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Philosophical essay

Axiology and the mortality of the human being

Mariusz Wojewoda¹

Man is a being who has the ability to split: he establishes the difference between himself and the image of himself. Between what he does and what he could do. Between his present existence and the existence he hopes for. In other words, he is a depicting creature, he bears in his mind representations about himself and the world, which remain somewhat remote from reality, although he may want to match it to him (Delsol, 2011, p. 88)

Abstract

Awareness of mortality is one of the key aspects of human existence. Death goes beyond the boundary of knowledge, mortality. However, it is actually experienced by man as something inevitable. Death is a fact – the end of life, and the experience of mortality is one of the borderline situations. In the essay, the author puts forward the thesis that the experience of mortality has a significant impact on the human understanding of values. Attitudes towards death be it fear, resignation, indifference, fascination, mourning, sadness, despair after the loss of a loved one, or the desire for death, indicate the wealth of the world of value of axiological experience. The attitude of the person towards death, in some sense, is a test of our humanity, the principal value to which we refer most often. The author of the essay adopts the position of axiological relationalism (or axiological structurism), it implies that values are independent of the subject, they form a network of relational connections, but they are in a significant way connected with culture. The study of these connections: 1) with the world of people, 2) world of things, 3) internal relations that take place between values, allows us to get to know the complex structure of the world of values. In the article, the author analyzes in what sense mortality influences human understanding of values.

Keywords: axiology, axiological structure, mortality, death in the media, death of values

The issue of death and mortality can be analyzed in many ways. In this article, the author wants to look at the issue from the axiological perspective. Death is a biological fact, in this sense it is inevitable for a human being. However, it is also something mysterious to us. Death is a mystery, a borderline aspect of human finitude, it cannot be directly presented to us, let alone indicate what happens to us after death. To express this helplessness, we often use the language of symbols and metaphorical approximations (Cichowicz, 1993, pp. 9–10).

Here we neither analyze the immortality of the human soul, nor the life of this soul after death. We are interested in death as a borderline experience, something that will happen for sure, but not yet. Considering biological life, we can influence the prolongation of lifespan through specific pharmacological, technical and genetic actions. Then the main problem is not the length of life, but the quality of life of an aging body. Some hopes for maintaining the quality of life are associated with biological and technical interference into the aging process

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and the decline of life's abilities. These types of futuristic visions are related to, inter alia, the transhumanism trend (Grabowski, 2015, p. 25).

Representatives of this trend postulate the use of science, technology, and now also neuroscience, biotechnology and nanotechnology to cross the boundaries imposed by biology. They postulate improvement in the quality of human life, and sometimes equipping it with some additional physical and intellectual skills (Kurzweil, 2013, pp. 23–45). When we reject the dependence between the human condition and death, we succumb to the civilizational illusion that the end of life is only accidental, and in the course of time, when we use appropriate technical means, we will live indefinitely, unless we decide to end our lives ourselves in the act of suicide. Nevertheless death is still a requisite for man, but it does not mean that one should not take care of the quality of the extended existence, life that brings satisfaction (Ziemiński, 2010, p. 418).

In this case, we deal with two aspects of the problem: 1) Do we undertake medico-technical activities to improve the individual well-being of specific people suffering from some dysfunction? 2) Do we have in mind interferences in the body related to the modification of human nature; then we assume a longer period of such impact. These are two different issues, although related to each other. It is easier for us to accept interventions in the individual life of a person with congenital defects, or a person who has lost “natural” abilities, than to accept activities that would permanently change the human condition.

In discussions on this subject, we return to the classic term “human nature”, which in this case is to set the boundaries of such interference, or indicate the duties that we have towards human nature, for example engagement in activities to defend people against civilizational threats, or ascertainment of their improvement. In both cases we deal with understanding of human life as a certain value. Then, on the one hand, we consider what is good or bad for our lives, and on the other hand we indicate what is better or worse for a human being. In the latter case, in the argument “from an inclined plane” we analyze how much a given kind of interference in the human body will bring more or less benefits or losses in the overall balance of the actions of medicine and technology. This, of course, is only a prediction that we cannot be absolutely sure about, but we are morally obligated to make such a reflection (Wojewoda, 2017, pp. 128–132).

Death and mortality

The term “mortality” is derived from “death”, but it reveals to us a different scope of axiological references. Awareness of existence is associated with the awareness of the loss of goods that are in our possession at a given time and to which we are attached, and often we cannot imagine life without them. The loss of goods convinces us of their importance, and among these goods life is a basic value, it is difficult to realize any other values without it. The discovery of mortality reveals one of the basic questions for a human being, that is, the question of the sense of individual and collective existence. Human existence in the world is being-towards-death, being temporarily finite. To understand our own life, we have to rethink the question of our finitude (Heidegger, 1994, pp. 332–334).

The question about the meaning of life can mean different things, but it basically indicates the attitude of man to the structure of the world of values. This structure is the source point of reference for human choices; it is associated with a certain type of existential experience. The experience of mortality reveals to us further episodes of losing something important to us: health, impairment of cognition, loss of vitality, exhaustion of the potential of life activities, or “small deaths”, which ultimately bring us closer to the factual death.

In the philosophical view of man's death and mortality one can take a 1) nihilistic position – death ends our lives and there is no point in analyzing the fate of man after death, 2) idealistic – based on the belief that man is the composition of the body and soul, after death of

the body the soul takes on another body, or goes to a “different” world and maintains consciousness of being, 3) realistic – considers human mortality as a basic aspect of his functioning in the world, when the discovery of finitude allows man to become aware of the specificity and distinctiveness of his existence (Čáp & Palenčár, 2012, pp. 158–161). In realistic terms, mortality understood as a belief – “not yet”, is associated with the experience of contingency of existence of things, relationships with relatives and ourselves. Awareness of finitude may be associated with awareness of dying – the fact that my death or the death of a loved one is not distant in time, nevertheless, it is not a necessary relationship. This awareness may result from a metaphysical reflection on the evanescence of man (Glaser & Strauss, 2016, pp. 11–19).

The French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch wrote about three aspects of human mortality included in the context of reference to the subject: death in the first, second and third person. Death in the first person (the death of “I”) is the most absurd thing, going beyond the limits of understanding. We do not remember the moment when we did not live. The consciousness of our “I” is connected with life. Plato, who argued for the existence of the soul before its connection with the body, appealed to the metaphor of forgetting – the soul forgot the knowledge resulting from watching eternal ideas. Therefore, later you have to remind it (anamnesis), or undertake the task of consistent acquisition of knowledge of reality (Jankélévitch, 1993, pp. 64–75).

Unfortunately, we do not know if our “life after death” will also be associated with individual consciousness. Collective consciousness does not guarantee the separateness of our “I”. In this case, one can refer to the theological argument, based on the concept of separateness of persons in the Holy Trinity. The separation of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit for human beings would also guarantee the separateness of existence after biological death (Wanlidenfels, 1993, p. 86). At the level of philosophical reflection, Epicurus’ argument is best known, which, without referring to the concept of the immortal soul, claimed that when we live, death is gone, and when death comes, we are gone. Death enters the limits of the rational, only the fear of death remains. Here, philosophy is useful, the task of which is to make man happy despite the fear he feels (Epikur, 1984, p. 645). Epicurus’ argument is not applicable to the fear of loss of a loved one, but only to the aspect of death that concerns for us.

This indicates the second dimension of understanding death or the death of another person. Mourning after losing someone with whom the subject was emotionally bound makes us left with inner emptiness that cannot be filled with anything. It is grief and sadness that can last for a very long time, even till the end of the life of the person who has suffered such a loss. The death of someone close to us is comparable to our own death. At a given moment, it seems that nothing will restore the person we have lost forever. In contemporary philosophical and psychological discourse, a lot of attention is devoted to this aspect of mortality, mainly to suggest some form of therapy to people who have lost a loved one and cannot return to normal functioning.

Death in the third person is an abstract and anonymous death. It has a media character, we know that people are dying, but it does not affect the rhythm of our lives. Death in this case is an object that can be analyzed by distancing ourselves from it. It can be examined from the demographic, medical and cultural side. We are accustomed to this aspect of death, and the universality of media coverage makes us neutral towards it. Showing images of death in the media does not make us sympathetic; instead, it makes us voyeurs of someone’s misfortune. You cannot blame the media for it, but thanks to media “peeping” others, it ceases to be an individual phenomenon and becomes an element of entertainment. Paradoxically, waiting for more reports about an unfortunate accident, the consequences of a terrorist attack, may be similar to looking forward the next episode of an interesting series.

This, however, is not indifferent to what images of death we see, or what the premises for our cultural associations regarding dying are. Photographs, and to a greater extent movies, subtract feelings from the description of events. Admittedly, photos exaggerate misfortune, but it is not associated with a feeling of greater threat from the viewers of the movie or information program. Photography can capture someone's death or show the moment shortly before it. This view of dying arouses great curiosity among the viewers which is why it is often shown in the media. In this sense, it teaches us a certain indifference to the misfortune of others. According to Susan Sontag, photography is a tool for depersonalization of our attitude to the world. We are afraid of death, but in the visual context it is intriguing and arouses curiosity. The misfortunes of others make our misfortunes more tolerable or more distant in time and space (Sontag, 2016, pp. 73–75).

The feeling that the misfortune viewed in the media does not concern the viewer is fueling interest in images of the suffering of other people who are anonymous to us. As a consequence, watching images of death blurs the boundary between the report from events and film or television fiction. Therefore viewing death image can please the average media recipient; allow them to become part of the evening entertainment. However, victims of persecution immortalized in photographs accuse us of our indifference. Images that we watch about death leave us indifferent, affect our axiological sensitivity, make us more or less sensitive to death. Sometimes they cause embarrassment in the viewer and sometimes unhealthy curiosity. They can also cause fear that the threat to life becomes something real.

In the opinion of the French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard, the sight of unhappiness can lead to attitudes and behaviors opposite to those described earlier. They might be based on solidarity and kindness towards the victims. In this sense, good may be the result of a human reaction to social evil or evil resulting from the circumstances of the destructive action of the forces of nature. It can also teach greater caution in making decisions that pose a threat to our security (Baudrillard, 2009, pp. 98–101).

Axiology of mortality

All human choices are related to the world of values, there are no axiologically indifferent activities. What, then, is the world of values? This is not the place to consider the dispute over the existence of values. However, fundamental decisions regarding this dispute refer to two positions: objectivism or axiological subjectivism. The third position is also possible, according to which, values are useless cultural fiction. I will not consider this view because no axiology can be based on it. As part of the assumption of axiological objectivity, values are independent of the subject, while according to the second position, values are created by an individual entity or by a cultural group. The author of the article is a proponent of the moderate version of objectivism, which he describes as axiological structure or axiological relationalism. According to it, values are independent of the subject; people, things, events are carriers of values. Man learns values; it takes place through internal experience and through intellectual reflection. We know nothing about the non-human experience of the world of values. Values are a kind of filter through which we make self-reflection, we refer to other people and objects from our environment.

Values are associated with a specific cultural context, but this connection does not concern the question of existence, but the specificity of their reading. This means that values can be read differently in a historical, cultural and social context, but also in relation to certain types of existential experiences. Values are not objects, but a certain type of relationship, the intensity of experiencing them depends on their comparison with other values. For example, the value of freedom, which is particularly valued by modern culture, will be interpreted in a different way depending whether we link it with independence from oppressive political power or whether we associate freedom with responsibility. In a sense, the position of

relationism was represented in German philosophy by Nicolai Hartmann, and Roman Ingarden, Władysław Tatarkiewicz and Tadeusz Czeżowski in Polish philosophy (Wiśniewski, 2013, pp. 34–35).

Values constitute a certain relationship, impossible to calculate, it is impossible to create a closed table of values and a measurable number of references, in this sense they do not fit into any system. Using the term “values system” we only talk about the cultural ordering of values, there are many ways of ordering it, they depend on the historical, cultural, religious and institutional context, for example in this way we speak about liberal and Christian values. The values structure is the basis of the communication code we use when exchanging information, interpersonal dialogue between interlocutors, models of description and ordering of reality. Dialogue concerns many situations, but if we are eager to reach an agreement and cooperation, we do it by referring to similarly understood values. Relationships between values have a network character, and there are a lot of possible configurations within the general axiological structure. The metaphor of the “communication network” works well here because the world of values is a multidimensional and diverse system of connections that we can consider on many ontic levels.

The intensity of axiological experiences depends on the situation in which the subject is located. One of these situations is related to the boundary experience of the inevitability of death. You can check in what sense you are aware of your mortality, suffering, guilt, fight – “borderline situations” (Jaspers, 1973, pp. 201–210). In Karl Jaspers’ concept, these situations are connected with the process of becoming human existence – we become ourselves when we encounter borderline situations. The author of the article assumes that borderline situations affect the experience of meeting the world of values.

Awareness of mortality is waiting for a specific point in time, but ignorance concerning this moment can become a general premise of fear of death. It may be the loss of a loved one. We are witnesses of the deaths of people who accompanied us – grandparents, parents, spouses, children, friends, people with whom we had bonds of love and friendship. As a rule, this is related to the experience of suffering, a sense of irreversible loss, regret, depression. We lose an important part of ourselves with them, the part that was associated with deceased people (Wieczorek, 2004, pp. 20–21). Suffering resulting from the awareness of the end of existence is associated with sadness, but in principle it can become an important pretext to discover the sense of existence. The question about sense in a borderline situation has an indispensable axiological dimension, from the perspective of death we ask about the value of life and its dimensions, which used to seem and still seem important, or lose their validity. When we talk about axiology of mortality, we can point to two aspects of this issue: negative and positive. The former is connected with the state of weakening or undermining the will to live. Human experience in this respect is diverse, it concerns:

Realization of the impermanence of existence in the biological and social dimension – especially when we think about our own life and our relationships with our relatives. From the perspective of the impermanence of existence, we see the value of our life, the value of family relationships, friendly relationships and commitment to typical life activities, participation in forms of community life in a different light. They appear to us as something particularly valuable, which should be cherished.

This may lead to an axiological error – a special concentration on vital and hedonistic values, marginalization of the value of another axiological area (level), for example those that indicate the dimension of spiritual life – moral, aesthetic. It is expressed in the disagreement and non-accepting attitude to the biological aspects of aging, and as a consequence, the creation of medical and cultural forms of denial of old age – plastic surgery, or consolation – “your age is determined by how you feel”.

Impermanence indicates the transitory character of civilizational, political and scientific theories. Thus with a certain intensity, we look at the value of truth in the historical context, credibility of scientific theories, or the value of power in relation to the freedom of citizens. The dominance of instrumental and pragmatic values over those resulting from the attitude of selflessness and generosity is customarily suggested then.

Discoveries of body and mind limitations affect the belief that the subject is not able to get to know everything; he cannot acquire many physical and intellectual skills he wants. To avoid frustration, he must master the art of enjoying small successes and minor pleasures. A man who discovers this type of his own “impotence” is prone to resentment in the sense in which this concept was used by Max Scheler that is, undermining the sense of realizing those values that the subject cannot materialize. For example, when he cannot acquire knowledge on a given topic, he undermines the value of education in this area. The liberating factor in this case would be the ability to show respect for those who realize values the subject cannot realize (Scheler, 1977, pp. 65–68).

Mortality is the discovery of impermanence of human memory. On the one hand, it is based on awareness that the memory of the deceased does not last long. A lot depends on the type and intensity of emotional relationships that connect the deceased to his loved ones, and the length of his and their lives. On the other hand, the subject may consider the dilemma of Homeric Achilles, whether to choose a short and famous life, or long and anonymous one. Life that is biologically short but full of glory can be a reason for the descendants to remember, even after the three thousand years that have passed since the Trojan War, thanks to Homer, we still remember Achilles. The persistence of memory in this case is primarily due to the fact that Greek literature has been a canonical element of an educated European for many centuries.

The passing of things and people also affects the world of values. Impermanence (mortality of things and people) solidifies the belief about the relativity of all aspects of life, including the relativity of values themselves. This argument is also used by axiological subjectivists, considering that the establishment and convention determine the constitutive features of the existence of values. They depend on factors such as culture, biology or collective will – social contract.

In a positive aspect, when we associate mortality as an expression of finitude with the world of values, then other aspects of understanding values emerge: Awareness of mortality leads to a re-evaluation of values, for example, the discovery of the validity of those values that had been neglected until now, or treated as secondary. Specifically, the “revaluing of values” has been adopted through the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, but fits well with the axiological context in question. Changing the validity in this case may be a crucial aspect of internal development – transitions from the development model related to the acquisition of new competences, the accumulation of intellectual and physical skills to the model understood as work on broadening subjective consciousness – metaphorically referred to as “the path into yourself” or expanding the range of responsibility for a new scope of affairs or for those around us. This type of attitude stems from concern about what will remain after me. We have in mind the influence on bringing up children, or creating something that will be remembered.

Awareness of mortality can change lifestyle, nutrition, and time management strategies, for example when it comes to establishing new proportions between commitment to family life and work. Awareness of mortality may lead to greater care for the efficiency of the body, brisk functioning of the mind, maintaining the “quality of life” at a satisfactory level, care for the satisfying relationship with loved ones.

An important consequence of recognizing your own mortality may be the need to appreciate the importance of mindfulness. Life in a “hurry” makes us insensitive to some kind of axiological experience. The validity (value) of certain things and activities is revealed

when we are watching reality at a slower pace (for example the value of working on ourselves), or when we are able to see a given thing from another, unconventional side (for example the value of harmony and order in nature). Exercise in mindfulness is, in a sense, an exercise of the mind, axiological sensitivity associated with moral or aesthetic competence, but also will, or courage in making difficult decisions. Lack of such sensitivity makes our experiences superficial, and meeting other people becomes hasty in its character and based on empty “talk”.

Death understood as “pushing” man into nothingness reveals to us the problem of memory – both individual and collective. The memory of our past can be recorded on the carrier of immortal soul, in social memory, material artifacts – in the products of human work, and now it can become a digital record placed in the resources of the network. The question of who I am is not only a question about self-determination, but also about the value of my own “I” – for me, my relatives, the people with whom I work, whom we identify with the supernatural power for the protection of the world (God). The conviction about the value of life is the conviction of its reasonableness; volitional and intellectual movement within the structure of the world of values determines the horizon of meaning and the proportions of involvement in various forms of life activities.

Finally, you can consider the topic of the death of values themselves, that is, life in a world where values have been forgotten. This, however, seems impossible, because it would be a life of total indeterminacy, equating all things, human choices and events with each other. It would also mean the death of the symbolic space for information exchange. We would become consumers of things that do not matter to us, events that we cannot understand. We get lost in various contexts of self-creation. By adopting the illusory conviction that each entity is the creator of a separate structure of values – the consequences of the axiological subjectivist position, we get a completely useless communication tool, such as creating private mathematics.

In order to negotiate the ways of interpreting the world of values, we must assume that the negotiation itself and the value of the agreement connected with it constitute a universal value. Diagnoses announcing the death of values in the space of symbolic exchange, however, seem to be exaggerated. This kind of critical evaluation of modern axiology of reversed meanings can be read, among others, in statements by Jean Baudrillard who, when describing the state of modern globalized culture, wrote that we are now dealing with a specific perversity of meanings – “reversibility of gift in the counter gift, reversibility of exchange in sacrifice, reversibility of time within a cycle, reversibility of production in destruction, reversibility of life in death, reversibility of every language rule and linguistic value” (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 12).

According to the author of the article, the diagnosis of the death of values is exaggerated, because the structure of the world of values as such cannot be destroyed. One can, at most, talk about the crisis of a certain model of understanding values, for example, Christian values or the value of the liberal culture of the West, in some sense it can be assumed that Islamic culture is also experiencing some crisis. In essence, values are relationships that are something accompanying an individual subject, something that is before the subject even starts to think of or wants to destroy. The relationship to death is a test of our humanity. When referring to one’s own and the mortality of others, we can check to what extent we are on the side of those values whose implementation requires from us personal courage, such as honesty, justice, openness, or the ability to work uncompromisingly, in situations posing a threat to other people’s life or health.

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