

Life circle, time and the self in Antoni Kępiński's conception of information metabolism

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The term 'information metabolism' is one of the key concepts put forward by the great Polish psychiatrist Antoni Kępiński. In this biological-philosophical approach, the fundamental feature of life is the exchange of energy and information with the environment. The exchange of information, or information metabolism, is exceptionally well developed in a human being. Thanks to it, man is able to maintain contact, in the broad sense, with the external environment, and to experience the sense of the self. This concept of metabolism basically allows Kępiński to account for many psychopathological disorders like schizophrenia and depression. Some problems with schizophrenic and manic-depressive subject's experience pertaining to temporal experiences are presented. Kępiński's concept of "the rhythm of life" is explained in the context of contemporary philosophy of mind and the phenomenological tradition of psychopathology.

Key words: informational metabolism, life circle, self

Antoni Kępiński (1918–1972) was a famous Polish thinker, one of the most outstanding figures in the Polish cultural history during the second half of the 20th century. His name was linked with the tradition of the Polish school of philosophy of medicine and humanistic psychiatry. For Kępiński, the general philosophical approach to human being is based on biological and evolutionary assumptions and related to the original concept of energetic-informational metabolism. In his work, Kępiński connected the subjective and the social levels of experience, human being-in-the-world, with biological, even thermodynamical aspects of our relations with the environment. The proposal of psychophysical unity, a kind of holism, is probably based on his clinical practice. As a psychiatrist, Kępiński made an effort to reconcile medico-scientific objectivism with therapeutical involvement and empathic attitude. Complexity, different rhythms and dimensions of human life were especially visible in the light of psychopathology. Schizophrenia, depression, or psychopathy raised the question of the full and healthy existence. This medical syndrome "labels" gave an opportunity to conceptualize the ways of being in the world. For the Polish psychiatrist, the main task was to contribute to what some medical terms really meant in behavioural, experiential and existential terms.

The conception of energetic-informational metabolism occupies the central position in Kępiński's work. It emphasizes human belonging to the animal world. Each living organism is the result of interactions with the environment. Living creatures cannot exist without the environment and both are bond together in behaviour. A biological system is able to maintain its characteristic organization for a relatively long period of time. Thus, each organism is an

autonomous system. Living beings are half-open systems which keep their complex organization far from equilibrium. They are self-organizing systems which Maturana and Varela called an autopoietic system (Maturana, Varela 1980).

The world and the organism determine each other; the organism–environment boundary must be permeable to some extent. Even language belongs to the utionary history of the human being. It constitutionally depends, like all human activities, on the physiological processes of our body and sometimes on large-scale technological systems. But only through language human beings are able to explain their experience in living and assimilate them to the inter-subjective social world.

The energetic part of metabolism consists of two laws and concerns thermodynamical conditions of keeping the balance and harmony between the organism and the environment. The first biological law deals with retaining the life of organisms. It focuses on the biological mechanisms responsible for protecting and preserving an individual existence at all costs, even at the cost of others. The second biological law is concerned with preserving the life of the species, it has a more pro-social attitude. The basis for these two biological laws is hidden in the genetic equipment of each individual organism. It gives the capability of surviving as individuals and species and keeping their integrity in spite of permanent change of the surroundings. But the attempt to grasp the specificity of human living in the world in terms of biological structures and functions is not enough. The world is basically shared with other people; in order to achieve a particular goal or restructure the environment, there is a need for external structures or resources (tools). However, for Kępiński some primordial symbols are present or deeply rooted in the animal world. He makes an attempt to find the primary sources of human essential (“real”) values, like egoism and love, in two biological laws of energetic metabolism.

“Informational metabolism” is a different term for human psyche. It consists of two strictly dependent layers, or parts: unconscious and conscious. The first part deals with the unconscious processes which are expressed by moods and the emotional colouring. On this layer we deal, on the one hand, with a vague emotional mood and, on the other hand, with more definite feelings. The unconscious area is not strictly integrated with consciousness, but they are not, like in psychoanalysis, the opposite forces which remain in the state of conflict. The former may be defined as a kind of pre-consciousness or *conditio sine qua non* of consciousness.

The second part of informational metabolism belongs to the conscious layer of our psyche. Its role is to create pictures (representations) of reality. Representations are not just reflections of objects in the environment. The external world is not just imprinted on the subject. They are rather useful models for coping with reality and for the possibilities of acting. The notion of informational metabolism does not implicate a kind of computationalism or representationism like in the classical cognitive sciences. This is rather a concept of embodied and environmental mind where knowing is strictly connected with action. Knowledge is not a kind of belief but an effect of practical experiential engagement in reality. On the biological level, some constitutive interdependence between the organism and the environment is always present. The organism takes up ordered energy and utilizes it to produce order by transforming the order energy into kinetic energy (movement), chemical substances and heat released to the natural world (entropy). For Kępiński, the boundary between the organism and the environment is always vague, and he prefers talking on the exchange of energy between these elements to describing it in the input–output terms. On the psychological level, the organism brings order into the chaotic mass of sensations only by exercising its own active powers. The

organism, which continually finds gratification without breaks, frustration or set-back, moves ahead without sufficient registering of experience. This is why, in the case of some delusions, ego grows excessively. It does not meet enough obstacles (because of the deficiency in some cognitive mechanism) and does not test its powers by endless solution of painful set-backs.

The author of *Schizophrenia* emphasizes that we are not able to understand human life without its subjective side – experience, which is influenced even by deep energetic processes. The conscious and preconscious minds have their own structure and temporality, with the central part responsible for the normal experience of voluntary or willed action – the self. We cannot understand our own experiences and internal psychical order without the self: “For the complex life processes, especially informational metabolism processes, to become an experience, engaged self is needed” (Kępiński 1981: 189). The self is a reference point for time and space coordinates and even for value hierarchy. However, conscious mind has no access to all the organism’s activities, and most of them appear in non-reflective and habitual forms.

Kępiński’s epistemology does not present human cognitive activity in terms of objective representation of reality and is rather critical to the scientific (natural) method of cognition. In his view, one of the basic aims of human activity is to impose man’s own internal order upon external reality, to materialize his own models / projects. Social structures, in turn, impose constraints and provide resources for the development of personality and everyday functioning. This form of interaction, or engagement in the environment, serves as a condition for subject’s autonomy-achieving. Only by deliberate action we are able to get an informational feedback necessary for working out an effective reality models and a real contact with the world. “The sense of reality refers to activity” (Kępiński 1981: 204).

The biological basis of our action and thinking is revealed in Kępiński’s considerations on the process of decision-making. He exposes a number of preconditions to be met even before the process of decision-making can begin. Controversially, this process is presented in terms of unconscious choice which only later meets more conscious elaboration. At the level of energetic metabolism, our organism presupposes a specific attitude toward the external world. It may be primarily an “open” attitude – “into-the-world” activity, or negative, withdrawal attitude – an “against-the-world” activity. Conscious processes are constitutionally dependent on our bodily capacities, they are based on primordial emotional attitude to the world. A strong emotional colouring may change the image of the world and even create its unreal, delusional form. Our feeling that we are free to choose or to control an exercise is compatible with the deep processes taking place in our brain, following processes that select amongst available options, in accordance with our current needs and goals. In the above description of human behaviour, it is possible to find some similarities between the Polish psychiatrist’s theory and the conception of the Russian psychologist Dimitry Uznadze who claimed that the subject was involved in the practice of conscious cognition when the smooth process of habitual forms of behaviour, which do not require the participation of the consciousness, ran into problems and encountered an obstacle (Uznadze 1966).

Like G. H. Mead in the first part of the 20th century, Kępiński understood human physiological capacities for the development of intelligence and reflective consciousness as partly the product of biological evolution. They both insisted that many psychological attributions are also the products of social evolution – processes of social experience and behaviour.

Kępiński presented an interesting and original concept of conscience. He claimed that the real basis for our conscience could be found in biology; it consists of energetic and vital elements which are effects of millions of years of evolution. The core of human morality is

rooted in human biology. Conscience is formed on the level of the first biological law as an expression of vital values like health and power. The second biological law is linked to the higher (spiritual) values like love, goodness and beauty. This real, or natural, hierarchy of values meets with a social sphere and sometimes grows into an incoherent shape divided into the real and the ideal images of the self. Kępiński emphasized that requirements of adaptation to the contemporary social life increasingly determine the nature of consciousness. Submission of the mind to life requirements contributes to the realization of instrumental and pragmatic values. This weakens ties with the lively emotional experience which, for Kępiński, was a deep source of moral values.

An important part of Kępiński's work was research into the capabilities of person's knowledge. It is possible to distinguish here two theoretical approaches: the oblique relation, based on the scientific model of cognition, and the horizontal relation with reference to the humanistic ("animistic") model of knowledge. Following the phenomenological perspective, Kępiński considered that the understanding of subjective phenomena has to be arrived at through empathy. It may be grasped by transferring oneself into the other individual's psyche. However, only very primordial emotions presented in nonverbal, extralingual elements of behaviour can be approached by empathy. Such direct cognition is triggered by the primitive biological mechanisms that we and other species have in common.

The author of *Schizophrenia* made an attempt to reconcile various exploratory frameworks especially referring to understanding *versus* explanation distinction. He would like the therapist to be involved in a particular condition of living, to understand exactly how his patient experiences the world. At the same time he celebrated objective and scientific endeavour in psychotherapy, which requires the therapist to be very steady and sure-footed, able to make consistent self-observation in a disciplined manner. This attitude was defined as an "ideal observer".

Kępiński claimed that man is basically a biological being subordinated to a variety of different biological rhythms. These rhythms may be controlled by conscious effort only to a limited degree. This made his conception similar to the psychodynamic vision of man. However, contrary to Freud, he did not want to confront the conscious and the unconscious parts of human psyche. We need to abandon the very idea of separating consciousness and unconsciousness, and struggle to present human being's manifestations in different actions and dimensions. Because even energetic elements of human metabolism have experiential aspects, Kępiński aimed to order the diversity of psychic life in a more systematic way. Focusing his research on schizophrenia and depression he, like the French psychiatrist Eugene Minkowski, showed how differently time may be experienced by different people. For him, human temporality had a periodical and linear character. In the strictly biological model, the human organism is involved in the oscillations of biological rhythms: building and destruction, pleasure and annoyance, dream and awaking, and hunger and satiation, sadness and joy, love and hate. From the linear time development, the organism is fighting for its own biological / energetic and psychological / informational integrity. It is tied with an inescapable perspective of senility and death.

Human temporality was analyzed by Kępiński in terms of a phenomenological analysis. It could not be grasped without a form of conscious experience, without the self as the central point of our psychological structure. "The self is a controlling centre of human experience" (Kępiński 1981: 198). Round the self, psychic life revolves in accordance with the time and space coordinates. The present self is the place where the lessons from the past are transformed

into positive action for the future. Kępiński describes how people may feel time collapsing, or stagnating. In the case of patients with depression there is no sense of open future, a person has no future. In these cases we may realize how fragile and dynamic the human agency is. It is based on the elementary feeling of the self (proto self), which finds an expression in "I can", "I feel" and "I think" statements¹.

Elżbieta Stawnicka supports Kępiński's theory of four subjective functions of the self (*Antoni Kępiński's Human Philosophy* 1999: 122):

1. Controlling and adaptive, in which the self, like the Freudian ego, coordinates and delivers the information proceeding from the body and environments.

2. Arranging and selective, expressed in the acts of free will and in the effort of the choice of a suitable behaviour.

3. The condition of personal identity: in spite changes in the dynamics of the psyche and in the environment itself.

4. The protective function of the self: the natural border between me and the world.

Kępiński speaks also about the self as an object of recognition, as the effect of the introspection and self-reflection, what he calls "self-portrait". Self-portrait is in general a distorted and partial image of the self. It is an effect of interaction with other people, social image and a kind of metaphysical projection of the ideal self into the world. Self-portrait disintegration might be a symptom of the illness development and sometimes a sign of an intensive personal or spiritual growth.

For Kępiński, the body itself, with its evolutionary acquired structure, is the source of conscience and moral laws. Paradoxically, his view is compatible in some dimensions with the Thomistic image of the human being as based on natural laws (in spite of the lack of theological and religious references). His holistic and humanistic approach was strengthened by his very genuine, caring and sincere attitude to his patients. After his death he became an unattainable paragon and authority for many generations of Polish psychiatrists and psychologists.

The concept of energetic-informational metabolism includes a positive model of human nature. In reference to psychology and psychiatry, Kępiński was making an attempt to overcome the reductionist and physicalist approach and, in spite of the biological-evolutional perspective, he was working on the phenomenological description of schizophrenic and depressive disorders.

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¹ The neural representation of the moment-to-moment state of the organism with respect to homeostasis is the foundation of what A. Damasio calls *Proto-self*.

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Gyvenimo ratas, laikas ir „aš“ Antonio Kępińskiego informacijos metabolizmo koncepcijoje

Santrauka

Straipsnyje pristatomos garsaus lenkų psichiatro A. Kępińskiego pažiūros. Sąvoka „informacijos metabolizmas“ – vienas iš raktinių A. Kępińskiego terminų. Jo biologiniu-filosofiniu požiūriu, pamatinė gyvenimo savybė yra energijos ir informacijos mainai su aplinka. Geba keistis informacija arba informacijos metabolizmas ypač gerai išplėtotas žmoguje. Jo dėka žmogus geba palaikyti ryšį su išorine aplinka plačiąja prasme ir patirti savo jausmus. Metabolizmo koncepcija leidžia Kępińskiui paaiškinti tokius psichopatologinius sutrikimus, kaip šizofrenija ir depresija. Kępińskiego sąvoka „gyvenimo ritmas“ aiškinama šiuolaikinės sąmonės filosofijos ir psichopatologijos fenomenologiniame kontekste.

Raktažodžiai: informacinis metabolizmas, gyvenimo ratas, patybė