

A bioethical perspective on man's life and death

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an interdisciplinary approach of the problems of bioethics related to the human existence, namely life and death: abortion and euthanasia. The connection point between bioethics and Christian morals is generated by the meeting of the two cultures, the scientific technologized one based on the economic perspective on life and the humanistic-moral one, which needs to be founded on the protection of life. At the same time, bioethics must not be focused only on man, but ought to comprise the biosphere as a whole as well, namely any scientific intervention of man on life in general.

Keywords: bioethics, life, death, abortion, euthanasia

Introduction

The world is continually changing, and this change involves new situations of life. In this new context of technological evolution, bioethics emerged as a new science combining medical concepts and ethical norms to give an answer to the contemporary existential problems. According to Christian morals, man and morality are not notions adapting themselves according to the “histories” that mankind is going through. Morality is a stable, incorruptible, resonant concept, not subordinating itself to the times, but on the contrary, subordinating the times to itself. Morality cannot acquire nuances, because it is not a trifle, a fashion style, architectural style, or even a philosophic trend that individuals could model unconditionally.

1. New existential realities, new approaches - Bioethics and Theology

There have always been situations containing moral issues, the human society being continually changing, which means new problems. The newly-emerged situations oblige us to reflect and understand them, so that our actions may be just and especially moral, when referred to the divine revelation.

Because almost 30 years have passed since the term “bioethics” was introduced in the literature, with the contribution of the oncologist Van Rensselaer Potter, it is imperatively necessary to take a look at the history of this new science that stands out in the modern academic arena. Using the term *bioethics*, he underlined that it is meant to be “*a new discipline combining the knowledge of biology and of the human system of values*” [1].

The connection of bioethics with technical science and philosophy is realized in order to solve the ethical issues that man and the society are faced with. Bioethics, in essence, is a philosophy of life relying on survival, and based on the juridical and axiological aspects of life.

As time goes by, medical ethics develops. Even in the archaic societies of the Antiquity we find three elements standing out in particular: 1. The ethics that the doctor had to respect. 2. Moral aspects specific of the care given to the diseased person and 3. The decisions applied by the State for its citizens concerning public health.

Bioethics, understood as scientific research or as an academic discipline, appeared in the 1970s. In almost 50 years of existence, bioethics has developed extraordinarily. The great number of publications in the domain of bioethics has rapidly increased during the last decennia, which has made Bioethics appear as an interdisciplinary confrontation between the biomedical sciences and the human sciences; or as a harmonization of moral philosophy with legal medicine or human rights in the spirit of medical ethics [2].

Etymologically, the term *bioethics* comes from the Greek words *bios* (life) and *ethike* (ethics), and literally means ethics of life. Yet, practice highlights a domain largely concerned with the ethical analysis of normative issues in biomedical sciences, and with the management of health-care situations.

Certainly, bioethicists come from various professional environments: including the medical professions, philosophy, jurisprudence, sociology and theology. Bioethical debates have been since the beginning inter- and trans-disciplinary, contributing to a continual analysis of life in its universality.

From a religious perspective, we need to mention the fact that monotheistic religions are traditionally less open regarding the acceptance of the pluralist perspectives emerged in the lay societies. However, even in Christianity and Judaism, there is a various array of opinions coming from theologians in relation to bioethics. For instance, the Catholic bioethicists tend to strictly agree with the new ethical medical context. This is explained by the fact that the Roman-Catholic Church reinterprets the bioethical situation in the sense of pronouncing itself *ex cathedra*, namely not as an official dogma. Despite this fact, there is a Catholic unanimity of the scientists on active euthanasia and abortion, which are not ethically accepted. In many Islamic countries, medical associations have organized their own ethical conduct code.

2. Considerations on human life: abortion and euthanasia

When we speak about man we need to think about the way human life appeared, but mainly about its sense. The source of life is, definitely, God. The Holy Scripture, in its first pages, presents, from the second day to the sixth day of creation (Genesis 1:6-25), the way the Creator, God, brings into existence, by His Word, all the things that exist, appavelled in the divine splendour mirrored in them, putting in each being his love and His goodness, the whole creation being *very [exceedingly] good*. The sense of this attribute reflects the fact that everything that was created had in it goodness and divine love, this meaning not that they were perfect, but that they were in a pure state of innocence. Out of all the creatures, only man is created by God in a unique way, he is not the effect of the divine commandment, because the earth was not able to produce a being endowed with reason, liberty, conscience and will, but only God, by His great power and love, creating Him in the image of His Glory, giving Him the likeness he is to reach by his endeavour. Certainly, scientifically, domains such as biology and ethnology may describe how life and the world appeared from the perspective of evolution, philosophy may ponder on its sense, namely its aim, yet in truth only theology shows what it consists in. The human existence, from a religious perspective, has a transcendental dimension, which gives it the feature of eternity. In most of the world's religions one can meet the conviction that man's existence is not just material, but also

spiritual, especially that life does not end the moment when death sets in. Consequently, the Christian philosopher Petre Țuțea wrote the following: *“The eternal religious man acquired the certainties lost by the historical man, who is moving asymptotically towards the ideal... the modern scientist, situated between hypothesis and experiment, finds it hard to accept the situation of the truth in religion and its redeeming function (...). Science, united to religion and art, means liberty and immortality”* [3].

The Book of Genesis, in its first chapters, shows that man was made at the same time body and soul: *“Then the Lord God took dust from the ground and formed a man from it. He breathed the breath of life into the man’s nose and man became a living person.”* (Genesis 2:7). The body is made of matter, while the soul has a special kinship with God. *“Man is related to God”*, says Saint Gregory of Nyssa [4], and Saint Macarius the Egyptian declared: *“Between God and man there is the greatest kinship.”* [5]. Man, being created not only out of earth, but also through God’s breath, in the body made out of this earth, it results that he has a special position, not just in relation to the nature his body has been taken from, but also in relation to God. In this sense, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus says: *“As earth, I am bound to the earthly life, but being also a divine part, I carry in me the desire of the future life.”* [6].

Life is man’s greatest gift and good. For this reason, one of the primary problems is related to the defence of life. Abortion, which means interruption of a pregnancy by the (spontaneous or caused) elimination of the foetus from the uterine cavity, before the end of gestation, results in the death of the foetus.

The word “abortion” comes from the Latin “aborior” – a term opposed to “orior” (to give birth) – and means to die or to disappear prematurely. Therefore, this term refers to premature death. Yet, death can be a fact or an act. We can talk about a fact of abortion when an involuntary, uncaused and unforeseen abortion occurs. In such a situation, abortion is just an unhappy event. Moreover, seeing that this fact does not concern someone’s free will in its occurrence, it is clear that one cannot talk about responsibility. In exchange, when an abortion is premeditated and wanted, it no longer has the status of a fact, but that of an act. When perpetrated by the mother, regardless whether her intention is to “get rid of” the child or to save her own health, abortion is a voluntary and, consequently, a condemnable act.

Is the act of abortion a crime or not? The answer is hard to find from a medical scientific perspective, yet from a Christian perspective, it certainly is.

A new human life begins the moment when the genetic information is transmitted by fecundation. As soon as fertilization has been finalized, a new man begins his life. The unique genetic heritage of the newly-formed person, and, consequently, of man, is determined at that moment. *“Since fecundation until individualization, the embryo will be organic life, belonging to the human species, yet not an individual person; starting from the first beginning of the individualization, the embryo as such will be a potential person”* [7].

Abortion is the premature death of the embryo or foetus during his development. We are not talking about spontaneous abortion, which is not deliberately-caused death. Abortion is induced death because someone deliberately ends the foetus’ or embryo’s life. Masked under the expression *pregnancy interruption*, abortion appears in the mind and the study of the doctors and jurists as a medical act and not as a death-triggering reality. According to almost all the State laws, the practice of abortion is accepted, for example, the women in the United States are allowed to choose to abandon their foetuses up to about 24-28 weeks or during the first pregnancy trimester (namely, three months) of pregnancy. However, unfortunately this practice terminates a life [8].

Abortion is homicide with premeditation. At present, there is no reason to say that the soul is not present in the body since the moment of conception. People are not a simple repetition of some uniform individuals. The human being, as a unique being, obliges us to a double respect, from conception till death. The refusal to give or the idea of taking someone's life is the expression of a secularized mentality, which has lost the spiritual sense of the human existence, reducing man to a simple biological product, without taking into account God's image in man.

The attitude of the Orthodox Christian Church concerning abortion is of categorical rejection, because life is man's greatest good. In the creation act, God commanded man: "*Be fertile and multiply, fill the earth and master it!*" (Genesis 1:28). The Christianity revealed by God is the religion of love and of the service for man; this is why it concerns life, especially that of man, to which it shows special care, protecting it even since its first moment, since the status and the presence of the human embryos. The Scripture, by the voice of David the Psalmist, states: "*Lord, You created my inmost being, You knit me together in my mother's womb*" (Psalm 138:13), and Prophet Jeremiah says: "*I chose you before I gave you life, and before you were born I selected you to be a prophet to the nations*" (Jeremiah 1:5). At the same time, the righteous Job mentions: "*Your hands formed and shaped me*" (Job 10:8-9). In the framework of the revelations received by Moses one can see a great care for the mother and her baby (Exodus 21, 23-24, 9, 6).

The Holy Apostle Paul shows that out of the sins preventing man from receiving the Kingdom of God, abortion represents a central point (1 Cor. 6:9-10, Gal. 5:20, Ephesians 5:5), known as *pharmakeia* practice. In the *Letter to Barnabas* (written towards the beginning of the second century) the following clarification is made in this sense: "*Love your fellow more than your own soul. Do not kill the child, the baby in his mother's womb; do not kill him after he has been born, either*" [9]. The same viewpoint shall be expressed in the *Didache (The Teaching of the 12 Apostles)* (2:2, 5:2). In the 3rd century, Tertullian shows that the body and the soul have a simultaneous connection. The apologists' period, starting with Saint Justin, Martyr and Philosopher (+165), presents the soul as a principle forming the human being, founded on man's reason and liberty. The Epistle to Diognetus highlights one of the notes differentiating between Christians and non-Christians, namely the fact that the first do not kill their children: "*They marry like all the people and give birth to children, yet they do not throw away their new-born babies.*" [10].

The canon discipline, following the Christian thinking, forbade and condemned abortion, considering it a crime against humanity. Canon 91 of the Trullan Synod, considered deliberate abortion to be homicide ("Those who give drugs for procuring abortion, and those who receive poison to kill the foetus, are subjected to the penalty of murder"). As a unanimous conclusion, abortion and all abortion practices are a great sin because:

1. by them, a human being is deliberately killed;
2. the woman's dignity is ruined;
3. abortion practices risk destroying the woman's body, and even killing her.
4. her conscience is burdened by the gravity of the act committed

In the post-modern society, abortion (and contraceptive) practices are perceived as the normality or as the normal reality of life. The Church cannot be indifferent to this worrying reality, nourished by the modern institutions, which focus on the freely chosen medical act, but which - instead of protecting life - limit and diminish it.

All the previous observations show that life is the most precious gift that God endowed man with and the premise of all the other goods. The right to life is a right inscribed in the natural moral law as a result of man's creation by God. Life is for man an asset overflowed out of the divine love and he has the duty to make it perfect for his own good and for the good of his fellows [11].

3. Euthanasia or death as a physician-assisted biological process

Looking carefully at the reality, we can easily notice the ephemeral character of life. The world's great mystery is more often than not obscured by sin, which spread its shade over all being (Romans 8:20-21). Nothing is unchanging in this world and the world itself is submitted to change. Death stays at its end as terminus of the earthly life. The wise Solomon, understanding the relative character of the world, affirmed that the impulse given by instinct is perverted: "*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.*" (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

Yet death does not mean man's annihilation or the total destruction of his being, but the beginning of a new life; similarly the world will not be ruined, but changed, turned into a new world.

According to the Christian faith, the teaching on death has the following coordinates[12]:

- death is the consequence of sin, the reward for sin is death (Rom. 6:23);
- it marks the end of the earthly life and the beginning of eternal life;
- death is unavoidable;
- by his soul, man is immortal.

Christianity appears in history and is actually known as a religion of love and of hope. It is precisely for this reason that the Christian eschatology is very well delineated in Christianity.

Death for the scientist and the contemporary man is not a mysterious divine act, but rather a technologized action based on scientific criteria, defined as physical-chemical decomposition: respiratory state, pupillary size, lack of certain reflexes, cardio- and electrogram etc.

As a re-animatological process, death has been divided into four stages:

1. agony
2. clinical death,
3. brain death, coinciding with the moment of irreversibility
4. biological death.

But all these moments present many ethical conflicts, because deciphering death at its physical-biological level is a unique and not general fact, which needs to be seen as an exception and not as a rule.

Agony represents the state of passage towards death, defined as a fight and a test both for the dying person and for the doctors surrounding him. This moment is a new objective medical reality because, now, the doctor is faced not just with the disease, but also with the process of death.

Clinical death is a special medical and existential reality. This state is not life, yet it is not death either, but an intermediate state, including the possibility of the return to life.

Medically and biologically, speaking about this state, one can affirm that clinical death comprises the fundamental elements of life: during it, multiple vital functions are limited almost to the maximum, yet not destroyed.

The problems related to death are treated as a right of every social individual to decide about his death. But, by this, medicine is forced to serve death instead of serving to defend and beautify life, namely it is forced to serve the existence of the human being instead of assuring the health and the beauty of the human life by the treatment and the therapy of certain diseases considered until recently as incurable [13].

Euthanasia is applied by certain countries of the world for different purposes, as is the case of social or eugenic euthanasia and the case of the death punishment for certain detainees. The issue of euthanasia is not new. During the Antiquity it was practiced under the form of the killing of children, of parents and of self-sacrifice. The extreme or non-Christian approaches supporting physician-assisted death can be briefly presented as follows: (a) adoring life (the gift) more than God (the giver), by an unnatural and illusory fight against ageing and death (*thanatophobia*) – including by a forced maintaining of the patient in a vegetative state with the help of apparatuses, as some bioethicists consider; (b) abandoning all battle for life because of the suffering – including by euthanasia on demand[14].

According to the means and methods used, euthanasia can be active and passive. Active euthanasia would define all the actions by which death is generated. This practice has been justly called “suicide by proxy”, being generated by the patient’s right to freely choose death and by the doctor’s obligation to submit to his desire. This notion sometimes includes the category of physician-assisted suicide. Passive euthanasia is actually the situation in which the doctor does not intervene or stops doing any action meant to lengthen the life of the diseased person [15].

Viewed as suffering mitigation, euthanasia has no logical argument and is not justified in any way. Today, modernized hospitals offer good care, and there is an increase of the palliative care. Today’s medicines cover all the pains that can be reduced. Accepting voluntary euthanasia could lead to non-voluntary and involuntary euthanasia, by giving the doctors the power to decide when a patient’s life can be taken.

The Orthodox Church categorically rejects euthanasia, accentuating the spiritual value of the human being, showing that man is made up of body and soul, yet, compared to the body, man’s soul is both principle of life and noetical (rational) principle generating spirituality. The entire human person – body and soul – is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Man received from God the life-giving spirit, holding together and making alive the material body united to the rational soul: “Glorify God with your body (*soma*) in your spirit (*pnevma*).” (1 Cor. 6:20).

Conclusions

The postmodern world is confused from a spiritual and religious perspective, and as an alternative the living in and with Christ can reopen to today’s world the perspective of eternal life, a perspective that it seems to have lost, showing instead its preoccupation for the material and the biological side of life. In the arena of the debate regarding the ethical acceptability of euthanasic decisions, various arguments have been brought, but, instead of defending life, they promote death, leading to the inevitable conclusion that an interdisciplinary approach of this delicate subject related to human life is absolutely necessary. Man has managed to transplant organs, has tried and succeeded in cloning animals and is still trying to clone people, and little by little has begun to believe that he can replace God. In this context, the Christian Church is called to intervene. It has presented its perspective on issues such as those above, namely euthanasia, contraception, but also in

others, trying to avoid the occurrence of some biological catastrophes and the apogee of this world. The aim of the Christian Church in this world is to promote the values of the faith revealed by God, which values serve and defend man as a whole: body and soul.

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