

# How is a Theological Bioethics and Medical Ethics Possible: A Study on Background and Foundation of the "Ethic of Personhood"

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**Abstract:** *The core issue in bioethics is how to define humans. Contemporary bioethics is in trouble on many issues because of limitations in principles and methods. Ethics of personhood tries to rethink these issues from a different perspective. The premise of the ethics of personhood is to redefine humans. From the perspective of Christian thought, it introduces the concept of "person" into bioethics and points out that the research object of bioethics is human being as human person. The concept of human person is the basis of the ethics of personhood. Human person possesses both substantiality and relationality. This makes up for the shortcomings of contemporary bioethics that either only value individual interests, or only value collective interests. Although the ethic of personhood is a very good paradigm and framework for studying bioethics, it still faces many fundamental problems in modernity, such as how to be widely accepted.*

**Keywords:** Bioethics, Medical Ethics, Ethics of Personhood, Theology, Christian Thoughts.

## 1. Introduction

The word bioethics may be unfamiliar to most people, who think it is a new thing, but it did not appear late. In the United States in the 1970s, the term "bioethics" first appeared. V.R. Potter, a biologist at the University of Wisconsin at that time, first used the term to refer to an ethical discipline based on biological knowledge and related to human survival and the improvement of life quality [1]. But its origins date back to the mid-20th century, when technology and culture were undergoing dramatic changes. The emergence of new technologies helps people fight diseases, alleviate pain, and extend life. The culture and concepts since the rise of modernity have also given people new ways of existence. With the end of World War II, these intertwined and inspired people's new hope to have more initiative in their own lives; but this also breeds a kind of arrogance, that is, thinking that people can completely exceed the limitations of nature. Bioethics was born in this context of the integration of technology and culture.

Therefore, we can see that bioethics is a discipline that involves medicine, biotechnology and ethics from its own knowledge theory, and has emerged due to their development. From a basic point of view, bioethics mainly studies the ethical issues brought about by the advancement of biomedical science and technology. But from a broader perspective, bioethics also involves many fields such as philosophy, theology, law, economics, management, ecology, anthropology and even literature. Therefore, when bioethics discusses related ethical issues, it also pays attention to the relationship between technology and morality, technology and humanity, and considers the impact of these changes on human survival and value. Such a subject has broad value and significance. It is not only relevant to scholars in this field, but also has practical significance to closely related clinical medical staff, technology developers, policy managers, business managers, sociologists, theologians, philosophers, and even the general public. Because reflecting on technology, society and human nature is not just the task of a certain group of people.

## 2. Limitations of Contemporary Bioethics

### 2.1 Shortcomings of the Four Principles

We have mentioned in the introduction that bioethics is concerned with the ethical issues brought about by the advancement of biomedical science and technology. These issues include, but are not limited to, euthanasia, organ transplantation, assisted reproduction, induced abortion, genetic engineering, embryos and stem cells, cloning, human enhancement, etc. Debates over these issues have arisen since the emergence of bioethics. In order to "once and for all" resolve various difficulties and debates, people have put forward the "four principles" of bioethics: the principle of respecting human autonomy, the principle of doing good to patients, and the principle of not doing evil to patients (or not causing harm to people), the principle of fair distribution. The biggest advantage of these principles is that they objectively demonstrate the basic rights and interests of patients, while ensuring what is considered "good" from the patient's perspective. These four principles have been the dominant principles in the field of bioethics for a long time in the past, because they simplify various theories and methods into four principles. When bioethics faces various situations and urgent problems, these four principles can reduce the problems to basic ethical choices. Therefore, this standardized approach can help different positions reach a consensus and thereby propose urgently needed solutions, so it is very popular.

However, the four principles still have some limitations in practical application. Some scholars pointed out that principled methods are ineffective when facing some problems. First of all, it is not uncommon for conflicts between the four principles to occur, so the solution within the original framework is to continue tracing up to a higher-level ethical principle. The general ethical principles are basically based on morality or utilitarianism. Therefore, even if each principle can be traced back to a highest-level principle, these highest-level principles are still unable to coordinate with each other, so conflicts between principles cannot be resolved within principlism. Because the four principles originated at

Georgetown University, some scholars have ridiculed the four principles as the "Georgetown Mantra." They want to point out that the biggest problem with the four principles is that it is a technical and formal method. When people implement principles without thinking, they are like mechanically chanting a mantra, but we have no idea what the mantra does.

## 2.2 Methodological Flaws

In addition to the shortcomings of the four principles mentioned above, the limitations of contemporary bioethics also include some flaws in research methods. Firstly, bioethics adopts a highly materialistic, free enterprise, and market economic context and method to a large extent [1]. Under the thinking framework of economics, real living people have become "economic man" who maximizes marginal utility. The most obvious one is the change in the concept of the medical insurance industry, where "patients" become "customers". "Cost containment" has become the primary goal of bioethics under the framework of economics. Secondly, contemporary bioethical theories tend to ignore the rights and interests of marginalized groups in society. These groups may be on the margins of society for various reasons and face more difficulties and unfair treatment. For example, when it comes to selecting volunteers for clinical drug trials, marginalized groups in society may be treated more unfairly. Thirdly, there are some issues that cannot be addressed by the linguistic norms used in contemporary bioethics. Because bioethics focuses on issues related to human life, such as growth, aging, disease, death, and suffering. These all involve questions about the meaning of people and the world, and these questions involve metaphysical/theological questions that we cannot avoid. Because contemporary bioethics is influenced by modernity, it considers these issues meaningless and beyond the scope of discussion. Fourth, contemporary bioethics leads to the disappearance of human dignity and value. Because of the influence of modernity and secularization, some concepts, such as love, compassion, tolerance, care, self-denial, service and sacrifice, are rarely paid attention to by contemporary bioethics. In addition, the biggest result of the secularization of bioethics is to turn the sensitive and soft nature of life itself into something rough or even vulgar [1]. The original intentions of various life technologies may be good, but bioethics has not seriously discussed the destruction of human dignity and value caused by all so-called scientific progress in creating life or extending life [1].

In this regard, we can't help but ask: why is there suffering in life? What is its significance? Should technological progress be regulated and restricted? Can the conditions and limitations of life be changed? Does it have to be changed? To answer these questions, one cannot simply adopt the perspective of contemporary bioethics. Bioethics cannot be limited to inherent modes of thinking, but should bear more reflection and responsibility. We need to abandon the shortcomings of modernity and stand on a broader perspective than modernity. Therefore, the introduction of the concept of "ethics of personhood" calls on us to reflect on and draw on a richer thought base: Christian thought. From a Christian perspective, answer and resolve the dilemmas faced by contemporary bioethics. Contemporary mainstream bioethics is a combination of biology, medicine, and ethics, while ethics of

personhood is a combination of biology, medicine, philosophy, and theology. Therefore, ethics of personhood is the study of bioethics as a kind of theology and philosophy. So, how can bioethics be integrated with theology and philosophy? Alternatively, what is the basis for such the bioethics as theology and philosophy? This article attempts to answer this question.

## 3. Background of the Ethics of Personhood

### 3.1 Criticism of the Views of Two Schools

Before professor Edwin Hui (1946-2020) talked about the ethics of personhood in detail in his book, he first made some criticisms of the views of two school's thought in contemporary bioethics. He first criticized the views of the "speciest school". This school of thought tends to view humans as objects composed of a certain essence, such as organisms determined by specific genes. Therefore, in this school's thought, the sign of a person's appearance is when life with human genetic chromosomes is determined [1]. However, professor Edwin Hui believes that this view treats humans only as static objects and passive products, blindly promoted by the impersonal forces of nature. This undoubtedly denigrates autonomous people who have the mind to understand things and the free will to make choices. Therefore, this view ignores living people and turns people into static things. At the same time, it also ignores the most important point in human existence: openness, which is also the point that existential theologians value most.

Secondly, it is a criticism of the views of the "development school". This school's thought makes a clear distinction between human being and human person, and regards some advanced integration ability as the standard for human person. They believe that although fetuses, infants, and patients with irreparable brain damage are human beings, they are not human persons. They believe that only human persons have the right to life and moral status. Professor Edwin Hui is opposed to this view. He believed that this view was at the expense of excluding the existence of a large number of people from the human person. This view denies the personhood of fetuses, infants, people with severe dementia, and irreversibly comatose people. This approach undoubtedly underestimates the moral significance of human organisms, ignores the normative and value characteristics contained in the word "human". Professor Edwin Hui believes that the standard for judging human person is not certain abilities, such as memory, self-awareness, intelligence, etc. The only criterion for determining human persons is that "they created by God". The view of the development school actually confuses the two concepts of "potential person" and "person with potential". We will discuss this in detail below.

### 3.2 Premise of the Ethics of Personhood

Any kind of bioethics faces the most fundamental and unavoidable question: how do we define human. In other words, it is to solve the problem of human self-understanding, and this is the starting point of bioethics. Therefore, both the speciest school and the developmental school tend to have excessive reductionism in their understanding of people. The speciest school turns people into self-enclosed and

unresponsive objects. This is actually the result of the transformation of subjectivity since the rise of modernity, represented by Descartes's metaphysical view. Although development school avoids treating people as static, closed objects that are passively produced by nature. But it makes human changes lose their basis. Because we must "be" before we talk about "becoming". Therefore, there must be a substantial entity as the continuing structure of human, so that we can guarantee the self-identity and continuity of the human person. In fact, if you reflect on it, you can find that the development school's perspective is still based on modernity ideas. Modern people use time to define themselves, showing that they are a brand new existence in the flow of time, an existence that begins with themselves [2]. Ultimately it's not even a form of being, but a form of becoming. To understand oneself as new is to understand oneself as self-originating, radically free and creative, not merely determined by tradition or dominated by destiny or providence. The idea of modernity shows that people are completely self-determined about what they will become, without relying on others or being determined by their own beginnings. This idea is distributed in the views of two school's thought.

Human person itself is a Person which implies becoming, and human persons are to become what they already are. (When the word "person" appears in the context of the paper, in order to avoid ambiguity and indicate distinction, the fully capitalized "PERSON" or the first capitalized "Person" are used to refer to the concept in the context of Christian religious thought). Therefore, the premise of the "ethics of personhood" is that human person must be comprehensively understood and completely defined. The structure of the human person consists of two poles, which are both substantial and relational. The two poles are also the relationship between "being" and "becoming". The existence of a human person is to preserve its substantiality and to develop and enrich its relationality. In fact, from the polarity of the existential structure of human persons, we can see that as religious philosopher John Macquarrie (1919-2007) pointed out when talking about the characteristics of human existence: human existence has polarity [5]. Therefore, what ethics of personhood has to do is to evaluate and guide the use of contemporary life science and technology on the basis of reorganizing and coordinating the polarity of people.

## 4. Basis of the Ethics of Personhood

### 4.1 What is PERSON

The above mentioned the limitations of contemporary bioethics and the premise of "ethics of personhood". But it seems that we still have questions: the key word of "ethics of personhood" is Person, but what does Person mean? What is a human person? Is there any connection between the two concepts of Person and human person? Let this paper now try to answer these questions. First of all, looking at any dictionary, we can see that the two words "human being" and "human person" both refer to "mankind". In everyday contexts, we cannot see any difference between these two words. But in the theological context, the meanings behind these two words are different. This is the key point where ethics of personhood differs from contemporary bioethics.

The word "person" is Latin for "persona," which originally referred to an actor's mask. Because theater actors in ancient Greece and Rome would play many roles in the same performance. In contemporary drama, an actor plays multiple roles, usually with the support of superb makeup and cross-dressing techniques. But in the classical period, actors wore different masks to represent different roles, so "persona" also means mask in drama. "Person" later gradually became the meaning of "character" in drama. In modern psychology, "person" also means "personality" because everyone has to play a certain role in social life. Therefore, "person" extends from the "character role" in drama to represent one's personality role in social life. But we can see that the word "personality" is still a concept that emerged under the influence of modernity, and its connotation is not as rich as "person". It has no transcendence, absoluteness or morality, nor does it have any stipulations on people themselves. "Personality" has become one's "character" and a combination of some consciousness and psychological characteristics. The entity, relationality and transcendence of human persons lose their meaning under this concept.

This is where the word "person" comes from, but what gave it its rich meaning was discussions in the Christian church in the third century AD. In the discussions of the Christian church at that time, philosophers used this word to understand and explain the doctrines of "Trinity" and "Incarnation" in Christian theology. In the doctrine of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three Persons. Therefore, God is one entity and three Persons. Contemporary religious philosopher John Macquarrie understands the three Persons in the Trinity as three activities performed by the divine "Being". These three Persons are not static but dynamic, and the relationship and substance of these Persons are inseparable. Other creation, such as humans and angels, are only one entity and one Person. Animals, plants and non-living things are not Persons. Therefore, humans' Personhood consists in their relationship with God. Not only a relationship of creation, but also a relationship of ultimate orientation. So, we can see that Person is not a neutral, descriptive term from the beginning, but a concept with inherent moral value in itself. Person is a word with philosophical, theological and moral meanings in the Christian tradition, and later added legal meanings.

### 4.2 PERSON and Human Person

But we still have questions: although the word "person" has these diverse meanings, what is the significance of this distinction? But as we pointed out above, "human being/mankind" is just a biological concept, indicating that humans are a kind of animals (even so-called "advanced" animals or primates). But such a human does not necessarily have moral status, or even the right to life. Alternatively, if we grant moral status to humans, then other animals should be given equal moral status. If we grant humans a higher moral status, what is the basis for doing so? If the reason is that humans are "advanced" animals, "advanced" means more developed intelligence and more complex brain structures. As shown in many science fictions works, if one day some kind of animal becomes more developed physically and intellectually than humans, or technology creates something that is more developed both intellectually and physically (like AI). Can we still say that human beings are "unique" and have

moral status at this time? At this point the word "human being" has become meaningless.

Back to the concept of "Person". Therefore, it is of great significance to distinguish between "human being" and "human person", which means giving real ethical value to people. Because human as a Person has moral status from the original concept, human person is created by God and contains the Imago Dei (Image of God). Therefore, human persons also possess the faculties of reason, free will, and love. And these are linked to humanity value, dignity and morality. Therefore, a human person is not only a member of the human species, but also a Person with dignity, rationality, freedom, love, and morality. That's why St. Thomas Aquinas said: The person itself has the ability to achieve the highest good, because it is itself the image of God. As an act of freedom, because of a pure and deep inner connection with God. So, the free behavior of the human person does not belong to this empirical world. Humans transcend the stars and the entire natural world because of their freedom [3].

Only in the multiple relationships of "God-human", "human-human", and "human-world" can human become a true human person. The real way of human existence is to open oneself to Being (God) and other existences, and to establish a community of communication with them (Koinonia). As John Macquarrie said, openness is a basic characteristic of human existence. It is shown as openness to one's own existence in the world, and also as openness to other centers of existence in the same world [4]. Therefore, only such a human as a Person is the real object that bioethics needs to face. This is where the ethics of personhood begins.

#### 4.3 Existence, Person and Being

As mentioned above, human can become human person in relationships, and to realize this kind of relationship, human's existence must be kept open. Existential theologians attach great importance to this point, and we can often see them saying that human's state in the world is existence, and God, as Being, maintains all of this. But here we have a question: Are there any connections and differences between the concepts of existence, Person and Being? "Be" is the most general foundation and the only commonality of all things, while "existence" is the fragmentary realization of being in time and space [6].

So, what is the relationship between Person and these two? First of all, Professor Edwin Hui believes that it is unreasonable to arbitrarily divide human into biological and moral entity. Therefore, human's existence is the unity of matter and form, the unity of body and soul, and the unity of biological and personhood. There is actually only one reality in human. This can actually be seen from the word "human person". The etymology of "human" comes from the Latin "humus", which originally means "dust", which comes from the record in the Bible that God created humans from dust. ("And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." - Genesis 2:7). Many people mistakenly believe that this shows that human is a humble thing like dust, but they ignore the image of God in human and the personhood that human possesses. The symbol of "dust"

simply indicates that human existence is material. The human body will age and disappear, humans are limited, and the ultimate goal of humans is not to achieve physical immortality. The ultimate meaning of humanity lies in our form, in our Person. And human person has both of these things. This is exactly what the ethics of personhood emphasizes, which is to value both human's biological and personhood.

Furthermore, Person is not determined by something external. It is not a special form of existence, it is the perfection of existence itself [7]. One's existence will manifest itself fully as a human person. There is no difference in kind between a human's existence and Person, but only in the degree of expression. The most complete manifestation of existence is becoming a Person. Therefore, as the ultimate Being, God, can only appear as God in personhood (Trinity), that is, the most perfect Person (Person Par Excellence). Person does not refer to a nature of existence, but to the specific realization of existence. The most perfect existence of human person represents the unity of soul and body, form and matter.

#### 4.4 "Potential Person" and "Person with Potential"

But there is still a question here: since the most complete manifestation of existence is to become a Person, does that mean that the Person is realized later? As we mentioned above, this is actually the misunderstanding of the development school, which confuses the two concepts of "potential person" and "person with potential". First, the concepts of "matter" and "form" come from Aristotle. Related to this are the two concepts of *dunamis* (potentiality) and *energeia* (actuality). From a logical perspective, when God created humans, they were already human persons. The relationship between human and God guarantees that human is a human person. At the same time, people also "exist" from this time on.

According to Aristotle, *dunamis* and *energeia* are inseparable. They are not two unrelated things, but two different states of existence of the same thing. Potentiality means simply that it has not yet been realized or completed [8]. Therefore, human is Person from the beginning. Professor Edwin Hui distinguished between "potential person" and "person with potential" based on his criticism of Engelhardt's view that the fetus is a "potential person". He pointed out that the growth and development of embryos (fetuses, infants) is a process of human person maturity, not a process of becoming human person [1]. Therefore, the developing individual is already a Person with potential, rather than another being with the possibility of becoming a Person. He goes on to point out that a person with potential cannot be mistaken for a potential person. The being that has potential and the being that later exercises that potential are one and the same entity [1].

The patristic philosopher Tertullian also said: this is a person in the process of forming, and its fruit is already contained in its seed [9]. Therefore, when a person with potential realizes this potential, what is produced is not another reality, but the maturity of the same reality. Person with potential act according to Person, and Person is the destination. This is also what Aristotle calls *entelecheia*. When life begins, and human is in a state of potential (person with potential), *entelecheia* is there and plays a driving role in realizing the potential. When person becomes a complete state of actuality, becomes

entelecheia (complete actuality). This process is the Person gradually realizing its potential and becoming the actuality, most perfect Person. So, the human embryo, endowed with the natural potential of reasoning, willing, and relating, is a Person from the beginning, whether or not the natural potentials or abilities have been realized [10]. Professor Edwin Hui believes that the emergence of this kind of controversy actually shows that the society under modernity is a society oriented by pragmatism and utilitarianism. The reason why there are debates about the personhood of fetuses, infants, comatose people, and the elderly and infirm is because, in the view of a pragmatic and utilitarian society, these people can no longer produce greater social output. Under modernity, human life has been stripped from a part of the sacred universe and turned into data that can be calculated efficiently and quantitatively, and this data must contribute to social production. As a result, society's values have become: only those lives that have social output are worthy of treatment. This kind of value becomes common sense, and anything that violates this is strange and questionable [14].

## 5. Conclusions and Prospects

Therefore, we can see that when faced with the limitations of contemporary bioethics and the crisis of human nature brought about by the rapid development of life science and technology, the concept of ethics of personhood was proposed. The shortcomings of the four principles of contemporary bioethics and the limitations of research methods may cause the concept of human to be eliminated or replaced by other things. Professor Edwin Hui pointed out the research object of bioethics: human person. There are two poles of entity and relation in the existence of human person, both of which are indispensable. The ethics of personhood pays equal attention to these two polarities, and this view may correct the extremes of contemporary bioethics, that is, either only focusing on individual interests, or completely focusing on collective interests. Both individualism and collectivism infringe upon and obliterate the human person.

The ethic of personhood begins with the analysis of human person. The concept of Person comes from the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The concept of Person is introduced into bioethics, indicating that humans are not neutral at the beginning, but are entities with moral value. If the starting point of bioethics is human as an animal species, it will face many contradictions. The reason why humans are human persons is that because of our creation relationship, we are related to God from the beginning, so we are also human persons from the beginning. Our existence in the world and our journey in the world are just to move towards Being and to realize our Person. The unique definition of human by the ethic of personhood is exactly the starting point of bioethics as a kind of theology and philosophy.

Therefore, as human persons, the relational dimension requires us to establish a relationship with the world and other persons. Only in the relational dimension can we know ourselves and God. The entity dimension requires us to have self-awareness and use free will properly, so as to ensure our uniqueness as God's creatures. Therefore, having one's own unique characteristics and personality is the embodiment of the dignity and identity of a human person. In bioethics,

application of the ethics of personhood can be reflected in many places. For example, in the issue of induced abortion, the ethics of personhood avoid being trapped in the shackles of opposition between the "pro-life" and the "pro-choice". Of course, this does not mean that ethics of personhood is a master key to various moral and ethical problems. It only reveals to us the essence of the problem and the direction of choice, so that we can make a choice that is most consistent with human nature.

But despite this, some questions remain. Foremost, the ethics of personhood believes that without a transcendent starting point, it is impossible to grasp the complete human person. If we just give a standard arbitrarily, it will be easy to discard many members of the human race [1]. However, can humans who have lost their transcendence establish true ethical concepts? Under the influence of modernity in our lives, many transcendent and ultimate questions have been rejected as meaningless. So, how should we establish the starting point of the ethics of personhood in such an environment? How can such bioethics be accepted by more people?

Existential theologians such as Paul Tillich and John Macquarrie tried to start with human existence. Because the finiteness and shortness of life are the essence of human existence. Once people realize the finiteness and shortness of life, they will have "anxiety" (angst), and this emotion can be expressed in words. Therefore, humans want to transcend themselves and speak of eternal and infinite meaning. The pursuit of meaning and value is the starting point for people to talk about God and the starting point for theological language [4].

But we can still raise questions: Even if people are aware of the limitation of existence, they may not all adopt a Christian stance to view problems and regard God as meaning. They may also adopt the perspective of other religions, or the perspective of empiricism and positivism, or even scientism. Professor Edwin Hui also said: Contemporary society has a utopian view, regarding medical technology as the ultimate hope of mankind. The most popular contemporary religion is a perfect society brought about by science and technology, and the eternal life of individuals is reflected in the perfect health brought about by medicine. Contemporary people have formed mythical expectations for medical technology, believing that it can help humans completely control life and health, and even achieve immortality. This mythification of technology not only explains contemporary people's obsession with health and medical technology, but also explains contemporary people's unwillingness to admit their own limitations [1]. That is, as humans of flesh and blood, we are limited, fragile, and subject to aging, illness, and death. Contemporary technology is part of the secularization of the contemporary world since the rise of modernity, and it is necessary for people to seriously and honestly reassess the prejudices it brings to contemporary people [1]. Therefore, this article believes that this will remain the most fundamental and thorny issue faced by ethics of personhood. Although ethics of personhood provides a very good paradigm and framework for studying bioethics.

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