

EDVARD KOCBEK: HIS CREATIVE SEARCH

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1. The ethics of life

This article attempts to evaluate the thought of Edvard Kocbek (1904–81) outside the purview of politics, considering him first and foremost as a person whose decisions were primarily guided by ethical choices. It is, of course, unreasonable to speak of him as an apolitical person, but politics in his turbulent life was always merely a means, never a goal. Indeed, any assessment of Kocbek inevitably becomes an assessment of the political events that shaped his life. It seems unlikely that members of his generation will ever break free of the divisive thinking associated with the struggle that Kocbek joined with his deep faith in the all-encompassing mission of the revolution and the redemptive goal of politics. To some, Kocbek will represent a test case of what it is to seek freedom in the most trying of circumstances. He sought to give expression to not easily articulated “romantic revolutionary” feelings at a time when fascism, as he put it, “thrust a ruthless choice upon us: to live or to die” (Kocbek 1972: 41).¹

If future generations judge Kocbek less through a political lens, then what is likely to gain prominence will be his ethical stance. His decision to stand on the side of the revolution (a popular decision among members of his generation) was taken on ethical grounds. In his book *Tovarišija* (Comradeship), he speaks of revolutionary sentiments as being “an exceptional human capability,” for they are akin to “divine sentiments.” Moreover, “a special inner bond has begun to bind all healthy individuals of our generation, in our resistance we have become better and closer to each other. How blessed the Slovenians are then to have this opportunity to vent this noble passion for a full and free humanity for the first time in our history” (Kocbek 1972: 252–53). His words in praise of rebellion are motivated by his striving for freedom and justice. After the war he expressed himself unambiguously: “The first sane and vital thought: to tell the world that the Slovenian people have instigated a nation-wide rebellion, have organized themselves into the Osvobodilna fronta (OF, the Liberation Front) out of national leanings, that these dominated and had a majority, that they formed the moral backdrop of the biggest turn in our history, that with the most conscientious resistance fighters these considerations were undoubtedly accompanied by social strivings...” (Kocbek 1991c: 177–78). Kocbek’s oeuvre is a comprehensive document testifying to the readiness of

¹ English-language versions of quotations belong to the translator.

spirit to embrace politics, a readiness which is present only because it is grounded in ethics.

Ethics is central to human life. Kocbek, whose approach to life was preeminently ethical, believed in something enduring and eternal. This made him highly sensitive to the world of nature and to culture. After all, politics change—how so is particularly visible after the collapse of socialism of the Bolshevik type in 1989—and economics are unpredictable. The war generation deserves to be credited precisely for their ethics, for their ability to develop and live according to a concept of politics that has been without a parallel since. In June 1942, in answer to the question, What is a Slovenian national revolution?, Kocbek wrote with confidence in the journal for the Catholic segment of the OF entitled *Slovenska revolucija* [Slovenian Revolution]: “Taking fate into your own hands and standing on the side of national revolution is the only historically viable step, which carries within itself a form of national self-affirmation and is the highest moral and political act of every people” (Kocbek 1991c: 103). Besides Kocbek, a number of other individuals were able to act ethically or at least strove to act so to the point where the line between the two becomes blurred, since politics to them was not a goal, but a means. Politics, Kocbek was to stress in 1958, “is to ensure that the world is humanized and man made sovereign,” thus a politician “must know that the highest goal is not earthly happiness in the sense of material gratification, but rather a sense of balance between the rationality of the world and irrationality of human beings” (Kocbek 1989: 224).

As Kocbek’s life works tell us, Christian socialists, or rather socialist Christians (Kocbek 1963: 184), as he himself refers to them, firmly believed that revolution is born out of moral intuition of man’s freedom and sovereignty on earth. “The fact that every political action means transcending the individual in the direction of humanity and transcending the present in the direction of the future” deserves to be given “due recognition”; politics is “bringing ethical demands to bear on the techniques of outer activity.” Morality likewise is not something rigid but a “creative search” (Kocbek 1989: 224). Subjecting the world to the world of ethics is and remains the highest imperative of the practically oriented truth that guided Kocbek and his like-minded colleagues; it was far more decisive than the highest theoretical truth of any ideology that was “fermenting” on the political scene at the time. In his *Slovenska revolucija*, he explicitly states that there should be no discrepancy between morality and politics. “Who wants to see political work as creating moral good and who is determined to act morally in politics, he should know that there should be no distance between political events as expressions of nature and history on the one hand and a moral evaluation as a principled stance on the other. Morality should not be something external, or foreign, to political action, something that would impose lifeless moral rules onto amoral life, on the

contrary it should be co-extensive with life as it is lived. Amoral politics should never be saddled with rules of a-political morality” (Kocbek 1991c: 222–23). At this point Kocbek discloses his understanding of revolution and revolutionary mission as the strictest convergence of ethics and politics, in which rests his explicit demand that “one of the very important aims of every true revolution is that it attains a harmony between moral evaluations and political action” (Kocbek 1991c: 222–23). With Kocbek, ethics can never be simply a private matter—the well-known ideology of liberalism, which has already begun to take revenge upon our present-day liberalism.

Written words follow their own course, and many of Kocbek’s published works are tied up in this process; it is unlikely we will ever stop reading him. Not least because his example encourages us in the direction of creative re-evaluations—which he himself had so thoroughly mastered in times of great historical upheavals, and which as an intellectual he expected also from others—from those who held some aspirations for the redemptive historical progress. It is this trait in Kocbek that is exemplary. It would not have been possible if in his creative work he did not let himself be guided by his rebellious ethos, which got him into trouble with countless institutions, and which Catholic circles saw as protestant rather than protesting (Kocbek 2000: 114). Trying to understand the underlying meaning of this ethos or rather rebelliousness, I can see that it derives from Kocbek’s sense of justice and fairness.² He objects to determinism as well out of a keen sense of spontaneity. Soon after the war, in the middle of a committee meeting, Kocbek could suddenly deduce “a pleasant, creative, vibrant atmosphere” (Kocbek 1991a: 51). He defended his creative thinking from the reductive grasp of psychology, since he firmly believed in the power of the spirit and spirituality, refusing to surrender it to mere subconsciousness. Spirit has its own essence, he argued, which is not a mere mechanical extension or transmission of the subconscious. “Modern psychology only defends itself with subconsciousness, while never bothering to ask what ‘the subconscious’ or the bearer of the subconscious is” (Kocbek 1991b: 202). Kocbek seems to be presenting us with a kind of regional ontology that understands man as a multifaceted being, as a complex of instinct, emotion, reason, spirit, with every aspect enjoying a measure of autonomy. Kocbek sees these processes as co-extensive, running on the basis of mutual autonomy. In fact he surmises the same parallel in man and the world, so that his notes on the war and its immediate aftermath can be read as a reflection on the parallel autonomy of man’s multifaceted being and the autonomy of the world’s being.

² See an extended discussion of this in Tóth (2000).

2. The sacred shrine of Slovenian history

When Kocbek is speaking of what he holds to be one of the most sacred shrines of Slovenian history, he is effectively describing his own commitment to the partisan forces. When the first partisan banner unfurled in the air he could feel, he says, an insurmountable force, his people in their unflinching resistance and young men in their sacrificial fight and the decisive Slovenian rebellion that was to take his people to their victorious end. With utter clarity he fathomed what is not all that easily graspable, namely that the two seemingly irreconcilable opposites, freedom and necessity, can be reconciled. He understood that time of war is also a time of “historical ecstasy” (Kocbek 2000: 30), of this terrible faith which he wants to relate as fully as possible, and shed light on the ecstatic, mighty and trusting radicalism of liberation years—something that cannot be conveyed through any historical factography [the concept of factography might benefit from an explanatory footnote]. He is striving for what is effectively unattainable, eager to lend his ear to this passion for the new and the better, to understand the mind and soul of those in the grip of this passion and all the attendant anxieties and joys, as fear and courage intersect, as you are driven by the sense that you are in the grip of something that can both destroy and save you. These were the moments when Kocbek felt “that at times Marxism was closer to [him] than it was to many a communist,” and how “earthiness was getting closer and closer” (Kocbek 2000: 30).

All along he is experiencing nature, aware of its primeval qualities. As some kind of stoic, he is able to discuss life, justice, and the solidarity of cosmic dimensions. He speaks of comradeship. His diary entries are both essayistic and aphoristic in nature, divulging at least two significant strains: his deep-felt need for authenticity/primordiality alongside just as intense a need for critical, engaged thinking. All along he is guided by spontaneity of being, elementariness, and autonomous reflexivity and as hard as we may try to find popular reasons to show he succumbed to ideology, we cannot. In the midst of fighting, Kocbek writes about his experience of nature and analyzes his relationship with the forest. It is as though nature steals its way into his experience, fills him initially with a sense of unease; it is a nameless plea. In time, as the feeling of security grows, he begins to experience the forest as a safe primordial place where different forms of life are in harmonious coexistence, and in spite of the hierarchy, he can detect a community which accords a place and recognition to everything. He derives a sense of homeliness from knowing that a certain balance needs to be nurtured.

How do you preserve your individuality in the green magic created by the earth, trees and rock? To experience the world and its activities first through one’s inner self is to experience the world in a pantheistic way,

which helps Kocbek discover a great deal about himself as well as the people around him. He is even led to discover images of humanity hovering between life and death. He captures such experience with the expression “cosmic sense.” Amidst the evident superiority of the occupational forces in the war, he discovers the hidden powers of silence. With his comrades he keeps almost religiously mum, like “objects, trees, grass, earth, rocks, the invisible world under the grass and in the earth. It is in the inner light that gentle faces of objects are revealed. The world is the material for inner life” (Kocbek 1972: 237). With his pantheism—that is, his cosmic sense—he experiences the sun; his connection with the cosmos is a precious source of active silence and solitude. The universe to him is both macrocosm and microcosm, and man is positioned between. Kocbek is convinced “that it is the lack of cosmic sense that is the crucial deficiency in man” (Kocbek 1972: 237). It enables him also to detect the existence of a tree, particularly in its “relation to the surroundings with which it unites into an organic whole” (Kocbek 1972: 85). Nothing is immovable and solitary, even the wind, in blowing, it connects trees with the movement of space. Such experience triggers in him a sense of homelessness.

Perhaps one of the most sincere, and moving, confessions related to the evolved cosmic sense can be found in Kocbek’s descriptions of his experience of theism and atheism. To him, neither is merely culture, they are still nature, in fact nature first. “I am constantly undecided between principled theism and practical atheism. My theism runs deep and it is as ancient as mankind, it is joined at the roots with who I am. Atheism on the other hand runs just as deep and is just as familiar, going back as far as the first days of creation. Both sensations are linked closely to the cosmic consciousness and are not merely an element of man as a historic and social being. They do not stop at the common surface of human consciousness where concepts and habits fight their quarrel, but they gaze at each other in the depths of man’s being” (Kocbek 1972: 238). How then is atheism possible as something utterly primordial and down to earth? Kocbek writes: “The crux of atheism lies in man’s genuine fear that the existence of God constrains him, degrades him, annuls him even, that it brings him a false mental and life comfort, that God in short is not the adversary to reckon with. Atheism is therefore an expression of ontological unease. This unease I can feel too, everyone can, even a saint. It is in our nature to resist final fulfillment” (Kocbek 1972: 238–39). Was this resistance of his or at least his attempt to resist, his personal and idiosyncratic atheisation [move toward atheism] which had forever made him turn his back on institutionalized Catholicism, and his struggle for new Christianity, as the late bishop Vekoslav Grmič has noted, a completely “de-clericalized Christianity of personal faith”? (Grmič 2004: 6). Kocbek certainly had a strong fear of nihilism, for which his Christian faith can be seen as an attempt to thwart nihilism, perhaps even is thwarted nihilism. Clear

demarcations between what is cosmic, ethical and religious have disappeared, also between cosmos and logos, so that pantheistic Christianity—an unfortunate conclusion for many, I realize—becomes Kocbek's mainstay.

Thus in relation to truth of human existence, Kocbek could never assign supremacy to some abstract ideological truth, but turns towards practically-oriented truth that is above all ethical and as such can be a binding force even between ideologically differing individuals, while confessional or rather religious truths are always divisive. He strove to gain command of concrete matters and almost intuitively he resented abstractness that would defy life, or go against it. He expected generosity from people, but there can be none if life is made subordinate to some universalism. Slovenes have unfortunately often been inclined to universalisms, and Kocbek in his 1969 essay "Tujstvo" (Foreignness) with the subtitle "Odlomki iz nemškega dnevnika" (Excerpts from the German diaries) noted:

Uncritically grasped and assumed universalisms have obscured and obstructed fundamental and positional forms of humanisation, because with their penchant for irrational passions they have fed us with illusions of superiority that were to compensate for our smallness, vulnerability and insecurity. All these hypotheses brought about consequences of much greater proportions, because rational insecurity had been substituted by irrational uncertainty, dangers became indeterminate, and the struggle with what is visible became fighting windmills. I repeat: the drama of Slovenian consciousness is a matter of constant surrender of Slovenian specificity to various universalisms that at this stage of human evolution are inevitably in the hands of the more powerful, those who had hitherto always been swayed by power into violence. In each and every considered and sovereign decision, Slovenians have to express, and demonstrate, our essential unity, for experience has never stopped telling us: Slovenehood is no less than humanness. (Kocbek 2004: 339–40)

With a touch of noble melancholy, Kocbek relates the story of his life as it is emerging out of the most concrete circumstances. He strives to remain faithful, real and restrained, neither does he lack mischief for that matter. He first lived his life, rather than reflected on it like a closeted scholar, so that all learned wisdom, all dead words had to be tested against life's living current. Kocbek is a clear case for ethics, aesthetics, and politics harmonized to near perfection in what deserves to be called an utterable, clear trail of full-bloodied living. To be vigilant towards what life

is in itself, in its elementariness and immediacy—that is Kocbek’s starting point. Ideological violence and life’s current do not belong together. It is life’s prerogative to live out its primeval energy, which demands a large measure of sincerity.

Kocbek’s ethics of life is rounded off with a rejection of nihilism and nihilization of the world; in fact his ethical stance stems precisely from him saying *yes* to the world and living in general, much like the eminent author of the declaration of universal ethos (1993), our contemporary Hans Küng. Similarities between Kocbek and Küng’s outlooks are indeed remarkable. Küng too contends that it is only with an affirmative stance towards the world and life, with fundamental trust, that we gain “a basis for fundamental ethos, life’s ethos, globally speaking, a world’s ethos” (Küng 2003: 39). Kocbek was able to hold on to this trust in the midst of war, in the most difficult of circumstances when death was a daily companion. He was able to comprehend life with tremendous generosity, complemented with responsibility and optimism, refusing to equate man with all the horrors surrounding him. Already in May 1942, when he began writing his diary *Tovarišija*, he discerned something deeply moral in partisanship, this Slovenian comradeship joined in resistance. Seeing Partisan youths, he wrote: “The gun in their hands is not only a means of defence against the occupying forces, but also a symbol of new strength in the Slovenian people. My heart was exhilarated: this is the end to Slovenian pessimism, the end to pettiness, the end to weepiness, the end to moral slavishness” (Kocbek 1972: 32). Thus “partisan loyalty,” Kocbek writes, “is a special kind of loyalty. The Partisan movement is a phenomenon of great potential, that is what I see when I look at these young men. You can tell that they have all gone through an ordeal by fire” (Kocbek 1972: 33). It is primarily moral freedom, which does not mean only purity in principle, but also a concerted effort for life’s evidentiality within “organized hope for happiness” (Kocbek 1972: 57). Being a Partisan together with others, he is experiencing a tremendous feeling of happiness. The evidentiality, according to him, is connected with three much needed values: “loyalty, trust, and purity” (Kocbek 1991c: 443).

Staying true to life in all its immediacy poses a challenge to one’s ethical stance, which can only ever find its expression through movement and activity—an active life: “If we want to embrace life with both hands, we need to ground our spiritual loyalty in earthly loyalty, that is to say earth, nature, history, human community. That is why in all our activities we need to start out from creation, from our immediate surroundings, from what we call nature and history” (Kocbek 1991c: 443). When speaking of trust, he notes:

A person who stays true to the laws of nature and history, that person trusts his or her being and everything around him. In

their relation to the world, people can be divided between those who in principle do not trust the world and thus turn their back on its human content, and those who are in principle trusting, affirming thereby all creation and above all man. Indeed, it is impossible to think of human life without a principled trust in life as such. (Kocbek 1991c: 445)

In 1943 he is aware too that “alongside principled trust, there needs to an acknowledgment of moral trust, which is not merely an outcome of reason, but of all our being, its every thread. It is to do with that relaxed, genial relation one has with reality, which puts one into a creative mood, dispelling all superfluity and misgivings” (Kocbek 1991c: 445). As a Partisan he is immeasurably happy and this happiness he can feel also in other Partisans, “primarily as a psychological phenomenon. The struggle gives fighters a remarkable sense of human worth, it individualizes him, gives him a sense of independence, it aggrandizes him. The stronger the opponent, the more it aggrandizes and liberates him” (Kocbek 1972: 57). Partisan happiness is also “a political phenomenon. Political in the sense in which politics is science and a skill for creating potential happiness. Partisanship is an organized hope for happiness, and fighters harbour such authentic hope. Everyone else partakes in it indirectly through them. Every partisan fighter is therefore in a specific sense happy. This feeling does not come simply from a sense of security derived from holding a gun, but comes just as much from the moral meaning derived from resisting violence, a resistance which is inevitably a form of release, which liberates and humanizes” (Kocbek 1972: 57–58). Partisanship as happiness is therefore something active and concrete, and Kocbek honored this happiness in words worth quoting:

Everyone has a right to be happy, if only because he is laying the ground for other people’s happiness. Moreover, true happiness is always direct; inscribed in human nature, this directness is essential to happiness as such. It is there, in the present, so we do not know anything of the blind, unconditional sacrifice practiced by the fascists. (Kocbek 1972: 58)

In static and motionless perseverance outside history, there cannot be any ethics; ethics exists only as *purity of dynamic man*. Activity relaxes man, as it also purifies him, and as late as 1973, when in many ways Kocbek had gone as far in his thinking as he could, he said in an interview that his “political engagement was always based on fundamental human inclinations” (Kocbek 1989: 268),³ so that already during the war, in *Comradeship*, he commended pure decision, which consists of my

³ An interview from 1973 was first published in *Revija 2000*, no. 6, pp. 3–6.

willingness to sacrifice my life if need be, and he resolutely opposed those who would eclipse the basic truth of life, saying: “Purity does not mean that I never dirty my hands with clay and dust. Purity lies in taking full and broad-hearted responsibility for your life. The worst crime is not in the act, but in giving up, remaining passive” (Kocbek 1972: 73).

After the war, Kocbek followed the changing times, recognizing that the world, due to technological developments, was becoming more and more one [unified], and that, in his words, “a planetary age had begun,” what in today’s language we would call globalization, and that humanity was facing new challenges. A new, planetary ethics was thus needed, and hence his concrete demand:

It is in this age that responsibility needs to assume total and global proportions, and above all become concrete. The recognition of the all-encompassing crisis of the world will lead to an appropriate universal measure. Then the nihilistic outlook of the present times will tread its final step, and at last become positive: it will force us to acknowledge our true essence, to realize that our being in the world is only a part of an a much larger unknown whole. We will begin to think and act ethically in a total way. (Kocbek 1972: 73)

To the question what this new ethics will be, Kocbek gives the following answer:

The ethics I have in mind are the ethics of interpersonal solidarity. Only joined humanity will be able to take up effective struggle against entropy and bring about a balance between nature as our biological reservoir and the creative powers of humankind. What I envision, therefore, is solidarity as an ethics of humanity and not as a socio-political creed. Solidarity not like a social sedative or a counter-revolutionary measure but a cohesive bond on a planetary scale. When I say “planetary,” I mean something fundamental, elementary, and concrete, something that has the potential of saving humanity and not only individual classes. Humanity as one body will emerge only if nations, states, peoples, classes, and individuals come together. The only shield against a catastrophe is greater closeness among all living beings. (Kocbek 1972: 73)

With ethics thus defined, we begin to see the absurdity of self-sufficiency. Recent history has, according to Kocbek, pronounced a death sentence on collective egoisms. Whenever and wherever people come together as people, there time congeals and history gains meaning.

Ethics is therefore akin to congealing time, and for the first time he felt this during the war.

The national liberation struggle has demonstrated an ethics of more cosmic than social dimensions. Time, then, indeed had meaning and direction, the future was bringing cohesion between various contemporaries. And whenever subsequently we would slacken in this tension, we would regress into our old, dated, and dubious mechanism of integration, where closeness is guided by interest. Revolution of a much higher and wider scale is therefore ahead of us, a transformation of relations, the creation of relational man. Interests will encompass the whole planet and humanity. Man will no longer pursue his own petty interests, but will constitute integral man. (Kocbek 1972: 274–75).

By relationality, Kocbek is undoubtedly speaking of our capacity for communication, capacity for nurturing as wide a relation with the world as possible, a point noted also by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) after the war, since “the mind itself is becoming a limitless desire for communication” (Kocbek 1972: 152), to be and become a citizen of the world when the maelstrom of war had only just subsided and many tragic consequences of the great absurdity were becoming apparent. Jaspers himself had only just escaped (American forces came only a few hours before his wife and he would have been deported to a concentration camp). After the war, Jaspers is constantly asking himself how to proceed from this bottomless nihilism and he sees the answer in humanism, understood as a means of effecting humanity. “Our capacity to communicate without inhibitions between ourselves” is crucial in nurturing it; it is precisely “the limitless readiness to communicate” that constitutes “the decision to embark on the path of humaneness” (Kocbek 1972: 274–75). These thoughts again resonate with what has emerged out of our own circumstances and unwittingly confirm our genuine cosmopolitan world-outlook, a capacity for the aforementioned universal communication that forms such an important post-war motive in Kocbek and his wider ethics of life; we are urged in other words to ask ourselves what indeed are our capacities for communication, so as not to sell ourselves short to the world and become mere chanters of universalisms. It is precisely here that Kocbek’s legacy deserves to be built upon.

Kocbek is aware that “our identification with people around us will not automatically gain us access to the new stage in history, but it will alleviate our pains with small and partial interests and broaden our interpersonal freedom. We will have to discover authentic man and his authentic needs” (Kocbek 1989: 275). What does he mean by authentic? Where lies the emphasis? When Kocbek is speaking of “authentic man”—again from an anthropological and not psychological perspective—he foregrounds man’s authentic needs. In our context, judging from Kocbek’s entire oeuvre, it is clear that one of the most authentic human needs is the

need for freedom. This need cannot be substituted by any other, no matter how refined or technologically perfected it may be, such as for example the phenomenon of today's consumerism. Modern democracies are highly adept at creating needs that are false, mere substitutes, which have driven out to the point of absurdity that which Kocbek would consider truly authentic. Kocbek's ethics of life warns us not to mistake unreal needs for authentic ones.

The woes of our past that have left an indelible mark on our psyche do not always allow us to see a way out of this past, but Kocbek, with the help of Ernst Bloch—Kocbek introduced Bloch's thought in Slovenia—and his notion of "all-redemptive hope" (Kocbek 1962: 258) urges us to take the past from the future and not the future from the past. Any confrontation with the past on the level of political propaganda is misplaced since it will only perpetuate what should never have happened in the first place. The world in which we live is also the world we create, and ethics is to do with human essence, an inner principle, with which we embark on our exodus into the world, into society, among other people, and when we try to "capture" Kocbek's stance as an ethical image, we are shown that nothing centers life more than ethics. In many ways past examples are useless when faced with the overarching ethical question what is to be done. What is entailed in an ethical or unethical act is not so much the goal as it is the means of reaching that goal.

The burden of the war generation has been passed onto us, and it is more than clear that we should not stand in condemnation of those who have opted for survival in the most terrible war conditions, for this was a generation who, faced with a decision, did after all decide on its own—perhaps more radically than ever before in our history. That many, like Kocbek, have first and foremost tried to act ethically, is as much a part of their greatness as it should be of ours that in a post-revolutionary age which has condemned the post-war terror on both sides (Premk 2005) we do not disavow the ethical greatness of the National Liberation Struggle (NOB), the revolution and their many precious achievements.

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