The Philosophical Concept of Person: Its Anthropological Foundations in Contemporary Bioethics

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Abstract

The definition of *personhood* is a cornerstone of contemporary bioethical discourse, directly affecting foundational debates such as the moral status of the embryo, end-of-life decisions, and technological interventions in human biology. This article provides a comprehensive comparative analysis of historical and contemporary philosophical schools regarding the concept of the person. By tracing this concept's evolution from its classical theatrical and legal etymologies to its ontological, functionalist, existential, and posthumanist interpretations, we examine how divergent anthropological frameworks yield conflicting ethical frameworks. Ultimately, this paper highlights the necessity of an interdisciplinary dialogue that integrates the intrinsic dignity of human nature with the relational and somatic dimensions of existence to address 21st-century biomedical challenges.

1. Introduction

Every ethical reflection regarding life, health, illness, or death operates upon an underlying philosophical anthropology. Contemporary bioethics cannot function in a conceptual vacuum; practical assessments—ranging from gene editing to resource allocation—depend entirely on whom we recognize as a "person" and what moral value we attribute to that status. While international treaties—such as the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights—position human dignity as the universal bedrock of bioethics, the theoretical justification for this dignity remains highly contested.[1]

It is important to understand the historical perspective on the various concepts of the *person* in bioethics, because the way we understand what a "person" is largely determines whom we consider to be a subject of rights, who deserves moral protection, and how we justify certain decisions regarding life and health. Also significant is understanding how the concept of the person has been constructed, what consequences each conception has had, and why certain characteristics—such as dignity, autonomy, or the capacity for relationships—have acquired moral significance. By exploring the concept of "person" in this way, bioethics can address contemporary

issues in a more critical and well-founded manner while remaining mindful of the diversity of conceptions of the person.

This study aims to expand and clarify these tensions through a dual objective:

- Etymological and Historical Analysis: To trace the semantic divergence between the biological concept of "human" and the evaluative status of "person" from classical antiquity to early Christian theology.

- Comparative Philosophical Taxonomy: To systematically evaluate classical, modern, and contemporary philosophical schools, mapping their core anthropological theses to their direct operational outcomes in bioethics.

2. Etymological and Historical Evolution of "Person"

The etymological roots of "personhood" reveal an intriguing paradox between appearance, amplification, and intrinsic value.[2] In the classical Greco-Roman theatrical tradition, actors utilized a hollow, concave mask known in Greek as *prósopon* and in Latin as *persona*. According to Boethius, the Latin noun derived from the verb *personare* ("to resound" or "echo"), as the extreme concavity of the mask functioned as a megaphone to amplify the actor's voice across large open-air amphitheaters. Concurrently, the adjective *personus* denoted intensity or volume, connoting that which stands out or is prominent.

Paradoxically, while the mask concealed the individual actor's physical face, it redirected the audience's attention entirely toward the character's narrative lineage and heroic stature. Thus, from its theatrical origins, *persona* was intrinsically tied to the notion of prominence, relevance, and role-based distinction.[3]

In the socio-political and legal spheres of Rome, the term *persona* underwent a structural shift. It became associated with *per se sonans*—indicating individuals who could speak with their own voices, under their own legal authority. Within

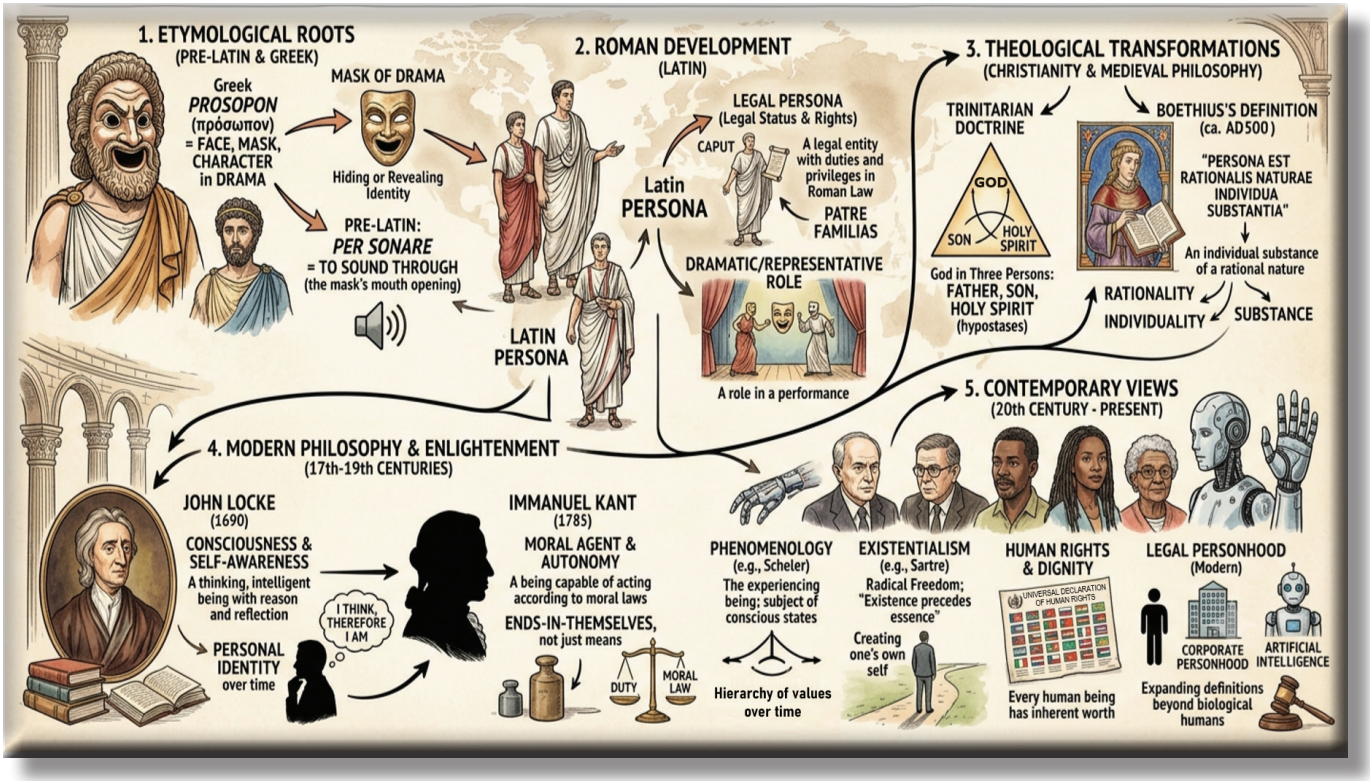

Fig. 1. Historical evolution of "person" by José López Castro (created with AI).

Roman law, a *persona* was a subject capable of holding legal rights and duties, epitomized by the *sui juris* citizen who possessed the right to vote and actively manage the common good. Crucially, Roman jurisprudence maintained a strict division between *persona* and *homo* (the biological human):

- *Persona sui juris*: Term used to refer exclusively to free, adult male citizens.

- *Homo/Persona alieno juri subjectae*: Term used for slaves and frequently for women and children. Slaves were recognized as biological humans (*homines*) but were classified legally as things (*res*), entirely lacking legal personality. This historic split demonstrates that, under Roman law, personhood was a contingent, socio-legal status rather than an inherent attribute of human biology.

The conceptual change of *persona* from a restrictive legal category to a universal attribute of human dignity occurred during the early Christian theological debates surrounding the Trinity and Christology. To explain how God could be simultaneously triune yet one, and how Christ could possess both divine and human natures, theologians detached *persona* from its external, theatrical, and political frameworks and anchored it to interior, substantial reality. This change culminated in the classic definition formulated by Boethius: *Persona = naturae rationalis individua substantia* (*Persona* is an individual substance of a rational nature). By defining the person as a substantial, indivisible reality endowed with rationality, Boethius laid the groundwork for an ontological understanding in which personhood is rooted in what a being *is*, not in the socio-legal status it happens to hold.[4]

While Aristotle did not formulate an explicit definition of "person," his hylomorphic framework provided the essential metaphysical architecture for classical ontology. He conceptualized human nature as an intrinsic, substantial unity of matter (the physical body) and form (the rational soul). Within his teleological cosmos and the *scala naturae*, the human being sits at the apex due to the exclusive possession of *logos* (both reason and symbolic language).

Thomas Aquinas integrated Aristotelian hylomorphism into a comprehensive metaphysics of being. For Aquinas, the person represented "that which is most perfect in all of nature" (*perfectissimum in tota natura*), characterized by subsistence, intelligence, and free will.[5] Key tenets of the Thomistic ontological model include:

- *Nomen Dignitatis*: Personhood is an honorific of inherent majesty or dignity.

- *Per Se Existens*: The personal mode of being is uniquely dignified because it signifies a being that exists in and for itself.

- Independence from Actuality: Conditioned by its underlying substance, personhood does not depend on the continuous, active exercise of cognitive functions. A human being is a person by virtue of his/her substantial nature, from the very inception of his/her biological existence, regardless of developmental stages, temporary unconsciousness, or intellectual disabilities.

In the modern era, Immanuel Kant shifted the ground of personhood from substantial metaphysics to transcendental, moral autonomy. Kant posited that, while nonrational entities possess only a relative value (price) and can be used as instruments, rational beings are endowed with an intrinsic, non-negotiable worth (dignity). Kant's categorical imperative commands that persons must always be treated as ends in themselves and never merely as means to an external end.

In bioethics, this view provides the foundational justification for patient autonomy and the strict requirement for informed consent. However, by tying dignity so closely to the exercise of moral reason, the Kantian framework creates a

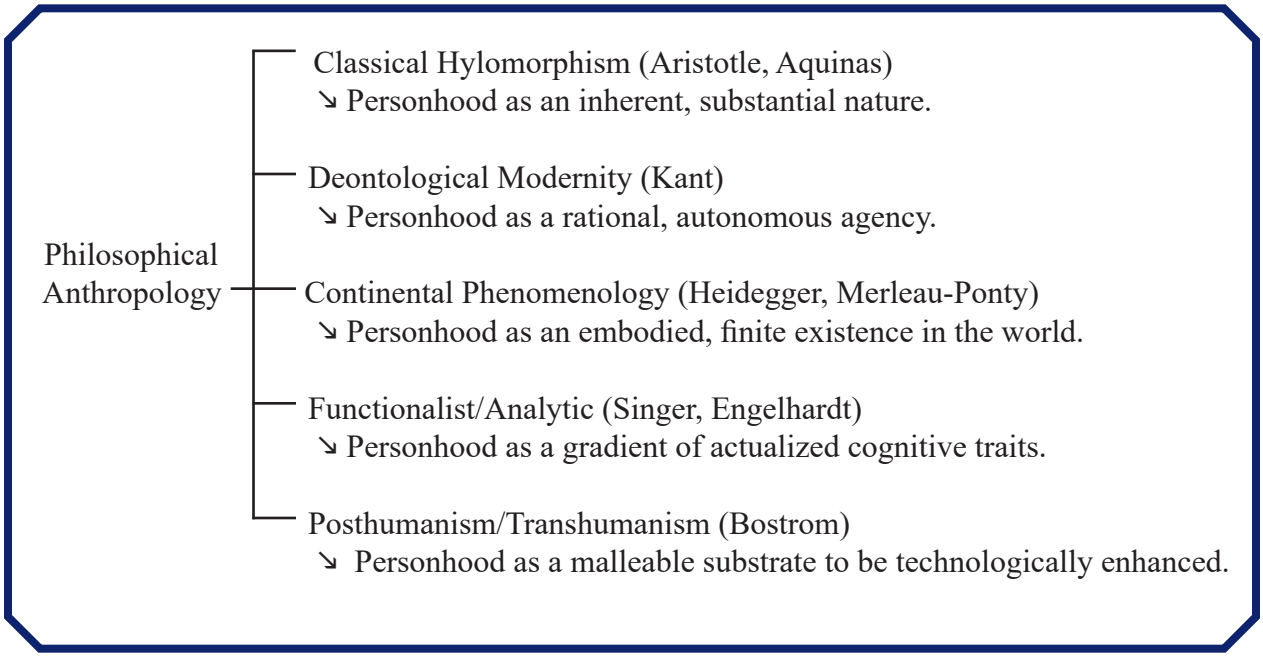

Fig. 2. Comparative analysis of philosophical schools.

conceptual disconnect from the raw biological body, offering fewer protections for individuals who lack full rational capacities.[6]

Georg Hegel countered the atomistic, individualistic tendencies of Enlightenment theory by emphasizing the social, historical, and relational dimensions of personhood. For Hegel, freedom was the fundamental property of human consciousness, analogous to mass being the fundamental property of physical bodies. However, this freedom is not a static biological given; it is realized through a historical process of mutual recognition within an ethical community (*Geist*) and a legal state. Hegel distinguishes between our primary "physical nature" and our "second nature"—the web of institutions, laws, and symbolic worlds created by practical reason. Consequently, any attempt to forcefully manipulate human volition (e.g., via coercive neurotechnologies) violates the historical essence of humanity itself.[7]

Rejecting static substance ontologies, Martin Heidegger reframed the human individual as *Dasein* ("being-there"). *Dasein* is characterized by its *facticity* (being thrown into an unchosen historical and cultural world) and its *being-towards-death* (an inescapable awareness of its own finitude). Through existential anxiety (*angustia*), *Dasein* confronts the void of pre-established meanings and must actively project its own authentic path. Heideggerian thought shifts the bioethical focus toward recognizing human vulnerability, frailty, and the limitations of hyper-technological medical approaches that risk treating the patient as an anonymous object.[8]

Jean-Paul Sartre pushed existential freedom to its radical extreme with his famous maxim, "existence precedes essence." In Sartre's view, humans possess no fixed biological telos, divine blueprint, or inherent human nature; rather, we are condemned to absolute freedom and must continuously construct our identities through our choices. Denying this radical responsibility by blaming a biological drive or external nature constitutes "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi*). Within bioethics, Sartre's framework vigorously defends a patient's right to self-definition and views genetic engineering or coercive eugenic policies as hazardous attempts to impose an artificial "essence" onto an unborn child from the outside.[9]

Maurice Merleau-Ponty provided a crucial corrective to both Cartesian dualism and

Philosophical School/Author	Central Anthropological Thesis	Primary Bioethical Implications	Critical Limitations/ Vulnerabilities
Aristotle & Thomas Aquinas	Hylomorphism: Substantial, teleological unity of body and rational soul.	Unconditional moral status from conception; natural law boundaries on biomedical intervention.	Potential rigidity when facing novel biotechnological innovations (e.g., xenotransplantation).
Immanuel Kant	The individual as an autonomous moral agent and an absolute end in himself/herself.	Strict reliance on informed consent; rejection of commercializing human organs or bodies.	Excludes or under-protects non-rational agents (infants, comatose patients).
G. W. F. Hegel	Spiritual freedom realized through social recognition and ethical communities.	Communal health mandates; public health ethics prioritizes collective well-being over raw individualism.	Risks subordinating individual liberties to state or collective interests.
Martin Heidegger	*Dasei*n: An anxious, finite entity thrown into a world, living toward death.	Focus on palliative care; critique of reducing medicine to cold, mechanical engineering.	Offers few concrete normative principles for solving specific clinical conflicts.
Jean-Paul Sartre	Existence precedes essence; human identity is shaped entirely by radical choice.	Maximizes patient self-determination; views genetic design as an encroachment on liberty.	Can slip into moral relativism if external moral groundings are entirely rejected.
Maurice Merleau-Ponty	Embodied consciousness; the physical body is the dynamic subject of perception.	Holistic view of disability; recognizes technological intervention as altering lived experience.	Lacks explicit systematic rules for resolving conflicting biomedical claims.
P. Singer	Analytic functionalism: personhood as a functional status based on active self-awareness and rationality.	Permits selective reproductive options, embryo research, and conditional moral status.	Introduces a slippery slope where human dignity can be lost or graded.

Fig. 3. Correlation between the major schools of thought in philosophical anthropology and their bioethical implications.

abstract existentialism by asserting that human consciousness is fundamentally *embodied*. The body is not an anatomical machine controlled by a separate mind but rather the live, perceptive subject through which we experience reality ("I am my body"). This somatic unity means that physical changes—such as illness, aging, and disability—are not mere alterations to a biological vehicle; they fundamentally reshape the person's subjective world.[10]

In contemporary analytic philosophy, writers such as Peter Singer propose a functionalist, performance-driven definition of personhood. Singer decouples "person" from "human species membership," arguing that personhood is contingent upon the present manifest operation of specific cognitive capacities, such as self-consciousness, rationality, and the ability to project future preferences.[11] This view creates two controversial categories:

- Non-Human Persons: Highly sentient animals (e.g., higher primates) that display self-awareness.
- Human Non-Persons: Human embryos, infants, or individuals with profound cognitive impairments who lack these acute cognitive attributes.

Similarly, H. Tristram Engelhardt divides biological human life from moral personhood, reserving full moral rights strictly for autonomous agents capable of negotiating within a mutual moral community.[12]

This functionalist methodology is strongly opposed by ontological personalists such as Robert Spaemann, Elio Sgreccia, and Karol Wojtyła. Spaemann argues that personhood is an all-or-nothing status rooted directly in a biological human nature rather than a gradient property acquired or lost over time—if personhood were dependent on cognitive performance, human rights would become unstable, contingent parameters that could be stripped away during illness, sleep, or developmental infancy.[13] Wojtyła adds an existential layer to this ontology, noting that human action does not merely reflect functional output and instead reveals the underlying personal structure of the self-determining subject.[14] Sgreccia operationalizes this framework into a bioethical system that guarantees unconditional moral protection to every human being from conception to natural death.[15]

3. Conceptual Nuances: Designation, Connotation, and Degree

To clarify contemporary bioethical disputes, we must employ precise linguistic distinctions regarding how terms are deployed.

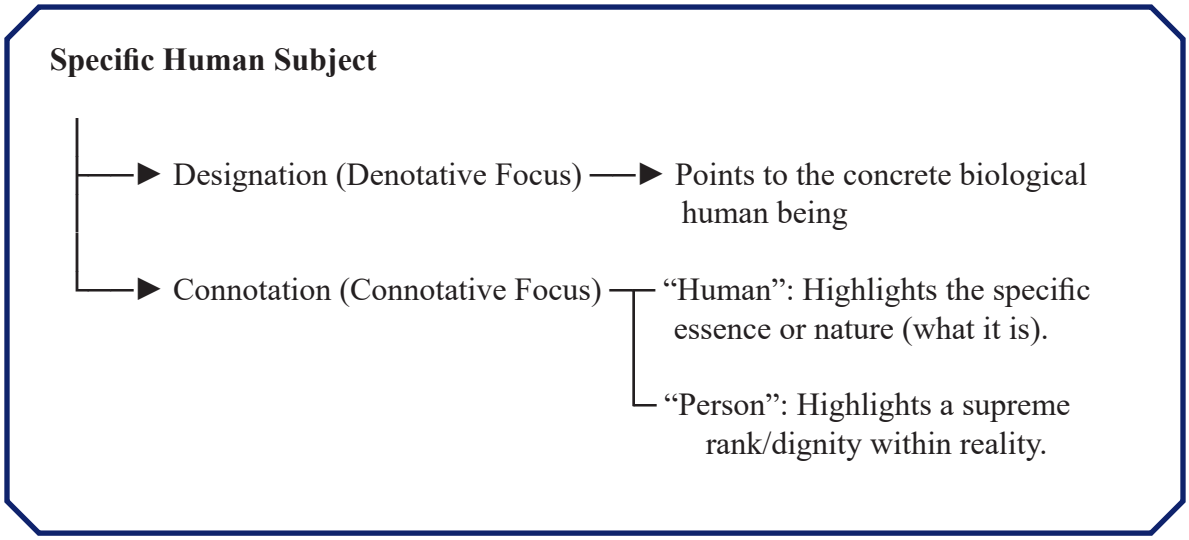

Fig. 4. Designation vs. Connotation.

When applied to our species, the terms "human being" and "person" share an identical *designation* (they point to the exact same physical subject); however, their *connotation* is significantly different:

- "Human Being"/"Man": Connotes a specific mode of being, essence, or biological nature, similar to the way terms such as "canine" or "maple tree" specify a biological class.

- "Person": Connotes a status, rank, or superior level of dignity within the hierarchy of reality. Calling an individual a *person* does not merely classify his/her biology; it signals that he/she occupies an elevated place within the real world.[16]

The central battleground of contemporary bioethics lies in whether this personal rank is understood as an inherent status or a variable degree. Functionalist paradigms transform *person* into a gradient condition that waxes and wanes alongside neurological performance. There is a tendency to define *person* based on certain capacities or functions that they can exercise, such as self-awareness, the ability to reason, autonomy, the ability to make decisions, the ability to form relationships, etc.

From this perspective, one can speak of "degrees of personhood," because these capacities may be present to a greater or lesser extent. For example, if rationality and autonomy are fundamental criteria for being a person, someone with full rational and autonomous capacity would meet those criteria to a greater degree than someone who cannot exercise them. This difference in capacity raises an important bioethical problem. If *personhood* depends on the degree of certain functions, can there exist human beings who are considered "more of a person" than others? This question is particularly problematic when considering embryos, people in comas, people with profound cognitive disabilities, newborns, etc.

Conversely, ontological personalism insists that, while human functional capacities develop in degrees, the underlying personal status is absolute and constant.[17] There may be varying degrees of development or expression of human capacities, but there are no varying degrees of personal dignity. For example, a newborn does not yet possess the same cognitive abilities as an adult, but that does not mean that the newborn has less dignity or is any less of a person.

4. Emerging Trajectories: Transhumanism and Posthumanism

The debate on personhood has expanded significantly with the advent of radical biotechnologies, such as CRISPR gene editing, advanced neuroprosthetics, and artificial intelligence. Transhumanist theorists, such as Nick Bostrom, argue that the biological constraints of human nature are malleable substrates rather than fixed boundaries.[18] Such theorists advocate using technology to deliberately upgrade human cognitive, emotional, and physical limits. From this perspective, modern humans would be a sort of starting point, though not necessarily the final state of the person.

Transhumanism can lead us to think of the person in terms of capabilities and potential for development (memory, intelligence, longevity, autonomy), and technology could enhance those capabilities. But if we can profoundly alter our physical and cognitive capabilities—and even our consciousness—where is the line between improving human beings and becoming something different?

This challenge forces bioethics to confront essential questions, such as that posed by Fukuyama: *Does engineering our biology preserve our dignity, or does it transform the human subject into a designed consumer product?*[19] Jürgen Habermas and others warn that pre-programming children's genetic traits undermines their future autonomy, turning them into an instrument

designed by others rather than an equal, independent peer within society.[20]

Posthumanism goes further and does not focus solely on improving human beings. Rather, posthumanism (1) questions whether humans must necessarily be the center of our ethical reflection, (2) criticizes the excessively anthropocentric view that humans are radically superior to all other beings, and (3) asks why moral consideration should be limited to humans.

Furthermore, posthumanism challenges the idea that there is a completely clear boundary between human and non-human, especially when technology allows us to create hybrid beings or profoundly to modify our own biological characteristics.[21] But if we radically modify a human's capabilities, is the resulting "being" still the same person?

From the perspective of analytical functionalism, technological development could alter the capabilities we use to define a person; and this act could open the door to new forms or degrees of personhood.[22] From a personalist perspective, a fundamental distinction must be maintained. Increasing the capabilities of people does not mean increasing their dignity. Therefore, a person with extraordinary capabilities would not have more intrinsic value than a person with limited capabilities.

5. Conclusions

The conceptual landscape of personhood remains diverse and conflicting, yet its stakes are intensely practical. A balanced, comprehensive approach to 21st-century bioethics requires a framework capable of holding two realities simultaneously: the extraordinary dignity of people and their inherent vulnerability and physical limitations.[23] Relying exclusively on any single reductionist model creates dangerous systemic blind spots; raw functionalism risks exploiting vulnerable human populations, while abstract idealism can disconnect from our concrete, embodied realities.[24]

Ultimately, biomedical advances must be judged not merely by their technical efficiency, but by their respect for human dignity across physical, psychological, and social dimensions. Protecting the human subject as a free yet fragile agent ensures that technology serves to heal and restore rather than to compromise our shared humanity.

The concept of the human "person" is the root and the foundation through which we live, perceive, and express our reality, our sensations, and our feelings, and through which we channel our quest for transcendence. Human persons possess value—not a price—as well as intrinsic dignity that precludes treating them as a means rather than as a unique and irreplaceable end in themselves. Alternate approaches to the concept of "person" have caused immense suffering throughout human history.

NOTES

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