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Personhood in secular bioethics and orthodox Christian anthropology: A Christological foundation for contemporary bioethical decisions

Abstract

This paper argues that contemporary bioethical deadlocks often stem from competing anthropological premises about personhood. It critiques dominant secular models, shaped by rationalist–humanist traditions and autonomy-based ethics of modernity, interpreting the human person as an immanent, self-referential subject whose moral value, dignity, and freedom are rendered conditional upon functional criteria of cognitive and psychological capacities, thereby exhausting truth within the confines of human thought and self-reference. To address these limits, it develops the Orthodox Christian account of personhood, conceiving the human being as a distinct person (hypostasis): a concrete, unique, and unrepeatable mode of existence constituted in reference and relation—primarily to God and, through this divine orientation, to others and the world—within a Christological horizon. Drawing on patristic theology and contemporary Orthodox thought, the study shows how this framework reconfigures ethical evaluation by grounding dignity, freedom, and equality in an inherent vocation to communion across all stages of life. It concludes that, although secular bioethics provides valuable procedural tools, its lack of transcendence can foster depersonalisation and moral fragmentation, whereas the Orthodox model offers a coherent basis for bioethical deliberation in pluralistic societies.

Keywords: Personhood, secular bioethics, hypostasis, distinct person, Christological anthropology, autonomy, bioethical reflection

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Introduction

The evolution of 'ontological perspectives in human thought' on the definition and comprehension of human existence has profoundly shaped contemporary bioethics. Where traditional societies once regarded human nature as immutable and grounded in spiritual or communal values, modern thought has increasingly adopted contingent, individualistic, and materialistic frameworks. This shift has redirected ethical reflection toward autonomy and the right to self-determination, a trend reinforced by 'Enlightenment ideals of liberal cosmopolitanism and the consumer culture of the present age' (Engelhardt, 2000). The Enlightenment ideals emphasised 'moral emancipation, free thought, and self-governance', favouring a morality grounded in human reason alone, understood primarily in discursive form. (Engelhardt, 2000). The liberal cosmopolitan ethos places primary emphasis on values such as 'autonomy, equality, and self-fulfilment', with 'self-determination' as its 'cardinal value' (Engelhardt, 2000).

Within this paradigm, 'personal freedom and individual choice are considered the highest goods'. Consequently, 'religious and cultural traditions are often required to justify their relevance in terms of autonomy'. When they fail to do so, their 'values risk being dismissed as unreasonable or archaic', and their traditional content may be 'condemned as illiberal' (Engelhardt, 2000). 'Bioethics, once shaped by communal and transcendent interpretations of human life', now frequently 'orients itself around the pursuit of personal life projects' (Engelhardt, 2000; Singer, 2011), particularly in matters such as 'abortion, assisted reproduction, and end-of-life decisions' (Engelhardt, 2000; Singer, 2011). In highly technological societies, death has come to be understood as an act of personal 'choice', aligning with the liberal cosmopolitan ethos that encourages choices supporting individual 'values, freedom, and dignity' (Engelhardt, 2000).

Questions that once drew upon 'communal wisdom and transcendent reference points are now reduced to calculations of autonomy, utility, or technological possibility' (Engelhardt, 2000; Singer, 2011), exposing a crisis in how contemporary bioethics understands the human person (Engelhardt, 2000). 'Secular frameworks attempt to address this by appealing to autonomy, rational choice,

or even altruism' (Engelhardt, 2000; Singer, 2011), but such categories remain bound within the 'logic of self-interest and functionality' (Engelhardt, 2000). Even psychological 'models that account for dual systems of reasoning ultimately reduce the person to cognitive processes' (Pinto-Bustamante et al., 2023). Psychology has frequently adopted conceptions of human beings as 'information processing machines or neural networks', which reduces persons to the 'inner workings of metaphorical processes of computation' (Martin & Bickhard, 2013). This proliferation of views again clashes with the Enlightenment ideal of the person as a 'rational decision and choice maker' (Stetsenko, 2012).

By contrast, 'Orthodox Christian anthropology affirms that the human being as a distinct person or hypostasis,' and that the truth of personhood is 'revealed and fulfilled only in union with Christ, the Incarnate Word' (Engelhardt, 2000; Hatzinikolaou, 2008; Yannaras, 1999). In Him, 'freedom is no longer self-assertion or calculation, but self-emptying love (*kenosis*) and communion' (Gombos, 2007; Yannaras, 1999). It is within this theological horizon that 'dignity, freedom, and equality are understood'. As Archbishop Anastasios of eternal memory, who has studied humanity's religious traditions and has direct knowledge of different cultures, observed, 'human dignity arises not from civic pride' or egotism but 'from the certainty that each person is a sacred person, the creation of a personal God' (Yannoulatos, 2003). 'Dignity is marked by discretion, consideration, and respect for others' (Yannoulatos, 2003). He notes that this 'concept of dignity is not only stated in theory but also lived and experienced by the 'ranks of saints' in the Church, who serve as models to guide the faithful and as a source of blessing for all humanity' (Yannoulatos, 2003).

'Freedom, likewise, is not the autonomy of liberal individualism but the responsibility of free beings created by a free God, who are answerable for their actions in love' (Yannoulatos, 2003). Without this 'transcendent grounding', secular bioethics risks collapsing into what has been called "egocentric anthropocentrism" (Yannoulatos, 2010), a condition that redefines both the world and humanity in 'purely immanent terms' (Engelhardt, 2000; Yannaras, 1999).

This study proposes that a Christological understanding of personhood not only reorients bioethics beyond secular notions of autonomy but also provides the only coherent horizon in which dignity, equality, and freedom can be fully sustained. Building on this claim, the paper first traces the philosophical and cultural developments that shaped secular bioethics and its emphasis on autonomy. It then contrasts these perspectives with the Orthodox Christian understanding of personhood in Christ, drawing especially on patristic and contemporary theological insights. Finally, it explores the implications of this Christological anthropology for emerging bioethical challenges, demonstrating how human existence attains its true meaning only in communion with Christ, the Incarnate Word.

Before examining ethical principles such as autonomy and dignity in bioethics, it is essential to clarify the underlying understanding of what it means to be a person. The definition of a person forms the foundation of every anthropological and ethical framework. Over the centuries, secular philosophy has proposed multiple, sometimes competing, definitions of personhood, each influencing how moral worth and rights are understood. The following section surveys these influential approaches, which, while central to secular thought, leave deeper questions unresolved. An alternative vision, rooted in an ontological and relational understanding, will also be outlined as the basis for Orthodox Christian bioethics.

Anthropology: What is a person?

Secular philosophy has long attempted to define the meaning of a person, yet its proposals vary widely, often yielding divergent ethical outcomes. Three major accounts dominate contemporary discussions: the biological, functional, and psychological continuity approaches.

The *biological approach* identifies personhood with 'being a member of the human species.' Personal identity is grounded in 'physiological and genetic continuity', maintained through 'life-sustaining' processes such as 'respiration, circulation, and metabolism'. This account does not depend on psychological traits such as memory, consciousness, or rational capacity. Even if all mental charac-

teristics were altered or lost, the organism would remain the same individual. Thoughts, memories, and preferences may hold moral or social significance, but they do not constitute the 'person's core identity' (Olson, 1997).

Beyond this biological account, secular perspectives emphasise psychological capacities and functions, while others focus on the continuity of those capacities over time. These strands, represented by the functional approach and the psychological continuity approach, offer distinct criteria for defining and tracking personhood, illustrating the varied landscape of contemporary secular thought.

The functional approach treats personhood, not as a 'simple biological fact', but a 'status conferred on beings who meet certain functional and social conditions.' The functional approach highlights 'what a person can do now' and defines individuals by the 'possession of certain capacities and functions' (Baker, 2000; Dennett, 2018), such as 'rationality, autonomy, language use, moral agency, and self-awareness'. These capacities are the 'criteria for moral consideration and the attribution of rights' (Baker, 2000; Dennett, 2018; Locke, 1690; Singer, 2011). Without the ability to 'plan, reflect, and pursue their own objectives,' a being cannot be considered a 'full member of the moral community and does not receive a moral status' (Baker, 2000).

In the third approach, which is the *psychological continuity approach*, grounds personhood in the capacity for 'continuity of psychological states across time' (Parfit, 1984). It defines the ability to be 'self-conscious and conceive oneself as an enduring entity over time' (Baker, 2000; Locke, 1690; Parfit, 1984). It describes the 'persistence of identity over time through mental connections', such as memory (the ability to recall past experiences) (Locke, 1690; Parfit, 1984), consciousness (the awareness of oneself as a consistent subject) (Locke, 1690), connectedness (the linking of beliefs, desires, and intentions across different stages of life) (Parfit, 1984), and anticipation (the projection of oneself into the future) (Locke, 1690).

These three models—biological, functional, and psychological—represent distinct strands of contemporary secular thought.

Each proposes different criteria for identifying persons and determining their moral worth, illustrating the diversity and instability of modern anthropologies.

At this point, it is important to recognise that the Orthodox Christian tradition articulates a distinct anthropology, or theory of man, assigning a depth and meaning to the term *person* that cannot be captured by empirical or functional categories. In Orthodoxy, personhood is fundamentally relational: a human being is constituted not by capacities or functions but by communion with God and thereby with other human beings. Created in the image of God and called to attain His likeness, each person possesses intrinsic dignity grounded in this relational vocation (Bucharest, 2002). Such a theological framework avoids the confusions that arise when personhood is limited to philosophical or psychological constructs (Vlachos, 1998).

Within this broader context, Martin Heidegger's ontological–existential analysis offers a helpful, though incomplete, philosophical critique of reductionist accounts of personhood. His distinction between the ontic (what man is in his worldly, empirical existence) and the ontological (his relation to and openness toward Being), and likewise between the substantial (concerning human existence in itself) and the existential (concerning man's orientation, reference, and progress toward Being) (Vlachos, 1998), exposes the limitations of defining the human being solely through measurable attributes and cognitive functions.

The biological, functional, and psychological accounts are all *ontic–substantial*, confining human identity to empirically observable traits. By contrast, Heidegger's insights emphasise dynamism, relational openness, and existential direction, features that resonate with, though do not replicate, the *ontological–existential orientation* of the Orthodox Christian understanding. Thus, Heidegger's analysis, while limited to philosophical categories, illuminates the inadequacy of secular anthropologies and serves as a conceptual bridge toward a richer, more comprehensive understanding of personhood.

Not all philosophical definitions of personhood shape bioethics

equally. In contemporary secular bioethics, it is primarily the functional and psychological continuity models—rooted in autonomy, rationality, and self-awareness—that dominate ethical debate. The following section explores how these categories structure modern bioethical reasoning.

Person in contemporary secular bioethics

In the definition of a person in contemporary secular bioethics, not all humans are equal; not all humans possess self-consciousness, rationality, and the capacity to engage in moral discourse. This distinction gives rise to classifications or classes in bioethics, creating confusion and producing complexities. Rational individuals form the core category of 'persons' who are often self-governing.

Within this framework, it is observed that there is no single, universally binding moral system that consistently evaluates and compares the relative importance of different benefits and costs, applying to all regardless of individual perspectives or values. When every individual prioritises their own well-being, they begin to evaluate what is beneficial for themselves and, therefore, determine their own priorities and criteria. Their values and preferences influence their choices and actions. He/She determines which benefits are worth pursuing and which costs are acceptable, thereby defining their interests. While individuals may err in their assessments, their values and preferences hold decisive weight in defining their interests. This authority extends even to decisions made on behalf of those who are classified as "non-persons"—such as infants, or individuals with severe cognitive impairment—for whom rational agents determine what counts as their best interests. The chooser's moral sense thus becomes the ultimate authority.

Because "people appreciate harm and good, pleasure and pain, in intricate and reflexive fashions," weightage is always given to the rational authority and decisions of persons who are capable of making these decisions. So, their role is always central. For instance, pain-killing substances are often tested on animals and not directly on people, even when such experiments will mean suffering for animals. "The greater good of humans is typically regarded as having

a higher priority in the hierarchy of values than the well-being of experimental animals sacrificed for medical experimentation and research." Even hunting an animal for pleasure like a sport, and personal pride is justified by the value ascribed to human interests. The same applies to those who "raise animals for food." Moreover, when such arguments reach an impasse and cannot establish which position should take precedence, it is unreasonable for individuals to rely solely on intuition. This is not simply a matter of prejudice or personal bias; rather, it reflects the difficulty of providing rational moral arguments under such conditions and of identifying what may genuinely count as a rationally defensible choice. "Even animals who are not persons, and will never be persons, are thus inescapably within the bounds of a person-centered morality, dominated by person-centered interests" (Engelhardt, 1986).

This highlights a central feature of secular bioethics: that personhood is not identified simply with biological existence. Those lacking cognitive capacities are not regarded as persons in secular bioethical frameworks. In this context, the biological approach—which grounds identity in physiological and genetic continuity—does not determine moral status. Instead, functional and psychological approaches dominate: personhood is defined by the possession of specific cognitive and psychological capacities, and continuity of these capacities over time informs questions of persistence and identity (Baker, 2000; Locke, 1690; Singer, 2011). Consequently, individuals who lack "self-consciousness, rationality", or moral agency—such as infants or those with severe cognitive impairments—are classified as "non-persons," with moral authority and decision-making entrusted to those who meet the functional criteria. Philosophical reasoning within this framework explains why, in principle, practices such as medical experimentation on non-persons could be justified (Singer, 2011).

Within this paradigm, the moral permissibility of practices such as prenatal biomedical screening, embryo selection, and genomic intervention is actively debated. Abortion serves as a paradigmatic case in bioethics, exemplifying broader questions regarding personhood, with the ethical debate largely dependent upon whether the

fetus is recognised as a full human person. The liberal-functional position maintains that fetuses lack the cognitive traits necessary for personhood, thereby justifying abortion. Secular ethicists argue that embryonic life is too rudimentary to have direct moral value. The fetus is not rational or self-conscious, and therefore no fetus has the same claim to life as a person. In terms of morally relevant characteristics, such as rationality and self-awareness, a fetus is often judged to be even less developed than certain nonhuman animals. Until a fetus acquires the capacity for conscious experience, terminating its existence is likened to the ending of plant life rather than that of a sentient animal (Singer, 2011).

This moral reasoning illustrates how the secular ethos centers on autonomous choice. The moral life becomes the pursuit of "more benefit than harm," as defined by the individual's own evaluative framework. Agreements and ethical norms arise from personal preferences and psychological capacities such as memory, intention, deliberation, and reasoning. Self-determination becomes the focal point of moral agency, and the legitimacy of ethical claims is grounded primarily in the autonomous chooser.

Right to self-determination in secular bioethics

In medicine and health care, we regularly confront the profound realities of human suffering, disability, and the inevitability of death. This is especially evident in hospital settings, where experience of suffering transcends clinical parameters and awakens critical questions about the meaning of life, the significance of death, and the essence of human dignity. These encounters reveal the precariousness of human existence and compel us to a direct encounter with our "finitude". These experiences prompt inquiries that go beyond scientific reasoning, encouraging deeper reflections.

Secular bioethics, by its very nature, limits itself to meanings grounded in the immediate and finite, excluding deeper, transcendent dimensions. Within this framework, suffering is interpreted primarily through the lens of tangible experiences. Confronted with the apparent absurdity of suffering, and unless opting for voluntary death, individuals are often encouraged to seek solace in the full-

ness of life, through its pleasures, beauty, and intellectual pursuits. The hope is that sensory and emotional satisfactions provide a sustaining distraction until the inevitable moment of death. Lacking a sense of the transcendent, the human desire for meaning may be temporarily fulfilled by indulging in earthly pleasures and fleeting joys. Medicine, operating within this same horizon, promises that pain can be managed, suffering can be avoided, and death can be delayed.

However, we often find that these promises fall short. Ultimately, suffering cannot be escaped entirely, and death is unavoidable. These limitations invoke a "liberal cosmopolitan ethos", which champions self-determination, liberation from past constraints, and self-fulfilment. In this setting, the search for meaning amid vulnerability fosters a sense of agency and personal autonomy, empowering individuals to shape their own destinies by making choices that alleviate suffering. When invited into this moral landscape, religion is often expected to accommodate these choices. In this cultural framework, religion is called to assist caregivers and family members in accepting patients' choices regarding "physician-assisted suicide and voluntary active euthanasia". Christians who embody love for their neighbors, within this "liberal cosmopolitan context", are compelled to support choices regarding death to respect the values, freedom, and dignity of others. In contemporary technological societies, the character of death has become a matter of personal choice. Thus, within an autonomy-affirming ethos, physician-assisted suicide and voluntary active euthanasia may appear not only morally permissible but even dignified and loving. As Engelhardt notes, "a positive moral reevaluation of physician-assisted suicide and voluntary active euthanasia...becomes appropriate not just for contemporary secular society but for post-traditional Christianity as well." (Engelhardt, 2000).

Furthermore, contemporary debates extend beyond human beings to the realm of artificial intelligence. AI is increasingly used as a philosophical "thought experiment" (Dennett, 2018) to clarify the criteria of personhood. If rationality, self-consciousness, and decision-making define what it means to be a person, then nothing

prevents a machine—constructed from circuits rather than cells—from qualifying as such (Olson, 1997). Rooted in Rational Choice Theory, AI systems assign human-like capacities such as evaluation, preference formation, and utility maximisation to computational processes. This reductionist framework, which treats cognition as algorithmic and morality as calculable, threatens cognitive freedom and undermines the practices of ethical deliberation that characterise the human person (Pinto-Bustamante et al., 2023).

Taken together, these trends in secular bioethics demonstrate that personhood is not identified simply with being human. Those who lack certain cognitive capacities are cast outside the boundaries of the moral community; their worth is left to the judgment of the rational and autonomous. Such a framework opens the door to justifying practices as grave as infanticide, euthanasia, or experimentation on the severely demented, since these lives are deemed expendable. The result is a fractured humanity, divided into 'persons' and 'non-persons,' with dignity no longer inalienable but conditional.

Orthodox Christianity offers a markedly different vision—one that preserves the integrity and wholeness of every human being. This alternative vision, which grounds dignity and freedom beyond cognitive or functional criteria, forms the basis of the Orthodox Christian anthropology examined in the following section.

Personhood in orthodox Christian anthropology

In the witness of the early Christian Fathers, the human being is a unified yet twofold reality: "the historical man is a spirit in a body," that is, an immaterial, bodiless "spirit-soul" (nous) dwelling in a material, "practical" body that serves as an "instrument" for the practice of good, but also of evil. With his spirit-soul, created in the image of God, man rises into the divine world, while his material body links him with the sensory cosmos that surrounds and relates to him (Bunge, 2009)" This psychosomatic unity forms the foundational structure of what a person *is*.

The term that best expresses how this integrated reality becomes manifest is *prosopon*. It refers to a referential reality, with its relational nature evident in its etymology. Pros-opon combines

pros ("toward") with ops ("eye," "face"), meaning turning one's face toward someone or something. Originally, it indicated direct reference and relationship, emphasising that a person is defined by reference, relation, and the capacity to establish both (Yannaras, 2007).

To grasp the term *prosopon* more concretely, we acknowledge that man—understood here in the inclusive theological sense of all human beings—possesses a face. The "face" is that "side" of the person that he turns toward another person when he enters into a personal relationship with the other. "Face" really means "being turned toward." Only a person can have, strictly speaking, a real "counterpart" to which he turns or from which he turns away. We become who we are as persons through continual growth and maturation, unfolding not in isolation but through genuine encounters with others. Such encounters challenge and refine us, gradually shaping us toward maturity (Yannaras, 2011). In this sense, being a person is not a static state but a dynamic process of becoming. To "become more and more a person" is to realise the full potential of being human. Personhood is thus relational and dynamic, continually emerging and deepening in the "face-to-face (Bunge, 2002)" encounter. This understanding of *prosopon* represents only the visible, relational dimension of personhood in the Orthodox view.

From a secular perspective, however, this visible and relational manifestation becomes the complete definition of the person (Martin & Bickhard, 2013) as understood in the paper. Secular models define personhood in terms of cognitive capacity, autonomy, and observable behaviour (Baker, 2000), reducing the person to what can be externally measured or expressed (Martin & Bickhard, 2013). This dynamic unfolding of self is intimately tied to the faculties that govern human life: how one understands, decides, and pursues action. Cognition provides understanding of oneself, others, and the surrounding context; volition guides decisions based on that understanding; and conation drives the energy, motivation, and persistence needed to carry those decisions into action (Martin & Bickhard, 2013).

While these faculties shape personality, they become unstable

when detached from a deeper ontological grounding. Secular bioethics, which defines personhood in terms of functional, psychological, or biological criteria, fragments these capacities and reduces the person to instrumental or operational terms. Without meaningful reference or relationality, autonomy becomes driven by subjective impulses and functional demands. Such disintegration leads to misaligned decisions, internal conflicts, and moral inconsistency, producing both personal and social tension. Autonomy and rational choice, however, require not only clear cognition and careful deliberation but also alignment of conative drive with ethical and relational awareness.

Without the integrated functioning of thought, choice, and motivated action, a person struggles to act responsibly or consistently, undermining both personal development and relational harmony. Therefore, we observe a trend nowadays towards psychological analyses that explore a person's inner world to achieve psychological balance (Vlachos, 2014). The "inner world" in this framework is reduced to introspective states, affective impressions, or neuropsychological patterns, *without acknowledging the soul* as an ontological and spiritual reality. Consequently, cognition, volition, and conation are interpreted as merely psychological functions operating within a self-contained system, shaped by subjective experiences or behavioural conditioning. Such conceptions, rooted in the rationalist and humanist traditions of modernity, exhaust the truth within human thought and self-reference, thereby overlooking the deeper existential reality of being.

However, in Orthodox Christian anthropology, the ground of truth and personal identity does not lie in the imaginations or self-enclosed assumptions of human thought and self-reference. Moreover, the person's inner world is understood not merely as a site of introspection—nor as a psychological trend, as in many secular approaches—but as the core of one's being— the *intellect*, that governs all other powers/faculties—including cognition, volition, and conation, discussed further in this study. This inner depth constitutes the point of invulnerability that opens the way for a person to manifest his own true self. It is here that he encounters God, and

his personal distinctiveness is revealed through that reference and relationship. This loss of reference and relationship towards God and thereby a disintegration of the human faculties is traced to what is theologically described as the 'Fall of Man.'

The Genesis narrative of Adam and Eve, the first human pair, that God created and from whom the entire human race descended, regardless of their race, color, language (Yannoulatos, 2003), is interpreted not as a mythic event but as an account of the human condition, depicting the disruption of man's original harmony with God, who is not our Creator alone but the Father of all humankind (Vlachos, 2003). Within this framework, the divine command in Paradise represented not a restriction but a life-giving invitation to remain in communion with God, the source of life. Through disobedience, man sought autonomy apart from this communion, thereby introducing a rupture within his own nature.

Spiritual death, which is understood as an alienation from God, analogous to how darkness results from the absence of light, preceded and gave rise to physical death (Vlachos, 1998). This did not mean cessation of existence, but a deliberate turning away from God and misuse of freewill (Chouliaras, 2020)[1], the consequences of which produced an inner disintegration: the intellect was darkened by ignorance, the will weakened by indecision, and desire corrupted by self-love (Bunge, 2012) and the passions—egoism, envy, and the pursuit of self-gratification. What was once oriented toward relational participation and life-giving communion, where love was meant to be unselfish towards God and one's neighbour, has become fragmented into self-referential or self-enclosed striving driven by fear and anxiety, in an attempt to escape the myriad consequences of mortality, illness, and various forms of suffering (Vlachos, 1998).

Thus, the Fall signifies not merely a historical or theological event, but an ongoing existential condition in which the human faculties, originally oriented toward communion with God, now operate in fragmentation and conflict. This fallen condition persists in the present, shaping both the world and the human person, and its

[1] God has created man as self-governing, with control over his actions, so that, if he uses his self-ruling power well, he can walk towards good and not evil;

implications for bioethics will be addressed in that section.

Yet even within this fallen state, the purpose of human existence remains the same: to rise from a condition of mere biological coexistence to one of true communion, between persons, in harmony with all creatures and the whole of creation. This transformation occurs through selfless love, revealed in the life of Christ, who is the model and measure of authentic human existence and who manifests relational life free from abstract philosophical speculation. The freedom endowed to every human being is therefore ordered toward choosing unselfish love over egoistic self-love—a choice made possible only when God becomes the ultimate point of reference and relationship (Yannoulatos, 2003). The following discussion further develops this orientation.

At this point, Martin Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein* offers an important philosophical ally. His conception of human existence as openness, relationality, and temporal becoming stands as a critique of the reductionist image of the human being that dominates much of secular anthropology and, consequently, secular bioethics, where the person is often defined as an autonomous decision-maker. Heidegger reveals that human existence cannot be reduced to rational functions, rather, it is referential and relational. This insight resonates with the Orthodox understanding of personhood, which likewise rejects the autonomous individual as an adequate account of human identity.

Yet, Heidegger's contribution remains incomplete. Unlike the Orthodox vision, Heidegger's relationality does not culminate in a mode of existence, revealed and made accessible in Christ, through whom the human person is healed and restored to communion with God, the source of true being (Vlachos, 1998). While Heidegger's insight serves as a valuable critique of the reductionism in secular anthropology, Orthodox theology moves beyond it by revealing that the person's full ontological reality is not exhausted by existence alone, but fulfilled in communion with God—the hypostatic and relational mode of existence that transforms mere biological or individual life into true personhood. This distinction is crucial for bioethics, for it exposes the inadequacy of secular frameworks

grounded in autonomy and rational capacity, and situates authentic moral reasoning within a relational, Christ-centered understanding of the human person.

Having identified the limitations of secular and philosophical-phenomenological accounts of the human subject, the Orthodox Christian Tradition offers a fuller and restorative understanding of personhood grounded in communion with God. From this perspective, the biological birth of man is not sufficient to fulfil the purpose of his existence; but it marks the beginning of his development (Vlachos, 1998). By birth, every human being has the potential to become a person, and he can actualise this potential only in communion with God. As metropolitan Hiertotheos Vlachos emphasises, "We cannot perceive a person without this communion. The person does not live alone as he has reference, relationship and communion (Vlachos, 1998)".

This communion is made possible because, although "The essence or nature of God is entirely unknown, invisible, unseen and unshared by man. Man knows and shares in the energy of God." "The bridge between the uncreated and the created is one. The point that unites them is Christ"(Vlachos, 1998). Therefore, it is in Christ that the restoration of human personhood becomes possible.

St. Severus of Antioch, a prominent theologian and Patriarch of Antioch, defines the purpose of incarnation with great clarity teaching that God created man so that he might maintain an unbroken relationship with himself—a relationship of love. Through the Incarnation—where the Only Son of God united Himself hypostatically to one flesh animated with a rational soul—the entire human nature was joined in love to the divine nature from which it had been estranged. Through this union, humanity becomes once more capable of participating in divine gifts and immortality, lost through Adam's trespass.

He writes, "The Only Son of God became consubstantial with us by being united hypostatically to one flesh animated in a rational and intelligent soul. Because of this, the entire human ousia and the whole race became united in love to the divine nature, from which

it had formerly been estranged. Hence, as it is written, we, being made worthy of the original harmony, have become partakers of the divine nature. By Participation, we have received divine gifts and immortality, which had been lost to us on account of the trespass of Adam (Samuel, 2001)"

Grounded in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Christian understanding of personhood introduces a radical transformation in the way human beings understand their own existence. The biblical affirmation that "God has come visibly" (Ps. 49:2 LXX) signifies that the ultimate truth of human life is not merely conceptual but experiential, tangible, and transformational (Vlachos, 1998). "In Christ—the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14)—God who is Spirit (Jn 4:24) becomes visible and knowable". As the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), Christ inaugurates "a new orientation for the human race" (Bunge, 2007): He assumes human nature in its fullness, reorders human freedom toward unselfish love, and restores humanity's capacity to "turn back toward the good." As St. Severus teaches, "Christ reassembled human nature within itself and within Himself and returned it to its original unity of communion and love. With His resurrection, everything was made new again, and every human being is now confronted with the question of whether or not, they will participate in this restoration (Yannoulatos, 2003)".

In this light, the Incarnation reveals that the foundation of human existence is communion—first with the triune God and, through that communion, with all other human beings who share the image of God (Yannoulatos, 2003).

Christology thus provides the theological ground for understanding human personhood. It reveals that personhood is constituted through two inseparable dimensions:

1. ***Koinonia (communion)***—the outward, relational expression of love toward others, the prosopic manifestation of the human person in concrete acts of communion and witness.
2. ***The inner noetic structure of the person***—the hypostatic and inward reference toward God in love, which grounds personal identity and makes authentic communion possible.

   In Orthodox anthropology, this inward *hypostatic* orientation

toward God defines who the person is, anchoring personal existence beyond psychological autonomy or self-enclosed rationality. The *prosopic* expression of koinonia then reveals how the person lives in the world—through love, self-giving, moral integrity, and ascetical witness. Thus, the human person becomes whole through a hypostatic inward reference to God and a prosopic outward manifestation of love—two dimensions intrinsically united and fulfilled in Christ. Together, these dimensions form the basis of Orthodox Christian bioethics and frame the ethical reflections that will follow in the next section. Having seen that the Incarnation restores human nature and reveals personhood as communion, we can now consider the anthropological implications of humanity being made "in the image of God," for the revelation of the personal God in history manifests the truth about man, his ethos, and the nobility of his descent (Yannaras, 1984).

Humanity, in all its variety and diversity, is fundamentally rooted in unity because man, in his true nature, is created "according to the image of God." All human beings, regardless of their race, color, language or education, bear the image of God, and thus possess intellect (thought), freewill (choice) and love (motivated action). Therefore, sharing in a *koinonia (communion) of love* (Yannoulatos, 2003) is intrinsic to human nature, since humanity was created on the model of the Holy Trinity, and it is this Trinitarian God who created and sustains "the world and everything in it." Therefore, by their very nature, human beings are oriented in harmony with all of creation and with the source of love—God, and this fact that all human existence shares in the divine image makes human nature an indivisible unity.

However, as described earlier, this unity was ruptured in the Fall, breaking humanity's relationship with God and obscuring the '*koinonia* of love' for which human beings were created. In this fallen condition, the world is approached through a discursive rationality shaped by post-Enlightenment expectations that exclude the personal presence of God. Fragmentation arises when human beings, guided by individual egos, attempt to control their own destiny, separating themselves from fellow human beings who likewise bear

God's image. Consequently, man becomes immersed in cycles of desire, lust, violence, conflict, and death, the patterns that mark the fallen natural order and shape human behaviour. This process resulted in the fragmentation of the human self (Yannoulatos, 2003). As a result, the human faculties of thought, choice, and motivated action become misaligned, driven by conflicting desires and passions. Human nature becomes normatively constituted through these disordered inclinations through a web of desires, forming the moral reference point for the fallen world.

This interior fragmentation mirrors the very condition highlighted in secular anthropology: a diminished capacity of the autonomous individual to act coherently, responsibly, and toward the good. The Fall thus provides the deeper ontological explanation for the psychological and ethical instability within the modern self and for the disharmony in human relationships. In rejecting 'koinonia of love' or communion with God, humanity abused its own nature, degenerating, as the fathers say, into an "ugly mask, (Yannoulatos, 2003)," a distortion that also reverberates through creation itself, now marked by forces hostile to human flourishing. Egoism and emotion cloud the mind, obscuring its capacity to perceive reality through erroneous representations and projections arising from a muddle of human thought, desire, and consciousness (Yannoulatos, 2003), thereby damaging this image.

However, despite man deliberately turning away from God, which is a matter of freewill/choice, there is no cessation of existence, and neither his 'image' was completely destroyed nor incapacitated. Human beings retain the capacity to receive "indications of God's will and His energies" (Yannoulatos, 2003). Thus, the biblical description of man as being created "according to the image of God" gives him the possibility of a firm and close relationship with his Creator (Chouliaras, 2020) and also the capability of knowing Him. Therefore, man has to restore back this "God-given" innate "ability" to "sense" and love by comprehending God's glory, "radiance and its meaning", not by "vague mental intuitions or psychological instincts", but by transforming or renewing oneself. Transformation and renewal require purifying and cleansing oneself from the power

of human passions, thereby achieving inner freedom from egoistic attachments of "material wealth and fame, excessive physical comfort, and love for power". Every effort needs to be made to "strengthen this divine spark within us" and "evolve together in harmony" through a constant relationship with God and others in the light of the Incarnation, thereby "arm ourselves with the power of love" (Yannoulatos, 2003).

The right to love and to be loved is the basic defining characteristic of a human being. God's love for humanity and humanity's love for God and all other creatures that He created 'in His image' is the light that illuminates our concern for human dignity and equality. This is the source from which we draw the strength and inspiration needed to make human dignity and equality a reality. With this love, one uncovers a deeper reality of things and sees each and every human being as he or she really is: a creation of God, an image of God, a child of God, our sister or our brother. The freedom found in Christian love is a tremendously powerful force. It is not restricted by what others believe, nor can any obstacle inhibit its initiative. However, the fact that others hold views different from our own in no way prevents a Christian from respecting their freedom to believe as they wish (Yannoulatos, 2003). In this restored relationality lies the foundation for understanding the human person and the ethical commitments that follow.

We now turn to the inner structure of the human person as understood in the Orthodox tradition. As noted in the beginning of this section, Orthodox Christian anthropology understands man as a unified yet twofold reality—a psychosomatic being composed of body and soul (Vlachos, 2017). Each has its own mode of being and activity, yet neither is complete without the other. The body serves as the visible medium through which its inner life (soul) becomes manifest, giving tangible form to what is otherwise unseen. This unity prevents the soul from dissolving into abstraction or the body from becoming a mere biological mechanism. The integrity of human nature thus depends on the coexistence and mutual development of the visible and invisible dimensions of existence; to divide them is to fragment the human person.

Within this unity, an immaterial, bodiless "spirit-soul" (νοῦς) in a material, "practical" body, we are speaking of man's noetic faculty: the spirit-soul or the rational soul of man (Vlachos, 2014). This rational soul is referred to as "intellect," the core of the human person, which, as the "image of God," is linked to God by nature" (Bunge, 2012). Although God's essence remains wholly inaccessible, the human person participates in His uncreated energies and, through them, perceives the divine. The body's perception of the divine is mediated through the intellect (Chouliaras, 2020). Created to know and love God, the intellect's natural function is to "be the light of the mind (Bunge, 2012)"; it seeks spiritual knowledge and delights in the contemplation of God. Through this orientation toward the Creator, the human being discovers his true self.

The will to orient himself to the Creator, and to do good, and to be as well disposed towards all is instilled in us since our creation, as we were all made in the image of Him who is good. God has created man as self-governing, with control over his actions, so that, if he uses his self-ruling power well, he can walk towards good rather than towards evil. As St. John Chrysostom writes, "A natural law of good and evil is seated within us... and we require no teacher to instruct us in these things." This natural law is not a rationalistic code derived from biological tendencies or discursive reasoning, as in modern secular ethics. Instead, it is a moral sense bestowed by the Creator Himself, serving as a guide in turning toward Him and experiencing His presence. It resides in our conscience and moral self-awareness. While man can enhance the awareness of natural law through instruction, it flourishes through prayer, virtuous actions, and love for God. Specifically, it is cultivated through a worshipful relationship with God, which helps one to realise that the law within is a manifestation of divine love (Engelhardt, 2000). This is the man's natural state of the soul, his natural law is oriented towards God, his soul is nourished through the uncreated energy of God, and spiritual experience is transferred to the body, which is in good health and does not let passions develop. Man can achieve this natural state only by looking towards his Archetype, i.e. Christ, and imitating Him, without deviating from the road of goodness (Chou-

liaras, 2020). For a self-enclosed autonomous individual, whose will is not oriented to his Creator's will, or he is looking away from His Archetype and prototype, this natural law remains clouded, and so is his rational soul darkened and entangled with passions of self-love. According to the Orthodox tradition, if someone's noetic faculty is not functioning correctly and has no experience of God, then his soul is sick, his nous is darkened, and it has many repercussions in our lives. Instead of being focused on God, his life revolves around himself. He idolises and worships himself. When his intellect is darkened, man's body revolts against his soul, and he loses his spiritual freedom. The intellect that is associated with freewill is darkened and blackened, and then freedom is also distorted. Man is no longer free, but acts according to the actions and desires of passions. This is how the intellect and the lower powers of the soul become fragmented. The intellect is distinguished and can operate independently from the lower powers of the soul—sensation, imagination, opinion, and reasoning—that operate through the bodily organ of the brain. The intellect is not opposed to reason or will but integrates the lower powers only into a higher form of knowing that is experiential and personal, and will remain darkened if the lower powers are subject to that which is merely conceptual and opposed to God. Within this framework, personhood cannot be reduced to cognitive, volitional, or conative capacities, as is often the case in secular bioethical discourse. As a result, Christian bioethics cannot be connected to secular bioethics. Within this Orthodox Christian understanding discussed so far, Christian bioethics has a therapeutic character, by leading us away from ourselves towards God, the Creator (Engelhardt, 2000) and our Healer, and cannot be connected to secular bioethics.

From this perspective, humanity's creation "according to the image of God" (Gen. 1:27; Wis 2:23) is not a static resemblance but a dynamic, and relational participation, as we saw in the definition of person. The human being reflects the divine prototype not merely through rationality or autonomy but through openness to communion with God and others. The "image" (εἰκών) signifies the inherent structure of relationality—an ontological orientation toward the divine "Other"—while "likeness" (ὁμοίωσις) describes the process

of actualizing that relationship in freedom and love. This movement from image to likeness implies that personhood is not fully given at birth but unfolds through participation, moral transformation, and communion. The Holy Spirit, "guiding into all truth," forms in the human person the likeness of Christ, enabling self-transcendence beyond the fragmentation of passions and egocentric desires. God turns towards man, calling him to himself, and also wants man to turn to him. God made man in his image and likeness (Gen 1:26) so that man, looking towards his Archetype, i.e. Christ, would not deviate from the road of goodness. Every human being who is of good will, has good intentions, and keeps the commandments of Christ (genuine love, humility, forgiveness, and unselfish service towards others)— even if he or she does not have the privilege of directly knowing the ineffable mystery of Christ— receives the Christ-Word that is present in His commandment. Since God is love, any expression of love whatsoever is automatically attuned to His will and His commandments (Yannoulatos, 2003).

Therefore, in Orthodox Christian anthropology, personhood is not defined by a self-contained, autonomous rational subject, but by a mode of existence constituted in communion—in relation and reference to God. From this perspective of the Orthodox Christian Tradition, man was created to have an unbroken relationship with God—a relationship of love. This status, however, was lost in the fall, when man could no longer maintain communion with the Creator. In this predicament, God expressed His love toward humanity (Samuel, 2001) in the most direct way: Christ became incarnate and "dwelt among us." He lived, worked, suffered, and died, rose again, and ascended into heaven. In this way, He transfigured human nature and emphasised the enormous value of the material world and of the human being as a psychosomatic unity (Yannoulatos, 2010), where soul and body coexist as distinct natures united in one personal subject, as discussed in this study. The spirit-soul is not liberated from the "prison" of the body, as in other philosophical or religious systems; rather, human thought—humbled and transfigured—becomes a faithful recipient of divine love (Yannoulatos, 2010).

When God the Son hypostatically united Himself to one flesh

animated with a rational soul—becoming man—He revealed a mode of existence that defines authentic personhood. In doing so, He becomes the reference point and measure of human fullness for every person who seeks to live truly human and God-like. As the first-born and "second Adam" of the new creation, and as the mediator between God and man, He represents each human being individually and the whole human race collectively. At the same time, as God, He remains continuous with Himself and fully united with the Persons of the Holy Trinity.

The Orthodox Tradition is profoundly nurtured by the intuition that life has priority over speech and focusses attention on the transformation and purification of oneself with inner genuineness (Yannoulatos, 2010). As free persons, each of us are invited to accept this possibility of activating the infinite potentialities to proceed to the fulfillment of human existence— the possibilities offered to every human person by 'being' in Christ and on ceaselessly 'becoming' in Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, the human being strives to become Christ-like and is led to the Father, the Holy Trinity (Yannoulatos, 2010).

This defines our hypostasis as a distinct person whose mode of existence displays concrete, unique, and unrepeatable properties, reflecting and illuminating the image of Christ. The fulfillment of the inward life as a personal "who," or hypostasis, takes place through participation in the divine life, through reference and relationship to Christ, and by freely subjecting one's freedom to God in love (Vlachos, 1998)—an inner transformation made possible by the Holy Spirit, who enables the human being to attain "freedom as love" (Vlachos, 1998). This inward transformation is expressed outwardly in the prosopon—the face, presence, and relational manifestation of the person in the mode of love and freedom in Christ. In the saints of the Church, we encounter this co-existence of love and freedom (Vlachos, 1998). Thus, the Orthodox Christian understanding offers a coherent theological framework for defining the human person (Yannoulatos, 2010), in which his/her personal distinctiveness is revealed and known within personal relationship and communion, attaining its wholeness in love (Yannaras, 1984).

Implications of Christological anthropology for bioethics

To act ethically is to love, and to love is to become like God. However, in the field of Bioethics, dominated by a secular understanding of the human person, we encounter varying senses of what it means to act appropriately (Cherry & Iltis, 2010). For this reason, analysis of the human person is essential: without a coherent anthropology, bioethical reflection lacks a foundation. A society cannot exist without man. When "man is the measure," *nothing outside human preference* can guide moral discernment. Furthermore, when human preference becomes the foundation, morality becomes contingent, unstable, and ultimately arbitrary (Cherry & Iltis, 2010).

Modern bioethics often presupposes the Enlightenment image of the human person as a self-contained, autonomous subject who defines meaning through will, preference, and self-determination. Within this paradigm, bioethical reasoning centers on rights and personal choice. This approach is supported by the four principles of bioethics: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, with autonomy taking precedence and influencing the others. It is noted that when personhood is defined solely by autonomy, moral value becomes subject to conditions such as capacity, productivity, rationality, and independence.

The modern self emerges through disengagement. It becomes itself by separation: I am not you; I determine myself, I decide. Autonomy becomes the ethical axis. Nevertheless, this model fails to account for the very conditions that make personhood intelligible. Communication presupposes relation; identity presupposes recognition; agency presupposes a world in which action bears consequence. A self that exists only for itself collapses inward. This is the paradox: autonomy, when made absolute, becomes isolation. Isolation becomes fragmentation. Fragmentation becomes the dissolution of personhood. Modern ethics equates freedom with choice. Choice, however, is morally empty until oriented. One may choose well or choose destructively.

Man, being created according to the image of God, means that he is by nature intrinsically oriented and has reference and relation to his Creator. Free will is the defining feature of this image. Therefore,

freedom is not the possibility of choice or preference (Vlachos, 1998) but the possibility of desiring communion with God. The "intellect," or man's rational soul, the core of the human person, which as the "image of God," is linked to God by nature (Bunge, 2012). Furthermore, man must be guided towards unity with God "in the person of Jesus Christ". "Christ is the archetype and prototype of the creation of man" (Vlachos, 1998). This movement and completion are essential, because only then man is fulfilled, i.e. his own self is enabled only with reference, relationship and communion with the Person of Christ, who alone is the Person of God in the absolute sense (Bunge, 2002). It is through Christ that man achieves anything in the absolute sense, to the extent he tries to restore this communion, or relationship, or reference with Him. Only God has absolute freedom since God is uncreated and is not bound by any necessity, including His existence (Vlachos, 1998). Without such a reference, depersonalisation occurs, which threatens the very essence of being human, as what is at stake is the human being's possibility of growing in the likeness of God, which alone brings about his own self (Bunge, 2012). So Orthodox Christian Anthropology always professes the fact that without this communion, man cannot become a true person. Without this communion in Christ, man's desire to achieve freedom in an absolute sense as far as possible remains incomplete. Orthodox theology, therefore, does not make autonomy the essence of freedom. With such self-enclosed autonomy, man is just a mask, which destroys the unity of society. Freedom is fulfilled when oriented toward communion, truth, and love.

Christ does not assert autonomy; He offers Himself. This is the paradox of divine freedom: it becomes itself by self-giving. When this does not happen, the consequences are not merely personal but social. A self-enclosed individual becomes ill, which radiates outward, creating disturbance and division, and ultimately producing a society dominated by tyranny and hatred (person).

Marriage, procreation, and infertility

In this broken and unredeemed world, the relationship between man and woman became distorted by sin. Since Eve was the first to be deceived and then drew Adam into disobedience, the primordial

harmony of their relationship was disrupted. What had been created as a synergy of equal honour and mutual help was expanded to a dominion that included even polygamy. The unique union of Adam and Eve became lost in polygamy, and the need to reproduce, a need embedded in a cycle of pleasure, pain, striving, and death, was born of the Fall (Engelhardt, 2000).

This world, still broken by sin, is redeemed through the Incarnation of Christ and on its way to restoration. The natural union of marriage can now be completed in the unique union, the monogamy of Adam and Eve, as restored in the Mystery of the Church. The Church regards the birth of each human being within the context of the mystery of marriage. Consequently, the Church also feels that the mystery of human beginning ought to occur within an atmosphere of monogamous, heterosexual intercourse blessed by the mystery of marriage, of a union in 'one flesh' (Chatzinikolaou, 2008). A conception that takes place in a laboratory instead of the maternal body and through a procedure other than the spouse's intercourse is deprived of the mystery's character.

As mentioned in the paper, a fundamental element of Orthodox Christian anthropology is the recognition of the sacredness of human existence. He unites the visible and invisible, or the material and immaterial world, with his existence. The objective of man, who is made in God's image, is to become 'after His likeness' (Genesis, 1952), namely to attain perfection and sanctification. With this ultimate objective in mind, man and woman unite only in marriage, and a union outside this mystery of marriage is often misdirected. Christian marriage, therefore, cannot be reduced to self-satisfaction or emotional fulfilment. Instead, marriage involves a pleasant ascetic struggle of mutual love and sacrifice: a joyful companionship of spouses and children in the pursuit of holiness. Husband and wife are called to turn away from self-love through love of each other and of God. They are called to be chaste with respect to eschewing sexual acts with others and to turn with love to each other and their children. In all of this, they are like martyrs; they are to die to their passions of self-love and egocentric desires. Within this ascetic and relational framework, the decision to limit children

because of health or due to limited familial or societal resources need not suffer from a misdirection of energies or one's capacities; it can be made out of love for others and with humility before God (Engelhardt, 2000).

Within this relational vision, infertility must likewise be approached through the Orthodox Christian anthropology of personhood. When infertility is treated merely as a biological defect or a social deficiency, the couple's identity becomes reduced to their reproductive capacity. By contrast, the Church regards sterility as an expression of God's will or even a blessing in the form of a trial. The Church acknowledges in every human being his infinite spiritual possibilities along with his natural identity (biological, psychological, etc.), and is clearly set against the notion that infertility constitutes a type of disability or an incurable social weakness. Oftentimes, couples who have difficulty having children have a well-defined spiritual orientation and are especially productive in various fields of social and spiritual life.

The contribution of the Church and clergy would be essential in eliminating unhealthy viewpoints and unjustified social pressures. Simultaneously, they could assist in cultivating the belief that although the birth of a child is a great blessing, infertility does not degrade the dignity of the spouses, nor does it harm their relationship or abolish their marriage.

At this point, a deeper anthropological clarification is required. The Orthodox understanding of personhood as relational, referential, and grounded in communion with God provides the proper lens for approaching infertility.

The persistent effort to overcome sterility risks, transforming the natural and sacred desire for childbearing into a form of self-will or a stubborn will set against the will of God. Accordingly, every attempt to address infertility must leave room for the humble acceptance of a possible failure (Chatzinikolaou, 2008). From an Orthodox Christian anthropological perspective, the couple's dignity and hope do not rest upon biological success but upon the affirmation that they are created in the image of God. This status grounds their worth independently of reproductive capacity. When person-

al identity is understood not through biological productivity but through one's referential and relational orientation toward Christ, divine love provides the interpretive framework through which the couple can perceive the deeper reality of their condition. Through ascetic discipline and spiritual struggle, the couple learns to discern the meaning of their existence independent of the external conditions they face (Yannoulatos, 2010). In this framework, the fulfillment of personhood does not lie in the attainment of biological outcomes but in the shared relational movement toward Christ, which, through the life of the Church in the Holy Spirit, discloses the truth and purpose of every human life.

The status of the embryo and the sanctity of human beginning

In Orthodox Christian anthropology, the beginning of human life is inseparable from the relational and referential understanding that defines personhood itself. A human being comes into existence within the psychosomatic union of husband and wife, marked by mutual self-offering, love, and communion. The desire for children is thus understood not merely as a biological act but as a natural and sacred orientation of marital love with the will of God in bringing forth new life. For this reason, procreation is not an autonomous human achievement but an asserted expression of God's will.

As God's creative act is always an expression of divine love, the child who comes into being through marital union is a gift, not a possession. Free will, which is God's greatest gift to humanity, can become distorted when the desire for a child is reduced to self-fulfilment, emotional satisfaction, or social validation. The newborn is not a "biological and psychological extension" of the parents nor an instrument to satisfy their needs. Instead, the child belongs to God, is entrusted to the parents for this earthly life, and is destined for eternal life (Chatzinikolaou, 2008). The proper reception of a child is thus grounded in a relational orientation directed toward God, the child as a distinct "other," and the wider community (Gambos).

This relational framework is crucial for understanding parenthood. According to the anthropology presented in this thesis, a person ex-

ists only in reference and relation. Thus, the identity of the parents as persons is realised not in isolated autonomy but in the relational encounter with the child, whose presence continually refers them back to God, the ultimate Giver of life. The child becomes a point who draws the parents out of individualistic self-containedness and into communion.

Parental love exemplifies this dynamic. It represents a movement beyond their ontic self towards life-as-relation (Yannaras, 2011). Parents come to know themselves and their child not through objective observation but through a referential knowledge grounded in love. As Christos Yannaras affirms, "love is the supreme road to knowledge of the person," because love recognises and receives the other in their fullness. Through this love, the child is encountered as a distinct person or hypostasis rather than an object of parental desire or social expectation (Yannaras, 1984).

Moreover, the parent–child relationship is not an isolated dyad but part of the broader ecclesial community. The family is understood as a "house church" where the relationships within it are illumined by "sainthood and the martyrdom of mutual love" (Cherry & Iltis, 2010) While biological parenthood is significant, the Church emphasises that relationships must transcend mere "natural necessity" and grow in relationship of love, according to the pattern of the way of being and communion of the Persons of the Holy Trinity (Vlachos, 1998). Parenthood thus becomes an arena in which biological bonds are transfigured into intentional, relational communion.

Therefore, the beginning of human life is sacred and cannot be understood apart from the referential and relational ontology that defines human personhood in Orthodox Christianity. Viewing the embryo as a gift of God, rather than as an autonomous product of the human will, provides the necessary framework for addressing questions about its status, identity, and moral significance. This relational understanding grounds the subsequent ethical analysis of the embryo and frames the sanctity of the human beginning within a robust Christological anthropology.

According to contemporary official Church texts, the embryo is regarded as having both a human beginning and a human perspective.

Its cells, genetic material, morphology and physiology are entirely human. The embryo has the inherent potential of 'becoming a child of God' (Chatzinikolaou, 2008). The body and soul are not considered entities born at different times; both come into being at the same. The embryo is endowed with a soul at conception (Chatzinikolaou, 2008). Moreover, its potential to develop solely into a perfect human being, and nothing else, confirms its human existence (Chatzinikolaou, 2009). The points to be highlighted here are:

1. ***It's right to human identity:*** The embryo possesses an ethically indisputable right to manifest its own identity and unfold its personal uniqueness. It is not for others to assign or deny its status. Rather, we are obligated to allow the embryo to reveal what it already is: a human being whose body and soul are distinct from every other. Respect for this identity requires that science and society safeguard the embryo's inherent dignity and protect its natural development.
2. ***The right to life:*** The embryo's natural course of development is the same as that of every human being. We should acknowledge the embryo's right to life and protect and care for it. The embryo should achieve autonomous status under the best possible circumstances. The sole aim of its existence should be its life, not the experiment (experimental embryos), or surplus embryos (spare embryos), or waiting under freezing conditions (frozen embryos). The fact that for thousands of embryos the frozen environment of a freezer has replaced the warm maternal womb, and the potential for life by the prospect of experiments and death, undermines human value and violates the right to life.
3. ***The right to eternity:*** The embryo has the prospect of immortality. From the moment of its conception, it is destined to live for eternity. This reveals God's right to repeat His image in man.

Euthanasia

Just as the beginning of human life is sacred because it arises within reference and relation, grounded in God and ordered toward Him, so too the end of human life must be approached within the same Christological and relational horizon in which the human per-

son is constituted and fulfilled. If the embryo cannot be understood apart from orientation toward God that constitutes personhood, neither can the suffering or dying person. The sanctity of human beginning and the sanctity of human dying are thus united by a single anthropological truth: a human being is never an isolated biological entity but a person whose identity is constituted in communion and is relational.

Orthodox Christianity adopts a fundamentally therapeutic, rather than juridical or legalistic, approach to the question of euthanasia (Engelhardt, 2000). In light of the earlier definition of prosopon, a person is not an autonomous biological unit but one defined by reference, relation, and the capacity to sustain both. Agency, therefore, is not the assertion of individual autonomy; rather, it is the acceptance of responsibility for the other through submission to God's will. To act as a person is to enter into and sustain relationships, to share in another's life, suffering, and loneliness (Sebastian, 2009).

Within the Orthodox theological tradition, the ethical issue surrounding euthanasia does not concern only the suffering patient; it also reveals the spiritual condition of the caregiver. As previously discussed with respect to the Fall, modern humans live in an existential crisis, alienated from their "natural state," a state of virtue, grace, and communion. This "natural state" is not merely a moral ideal but the proper mode of human existence: a life directed toward God, shaped by responsibility for others, and rooted in the pursuit of spiritual truth. Returning to this state is tantamount to becoming a true person.

By contrast, secular bioethics approaches the human being as an autonomous individual defined by reason, functional capacity, and immanent considerations. Without reference to God, secular frameworks often rely on utilitarian or functionalist principles in which life may be judged to lack moral worth once reasoning abilities decline, dependency increases, or suffering outweighs pleasure. Though procedurally effective, these approaches risk profoundly negative anthropological consequences. By neglecting the spiritual depth inherent to every human being, secular bioethics undermines

the very sources from which individuals draw meaning, resilience, and hope in times of suffering (Gombos). This pertains especially to the human being as a psychosomatic unity.

In Orthodox thought, although the human body is subject to biological laws, it cannot be reduced to an organism. It is the body of a person, inseparable from psychological and spiritual dimensions that elevate the human being beyond the animal world. The body expresses the person and, in a profound sense, is the person; thus, whatever affects the body affects the person as a whole. If our efforts focus solely on alleviating physical suffering without attending to the spiritual identity of the patient, we risk doing immeasurable harm, depriving the suffering person of the possibility of situating their condition within a meaningful spiritual horizon (Larchet, 2002).

When the spiritual dimension of the human person is excluded from the caregiving encounter, both the patient and the caregiver suffer loss. The patient misses the opportunity to approach suffering in ways that foster meaning, hope, and communion. The caregiver, correspondingly, is deprived of the deeper moral and spiritual context necessary for authentic accompaniment.

From an Orthodox perspective, reference to God transforms what would otherwise be a secular, contractual interaction into a sacred relationship involving the caregiver, the patient, and God. The divine challenge is always to "choose life," to preserve, protect, nurture, and cherish earthly life by every means available and in all circumstances. Choosing life also includes receiving death as a passage into eternal life, approached with faith, hope, and trust in God.

To guard the dying from the gravest temptation, the temptation to despair, the caregiver must accompany them with compassion, love, and unwavering hope. Through presence, prayer, and gentle words, the caregiver bears witness to the truth that God receives His dying child into His embrace, where sorrow and pain are no more. Acts of love performed in reference to Christ, treating the dying as persons created in the divine image, reveal deeper spiritual realities to both the patient and the caregiver (Breck, 2000).

This work is demanding and transformative, summoning the

caregiver to virtue. The willingness to remain with the dying, marked by patience, compassion, and self-emptying love, constitutes an ascetical struggle. When the caregiver subjects his will to God's will, he partakes in divine grace. Such acts restore the caregiver's sense of responsibility for the other and affirm the intrinsic dignity of the suffering person, countering the reductionism of secular bioethics, which often withdraws recognition when functional or cognitive capacities decline.

Furthermore, the Orthodox tradition understands this service not merely as a moral obligation but as Christocentric. When the caregiver perceives the dying person as an icon of Christ, he fulfils the scriptural command: "*Whatever you did for one of the least of these... you did for Me.*" Caregiving thus becomes synergistic, a cooperation of divine grace and human freedom. Through this synergy, the caregiver learns to soften his heart and redirect his will through a meaningful existential orientation in Christ.

Within this framework, accompanying the dying becomes a decisive moment in which the relational, spiritual, and ethical dimensions of personhood are revealed. Human life is experienced as communion, with God and with others. Virtue becomes the expression of authentic humanity, and the approach to death is shaped not by autonomy or fear but by hope, love, and the sacramental life of the Church.

Conclusion

As science becomes increasingly detached from art, theology, and the personal encounter with truth, and as secular culture gravitates toward non-personal forms of religion, a broader liberal cosmopolitan ethos has taken shape, as this study has shown. In an age marked by rapid technological progress, particularly in fields such as artificial intelligence, cognitive science, and data science, the deeper question concerns the status of personhood. Scientific developments may enhance human capability, yet they also risk obscuring the truth about the human person that has been handed down throughout history.

Artificial intelligence, for instance, draws heavily on Rational

Choice Theory (RCT), which serves as one of its conceptual and functional foundations. By grounding decision-making in data modelling while suppressing moral values or reducing them to preference metrics, such systems pose significant risks to cognitive freedom and to the practices of moral deliberation that sustain pluralistic societies. The creation of algorithmically filtered environments, such as "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles" (Pinto-Bustamante et al., 2023), further threatens the conditions necessary for genuine ethical reasoning, ultimately raising profound questions about human personhood.

At the same time, as individuals attempt to understand sin and evil in secular or psychological terms, such as diffuse guilt, social aggression, or structural malfunction, the awareness of evil as a personal power diminishes. Many enlightened individuals recognise it as significant "progress" or even genuine "liberation." Yet, as the Orthodox tradition observes, the absence of personal recognition of evil—of handling sin and evil in their own way without perceiving it as a personal power— simplifies the task of the destructive forces, or the 'devil—the evil one'. As one insight puts it, "He can do very well without being perceived by human beings as 'really existing'".

This condition leads back to the primordial account of the Fall. Archbishop Anastasios notes, "In the twenty-first century, with the development of sciences and technology, many celebrate human capability with declarations such as "God is dead" or "We are gods,"; claims that echo the ancient temptation in Eden: "You will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). The problem here is not human aspiration itself, which means the desire of man to elevate himself to the throne of God is not altogether wrong, which reflects a predisposition of divine origin of being made in the 'image of God, and called to His likeness', but the distortion of this aspiration into autonomy that dismisses God.

The Devil cannot create something new; he can only pervert creation. With that ancient proposal of his, he distorted the truth and turned it into a lie. Just as in Eden, he began with a basic truth, but he expressed it in such a way as to set humanity on the wrong path, pushing humanity towards arrogance and self-realisation (Yannoulatos,

2010). When awareness of the personhood of God, the awareness that we are in the image of God and that we sin only against God through our actions that dismiss Him, who is a Person in the absolute sense, along with the awareness of our own being, and of the forces opposed to human flourishing fades, the very idea of unity is lost. Unity is not mere "aloneness," but the unbroken relation of the "I" before its "You. (Bunge, 2012)"

When this awareness fades, it leads to a loss of understanding of one's own personhood, resulting in depersonalisation. This threatens the very essence of being human, as "what is at stake is the human being's possibility to grow in the likeness of God". Only in this light is the "created being or the person brought about".

Every person is given the opportunity to define his own personhood, and this possibility is made possible by the Incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. We have seen that "Christianity is a revelation of God. It is not a discovery by man but a revelation by God Himself to man. Human reason could not discover the truths of Christianity. Where human reason was powerless to find God's truth, Christ, the God-man, came and revealed the truth (Vlachos, 2017). Though articulated using philosophical terminology, this revelation is not a philosophy".

For an Orthodox Christian, the Church is the (mystical) Body of Christ, which receives the uncreated energy of the Trinitarian God. Each member of the Church, bearing the image of God, is united to Christ and shares in the uncreated energies of God (Vlachos, 1998). The Holy Fathers, using the philosophical terminology of their time, shaped theological formulations, giving these terms the content of their experiential knowledge. "Experience is something stable, while philosophical terminology may change (Vlachos, 1998)". "God is not an object of conjecture and logical understanding, but a matter of participation, revelation, that is to say, of experience (Vlachos, 1998)" A person is therefore revealed existentially through experience. Human moral psychology and structure are grounded in this experiential knowledge.

The Incarnation does not merely introduce "a few moral rules or clarify" our daily conduct; it "ontologically renews all things." "Christ transfigured the human nature that he assumed. But for us, it still remains an enormous potential, still underdeveloped". As

free persons, we are called to accept this possibility voluntarily (Yannoulatos, 2010). Christ sanctifies the human body—transforming, resurrecting, and elevating it to heaven in the Ascension. His historical life, by assuming flesh with a rational soul hypostatically, affirms the dignity of the body and opposes both vague idealisms and every form of atheistic humanism. The Christian proclamation is not the liberation of the soul from the body but the resurrection and elevation of the whole human nature.

Humanity and the world acquire an indescribable dignity and significance. Every person who takes an authentic interest in human beings, in the protection of their health, their freedom, and justice and dignity of the human person, finds themselves in harmony with the great purpose of the elevation of human beings realised by the risen and ascended Christ. To be truly human, one must be God-like. Jesus Christ always remains the measure of fullness for Christians (Yannoulatos, 2010)". "Therefore, to become Christ-like is the highest human right, and all other human rights are derived from this right. Any thought that ignores the ultimate right of the human person results in disorientation and makes one indifferent towards the essential element of human existence: one's divine origin and one's divine destination".

This theological vision extends even to the earliest beginnings of human life. The "beginning of man's biological life is identified with a unique event of utmost importance: the birth of a new soul. In every embryo, along with the cellular multiplication, which indicates the growth of its body, and the transmission of the inherited characteristics, which form its person, another process is also carried out: the birth and development of its soul. With its soul, the embryo will pass from the condition of human 'clothing' to the state of the 'garment' of divinity, from time to eternity, from decay to incorruptibility, from the physical resemblance to its parents to the spiritual likeness of God. Within the embryo, the image of God humbly exists (Chatzinikolaou, 2008)"

Therefore, a Christian is called to proclaim and live the fact that every person has the right, and the obligation to activate infinite potentialities which are offered to each human person in Christ

through the Holy Spirit, so that we proceed to the fulfilment of human existence. This is perfection or deification. This process is revealed in the Ascension of Christ in a manner that transcends every static or merely conceptual human thought (Yannoulatos, 2010)".

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