

## Centre For Health Economics Seminar Series 2017

# THE SUBJECTIVE VALUE OF LIFE: WHAT IS IT?

**Presenter:** Prof Paul Menzel, Pacific Lutheran University  
**Date:** Wednesday 15 Nov 2017  
**Time:** 12.00pm -1.00pm  
**Venue:** RB Scotton Room  
Centre for Health Economics



### Abstract:

One kind of value that a person's life has is subjective – the value of life to the person whose life it is. The subjective value of life is a prominent concept in certain moral philosophies, in health economics, in health policy, and in various fields concerned with subjective well-being. It plays an important role in many normative judgments about the saving and taking of lives. It is surprisingly difficult, however, to say just what it is that we are referring to with this concept. After clarifying its basic conceptual characteristics, I proceed to argue that substantively, the subjective value of life for individual human persons is comprised of three indispensable components: an all-of-life element (an aggregate of all temporal segments of a person's life), a "time-relative interest" element (developed notably by philosopher Jeff McMahan), and the effect of highly varying reference points on both of these elements. Important different versions of the first two components, especially, leave us with several stubborn ambiguities. The result is that in the last analysis it is difficult if not impossible to say just what we are referring to when we speak of "the subjective value of life." I conclude by suggesting several constructive ways of handling this unsettling situation in moral and social policy decision making that is influenced by assessments of the value of life, including models of health benefit evaluation. Despite the difficulties, dispensing with the notion of the subjective value of life is not a viable option.

### Presenter:

Paul T. Menzel, PhD, is Professor of Philosophy emeritus at Pacific Lutheran University. He has published widely on moral questions in health economics and health policy, including *Strong Medicine: The Ethical Rationing of Health Care and Prevention vs. Treatment: What's the Right Balance?* Most recently he has written on several end-of-life issues, including advance directives for dementia and voluntarily stopping eating and drinking. He has been a visiting scholar at the Rockefeller Center-Bellagio, the Brocher Foundation (Geneva), and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and in the fall of 2017 he will be at the Monash Bioethics Centre (Melbourne).

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