

BIOETHICS MEETS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

– Tomasz Żuradzki, Elena Popa –

Abstract: This special issue of *Diametros* critically examines the evolving relationship between bioethics and political philosophy, focusing on the limitations of autonomy-centric and neutrality-based liberalism in addressing contemporary bioethical challenges. Through four contributions, by Greg Bognar, Søren Holm, Jurga Jonutyte, and Thaddeus Metz, the issue explores the normative tensions surrounding genetic enhancement, the exclusionary use of public reason in bioethics, the ontological dimensions of identity under institutional humiliation, and the moral justification of healthcare allocation. Drawing on real-world examples such as vaccine hesitancy, conscientious objection in healthcare, disability activism, and treatment prioritization, the authors argue for a rethinking of liberal frameworks in light of biopolitical complexity.

Keywords: bioethics; political philosophy; liberalism; public reason; genetic enhancement; disability and identity; healthcare prioritization

Bioethics emerged in the late 1960s and was institutionalized in the 1970s with the establishment of dedicated journals and academic programs, responding to growing public concern over medical regulation, human experimentation, and the ethical implications of biomedical innovations. The field was shaped not only by philosophical inquiry but also by broader social and political forces, including public distrust of medical authority and the rise of patient advocacy. From its inception, bioethics has addressed issues of clear political significance, such as the distribution of healthcare resources, the regulation of research involving human participants, the governance of emerging technologies, the value and limits of privacy, the ownership of body parts, and tensions between individual rights and collective goods. It was conceived as an interdisciplinary meeting ground, bringing together philosophers, theologians, physicians, bioscientists, lawyers, and social scientists, to engage with normative questions that are inherently political.

Political philosophy, particularly liberal theory, as vividly exemplified in this special issue, quickly became and remains central to this project. Although bioethics is sometimes narrowly framed as applied ethics, this perspective overlooks its entanglement with political ideologies and institutional power. Its much broader scope is well

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illustrated by a recent study, based on a systematic analysis of nearly 20,000 texts published over the past 50 years in seven leading bioethics journals,¹ which clearly shows that themes closely aligned with political philosophy have gained significant prominence in recent bioethical scholarship. While the increasing popularity of some topics, for example public health emergencies, unsurprisingly reflects recent global events like the COVID-19 pandemic, the study also identifies a growing interest among bioethicists in areas such as privacy, vaccination, and international research. These trends suggest that recent work in bioethics indeed vividly engages with questions central to political philosophy, including state authority, global justice, and the balance between individual rights and collective welfare. The findings underscore the timeliness and relevance of further exploring the conceptual and normative intersections between bioethics and political philosophy.

This special issue of *Diametros* seeks to deepen the dialogue in question, showing how contemporary work in political theory can enrich bioethical analysis, and how bioethics, in turn, can illuminate canonical debates on justice, equality, authority, and freedom. It brings together four contributions that critically examine the intersection of bioethics and political philosophy, each challenging the adequacy of dominant liberal frameworks in addressing human enhancement, the disciplinary boundaries of bioethics itself, allocation of healthcare resources, and the notion of identity. While referring to different examples, all articles converge on a shared concern: that autonomy-centric and neutrality-based liberalism is increasingly ill-equipped to respond to the moral complexities of modern biopolitical life.

Greg Bognar's article, "Liberalism and Human Genetic Enhancement,"² explores a speculative but increasingly plausible scenario in which safe, effective, and widely accessible genetic enhancement technologies are available in a liberal democratic society. Despite their benefits—such as increased intelligence, improved health, and longer life spans—a significant portion of the population irrationally rejects them due to knowledge resistance, distrust in institutions, and cognitive biases like genetic essentialism, belief in the benevolence of nature, and precautionary bias. Drawing parallels with vaccine hesitancy during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bognar anticipates a future in which enhanced individuals, "wonderwomen" and "supermen," form a privileged class, while the unenhanced become a disadvantaged underclass. He examines this scenario through the lenses of distributive and relational egalitarianism, referencing Rawls's Liberty and Difference Principles, luck egalitarianism, and critiques by Elizabeth Anderson and others. Bognar argues that liberalism may lack the normative tools to address such inequalities without violating its core commitments to autonomy and neutrality, and he considers whether such inequalities could be framed as structural injustice.

Søren Holm, in "Policing the Borders of Bioethics – 'Rawlsian' Public Reason as a Disciplinary Tool,"³ critically examines the internal boundary-setting practices within academic bioethics. He reflects on how the concept of public reason, originally developed by John Rawls to guide political discourse in liberal democracies, has been

¹ Bystranowski, Dranseika, Żuradzki (2022).

² Bognar (2025).

³ Holm (2025).

appropriated and transformed within bioethics to exclude religious arguments and religiously grounded bioethicists. Holm argues that this reception has narrowed the scope of public reason to “secular reason” and extended its application beyond Rawls’s original intent, from public policy debates to all philosophical bioethics. He criticizes this expansion through examples such as debates on conscientious objection in health-care, where bioethicists have argued that individual objectors must justify their actions using public reasons, even when acting within legally protected frameworks. Holm also highlights the performative self-defeat of excluding religious reasoning from bioethics: in societies where religious arguments play a role in public discourse, such exclusion undermines bioethicists’ ability to engage effectively in policy debates. He draws on examples from Catholic moral theology, Jewish and Islamic jurisprudence, and the pedagogical challenges of teaching bioethics in religiously diverse classrooms to argue for a more inclusive and philosophically coherent approach.

Jurga Jonutyte, in “The Self after Official Disdain: The Analysis of Ontologically Weak Identity,”⁴ explores how individuals respond to institutional humiliation through different ontological modes of self-identification. Drawing on the philosophical discussions of norm and power by Foucault, and anti-essentialist framings of identity in terms of relations by Deleuze, she contrasts two life narratives of disabled individuals in Lithuania. Mary, who was unknowingly and involuntarily sterilized during a caesarean section, transforms her experience into public activism. She rejects the stigmatizing framings of her disability and her encounters with the healthcare system, by embracing a fluid, relational identity that enables resistance. In contrast, Peter, who became disabled as a result of prison violence and was ignored by a police officer when at his most vulnerable and in need of justice, retreats into social isolation and internalizes stigma. Jonutyte draws on Judith Butler’s notion of vulnerability and Leticia Sabsay’s view of interpellation to show how Mary’s activism emerges from a dense network of social support, while Peter’s resignation reflects the internalization of normative disdain. Her analysis challenges essentialist views of identity and calls for a greater recognition of ontologically weak identities, i.e., the self being nothing but (social) connections, as potent sources of social transformation.

Thaddeus Metz, in “Intuitions about Just Public Healthcare Versus Liberal Political Theory,”⁵ argues that widely shared intuitions about how public healthcare ought to be allocated are in tension with liberal principles that prioritize individual autonomy and state neutrality. He illustrates this through examples such as breast reconstruction, reattachment of fingers, removal of vestigial tails, fertility treatments, and palliative care for newborns and patients with advanced Alzheimer’s – interventions that are justified not by their contribution to autonomy but by their role in promoting a good life. Metz further critiques liberalism’s inability to account for prioritization decisions, such as why restoring taste and smell or preserving original limbs might be more important than providing superior prosthetics, and highlights how common rationing principles like QALYs, dignity, or prioritizing those with dependents inevitably rely on contested con-

⁴ Jonutyte (2025).

⁵ Metz (2025).

ceptions of the good. He concludes that liberalism must either be revised to accommodate objective goods beyond autonomy or be replaced by alternative normative frameworks.

While the topics discussed in this issue of *Diametros* obviously do not exhaust the possible intersections between bioethics and political philosophy, the four authors provide thought-provoking and diverse perspectives on a wide range of issues that illustrate this interplay. Drawing on real-world examples and approaching the theme from a variety of analytical and interpretative traditions, they interestingly converge in arguing for a rethinking of liberal frameworks in light of biopolitical complexity.

Funding: This special issue of *Diametros* is funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (Poland) under the agreement no. RCN/SP/0580/2021/1.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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