calamity curbed his empty philosophizing and his nihilistic outlook upon life. After losing his job and status as a medical doctor, he started to live more authentically by appreciating the small joys of life, refusing to participate in phoney social interactions and ditching his own shallow philosophies. In the final hours of his life, he even came to realize the untenability of his previous "nothing really seems to matter" nihilism, and he faced up to the feelings of guilt and remorse that he had been eluding for so long. He finally understood the lesson that had he been more courageous and made the right choices, he could have made a difference in the life of his patients.

Conclusions

Although Anton Chekhov is not generally referred to as an existentialist thinker, the philosophy exposed in his literary works and the considerable amount of literature discussing his intense preoccupation with such questions as existence as a concrete experience, dread of death, limits of scientific inquiry, the possibility of choice, and the ensuing individual responsibility qualify him a forerunner of twentieth-century existentialism.

The analysis of his two short stories, "A Dreary Story" and "Ward No. 6," published three years apart, demonstrates that Chekhov did not only dedicate a lot of attention to address the existential conundrum of life, but he also explored possibilities for action against the existential despair. Both professor Nikolay Stepanovitch from "A Dreary Story" and doctor Andrey Ragin from "Ward No. 6" experienced the lowest depths of misery where they were compelled to look death and nothingness in the face. But while Nikolay Stepanovitch remained petrified at the grim spot of desperation without the slightest clue how he should have lived otherwise (a situation reflected by his inability to offer a beacon of hope to his adopted daughter), Andrey Ragin at least came to the realization that his stoic "nothing really matters" attitude to life had been a fatal mistake. Apparently, the only person who could have lived a worthwhile life was Andrey Ragin's patient, Gromov, but he was denied the opportunity by having been locked up in the asylum for years under the supervision of doctor Ragin until they finally became roommates.

Just as the existentialist thinkers invoked in this paper, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Ortega, and Becker, Chekhov appears to view exasperation as a necessary step

towards spiritual awakening. Chekhov's two protagonists differ from each other in the way they face their ordeal: while Nikolay Stepanovitch sinks into life-denying nihilism, Andrey Ragin gains a new perspective of existence.

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