

BETWEEN POTENTIALITY AND PERSONHOOD: A BIOMEDICAL ETHICAL INQUIRY INTO ASSISTED REPRODUCTION

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Abstract:

Debates surrounding potentiality and personhood occupy a central place in contemporary biomedical ethics, particularly in the context of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). The emergence of practices such as in vitro fertilization, cryopreservation, and embryo selection has intensified ethical questions concerning the moral status of early human life and the limits of biomedical intervention. Traditional philosophical accounts often oscillate between viewing early human life as a mere biological entity with future potential and recognizing it as a bearer of moral consideration associated with personhood. This paper critically examines the ethical conflict between potentiality and personhood by drawing upon classical philosophical foundations, modern theories of personhood, and contemporary bioethical frameworks. Special attention is given to the Warnock Report and its pragmatic regulatory approach, alongside perspectives from Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, Hans Jonas's ethics of responsibility, and feminist care ethics. By situating these debates within the lived realities of assisted reproduction, the study argues that binary classifications are insufficient to address the moral complexity introduced by ARTs. The paper proposes a layered ethical understanding that recognizes biological development, relational context, symbolic meaning, and moral responsibility as interrelated dimensions of ethical evaluation. Such an approach offers a more nuanced framework for addressing ethical concerns in assisted reproduction while balancing respect for human dignity, reproductive autonomy, and responsible biomedical practice.

Keywords: Potentiality, Personhood, Biomedical Ethics, Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs), Moral Status.

INTRODUCTION:

“The beginning of life is not a matter of discovery, but of decision.” (Warnock, 1985, p. 3)

The metaphysical and ethical status of embryos has been a central preoccupation of moral philosophy and bioethics, but its urgency has been magnified by the rise of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). In vitro fertilization, embryo freezing, and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis are no longer peripheral medical practices but have become central to contemporary discussions of family, procreation, and human dignity. At the heart of these debates lies a persistent question: how should we understand the embryo as a mere cluster of cells, as a potential person, or as a being already deserving the moral respect accorded to persons?

Philosophical reflections on this question often move between two poles. On the one hand, the notion of potentiality, inherited from Aristotle's concept of *dunamis*, emphasizes the embryo's orientation toward becoming a fully developed human being. This view underscores the embryo's moral significance while allowing for distinctions between stages of development. On the other hand, theories of personhood, from Locke's account of continuity of consciousness to Kant's grounding of dignity in rational autonomy, frame

moral worth in terms of actual characteristics rather than future capacities. These perspectives generate a tension: if moral status requires the exercise of rational agency, embryos fall outside the scope of personhood; but if mere potential suffices, then every embryo must be accorded full moral respect from conception.

Contemporary bioethical debates have wrestled with this conflict in various ways. Pragmatic approaches, such as the Warnock Report's 14-day rule, attempt to balance scientific progress with respect for human life. Utilitarian arguments, advanced by Peter Singer, prioritize the capacity for sentience over mere biological development. Hans Jonas, by contrast, defends a duty of responsibility to life in its most vulnerable forms. More recently, feminist care ethics and relational ontologies challenge the abstraction of embryo debates, insisting that embryos must be understood within networks of care, kinship, and embodiment. The stakes of this inquiry are not merely theoretical. ARTs have made embryos available outside the womb, inviting practices such as cryopreservation, genetic screening, and embryo donation. These practices foreground questions of commodification, parental responsibility, and the boundaries of human dignity. The embryo thus becomes not only a biological entity but also a philosophical site where metaphysical, ethical, and political concerns converge.

This paper contends that the moral relevance of embryos cannot be adequately explained by the potentiality vs personhood dichotomy. Rather, a multi-layered ontology is needed, one that recognises developmental reality, biological potential, social context, and symbolic meaning. This study aims to offer a more sophisticated framework for comprehending the embryo in the context of ARTs by fusing current notions of personhood, ancient philosophy, and contemporary bioethics.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine classical philosophical accounts of potentiality (Aristotle, Aquinas) and their continuing influence on debates about the embryo.
- To analyse modern theories of personhood (Locke, Kant, and contemporary bioethics) in relation to the moral status of embryos.
- To evaluate the relevance of contemporary ethical perspectives, including utilitarianism, Jonas's ethics of responsibility, and feminist care ethics, in shaping embryo debates.
- To situate the moral inquiry within the practical context of ARTs, considering IVF, cryopreservation, and embryo selection.
- To propose a layered ontological framework that moves beyond the binary of potentiality and personhood.
- To highlight the broader implications of this framework for reproductive ethics, human dignity, and bioethical policy.

Classical Roots of Potentiality:

Aristotle and the Concept of *Dunamis*-

The philosophical foundation of the embryo's moral status begins with Aristotle's notion of potentiality (*dunamis*) and actuality (*energeia* or *entelecheia*). In *De Anima* and *Metaphysics*, Aristotle distinguishes between what a thing is and what it has the capacity to become (Aristotle, trans. 1998). For Aristotle, the acorn is not yet an oak tree, but it carries within itself the potential to actualize that form under the right conditions. Applying this analogy to human reproduction, the embryo is not yet a person in actuality, but it is oriented toward personhood as its natural telos. This Aristotelian framework provides one of the earliest rational accounts of why embryonic life holds significance. It avoids reducing the embryo to "mere matter," as the potential for personhood imbues it with moral weight. Yet, potentiality is not equivalent to actuality: while all embryos have the possibility of developing into persons, not all will do so, due to natural miscarriage, implantation failure, or medical intervention. The distinction between *being*

potentially X and *being actually X* became central to later metaphysical and theological debates on human life (Kenny, 2012).

Aquinas and the Debate on Ensoulment-

Building on Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas introduced the idea of ensoulment, which further refined discussions on embryonic status. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas (trans. 1947) argued that the human soul is not present at conception but is infused at a later stage of development, once the body is sufficiently organized to receive it. He adopted Aristotle's theory of delayed animation, suggesting a progression from vegetative soul, to sensitive soul, and finally to rational soul. This gradualist account implied that embryos acquire full moral status only after ensoulment, which was thought to occur approximately 40 days after conception for males and 90 days for females, according to medieval interpretations (Pasnau, 2002). While Aquinas's position reflects the limited biological knowledge of his time, it illustrates a metaphysical attempt to link biological development with moral worth. Importantly, it also shows how metaphysical concepts shaped theological and legal judgments about abortion and the protection of embryonic life in medieval Christendom.

Scholastic and Medieval Debates-

Medieval scholasticism continued to refine the potentiality-personhood relationship. Thinkers such as Albert the Great and Duns Scotus debated whether ensoulment occurred instantaneously or gradually, and whether potentiality alone sufficed for moral respect. Some theologians began to move toward a more immediate ensoulment model, emphasizing divine involvement at conception, a view that gradually replaced Aquinas's delayed animation in Catholic thought (Noonan, 1970). This transition demonstrates how metaphysical reflection was not static but responsive to changing religious, cultural, and scientific contexts. The embryo became a symbolic site of both divine creation and philosophical speculation. Even where potentiality was recognized, its moral implications remained contested: did potentiality itself command absolute respect, or did moral worth depend on actualized personhood?

Modern Reinterpretations of Potentiality-

In modern philosophy, the Aristotelian-Thomistic framework has been revisited in light of advances in embryology and reproductive medicine. The discovery of fertilization and early embryonic development in the 19th and 20th centuries challenged delayed ensoulment theories, shifting attention toward conception as the beginning of individual human life. This move influenced Catholic bioethics, which now defends the view that life—and by implication, personhood, begins at conception (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1987). However, philosophers have argued that potentiality is not an automatic justification for full moral status. As Michael Tooley (1983) points out, the potential to become a person does not entail that one already possesses the rights of a person, just as the potential to become a judge does not give one the authority of a judge. The potentiality principle, though compelling, requires careful differentiation between moral respect due to possibility and the full recognition of actualized personhood.

From Aristotle through Aquinas to modern reinterpretations, the embryo has been conceived as a being defined by potentiality. Yet the moral and metaphysical weight of this potential has remained disputed. Aristotle's distinction between actuality and potentiality offered a nuanced starting point, Aquinas's ensoulment theory added theological depth, and later scholastics highlighted the difficulties of bridging metaphysical categories with biological realities. These classical debates still reverberate today, particularly in discussions of ARTs, where embryos exist in states such as cryopreservation that Aristotle and Aquinas could scarcely have imagined.

Modern Theories of Personhood:

Locke and the Continuity of Consciousness-

John Locke provided one of the most influential modern accounts of personhood by linking identity to continuity of consciousness rather than to mere biological existence. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke (1694/1975) defines a person as “a thinking, intelligent being that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself” (p. 335). For Locke, what makes someone a person is not simply being human but the ability to reflect on one’s own existence across time. Applied to embryos, Locke’s theory suggests that embryos cannot be considered persons, since they lack the capacity for consciousness and self-awareness. An embryo has biological life but not the psychological continuity that Locke regards as essential for personhood. Thus, Lockean thought provides one of the earliest rationalist bases for distinguishing between “human being” as a biological category and “person” as a moral and psychological category.

Kant and Personhood as Rational Autonomy-

Immanuel Kant provided a different but equally powerful grounding for personhood: autonomy and rational moral agency. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant (1785/1998) argues that rational beings possess dignity because they can legislate moral law for themselves. Persons are ends in themselves, never to be treated merely as means (Kant, 1998, G 4:429). From this perspective, the embryo is not a person, because it lacks rational autonomy. It cannot act according to maxims, nor can it engage in moral reasoning. However, Kant’s framework leaves open the possibility that embryos deserve indirect moral consideration, not because they are persons, but because our treatment of them reflects our duties toward humanity as a whole. As Wood (2005) argues, respecting potential persons can be seen as part of respecting humanity itself.

Contemporary Utilitarian Perspectives: Singer and Tooley-

Modern utilitarianism shifts the debate by prioritizing sentience over rational autonomy or metaphysical potential. Peter Singer (1993) argues that what matters morally is the capacity to experience pleasure and pain. Since embryos lack a nervous system capable of such experiences in early stages, they cannot yet have interests, and thus do not hold moral status equivalent to persons. Michael Tooley (1983) makes a sharper claim: a being has a right to life only if it possesses the concept of a self as a continuing subject of experiences. Since embryos do not have this capacity, they cannot be considered persons. For Tooley, the embryo’s potentiality does not confer rights. A kitten may potentially become a cat capable of self-awareness, but that does not give the kitten the rights of a self-aware adult cat. Likewise, embryos may have the potential to become persons, but potentiality is not equivalent to actuality. This position stands in direct contrast to Aristotelian-Thomistic traditions, and it provides one of the most forceful philosophical justifications for permissive attitudes toward embryo use in ARTs.

The Critique of Rationalist and Utilitarian Frameworks-

While Locke, Kant, Singer, and Tooley provide rigorous definitions of personhood, their approaches face criticism. First, grounding moral status entirely in consciousness or rationality risks excluding many vulnerable human beings such as infants, the comatose, or those with severe cognitive impairments, from the community of persons. If embryos lack personhood because they lack rational autonomy, then so too might new-born infants a conclusion that many find ethically unacceptable (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). Secondly, utilitarian approaches have been critiqued for reducing dignity to measurable capacities like sentience. Jonas (1984) counters that life itself, particularly in its most vulnerable forms, commands responsibility irrespective of capacities. Moreover, feminist philosophers argue that personhood frameworks abstract embryos from them

Embryo in Bioethical Debates

The Warnock Report and the 14-Day Rule-

One of the most influential policy documents shaping embryo debates is the *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology* (1984), commonly known as the Warnock Report. Faced with the rapid development of in vitro fertilization (IVF) in the late 20th century, the committee sought to provide a balanced framework for regulating embryo research. The report recommended that embryos should not be kept alive in vitro for more than 14 days after fertilization. This limit was not chosen because embryos suddenly become persons at day 14 but because the primitive streak, a marker of individuation, emerges around that time. Before this stage, the embryo could still divide into twins, which complicates notions of individual identity (Warnock, 1985). Thus, the 14-day rule functioned as a pragmatic compromise, respecting concerns about human dignity while allowing biomedical research to proceed. Although ground-breaking in its attempt to combine ethics with policy, the Warnock framework has been criticized for being practical rather than metaphysical. It does not answer whether embryos are persons, but rather sets boundaries that allow science and public opinion to coexist. Philosophers argue that this compromise highlights the difficulty of grounding embryo debates solely in metaphysical or biological categories (Harris, 1998).

Hans Jonas and the Imperative of Responsibility-

Hans Jonas offered a very different perspective. In *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984), Jonas argues that modern technology creates unprecedented ethical challenges by giving humanity power over life itself. For Jonas, life particularly in its most vulnerable and dependent forms commands a moral duty of responsibility. Even without personhood or sentience, the embryo as living human material is owed respect. Jonas's argument shifts the focus from the embryo's intrinsic capacities to the responsibility of human agents. What matters is not whether the embryo is a person but whether human beings, endowed with freedom and foresight, act responsibly toward the fragile beginnings of life. This framework resonates strongly in ART contexts, where embryos exist under human control in laboratories and clinics. Jonas would likely insist that such control imposes heightened ethical duties.

Human Dignity and Biomedical Ethics-

The concept of human dignity has also played a central role in embryo debates. Unlike utilitarian approaches, dignity frameworks emphasize the inherent worth of all human life, irrespective of capacities or stages of development. The Nuremberg Code and later UNESCO declarations reflect this commitment to dignity as an inviolable principle in biomedical ethics (UNESCO, 2005). Applied to embryos, dignity arguments maintain that early human life deserves respect, even if embryos are not yet persons in a strict philosophical sense. Beauchamp and Childress (2019) suggest that respecting dignity may not always entail full protection but does require avoiding instrumentalization. For instance, embryos should not be treated merely as disposable raw material for experimentation, even if some forms of research are ethically permissible. Yet dignity itself is contested. Critics argue that the term is vague and often used rhetorically to shut down debate (Macklin, 2003). Others insist that dignity, properly understood, provides a vital counterweight to purely functional definitions of value. In ARTs, the dignity debate underscores the tension between respecting embryonic life and enabling reproductive freedom.

Feminist Ethics and Relational Ontologies-

Feminist philosophers have challenged both the abstract potentiality framework and the individualistic conceptions of personhood. Carol Gilligan (1982) and Eva Kittay (1999) emphasize relational ethics of care, arguing that moral value emerges from interdependence, not isolated capacities. Applied to embryos, this perspective situates their significance within relationships of kinship, motherhood, and care. For

example, an embryo created through IVF does not exist in isolation but is embedded in the hopes, decisions, and vulnerabilities of parents and medical practitioners. Sara Ruddick (1989) further develops this perspective by showing how maternal practices of care constitute moral meaning. From this angle, the embryo's value is not simply metaphysical but relational—it reflects human projects of love, family, and responsibility. Feminist approaches also warn against the commodification of embryos, especially in markets for surrogacy, egg donation, and embryo selection. By reducing embryos to objects of exchange, society risks erasing the relational dimensions that give them meaning (Anderson, 1990). Thus, feminist care ethics expands the embryo debate beyond metaphysics into the lived moral world of reproductive practices.

The Warnock Report illustrates the pragmatic compromise strategy, Jonas highlights responsibility toward vulnerability, dignity-based arguments stress inherent worth, and feminist ethics emphasize relational contexts. These perspectives demonstrate that embryo debates cannot be resolved by metaphysics alone. Rather, they must account for political, cultural, and relational dimensions of human life. In the context of ARTs, these approaches highlight the multiplicity of moral registers at play: regulatory limits, duties of responsibility, respect for dignity, and care for relational meaning. The embryo thus becomes a site where metaphysics, ethics, and lived experience intersect.

ARTs and the Embryo

IVF and the Visibility of the Embryo-

The advent of In vitro fertilization (IVF) in the late 20th century radically altered how embryos are perceived. For the first time, embryos could exist and develop outside the womb, visible under a microscope and subject to medical intervention. This visibility transformed the embryo from a hidden stage of development into a discrete, manipulable entity (Franklin, 2013). In IVF, multiple embryos are often created to increase chances of successful implantation. Some are transferred to the uterus, while others are frozen, discarded, or used in research. This raises profound metaphysical questions: if each embryo has the potential for personhood, how can some be selected while others are abandoned? IVF thus highlights the tension between biological potentiality and practical reproductive choices.

Cryopreservation and Suspended Potential-

Cryopreservation further complicates the embryo's metaphysical status. Frozen embryos exist in a state of suspended development, neither progressing toward personhood nor ceasing to exist. Philosophically, this challenges Aristotelian notions of teleological development: the embryo's *telos* is interrupted by technological intervention. For some, frozen embryos exemplify the ambiguity of potentiality they are neither active lives nor mere tissue (Lyerly & Faden, 2007). Ethical debates about abandoned frozen embryos, often numbering in the hundreds of thousands worldwide, illustrate the difficulty of assigning moral status to beings that are biologically human but temporally suspended.

Embryo Selection and Genetic Screening-

Advances in pre-implantation genetic testing (PGT) allow clinicians and parents to select embryos based on genetic health, sex, or even desired traits. While this offers opportunities to prevent genetic diseases, it raises questions about the commodification of embryos. If embryos are chosen or discarded based on quality, does this reduce them to products of consumer choice rather than beings of intrinsic worth? Philosophers warn that embryo selection risks reinforcing problematic social norms, such as preferences for certain genders or abilities (Sandel, 2007). Moreover, the practice underscores the difficulty of reconciling potentiality and personhood with the realities of reproductive freedom and parental autonomy.

Commodification and the Marketization of Embryos-

From a critical perspective, ARTs risk transforming embryos into commodities within global markets of reproduction. Feminist and Marxist critiques argue that the labor of producing and handling embryos through egg retrieval, surrogacy, or laboratory work—can become alienated and commodified (Corea, 1985; Anderson, 1990). In such contexts, embryos are no longer valued primarily for their potential life but for their role in fulfilling reproductive desires or advancing scientific research. This raises questions about whether commodification undermines human dignity. If embryos are treated merely as objects of exchange, their metaphysical ambiguity is flattened into economic utility.

Relational Identity of Embryos in ART Contexts-

Despite risks of commodification, embryos in ARTs also carry profound relational meaning. They embody parental hopes, struggles with infertility, and the possibility of kinship. In many cases, embryos are regarded by parents not as abstract potential persons but as intimate participants in their life narratives (Franklin & Roberts, 2006). From a relational perspective, the embryo's significance emerges less from metaphysical status and more from the networks of care, decision, and meaning that surround it. An embryo frozen for years may represent loss, hope, or moral burden depending on the relationships in which it is embedded. Thus, ARTs show that the metaphysical question of embryos cannot be divorced from the human contexts that give them meaning.

ARTs illustrate the embryo's ambiguous metaphysical status more vividly than any abstract theory. IVF creates embryos in numbers, cryopreservation suspends their development, genetic screening invites selection, and global markets risk commodification. At the same time, embryos in ARTs acquire relational significance as symbols of hope, family, and care. These practices force us to confront the inadequacy of simplistic categories: embryos are neither mere tissue nor full persons, but beings whose significance emerges at the intersection of biology, technology, and human meaning.

Toward a Layered Ontology of the Embryo

The Limits of Binary Thinking-

The history of embryo debates has been dominated by a binary: embryos are either regarded as potential persons (thus deserving protection) or as non-persons (thus available for use in reproductive or research contexts). Both positions capture important insights but ultimately fail to do justice to the embryo's complex reality. Potentiality emphasizes biological orientation toward personhood but risks inflating possibility into actuality. Personhood theories emphasize rationality or sentience but risk excluding vulnerable humans and ignoring relational contexts. This binary is particularly inadequate in ART contexts, where embryos can be frozen, selected, or discarded. Such practices reveal that embryos are not easily classified as either full persons or mere biological material. Instead, their significance shifts depending on biological stage, relational meaning, and social context.

A Layered Model of Embryonic Status-

To move beyond the binary, this paper proposes a layered ontology of embryos. Such an approach recognizes multiple dimensions of embryonic significance without collapsing them into a single criterion. The layers may be described as follows:

Biological Layer: Embryos are living human organisms with the inherent potential for development. This layer acknowledges their continuity with human life but does not equate potential with personhood.

Relational Layer: Embryos exist within human projects of reproduction, kinship, and care. Their significance is shaped by the intentions and commitments of parents, clinicians, and communities.

Symbolic Layer: Embryos carry cultural, religious, and ethical meanings. They may symbolize hope, suffering, continuity of family, or sacredness of life.

Moral-Philosophical Layer: Embryos invoke duties of responsibility and respect, not because they are persons, but because how we treat them reflects our moral commitments to humanity, dignity, and justice.

This layered model allows us to acknowledge embryos as morally significant without assigning them full personhood. It avoids both the absolutism of potentiality and the reductionism of personhood-only theories.

CONCLUSION:

The question of the embryo's metaphysical status lies at the crossroads of philosophy, ethics, and biotechnology. From Aristotle's concept of potentiality to Locke's continuity of consciousness, from Kant's autonomy to Singer's utilitarianism, the embryo has been interpreted in ways that highlight either its biological orientation toward personhood or its lack of actual personhood. Contemporary debates—from the Warnock Report to feminist care ethics have further revealed that embryos are not only biological entities but also social, relational, and symbolic beings. This study has argued that neither potentiality nor personhood, taken in isolation, can adequately capture the embryo's moral significance. The embryo is not merely a potential person, nor simply non-personal biological matter. Instead, it occupies a complex position that requires a layered ontological framework. Recognizing the embryo as biologically human, relationally embedded, symbolically meaningful, and morally significant allows us to move beyond rigid binaries and toward a more nuanced ethical discourse.

The implications of this framework are profound for assisted reproductive technologies. IVF, cryopreservation, and embryo selection force society to confront the ambiguity of embryonic life. A layered ontology provides guidance for responsible practice: embryos should not be commodified or treated solely as research material, yet reproductive freedom and medical progress must also be respected. Policies such as the 14-day rule, while pragmatic, gain deeper ethical grounding when seen as reflecting layered respect for embryonic life. More broadly, the debate over embryos challenges philosophy to rethink the boundaries of personhood, dignity, and moral responsibility. By situating embryos within overlapping layers of meaning, we preserve respect for human life without collapsing into absolutism. We also open pathways for dialogue between secular, religious, and feminist perspectives, enriching bioethical discourse with plurality and depth. Ultimately, the embryo's metaphysical status cannot be resolved by a single definition. It is a threshold being, calling us to humility, responsibility, and care in the face of life's beginnings. The layered ontology proposed here offers a philosophical framework that honours complexity, balances competing values, and affirms human dignity in the age of Assisted Reproduction.

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