

PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE



Man is a tragic animal. Not because of his smallness, but because he is too well endowed. Man has longings and spiritual demands that reality cannot fulfill. We have expectations of a just and moral world. Man requires meaning in a meaningless world.

—Peter Wessel Zapffe

Biography of Peter Wessel Zapffe

Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899–1990) is widely regarded as “Norway’s earliest eco-philosopher.” He was the first Norwegian thinker to develop a philosophical critique of man’s relationship with the environment. Zapffe was not only a philosopher, but also a writer, literary critic, humorist, environmentalist and alpine climber. He grew up in a rather bourgeois environment in Tromsø in northern Norway. His father, Fritz Zapffe, was known for being a close friend of polar explorer Roald Amundsen; he helped the latter with rations and other kinds of materials for his expeditions up to the polar areas. Peter Wessel Zapffe’s childhood was characterized by tough discipline. From early on this awoke in him a strong aversion against any type of authority.



Zapffe climbing at Kolsås.

Pressed by his father, Zapffe started studying law in Oslo in the interwar period (1918–25). During his university studies he taught himself mountain-climbing at Kolsås, a wooded mountain ridge in the municipality of Bærum, close to Norway’s capital city. Sparked by their mutual love of climbing activities, he became a lifelong friend of Arne Naess. Famously, when he took his lawyer exam in 1923, he performed one of the tasks completely on rhyme. Zapffe returned to Tromsø in 1925, where he worked for a period as a jurist. In the area around this Nordic city he successfully carried out more than twenty first-climbs. Thanks to many literary contributions and humorous drawings he became a noted member of the Norwegian climbing community.



Zapffe as a student, 25 years old.

In the 1930s Zapffe travelled back to Oslo, with a keen interest to study comparative literature. His re-discovery of Ibsen’s work in drama had motivated him to embark on pursuing a master’s degree. The thesis, however, gradually outgrew this format and historian of literature Fredrik Paasche recommended him to rework it into a full doctoral thesis. In the winter of 1940 Zapffe handed in his dissertation, entitled *Om det tragiske* (“On the Tragic”), for evaluation. With this, he established himself as one of the most original Norwegian philosophers of the twentieth century. One of the committee members was Arne Naess. After it had been through a round of drastic shortening, Zapffe would get his degree as Doctor of Philosophy the next autumn. The thesis didn’t only spark attention in academic circles; it was eventually published as a book (1941) and reprinted in several editions. The voluminous philosophical treatise of more than 600 pages has been re-published several times but has never been translated into English. Zapffe’s eco-philosophical thesis is that humans are the ultimate tragic being, because we have the capacity to realize that the earth would be a better place without us due to the nefarious effects we have on the environment. His central claim is that human beings need a fundamental meaning *of* life as a whole that transcends other interests. He insists that life is meaningless, since the meaning of life is fundamentally lacking. He asks questions like: why life? What is the point of it all? Zapffe published a six page summary of the basic ideas he put forth in his dissertation in “Det Sidste Messias,” which has been translated into English under the title “The Last Messiah.” Zapffe’s writings have been compared to those of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. A major influence in the development of Zapffe’s thinking was the philosophical pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer. He was interested in what he considered the objective tragedy. Zapffe’s essential point is that humans have, contrary to other mammals, a highly evolved consciousness. This is broadly considered to be a positive thing. We have evolved to see meanings and analyze everything around us. There is,

however, a backside to our ability to reason and analyze the world around us, according to Zapffe. It has given us the ability to understand what we are ourselves, and what our own role in the cosmos is. A role which seems meaningless in the larger scheme of things. With this ability we can also see the cruelty of life around us and the basic indifference of the universe. We can see how crude and brutal the force of natural selection is, the force that got us here in the first place. Our ability to see the world this way, is at the core deeply tragical, Zapffe held. Nevertheless, he also believed that humans should seek, even demand, meaning and justice. (Yet these are not to be found in the world since the universe is indifferent towards our needs.)

In his dissertation, Zapffe tried to explore “what it means to be a human being.” His point of departure was that for humans, the meaning of life is self-realization in the environment at hand. Unlike animals, human beings are not bound by instincts. They are equipped with a consciousness that enables them, among other things, to think abstractly. Through that, humans maintain a less restrained position to the environment they live in. We must presume, Zapffe held, that humans are the only species on Earth with a capacity for self-consideration. We have the ability to reflect on our particular circumstances and we can assess these in relation to those of other beings. We are not only able to adapt to a given environment, but thanks to our technical remedies we can even survive certain changes in our environment that would mean death for other creatures. Other organisms have abilities that correspond to the challenges that life poses to them: wings to fly with, sharp teeth, fast legs. Humans, however, have eaten from the *Tree of Knowledge* and acquired a “surplus in consciousness.”

Obviously, this freedom affords humans more options for self-realization compared to other animals. But these opportunities may be a burden as well. For humans may well aim to give expression to their abilities and talents (both in their free time and at work), there is always the looming possibility of a tragic out-

come. To Zapffe, the essence of the human tragedy is that the human being is utterly unsuited to his or her environment. We are a “noble vase in which fate has planted an oak,” he once said. In his doctoral dissertation he formulated this insight which would be leitmotif during his whole life. Zapffe asserted that human beings are overdeveloped in relation to the circumstances under which they live, and therefore fail to fit in with the natural world.

Next to Schopenhauer, Zapffe based part of his brand of pessimistic existentialism on the work of Baltic German biologist Jakob Johann von Uexküll (1864–1944). Each particular organism has its own *Umwelt* (from the German *Umwelt* meaning “environment” or “surroundings”), Uexküll held, consisting of functional components that represent the organism’s model of the world. This pertains to all the meaningful aspects of the world for any particular organism, i.e. water, food, shelter, potential threats, or points of reference for navigation. An organism creates and reshapes its own *Umwelt* when it interacts with the world. The *Umwelt* theory states that the mind and the world are inseparable, because it is the mind that interprets the world for the organism. According to philosopher Morten Tønnessen, this theory constitutes a central ingredient in Zapffe’s lifework; it is part of the biological outlook on which he built his existentialist ecophilosophy.

The year after Zapffe defended his doctoral dissertation a publication of a completely different kind saw the light, *Vett og uvett* (“Wits and witless”). In the course of time, this book would reach a far wider audience. *Vett og uvett* is a collection of humorous stories from northern Norway, edited by Zapffe and his friend Einar K. Aas. The bestselling book has subsequently been reprinted in several versions and is also put to drama.

In the 1930s, Zapffe built a cottage in the mountainous area of Lyngen, a municipality in Troms County, which he called Jægervann. Naess, who gave him a helping hand in the work, never hid the fact that Zapffe was a major source of philosophical inspiration to him.

Zapffe is especially known for his literary descriptions of climbing. In several essays and stories he speaks subtly and humorously of his escapades in nature. Arne Naess once gave the following characterization of Zapffe: “Climbing is as meaningless as life itself, he said, but it’s an excellent distraction.” His essay “Stetind,” on the mountain with the same name, first appeared in the 1937 yearbook of the Travel Association. The mountain is discussed as a giant, titan, majesty and horn of hell: “an anvil upon which the gods can hammer.”

After the Second World War, Zapffe, as a freelancer, taught an introductory course in philosophy at the University of Oslo. His publications in the post-war period covered several different topics. We mentioned already mountaineering. But he also wrote on fiction, philosophy, environmentalism, dramaturgy, culture, religion, and politics.

Several of Zapffe’s essays are collected in the 1969 book *Barske glæder* (“Rough joys”), among them this essay, “Stetind.” These selections are regarded today as classics; to the rest of the country, they opened up the world of the mountains of North Norway. Through his writings, Zapffe has united northern Norwegian humor with the clear thought and sharp pen of a thoughtful intellectual. Zapffe cherished his solitude and was skeptical of anything implying the need of formal organization. His first application for membership in the Norwegian Alpine Club was written almost as an anti-application. In it, he spoke ironically and deprecatingly of his climbing activities. The application was rejected. But later, when the club sent him an invitation to join, he thanked for it and said yes. “For that matter, mountain climbing isn’t a ‘sport’ at all,” Zapffe declared. “It is a Dionysian affirmation of life. It is the poor creeping human’s encounter with the wrathful scowl on the face of the earth. A Dante’s journey along the jaws of the Inferno, a stroke of arcing life over the silence born of stone.”

Zapffe was a “master of words,” writes Dag O. Hesen. His stories about life under the open sky are full of

burlesque humor and linguistic elegance. In *Barske glæder* he describes a sleeping bag as “an artificial fur, which man creeps in to sleep in an otherwise deathly climate.”

He wished mountains should remain intact, without human intervention. Even the markers for mountain hiking trails, the red T’s of the Norwegian Tourist Association, should be taken away. “A mountain trip with signs is something completely different from a trip without them.” Destruction of nature was treason. His opinions were strongly expressed in several of the book’s chapters such as “Farewell Norway” and “Parting with Gausta.” A characteristic statement of Zapffe is: “The mountain won’t adapt to humans, but humans are welcome in the mountains. They should just not leave any traces behind them.”



Portrait of Zapffe.

Zapffe had his own contributions to eco-philosophy. Zapffe was concerned that life in the mountains should be simple, but informative. When he looked across the landscape he was silent. This was not a time for endless chatting but rather for contemplation.



Above: Peter Wessel Zapffe on an ice floe.

Below: Zapffe resting.

Zapffe has also written several literary works, sometimes with controversial content. During his entire working life Zapffe turned down offers to accept permanent employment. He wanted space and peace to do his own work. Nevertheless, for a number of years he did teach Logic at the University of Oslo, preparing students for tests that would be part of their *examen philosophicum*. In 1966 he even published his own textbook in Logic, *Den logiske sandkasse* (“The sandbox of logic”), in which he presented, peppered with his characteristic dry humor, the “mysteries” of the subject to the uninitiated.

Zapffe published several collections of essays, in addition to numerous articles in various journals and newspapers. At the age of 87, he published his last book, *Hvordan jeg ble så flink* (“How I became so clever”). In the following year, 1987, he received Norway’s *Fritt Ord* (“Freedom of Expression”) award. The city of Tromsø honored him by naming a mountain after him. Zapffe died on the 12th of October, 1990.

