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## The Basic Approaches to the Value of Life in Bioethical Discourse

### [Podstawowe podejścia do wartości życia w dyskursie bioetycznym]

**Streszczenie:** Autorzy zajęli się badaniem rozumienia życia w dyskursie bioetycznym, w aksjologicznych uwarunkowaniach w odniesieniu do współczesnych dociekań w tym zakresie. W obecnych warunkach kryzysowych wartość życia jako unikalnego zjawiska przejawu bytu życia niezmiernie wzrasta. Całą różnorodność punktów widzenia i podejść do określania wartości życia w przedmiotowym dyskursie można analizować z perspektywy dwóch oglądów – etyki świętości życia i etyki jakości życia. W tej debacie autorzy dostrzegają ogromny potencjał naukowy, pozwalający na rozwój doktryny bioetycznej przez kształtowanie norm moralnych i imperatywów ludzkich zachowań, jednocześnie dbając o wyznaczanie granic ludzkiego wpływu na sposoby i formy egzystencji każdego z nas.

**Summary:** The article is devoted to the study of the understanding of life in bioethical discourse, axiological determinants of understanding “life” in modern bioethical research. The authors note that in the current crisis conditions, the value of life as a unique phenomenon of the manifestation of the beingness of the living increases immeasurably. All the variety of points of view and approaches to determining the value of life in bioethical discourse can be grouped into two main approaches, which can be conditionally called the ethics of sacredness (sanctity) of life and the ethics of the quality of life. Being oppositional in their views to each other, these approaches have a great scientific potential, allowing the development of bioethical doctrine through the formation of moral norms and imperatives of human behavior and the

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establishment of the boundaries of human influence on the ways and forms of existence of the living.

**Słowa kluczowe:** bioetyka; życie; wartości; dyskurs; świętość życia; jakość życia.

**Keywords:** bioethics; life; values; discourse; sanctity of life; quality of life.

## Introduction

The tragic events of the recent months in European history, taking place on the territory of Ukraine, make us take a fresh look and actualize the value of human life as the supreme value, which was granted to living beings on Earth. The very phenomenon of life appears as a special earthly phenomenon that deserves special respect, which is manifested through its sanctity or its saving in cases of a threat to its security.

Life is the only biologically possible way of human existence in the world. Its value lies not only in the features of existing biological forms and various manifestations, which, nevertheless, are a unique phenomenon of being in their entirety, but also in the possibility of self-reflection, conscious experience of the phenomenon itself and the ability to form symbolic pictures of the existential world on this basis. The philosophical reflection of “life”, according to Heinrich Rickert, should proceed from the fact that “Life should be placed in the center of the world whole, and everything philosophy has to interpret must be relative to life. It appears as the key to all the doors of a philosophical building. Life is declared the own “essence” of the world and at the same time an organ of its cognition. Life itself should philosophize from itself without the help of other concepts, and such a philosophy should be directly experience” (Rickert H., 1998).

## Presentation of the main research

Bioethical discourse brings value characteristics to the reflection of “life”, pointing to the moral component of understanding the unique phenomenon of being. Bioethical discourse is marked by questions related to the responsibility of the individual in relation to his or her own life and the lives of others. The central place in these issues is occupied by the problem of criteria by which it is possible to determine the degree of value of various manifestations of the living in general, and the value of the life of each person, in particular.

Understanding the value of human life is usually acquired by a person from his or her own experience. On the one hand, it is a manifestation of the instinct of self-preservation, pushing the living person to the maximum elimination of the danger to one's own life and health. In addition, there is an extensive system of rules and norms established in society, many of which are mandated by the state to ensure the responsibility to protect and save human life. These rules and norms apply to all people (prohibition of harming the life and health of third parties; providing moral and / or physical assistance to persons whose life and health are in danger), and there are specific professional duties of special groups of people (for example, doctors, firefighters), as well as moral criteria for the behavior of certain social groups or individuals (for example, representatives of certain religious movements, individuals professing the philosophy of "reverence for life").

However, an important point should be noted that the same human experience also demonstrates the opposite course of actions on the preservation of life, examples of which are self-sacrifice (deprivation of life in the name of another higher goal) or suicide (departure from life due to a deep mental shock, loss of interest in life, loss of the meaning of existence). In the case of both self-sacrifice and suicide, it turns out that in each such specific case there is a higher good for the individual than human life. The very act of leaving life is associated in an individual precisely with the presence of a more valuable phenomenon in his or her being than life itself.

This detail in our study is important and necessary, since it allows us to record the possibility and the presence of values more significant than life itself, both in the public and in the individual worldview. At the same time, the presence of such a value in an individual or in the public consciousness is rather an exception than the dominant in the value scale. The value of human life is the one we recognize unconditionally.

Keeping in mind these features and the specifics of human consciousness, we would like to focus our efforts on the analysis of the value of life as the supreme value among the moral imperatives presented in the bioethical discourse as the purpose of our study.

It should be noted that bioethics is the most important direction in the implementation of the value paradigm in the study of the phenomenon of life. We propose to consider it as a special branch of scientific knowledge that arose in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is focused on the study and analysis of the morality of human actions, primarily in the field of biomedical activities (Horban O. & Martych R., 2018). As we have previously emphasized, we see the main task of

bioethics in answering questions about the boundaries of the existence of the living and determining the moral possibilities of influencing these boundaries on the basis of the theory of values, that is, through the prism of moral norms and imperatives (Horban O. & Martych R., 2017, p. 101).

An important methodological basis for the analysis of the main approaches to the value of life in bioethics is I. Kant's doctrine of values. An outstanding German thinker substantiated the humanistic nature and developed the universal meaning of value. I. Kant's analysis of axiological issues is based on the categories of duty and good will, which form the foundation of the moral imperative and ensure the rationality of people's actions (Kant I., 1965, p. 211–310). Value, according to Kant, exists as a property of a rational personality in its relation to the world. The moral value of an act is determined not in its consequences, or in the principle of conduct, but solely in the manifestation of good will. It is valuable in a person in itself, regardless of whether it brings external benefits. Good will is determined by a self-imposed moral law. A person can be forced to fulfill it only by oneself. A person of good will is the one who makes decisions solely on the basis of their moral value, who accepts moral attitudes in themselves as reasons for controlling their own behavior.

Good will, according to Kant, is so important for the proper existence of a person that its appearance is the true purpose of the mind. Based on the nature of the assessment of goals, all values are divided into absolute and relative. Therefore, all benefits that exist outside of our good will are subjective, and their value is relative. The objective goal, according to Kant, may be the person, that is, such a rational being, which, unlike a thing, is the goal in itself, and its existence has an absolute value (Kant I., 1991, p. 268–269).

In essence, the humanistic interpretation of I. Kant's categorical imperative is that people see each other as a goal in the form of humanity, as a set of properties that manifest themselves in their rational behavior based on good will. In addition, I. Kant saw in humanity a duty to the development of a human. As a goal in itself, humanity in a person requires respect that corresponds to an absolute value.

A significant contribution to the development of the theory of values was made by the famous German philosopher Max Scheler, who argued with Kant and the neo-Kantians. M. Scheler's doctrine of values is important for us, because he managed to organically incorporate it into his own philosophical concept. M. Scheler's idea about the

special position of human in the Cosmos is one of the most fundamental attempts to explore the phenomenon of life and its value as an object of philosophical anthropology. He set himself the task of giving the essential concept of human, going beyond natural science definitions, including the entire spiritual component of human existence in the phenomenon under consideration, identifying it with the sphere of human “living” in general. Therefore, M. Scheler substantiated the essential-phenomenal properties of the living, which are “self-movement, self-formation, self-limitation in spatial and temporal terms” (Scheler M., 1988, p. 33–34).

According to M. Scheler, value is given to us exclusively in phenomenological experience, hence his desire to emphasize the richness and differentiation of the world of values, which has many types and complex hierarchization. The philosopher distinguishes between values that belong directly to the individual, such as the value of life itself, moral values, and the values of things. Differentiating values according to their content, the philosopher built a hierarchical structure of vital, hedonistic, spiritual and religious values, with the latter at the top. M. Scheler raised separately distinguished moral values that appear in situations where a person chooses or implements a “thing-value” (*Sachwerte*) from a higher hierarchical group in the act to a special kind of values (Scheler M., 1973, p. 200). Religious values are defined as the highest, because, according to M. Scheler, they are the values of the individual, which is a value in itself. The philosopher calls such a person “ens amans” – a person who loves. Therefore, the criterion for experiencing values, according to M. Scheler, is love as the desire to manifest higher values as opposite to hatred as a movement from higher values to lower ones, which underlies resentment.

Speaking about the value of life, the philosopher developed the levels of the vital organization of the living. These levels manifest themselves from the foundation in the form of a “sensory impulse” (*Gefühlsdrang*), which is inherent in the plant world, through the stage of instinct formation, to the level of the emergence of associative memory, and, finally, to the presence of intelligence. Despite the unique features of each of these levels, only a person, as M. Scheler emphasizes, “combines all the essential steps of existence in general, and in life particular... All nature comes to the concentrated unity of its being in them” (Scheler M., 1988, p. 37). At the same time, what makes a human being a human is not reducible to one biological evolution of life. M. Scheler affirms the opposite of life to the very principle of humanizing a human. Life and spirit are radical opposites in M. Scheler’s concept.

M. Scheler's views on the phenomenon of the living made it possible to form a phenomenological axiology, based on which a person's life is determined by the feeling, preference or rejection of certain values, and their cultivation forms the very atmosphere of human existence. In fact, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, M. Scheler laid down the idea of the value of the human person as an ethical category within the framework of the general theory of values, thereby predetermining the theoretical foundations of the value of life, which were used later, including in bioethical discourse.

One of the fundamental problems of modern bioethics is the problem of life as a value. In modern bioethical discourse, two main approaches to the analysis of this problem have been formed. The first approach can be called the ethics of sacredness (sanctity) of life or life as the highest value (sanctity of life), the second is the ethics of quality of life.

According to the concept of sanctity, human life has a special value. Each person's life is unique and therefore equally valuable. The sacredness of life provides for the attitude to the phenomenon of life as an exceptionally significant object, which has eternal value and, on this basis, requires a reverent attitude towards it. Based on this approach, the value of life is postulated as an unchanging and absolute value that retains its value under any circumstances and does not depend on external conditions. The value of life also does not depend on its characteristics or on the opportunities for its implementation that it provides to different people. Adherents of the concept of the sacredness of life consider its value as absolute. That is, it cannot be conditioned by anything other than the cause that gave rise to it. They also consider the value of human life to be incomparable, in the sense that one's life cannot be more or less valuable than another's. At the same time, the phenomenon of life can possibly be compared with other values, but at the same time it must be placed at the top of their hierarchy. This approach in bioethics is most vividly and fully represented by religious discourse (Horban O. & Martych R., 2020).

According to the concept of "quality of life", a true human life should have certain "qualities", therefore, not all states of organismic life need to be maintained. It is assumed that there should be some criteria by which it is possible to decide where medical care should be provided, and where it can be stopped (or not started at all). Within the framework of this system of views, there is an attempt to introduce a special concept of "personal life" into the modern bioethical discourse along with the concept of "life of the organism" and "life of the body", "biological life", which are synonymous to it. With this approach, the concept of "life of the body" is only a basic

condition for a higher quality level of beingness of the living, “the life of the personality”. And if a given human organism lacks certain qualities, it becomes possible to deny a moral status, i.e. this human’s status of a person, to such a life.

Among the bioethical problems, the most controversial one is the problem of making life easier for a person, including physical suffering during illness. Supporters of the sanctity of life approach are mainly represented by religious philosophers and theologians. To perceive all the benefits of civilization, which provide, if necessary, a more comfortable life, or not is determined by the dogma itself. Considering only Christianity in our case, we can state updated approaches to bioethical problems. This is especially remarkable in Protestantism. Protestantism, focused on the autonomy of the individual, moral autonomy, raises these postulates to the fundamental principles of respect for the autonomy of the patient. In this case, the ethics of life is reduced to the ethics of responsibility, rooted in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

As interpreted by Catholic philosophers and theologians, the concept of the sanctity of life strongly forbids euthanasia, considering it as the murder of an innocent person. The supporters of the sanctity of life see the reason for the emergence of the very fact of euthanasia in the general moral crisis that humanity has faced. Important elements of this crisis are the inclination of modern humanity towards utilitarianism, moral relativism and the existential problems of modern people. The consequence of such a crisis is negative changes in the consciousness of the doctor, when, being not devoid of mercy, he or she tries to help the hopelessly ill in the simplest and fastest way – by killing the patient (Ochmański W., 2007, p. 82). Criticizing euthanasia independent of the will, supporters of this approach point to the opponents’ incorrect understanding of human nature. In their opinion, an objective vision of a person is one in accordance with which there is no such existential state of a person in which his or her moral destiny and the possibility of a minimal fulfillment of the sense of existence would be subject to liquidation (May W., 2013, p. 259). The legalization of voluntary euthanasia is criticized because of the incorrect understanding or absolutization of freedom, its identification with desire. It also highlights the incorrect interpretation of the meaning of human suffering. Suffering can help a person in his or her moral and spiritual development, mobilize for deep spiritual, in particular, religious experiences, give rise to love and compassion among those who care for the sufferer (Ślipko T., 2012, p. 319–323).

Supporters of the concept of quality of life, in turn, provide arguments for the admissibility of euthanasia independent of the will of a human.

Since a living being in this case is unable to express its thoughts and will, it cannot be considered a person, and therefore cannot acquire the status of a “victim”. Due to the support of the idea of low value of a purely biological form of manifestation of human life, euthanasia independent of the will for organ transplantation is also allowed. Such a state of life (permanent vegetative state) is equated to the status of a dead person and is practically identified with the autopsy of corpses. In this case, the destruction of the individual in the process of euthanasia is permissible, since life ceases to be worth living (McMahan J., 2002, p. 447–449).

Supporters of the quality of life approach name the following among the main arguments for voluntary conscious euthanasia: 1) an autonomous choice of a person in the right to manage oneself; 2) the right of the individual to a dignified death; 3) the right to a utilitarian calculation of the benefits and losses received by the individual as a result of the extension of his or her existence, which may not be worth the effort and suffering received (Singer P., 1996, p. 194–195). Autonomous decision is the main reason for supporters of the right to euthanasia, because they see it as an essential characteristic of the individual, the basis of his or her dignity.

The issues of life and death are actualized in the bioethical discourse not only as the conscious consent of the subject to the termination of life, but also in cases of artificial termination of pregnancy, where the subject of deprivation of life is a child, even if it is still in the embryonic phase of development. Despite the fact that euthanasia is associated with the end of life, and abortion with its beginning, they raise a single ethical problem, namely the termination of life and its values.

Adherents of the ethic of the sacredness of life give arguments against the permissibility of abortion on the basis of the idea of the potentiality of being a person as a basis for giving the embryo a moral status equivalent to the status of a person. The essence of this idea is that, despite the absence of such personality traits as individuality, rationality, consciousness, autonomy in the prenatal stage of embryo’s existence, it already has the inclinations for their development, acquiring a status equivalent to personal in this regard. Therefore, the embryo has an active potentiality for being a personality, that is, hidden specific abilities that are actualized at a certain time under the influence of exclusively internal factors. Fertilization is recognized as the only “starting point”, the moment of launching the mechanism of further changes. All further stages of human development are already relatively insignificant (Holub G., 2011, p. 113).

The argument about the presence of embryo's personality status is subjected to quite constructive criticism. Therefore, a supporter of the sanctity of life approach, R. Dworkin, proposes the idea of the intrinsic value of life. It is a unique phenomenon that people should respect and defend as the most amazing phenomenon of being, just because it exists (Dworkin R., 1995, p. 73).

Adherents of the quality of life ethics reject the argument about the beginning of personal existence at the embryonic stage of life development in issues of abortion. Abortion does not violate the interests of the unborn subject, since their interests as such do not exist due to the lack of consciousness, rationality and autonomy. The fetus is below the threshold of respect and behavior towards it should be regulated by other interests. The emphasis is on the rights of the mother's personality, including the protection of her life and health. A woman is considered to have ownership of her body and the right to choose between giving birth or aborting the life she has conceived. The embryo in this case is understood as part of the woman's body, and therefore comes into her disposal, like any other element of her body (Harris J., 1985, p. 158).

Supporters of the ethics of the quality of life also provide arguments justifying abortion as self-defense, for example, in a situation involving rape (Thomson J., 1971).

## Conclusions

In conclusion, it should be noted that in its essence, the modern anthropological crisis is a crisis of the ethical foundations of human society. Utilitarianism, moral relativism and the existential problems of a modern human lead to crisis consequences in the form of negative changes in human consciousness. The phenomenon of life as a unique value of human existence also undergoes rethinking. Modern bioethical discourse includes a wide range of opinions and points of view on the value of life. All of them can be grouped into two so-called approaches: the ethics of the sacred or the sanctity of life and the ethics of the quality of life. Being oppositional in their views, these approaches have a great scientific potential which allows the development of bioethical doctrine through the formation of moral norms and imperatives of human behavior and the establishment of the boundaries of human influence on the ways and forms of existence of the living.

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