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## **Human life – the theological perspective**

### **Introduction**

What does the theologian know about life? At the first glance, the question may seem so general as to border on banality. After all, it would be impossible to compress such a complex topic into a single academic article. On the other hand, however, a general theological reflection on human life, even if barely touching on several selected aspects, may make sense, especially if it fits within a larger volume, like the present one, on the protection of human life.

Anyone attempting to tackle the problem of the meaning of human life ought to realize that he will have to face not only empirical facts and assertions about human life, but the questions about the very sense of life. Theologian must not shrink from any of these. Of course, he has at his disposal resources proper to his discipline, that is the Revelation, the Magisterium of the Church, the heritage of philosophical and ethical discourse of the past ages, and the enormous human, individual and social experience. His theological reflection can assume the form of a well informed discourse between theology and various fields of human research (especially empirical ones) into many important aspects of human life.

In order to avoid watering this vast topic down, two restrictions were adopted for the needs of the present essay. We shall not concern ourselves with the phenomenon of life as such, but rather limit our discussion to human life. Not on the level of the life of human organs, tissues or cells, but the entire living human being as the unique fusion of biological and psychological functions and processes. Hence

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the frequent usage of the phrase *the living man* in this text. Another restriction will affect these areas of theological reflection that do not acknowledge theological and moral perspective as their primary concern. The bulk of the essay consists of four main theological and anthropological premises, considered important to the discussion on the protection of human life. The lead question of the presented essay may be formulated as follows: What are the ethical consequences of a general theological reflection on human life?

### **Life is not a supplement to existence**

Upon even a cursory lecture of some of the more readily available writings on human life it is hard to resist an impression that their authors seem to suggest that life occupies a rather supplementary position in regard to human existence, in that the former is nothing more than an additional feature of the latter, giving it – at best – an extra value. In this essay we will present a couple of arguments against pronouncements of this kind. The first of these is that “human life” as such does not really exist, unless one means the living cells containing human genomes. Real existence is the attribute of the real, living human being. It follows that one cannot *have* life, in the sense of owning it; one can only *live*. In similar vein one cannot be the *master of his own life* without being the *master of himself* at the same time. It is noteworthy in this connection to clarify some of the not so uncommon misconceptions in the public discourse on the meaning and value of human life. *Transmission of life* is far too complex and important a matter to be reduced to having to suffer a comparison with the olympic torch relay, which transports the flame from one torch to another. In the moment of fertilization a new life is begun, the existence of which far surpasses the “life” of the egg cells. Seen from the theological perspective, transmission of life amounts to the cooperation of man with his Creator in calling into existence of a new and unique human being. By the same token, *concern for* and *protection of life* implies more than concern for one or another dimension of human life. After all, what is really at stake here is not concern for safeguarding one particular value, or principle, from among others, allegedly equally important and deserving attention and care, but concern for *the most fundamental value of all: the existence itself*, without which the very prospect of concern for and realisation of all other values would have to operate in a vacuum. To take the argument a step further, contempt for life always means contempt for man – that is, both for humanity as the whole and for every particular human being. When seen in this light, it becomes obvious that we cannot speak of *taking human life* as if it were a mere perturbation in the course of man’s life, a manifestation of a minor deviation in human nature, present with us from time immemorial. Nothing of the sort. Taking one’s life means irrevocable destruction of the earthly existence of the human being.

In the light of what was argued above, the proclamation of the value of man's temporal life here on earth is highly commendable. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical letter *Evangelium vitae* got to the very core of the matter:

The loftiness of [...] supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life even in its temporal phase. Life in time, in fact, is the fundamental condition, the initial stage and an integral part of the entire unified process of human existence. [...] After all, life on earth is not an "ultimate" but a "penultimate" reality; even so, it remains a sacred reality entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility and brought to perfection in love and in the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters<sup>1</sup>.

Describing human life as a sacred reality, the pope places it in the context of man's call to eternity, remembering that "[for (...) faithful (...)] life is changed, not ended"<sup>2</sup>.

This eschatological perspective renders the sharp distinction between man's temporal sojourn on earth and his post-mortem existence impossible to maintain. The former must be acknowledged as the initial stage leading to the latter, extending beyond the barrier of the biological death. It cannot go unremarked though that this initial stage of human life, extremely precious and absolutely indispensable if it is to lead man into eternity, is nevertheless not *the* most precious thing on earth; it is not *the absolute* value. True, it must be recognised, protected and preserved as critically important for any other values to be recognised, protected and preserved in their turn, or for any good achieved, but it is still penultimate; it remains subject to man's ultimate fate, the prospect of which which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence.

### Human body participates in the dignity of man

Philosophers have struggled with the unintelligibility of the human nature for ages. Blaise Pascal, echoing St Augustine<sup>3</sup>, lamented that of all created things, it is man, that mixture of spirit and body, which he least understands: "Man is to himself the most wonderful object in nature; for he cannot conceive what the body is, still less what the spirit is, and least of all how a body should be united to a spirit. This is the consummation of his difficulties, and yet it is his very being"<sup>4</sup>.

Human beings are endowed with powers and properties not found anywhere else in nature. They are fundamentally unlike any other material creatures. Man has conscious knowledge of his own existence in space and time. He enjoys the ability to use his mental faculties to exercise free choices on the strength of rational arguments rath-

<sup>1</sup> EV 2.

<sup>2</sup> Preface for the Dead I.

<sup>3</sup> Św. Augustyn, *O państwie Bożym*, przeł. i oprac. W. Kornatowski, Warszawa 1977, XXI, 10.

<sup>4</sup> B. Pascal, *Pensées*, transl. by W.F. Trotter, New York 1941, *Section II: The Misery of Man without God*, 72.

er than upon the urgings of his physiological impulses or personal desires. He has both the potential and obligation to assume responsibility for his own actions. Classic anthropology ascribes possession of such properties to human soul, for they are distinct – in kind rather than degree – from the purely corporal ones, setting man apart from the rest of the created matter. Man is the corporal and spiritual unity. Unfortunately, many authors seem to have no qualms about stripping man of all this spirituality and leaving him subject to purely material processes alone. Opinions of this kind arise from the chasm that has opened up between the Post-Cartesian dualism and classic metaphysics, the former being taken over and expanded by some of the investigative methods in the empirical sciences. As yet, there has been little sign of rapprochement between the two<sup>5</sup>. The accumulated body of knowledge about the working of the human brain has unveiled many its hitherto hidden organic components with a potential to influence, or even condition, certain conscious and free activities of man. Tremendously important as this knowledge is, it nevertheless has not been able to demonstrate the fallaciousness of the age-old conviction of man that his psychological expressions of the higher order must have a spiritual source<sup>6</sup>.

Though the reflection on human nature is still far from reaching any firm conclusions, the theologian abides by the statement that “though made of body and soul, man is one”<sup>7</sup> (*corpore et anima unus*); the corporal and spiritual unity. Some dualistic concepts, both ancient and modern ones, treat body as a mere instrument in the service of man’s spirit/mind. But it cannot be so. Humanity cannot be explained exclusively in terms of material features and processes of various levels of complexity, as proposed by different kinds of monism, especially materialistic monism. Theological reflection, while strongly defending the reality of dual, i.e. corporal and spiritual dimensions of man, argues for their essential unity rather than one or another kind of coexistence. This stance has profound implications in that it thoroughly rejects speculations of the dualistic anthropology as to the alleged difference between “human being” and “human person”, which accord value to any given human life on condition that it can demonstrate possession of certain characteristics proper to the human person. According to this brand of dualism, human dignity is not intrinsic to human life; it is the value added only. When man fails to meet the supposed criteria of his humanity, he loses his title to human dignity. Human beings who are not able to satisfy these criteria do not constitute any real value. They may be accorded any worth only if some other fully fledged human beings judge it proper or desirable for their own interest.

This way of reasoning stems from the supposition that man can completely transcend his own corporeality. True, man *has the body*, in a sense, since he can con-

<sup>5</sup> T. Pröpper, *Theologische Anthropologie*, vol. 1, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2011, p. 119, n. 101.

<sup>6</sup> On the present state of the debate between philosophy, theology and neurology about an accurate concept of the human mind and, by the same token, an adequate anthropological vision, see *Mózg – umysł – dusza. Spór o adekwatną antropologię*, red. K. Jasiński, Z. Kieliszek, M. Machinek, Olsztyn 2014.

<sup>7</sup> GS 14.

sciously control its movements and use it in his communication with others (like in the so-called “body language”). But, most of all, man *is the body* and he cannot fully and effectively free himself of it. The body participates in the dignity of its bearer, the subject. Hence whatever one does with or to his own body, he does it to himself in his entirety. Conversely, whatever one does with or to anyone’s else body, he does it to that entire person. It is fully legitimate to state that lack of due respect or aggression against one’s fellow human being constitutes a direct offense to his human dignity. Every living human being deserves exactly the same respect and protection from the very beginning of his life to its natural end, regardless of any conceivable circumstances. That protection does not begin sometime after his actual birth, nor ceases with the irrevocable break-up of his psychic personality, which may occur some time before the actual biological death.

### Human nature is capable of discerning a moral message

Human nature does not exist in the same way that material objects do. It is an abstract concept. Strictly speaking, human nature exists only in the form of the concrete, living human being. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to use this concept for the sake of our present discussion on the theological and moral significance of the human corporeality. Evolutionism, understood here not so much as a branch of biology concerned with a scientific enquiry, but rather this particular brand of anthropology that evokes evolutionistic manner of argument, makes a bold claim to have rendered any talk of the teleological dimension of human existence invalid. Its proponents argue that since human nature is a direct product of the evolution process and a chance sequence of incidents governed by the laws of physics<sup>8</sup>, inquiries into normative qualities of the human nature do not make much sense.

As indicated above, such opinion cannot aspire to being based on the direct data from biology and anthropology, because these fields of study can explain only some biological mechanisms and describe the physical and biological processes in the evolution of the universe. As empirical sciences, they cannot invalidate the question concerning the meaning of the human nature for the simple reason that the possible answers lie outside the scope of science<sup>9</sup>.

Theological reflection does not question empirical results. It only cautions against crediting them with capacity to deliver exhaustive answers to questions on the sense of the human nature, including the normative sense. Joseph Ratzinger said that though

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<sup>8</sup> The whole idea that chance, which evolutionism elevates to the rank of irrefutable proof against purposefulness of creation, is ambiguous. See F. Euvé, *Darwin i chrześcijaństwo*, transl. K. Chodacki, Kraków 2010, pp. 127–130.

<sup>9</sup> See M. Machinek, *Ewolucjonizm jako wyzwanie dla chrześcijańskiej antropologii*, in: *Teoria ewolucji a wiara chrześcijan*, red. K. Parzych, Olsztyn 2010, pp. 173–187.

the world has come into existence in a very complex process of evolution, in the deepest sense its origins lie in the Logos<sup>10</sup>. The universe, with its variety of beings, including humans, has been created by God and contains within itself a trace of God's thought<sup>11</sup>. Whereas for biology and palcontology there is no sense in a casual sequence of incidents and processes, for the theological reflection on creation it is the opposite. Hence it is perfectly legitimate to maintain that human nature has a deeper meaning and is endowed with a capacity to understand and accept moral rules. Pope Benedict XVI said that the "[human] being itself bears in itself a moral message and an indication for the paths of law"<sup>12</sup>. It is the task of the human reason and its normative powers to codify these paths of law into a juridical framework.

To the evolutionistic reductionism moral norms are nothing more than constructs of the practical reason, imposed by the necessities of social life. Theology is far from being impressed by such reductionistic conclusions. It insists that moral norms must be consistent with human nature and serve its ends. The most important point of reference must be the living human person. Moral norms therefore must respect the dignity of man. Human needs stem from the nature of the living man and govern his moral obligations. It does not follow that one can simply decode moral norms from empirical facts, as this way of reasoning could actually lead him to the naturalistic fallacy. Nevertheless, man does formulate ever more accurate moral norms only on condition of his sincere efforts to better understand his human nature.

Freedom and self-determination of the living man are always firmly anchored in his corporeality. It is precisely this corporeality that provides him with the first "draft" of how he should use his freedom for his personal development and avoid the danger of self-destruction. It tells him that there is no good in giving in to his otherwise natural instincts and desires, since he is not merely alive, but he must also "lead" his life<sup>13</sup>. It also tells him that creative freedom, inattentive to the needs and problems of his body, is not good either. Every negation of the value and importance of the human body will always lead to a moral transgression-against human dignity, the most grievous of which is killing another human being or taking one's own life.

### **Living man is a relational being**

Traditional debates on corporal and spiritual nature of man tend to focus on the somehow static aspects of life. Seeing man as a relational being allows to broaden that

<sup>10</sup> After Ch. Schönborn, *Cel czy przypadek? Dzieło stworzenia i ewolucja z punktu widzenia racjonalnej wiary*, Kielce 2009, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Wprowadzenie w chrześcijaństwo*, transl. Z. Włodkowska, Kraków 2007, pp. 156–163.

<sup>12</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address to Participants at the Plenary Session of the International Theological Commission on 5 December 2008*, Vatican 2008.

<sup>13</sup> See E. Schockenhoff, *Ethik des Lebens. Grundlagen und neue Herausforderungen*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2009, p. 30.

focus to encompass life's more dynamic and historic dimensions. No one seriously questions the fact that men need to rely on each other. Right from the beginning of our existence we depend on others to survive. From the biological point of view we are "premature babies". Not only physical survival, but our personal development can be ensured only by others. Man is not able to discover the marvel of his own being, let alone comprehend it, without intensive communication with other similar beings. Experience of the other ("you") leads to the comprehension of myself ("I"). Selfless gift enables self-fulfilment<sup>14</sup>.

Theology maintains that the basis of this relational aspect of man lies in his relation to his Creator. Since God created man in His own image (cf. Gen 1,27), it is the first and most fundamental of all human relations, on which rest his relations to himself and his fellow human beings<sup>15</sup>. Being a creature (*Kreatürlichkeit*) entails first and foremost dependency. Living man does not owe his life to his own resourcefulness. He does not have an absolute power over his life. He is finite and mortal, limited in his entire being, imperfect and capable of sin.

Nevertheless, these negative aspects do not exhaust the meaning of man's relation to God. Being a creature means being the object of love of the Creator, loved and chosen. Theologian is aware of the singularity of each concrete man and in his reflection acknowledges empirical facts confirming limited nature of men. But he also takes into account the fact that each man is loved by God. In this way an extremely important aspect of man's life, to which empirical methods have only a very limited access, can be exposed. It is called the *spiritual* life. In opposition to ancient philosophers, New Testament authors make distinction between the biological life of man (*bios*) and the true, indestructible life, begun at baptism, the *dzoe*<sup>16</sup>. The image of God that man carries within himself enables him to attain an immaterial existence. Man is destined to live for ever. More than that: he is destined to live forever in eternal happiness. His future perfection is unveiled in Jesus Christ – God Incarnate. In His life, words and deeds the mystery of man, the first elements of which – as mentioned above – may be distinguished in man's mutual participation in the humanity of each other, is finally unveiled. In this sense "man is incapable of understanding himself fully without Christ. He cannot understand who he is, not what his true dignity is, nor what his vocation is, nor what his final end is"<sup>17</sup>. Living man can be described as a "christoformic" being, open to become one with Christ and thus achieve his ultimate fulfilment and union with God. Such a close connection between the essence of humanity and the mystery

<sup>14</sup> K. Wojtyła, *Uczestnictwo czy alienacja?*, in: *Osoba i czyn oraz inne studia antropologiczne*, Lublin 2000, pp. 445–561. See also A. Szostek, *Śladami myśli Świętego. Osoba ludzka pasją Jana Pawła II*, Lublin 2014, pp. 64–69.

<sup>15</sup> E. Schockenhoff, *Ethik des Lebens. Grundlagen und neue Herausforderungen*, pp. 164–167.

<sup>16</sup> E. Schockenhoff, *Ethik des Lebens. Ein theologischer Grundriß*, Mainz 1993, p. 123.

<sup>17</sup> John Paul II, *Homily at Victory Square in Warsaw on 2 June 1979* [online], [accessed: 2014, Jun 14]. Retrieved from: <<http://ekai.pl/biblioteka/dokumenty/x537/homilia-jana-pawla-ii-wygloszona-podczas-mszy-sw-na-placu-zwyciestwa?print=1>>.

of the Incarnation of the Son of God is possible because man, in the concrete shape of his human nature, is “capax Dei” – capable of knowing and following God.

Ethical consequences of the above statements tend to confirm and strengthen the anthropological reflection that accord a special status to man. By the virtue of being chosen by God, every human being enjoys value that cannot be compared with anything else. Human dignity, recognisable by man’s natural reason, reaches new heights: the eternity. At the same time, the awareness of being only a creature puts all human “dreams about power” and deification of man into proper perspective. Especially when men attempt to elevate the otherwise quite acceptable postulate of human autonomy to the rank of the absolute value. One’s sense of freedom, if detached from all normative reference points, becomes a blind force, which inevitably leads him to feel entitled to attest his right over his own life first, and then over that of others as well. The gift of life must be treated as the task. Human nature, alive in the living man, is, in a sense, “incomplete”, open to further formation and moulding into a concrete shape. In this way man’s openness and imperfection are both his weakness and his strength. Man is equipped for and called to take his life into his own hands – up into the eternity. But he can also annihilate his life; theologian would add: up into the eternity, too. Protection of life, including care for good health, goes beyond life’s temporal existence up to its ultimate destination. That is why it is of such a profound moral importance.

### Conclusion

In relation to the vast scope of research into the meaning of human life, theology takes a somehow critical and analytical position. The four aspects of theological reflection on human life sketched above confirm the veracity of certain intuitions, accessible to unbiased minds, about normative consequences of human life. Theology underlines corporal and spiritual unity of man on the one hand, and defends their irreducibility on the other. Human freedom must always remember that the body participates in the dignity of the subject, at every stage of their existence, from conception to natural death. Respect for corporeality prevents human autonomy from going astray and helps it in seeking and discovering such moral norms that assist men in leading good, honest lives, according to the high status of creatures made in the image of their Creator. In this we recognise another role for the theological reflection on human life: the supplementary one. Theology reaches beyond territories accessible to the empirical methods. It can cast a new light on human dignity and value of his temporal life. Thus the protection of every temporal human life turns out to entail something far more than mere preservation of the biological lives of the entities belonging to the species called the homo sapiens.