

# **Exploring the Core of Humanity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the Concept of Personhood**

by  
**Jing-bao Nie**

French sociologist Marcel Mauss, Émile Durkheim's nephew and student, began the 1938 Huxley Memorial Lecture by telling his audience that the idea of the "person" (*personne*), the notion of self (*moi*), is one of the most significant categories of the human mind. Although the concept "originated and slowly developed over many centuries and through numerous vicissitudes," said Mauss, "even today it is still imprecise, delicate and fragile, one requiring further elaboration."<sup>1</sup> Although seven decades have passed, the notion of the person is still unsettled and requires further elaboration, as in Mauss's day. The subject of personhood—or the question of what makes a human being a special entity with dignity and fundamental moral rights that ought to be respected and protected—is one of the crucial and most controversial topics in contemporary bioethics and moral philosophy. It is not only theoretically important but practically significant, because any argument about personhood carries implications for contemporary academic and public debate on a series of moral dilemmas such as abortion, infanticide, the withdrawal of medical treatment, and euthanasia. Gerhold K. Becker has called these discussions on personhood, "exploring the core of humanity."<sup>2</sup>

The dominant perspective on personhood in contemporary bioethics, as exemplified in the theories of Michael Tooley, Joseph Fletcher, Mary Anne

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Mauss, "A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person; the Notion of Self," trans. W.D. Halls, in Michael Carrither, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes, eds., *The Category of Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhold K. Becker, "Exploring the Core of Humanity," *Ethics and Society, Newsletter of Centre for Applied Ethics, Hong Kong Baptist University* 6/2 (1998): 2-7.

Warren, Joel Feinberg, H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., and Peter Singer, has been developed within a specifically modern Western philosophical framework and is rooted in the thought of Locke and Kant in particular. In this perspective, such terms as autonomy or self-determination and reason or rationality are used as the key words to define personhood. The knowledge, teachings, and insights of Judeo-Christianity, non-English-speaking cultures in the West, and non-Western traditions, as well as other academic disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, are marginalized or remain in the background—if not totally banished from the picture—in mainstream bioethics.

The two volumes edited by Gerhold K. Becker—*The Moral Status of Persons* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000) and a special issue of the *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* (Vol. 9, No. 4, 1999)—represent the successful steps beyond the prescriptions of this dominant bioethical discourse. The eighteen essays collected in these two volumes offer new and challenging perspectives on personhood. Not only do they critically analyze a number of accepted ideas in the bioethical discourse on personhood, but they also draw on the ethical legacies of Eastern cultures and Christianity (German theology in particular). Few volumes in bioethics can boast such a diverse international authorship. This suggests that no single intellectual tradition, no single culture, no single discipline, no single perspective can fully explain the core of what makes us human. Since the contributors to these two volumes deal with a wide range of issues, I have no intention of reviewing all the essays and the arguments they contain. My focus here will be on the cross-cultural perspectives they embody, and specifically on their treatment of Eastern, especially Chinese, understandings of personhood.

First, though, I will mention a group of essays which address conceptual issues and practical concerns from within the Western philosophical tradition and which challenge many popular ideas on personhood both in bioethics and moral philosophy. For example, inspired by the work of Robert Spaemann, the Taiwanese philosopher Johannes H. C. Sun criticizes the liberal functionalist view in which some human beings are not regarded as persons, and offers a defense of the traditionalist view that all human beings are persons. Michael Quante, a German philosopher, disagrees that autonomy is the basis of personal identity and argues rather that personal identity is the sole basis for autonomy. He believes that personal identity has existential priority over autonomy and that, conceptually speaking, the ethically relevant meaning of autonomy is directly or indirectly based on personal identity. The

British medical ethicist John Harris rejects both the potentiality argument and gradualism, defining a person as “a creature capable of valuing its own existence.” The American bioethicist Tom Beauchamp thinks that modern and contemporary theories of personhood all fail to capture the depth of moral commitment embedded in use of the term “person” and fail also to distinguish what he calls “metaphysical” from “moral” concepts of persons. In contrast to popular beliefs, Beauchamp argues that a unique moral status or concept cannot be derived from a description of some non-moral, usually cognitive, property of persons such as self-consciousness. Both volumes discuss a number of practical issues from the perspective of personhood and personal identity, including gene therapy (see the essay by the British philosopher Ruth Chadwick), human cloning (Jonathan Chan, a philosopher from Hong Kong), brain injury (Derrick Au, head of rehabilitation services at a hospital in Hong Kong), the status of animals (the Scottish philosopher Elizabeth Telfer), and advance directives (the Australian bioethicist Helga Kuhse and the German philosopher Michael Quante).

Judeo-Christian theology was a vital force in the birth of bioethics in the West, particularly in the United States, and is still probably the most significant source for public debate on bioethical issues in Western countries. But in the dominant bioethical discourse on personhood, theological reflection has often been treated as irrelevant, if not downright harmful. In an attempt to remedy this deficiency, two essays in *The Moral Status of Persons* focus on Christian theological viewpoints of personhood. Dennis P. McCann, an American theologian, discusses the conception of personhood in Catholic social teaching as articulated by Pope John Paul II and its implications for healthcare policy. The German theologian Friedrich-Wilhelm Graf charges that current bioethical discussions, especially those framed in the context of British utilitarianism, are reductionist because bioethical theorists define persons as a class of object with distinctive natural, physical, and psychic features. For Graf, in contrast to the status held by things and other living beings, the essential characteristic of a person in the Protestant tradition lies in the Christian idea of freedom; personhood “is not phasic in itself,” but “has a life history.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Graf notes that many theological ethicists react to “social technology” such as human cloning “with moral indignation and are reminded of George Orwell’s *Brave New World*” (p. 172 in *The Moral Status of Persons*). Certainly, both Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *1984* still have relevance for issues of human dignity, freedom, and the meaning of humanity in an intensively interconnected world, in face of new technologies and rapidly changing social institutions.

The cross-cultural perspective is the most notable feature of both volumes, especially in *The Moral Status of Persons*. This work is the 96th volume in the Value Inquiry Book series edited by Robert Ginsberg and the first volume in a new series entitled Studies in Applied Ethics. Both series are published by Rodopi, the latter under the general editorship of Gerhold Becker. The goal of Studies in Applied Ethics, as stated by Becker in the editorial forward, is to publish scholarly works in the field with preference given “to comparative studies, [...] to multicultural approaches, and to research that draws on and makes available for critical reflection and moral discourse the ethical resources of the East, particularly of China.” For Becker, an “unbiased, critical exploration” of personhood from the vantage point of non-Western, particularly Eastern, cultures and intellectual traditions is a “genuine task.”

In a sense, the two volumes reviewed here present a Hong Kong approach to bioethics. All the essays originated in an international symposium on bioethics and the concept of personhood held at the Centre for Applied Ethics, Hong Kong Baptist University, in May 1998.<sup>4</sup> Becker was at that time still the director of the Centre he had founded, and four others among the international team of authors were also teaching in Hong Kong. Even more importantly perhaps, the two volumes reflect the role of Hong Kong as a meeting place of Western and Eastern traditions and as a bridge connecting different cultures. Hong Kong has proven to the world how fruitful the meeting of East and West can be. The experiences of Hong Kong—its successes, problems, and failures—can teach citizens of a globalized world how to think about and live with the civilizations of China and the West, their inevitable conflicts, their potentially harmonious co-existence, and even the seamless fusion of their cultural horizons. Hong Kong seems to be an ideal place to conduct Chinese-Western comparative studies in many fields including ethics. In 1996, Becker edited *Ethics in Business and Society: Chinese and Western Perspectives* (published by Springer). Through the two volumes under discussion, he has provided readers with a further valuable and timely service in the field of cross-cultural applied ethics.

Five essays in *The Moral Status of Persons* and one article in the *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* address the topic of personhood from a cross-cultural perspective. All are interesting and thought-provoking. Using as an example the practice of Japanese physicians of disclosing the diagnosis

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed report on the symposiums, see Becker’s preface in *Ethics and Society*.

of a terminal illness to the patient's family first, the Japanese ethicist Shin Ohara re-asserts the importance of "we-consciousness"—or "we"-identity rather than "i"-identity—and emphasizes the need for moving beyond the restricted "I-we" or family relationship to a more communal ethics. The Chinese bioethicist Ruiping Fan, editor of an anthology titled *Confucian Bioethics* published in 1999 by Kluwer, outlines four international approaches to the issue of personhood. He characterizes the Confucian conception as an "appeal to rites," in contrast to what he calls the Judeo-Christian "appeal to creation," some contemporary Western authors' "appeal to rights," and Engelhardt's "transcendental" or "general" conception of personhood. Based on Herbert Fingarette's famous interpretation of Confucianism in *Confucius: Secular as Sacred*, Fan considers "participation in rites" as the essence of the Confucian conception of personhood.

Renzong Qiu, a leading bioethicist and philosopher of science in mainland China, argues for a holistic version of personhood that includes the biological, psychological, and social characteristics of being a person. For him, possessing the human genome with a human body and brain and possessing the potentiality for self-consciousness are *necessary* conditions for being a person, whereas being a social agent with the capacity to communicate and interact with other persons is the *sufficient* condition for personhood. Qiu also briefly discusses the implications of his conception of personhood for human cloning, abortion, infanticide, irreversible coma, brain transplantation, split brain, a human baby in E.T. society, and the "rights" approach in bioethics.

The sophisticated and seminal essays by Chad Hansen, Edwin Hui, and Jiwei Ci challenge, explicitly and implicitly, some widely-held but problematic (or at least insufficient) approaches to Chinese culture and Chinese-Western comparative ethics. For example, even though Western modernist and postmodernist attitudes toward Chinese culture appear totally opposite—one negative and the other positive—both have treated China as the Other, the alternative, something fundamentally different. A number of generalized comparisons or dichotomous terms of the type "China vs. the West" have been formulated to indicate these supposed differences in cultural values and social mores: communitarianism vs. individualism; personal responsibility and duty vs. individual liberty and freedom; moral and spiritual vs. materialist; secular vs. religious and transcendental—to list only a few. Even the essays by Shin Ohara, Ruiping Fan, and Renzong Qiu seem by and large to follow this model in their elaborations of Eastern and Western cultural

differences regarding personhood. But this long-rooted and widespread way of thinking usually simplifies and even distorts the complex reality of both Chinese and Western cultures.<sup>5</sup>

In his remarkable essay “Jen and Perichoresis: The Confucian and Christian Bases of the Relational Person,” the Chinese-Canadian theologian and bioethicist Edwin Hui, who is currently teaching in Hong Kong, has put this “East vs. West” dichotomy far behind him. On the one hand, Hui shows how the foundational Confucian concept of *jen* (*ren* in the current pinyin system) stands in contrast to the modern Western Cartesian view of self and person, and emphasizes the dynamic process of “person-making” or the relational basis of personhood. On the other hand, he points to an alternative language in modern Western philosophical thought and shows that such thinkers as Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, and John Macmurray have given prime importance to the experience of the “other,” relation, and community. For Hui, Christianity has developed within Western culture a relational conception of personhood as exemplified in the notion of perichoresis formulated in early Christian theology. Moreover, Hui interprets the Confucian teaching of the “person-in-relation” as deeply rooted in a religious system embodied in belief in “The Great Plan.” He demonstrates that the Confucian concept of *jen*, like the Christian concept of perichoresis, possesses not only a relational but also a transcendental understanding of personhood. These insights make Hui’s essay a model in the field of Chinese-Western comparative studies of ethics. Ideally, cross-cultural comparisons should avoid stereotypes or getting stuck at the level of “West vs. Non-West,” but should rather explore pertinent differences and similarities at the same time.

It is widely held that the individual-rights approach in the West and in Western bioethics is not applicable to non-Western societies including China because Chinese and most other non-Western cultures are not individualistic in nature. Interestingly, while Renzong Qiu is an enthusiastic advocate of patients’ rights in China and co-author of the first book on the subject in

<sup>5</sup> I have critiqued this general approach by emphasizing the great diversity of medical ethics in China: see Jing-Bao Nie, “The Plurality of Chinese and American Medical Moralities: Toward an Interpretive Cross-Cultural Bioethics,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 10/3 (2000): 239-260. (A modified Chinese version of this article, translated by Wang Jin and Chen Rongxia, was published in *Chinese and International Philosophy of Medicine* 3/4 (Dec 2001): 135-158). See also *Behind the Silence: Chinese Voices on Abortion* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), Chapter 8, as well as “The Specious Idea of an Asian Bioethics: Beyond Dichotomizing East and West,” in R.E. Ashcroft, A. Dawson, H. Draper, and J.R. McMillan, eds., *Principles of Health Care Ethics* (London: John Wiley & Sons, <sup>2</sup> 2007), 143-149.

mainland China, he seems unhappy with the rights approach in bioethics. Though he only touches on this topic in his essay, Qiu does claim that the rights approach, in contrast with the holistic Chinese perspective, has put too much emphasis on the individualistic and autonomous dimension of persons and failed to give sufficient attention to social, interpersonal relationships or individual responsibilities and duties.

However, in his essay “Why Chinese Thought is not Individualistic: Answer 1 of N,” the Hong Kong philosopher and Sinologist Chad Hansen presents a rather different argument. On the one hand, using Western “semantic individualism” as a reference point, Hansen elucidates why Chinese thought is non-individualist in its semantic theory, i.e., the ideographic nature of Chinese language. On the other hand, supplementary to his main thesis, he emphasizes that there are many types of “individualism” in both Western and Chinese cultures and that Chinese moral thought is not predominantly communitarian. He questions whether the fact that Chinese thought did not find “the inherent dignity and worth of the rational individual to be a natural first principle of morality [...] would not block any Chinese thinker, ancient or modern, from adopting various kinds of a posteriori arguments for greater individual freedom.” Hansen provokingly concludes: “Individualism in China would merely sound more like John Stuart Mill than like Immanuel Kant.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Hansen does not focus on this topic in the essay reviewed here. For his views on human rights and traditional Chinese thought, see his “Chinese Philosophy and Human Rights: An Application of Comparative Ethics” in G.K. Becker, ed., *Ethics in Business and Society: Chinese and Western Perspectives* (Berlin etc: Springer, 1996); and “Do Human Rights Apply to China? A Normative Analysis of Cultural Difference,” in Kenneth G. Lieberthal, Shuen-fu Lin, and Ernest P. Yong, eds., *Constructing China: The Interaction of Culture and Economics* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1997), 83-96.

For a defense of the rights approach in international bioethics from a Western-style universalist perspective, see Ruth Macklin, *Against Relativism: Cultural Diversity and the Search for Ethical Universals in Medicine* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). I have addressed such issues as informed consent and human rights in the Chinese context: Jing-Bao Nie, “Is Informed Consent not Applicable to China?: Intellectual Flaws of the Cultural Difference Argument,” *Formosa Journal of Medical Humanities* 2/1 & 2 (2001): 67-74, available online at [http://www.csmu.edu.tw/genedu/public\\_html/journal-2.htm](http://www.csmu.edu.tw/genedu/public_html/journal-2.htm). (A modified Chinese version, translated by Zhao Mingjie, was published in *Medicine and Philosophy* 23/6 (2002): 18-22). See also “Feminist Bioethics and its Language of Human Rights in the Chinese Context,” in Rosemarie Tong, Anne Donchin, and Susan Dodds, eds., *Linking Visions: Feminist Bioethics, Human Rights and the Developing World* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 73-88, as well as “Reproductive Rights Matter in China,” a key-note speech at the 2nd Nordic-China Women and Gender Studies Conference on Gender and Human Rights, Sweden, 7-10 August 2005.

Jiwei Ci's marvelous essay, "The Confucian Relational Concept of the Person and its Modern Predicament," in the *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, critically examines the treatment of the Confucian communitarian view of personhood as an epistemically more cogent and ethically more attractive alternative to liberal individualism. Without defending liberal individualism, Ci argues against the proposed superiority of Confucianism due to its serious ethical and epistemic flaws. First, as both theory and practice Confucianism in its specific historical form is normatively unattractive, i.e., Confucian personhood, defined by hierarchical and unequal relationships within family and clan, is not able to provide an adequate ethical foundation for the modern understanding of relations among equals. Second, epistemically, Confucianism falls into the essentialist fallacy by presupposing that its theory of personhood reflects the "essence" or true nature of human relations. As a result, the Confucian relational concept of the person fails to provide a viable framework for dealing with contemporary social issues including those dealt with in bioethics.

It seems to me that Ci's theoretical and methodological approach is insightful. Of course, the fact that the Confucian relational view (or the perspectives on personhood held by other cultural and intellectual traditions) fails to provide a viable framework for contemporary social and bioethical issues does not necessarily—should not, in my understanding—mean that we cannot develop a viable framework for today's social and bioethical issues from that standpoint. This conclusion does not necessarily—and should not—mean that other aspects of Confucianism or theories derived from it cannot provide valuable insights for dealing with contemporary social and bioethical issues. Moreover, Ci's conclusion does not necessarily—and should not—mean that the viewpoint in question cannot make significant contributions to the development of a viable framework for dealing with these issues. In cross-cultural bioethics, a critical attitude toward the dominant Western discourse is certainly needed. However, the point I want to emphasize here is that a critical attitude toward cultural traditions and social practices in non-Western societies including China is also called for. This critical attitude differs from the nihilist nor "total anti-traditionalist" approach exemplified in the total dismissal of Confucianism and Chinese culture by the May Fourth New Cultural Movement in early twentieth-century China, and especially in the infamous Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. That is to say, while it is unhelpful to reject Chinese and other non-Western traditions out of hand, neither is it



helpful to romanticize them. Genuine cross-cultural communication and exchange depends on a critical analysis, along with imaginative reading and creative interpretation, of Confucianism and other non-Western intellectual traditions.

Bioethics is a practical discipline and should ideally be a form of social and cultural criticism. From the outset, the bioethical discussion of personhood has never been a game played in an ivory tower or a diversion for arm-chair academics. There are many urgent practical issues and troubling social practices related to healthcare and medicine in the East including China, like anywhere else. All these marvelous theoretical essays covering China are very helpful and call for further research to discuss more directly, critically, and powerfully—from the various Chinese understandings of personhood—how China ought to deal with thorny practical issues like organ transplantation, euthanasia, human experimentation, abortion, the extraordinary and increasing inequality in healthcare resource allocation, rural healthcare, *yousheng* (eugenics or “healthy birth”), and population control.

In his lecture devoted to a social history of the notion of the person, Marcel Mauss used China as evidence to illustrate his evolutionist theory, in which the “Chinese” understanding of personhood represents a lower level in respect to the highest form—“a fundamental form of thought and action”—developed in the modern West. For him, through the modern Western view of the person as an individualistic and autonomous entity, the whole “course [of history] is accomplished.” Mauss also equated “Confucian” (in fact, one of many Confucian viewpoints on the subject) with “Chinese.” As a result of our greater knowledge and changed perspectives on both China and the West, it is clear now that, for many, most of what Mauss said about China is simply wrong. However, in spite of enhanced knowledge and changed perspectives, some myths about Chinese culture still remain. As pointed out above, one of the most widespread myths depicts Chinese culture as a single, unified whole and assumes the existence of a distinctive Chinese mind or mentality.<sup>7</sup> Yet, Chinese culture—indeed, any culture—is always plural and changing. To treat Confucianism as representative of the Chinese worldview is like treating Christianity or liberalism as representing the whole of Western culture. It goes without saying that, along with classical Confucianism, Daoism (both philosophical and religious), “Legalism,” Neo-Confucianism, sinolized Buddhism and sinolized Marxism (socialism) have

<sup>7</sup> See Nie, “The Plurality of Chinese and American Medical Moralities.”

all greatly influenced Chinese history and culture. They all, among many other schools of thought in China such as Moism (universal love) and Yuang-Zhu (egoism), have their own distinguishable perspectives on the person and self.

In one of his characteristically thoughtful articles, Becker critically addresses the “Asian values” approach, reminding us of some “simple facts” and “real dangers” we often overlook in considering cross-cultural matters: the tendency to simplify the rich plurality of values in every culture, including Western cultures, and to deny the existence of a common humanity.<sup>8</sup> The two fascinating volumes which Becker has generously put together illustrate these points and more.

In conclusion, *The Moral Status of Persons* and the fourth issue of the 1999 *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* have significantly expanded our intellectual horizons regarding the conception of personhood and thus made a valuable contribution to applied ethics in general. Any future venture that sets out to explore the core of our humanity cannot afford to neglect them. In regard to cross-cultural conceptions of personhood and East-West comparative studies, these two volumes have given us reason to anticipate the appearance of even more stimulating and definitive studies. We can be sure that a steady flow of publications, focusing on Chinese and other Eastern perspectives on personhood and their implications for bioethics in China and the wider world, will appear as part of Becker’s *Studies in Applied Ethics* series and elsewhere. In his insightful book *Confucian Bioethics*, a systematic and in-depth study of the subject in the Chinese language, Taiwanese philosopher Lee Shui-chuen discusses the various perspectives of contemporary New-Confucianism on personhood and some of their implications for bioethics.<sup>9</sup>

Becker has long been an internationally recognized doyen of Eastern/Chinese–Western comparative applied ethics. His dedication and work magnificently testify to the fact that effective cross-cultural dialogue can enrich not only “our” cultures, the cultures we are most familiar with, but also “their” cultures, the cultures we know little about, to such an extent that we all know ourselves, humankind, much better as a result. Mauss ended his lecture by saying: “Let us labour to demonstrate how we must become aware

<sup>8</sup> Gerhold Becker, “Asian and Western Ethics: Some Remarks on a Productive Tension,” *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics* 5 (1995), 31-33.

<sup>9</sup> Lee Shui-chuen, *Confucian Bioethics* (Taipei, Taiwan: Goose-Lake Press, 1999), 153-178.

of ourselves, in order to perfect our thought and to express it better.”<sup>10</sup> Let us continue the quest Becker has ably initiated. Let us, as he has done and continues to do, take seriously our individual and communal responsibilities and commitment to our different cultures, and to our common human vocation of promoting the cross-cultural dialogue in bioethics.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See M. Mauss, “A Category of the Human Mind,” 21.

<sup>11</sup> Acknowledgment: This is a modified version of a review paper published in the *Medical Humanities Review* 14/2 (2000): 26-34. I am grateful to Dr. Paul Sorrell for his professional assistance with the English language and to Dr. Ole Döring for his helpful comments.

