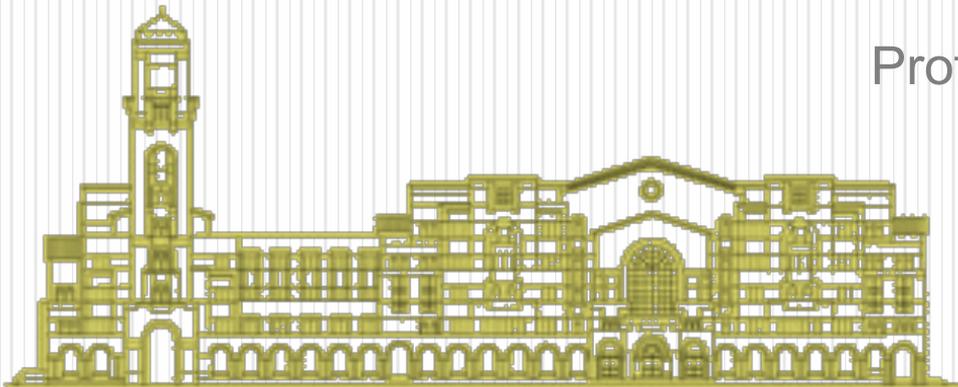


The 4th International Conference:
Applied Ethics and Applied Philosophy in East Asia

How Does an Empty Buddhist Bioethics Work: The Example of Abortion

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Structure of paper

I. Introduction

II. What is Buddhist Bioethics?

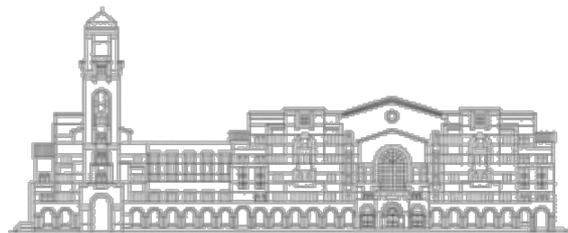
III. A Shift of Bioethical Questions from Entity-centered to Process-oriented Perspective

IV. Insight into Emptiness from Process-oriented Perspective

V. What Can an Empty Vision Offer for Bioethical Exploration?

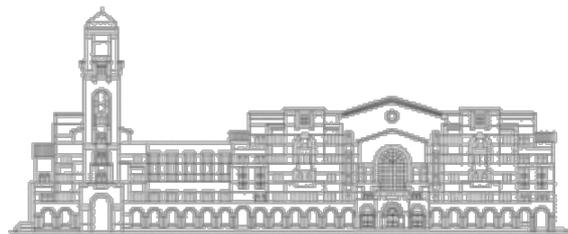
VI. What Can an Empty Vision Suggest for Bioethical Controversies?

VII. Conclusion



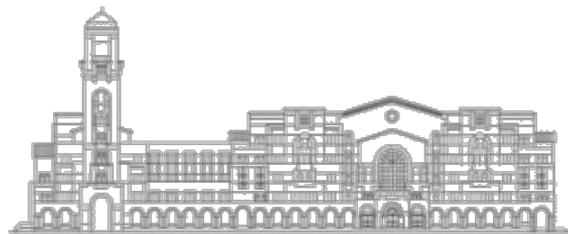
I. Introduction

- Over the past few decades, there have been a number of works on Buddhist ethics, including analysis and discussions of bioethical issues. However, until relatively recently, little had been written on Buddhist ethics from the perspective of emptiness (*śūnyatā*).
- This article seeks to demonstrate that a Buddhist bioethics based on the doctrine of emptiness is not only possible but also actually works.



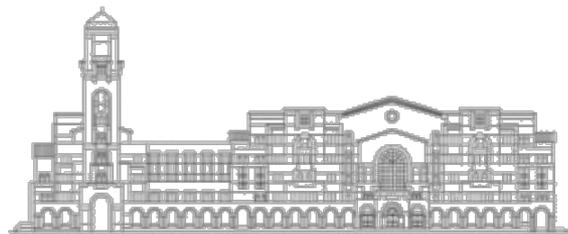
II. What is Buddhist Bioethics?

- Bioethics is the study of ethical or moral issues especially brought about by advances in biology and medicine.
- Simply put, bioethics not only questions the morality of various biological and medical procedures, but also studies our reasoning for what is appropriate in handling or approaching bioethical relationships, or our exploration of what is morally right while encountering bioethical situations.



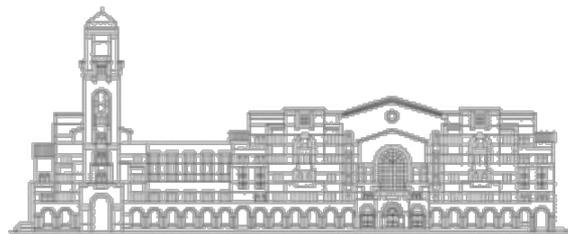
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- Based on the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha, Buddhism offers several paths of practice and spiritual development leading to insight into the true nature of reality.
- The philosophy of Buddhism emphasizes the importance of observing and thinking clearly rather than allowing the monsters in our heads to drag us around with our conceptualizations or attachments.



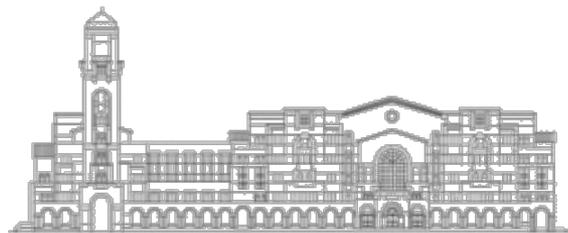
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- We may speak of “Buddhist” bioethics as we deal with bioethical issues based on Buddhist teachings or even as we bring about a theoretical formulation that is specifically Buddhist.
- Buddhist bioethics, in general, is characterized by a prudential outlook that leads to an approach not only pertinent to the mechanism of the world of sentient beings (*sattva-loka*/ 生命世界、有情世間) but also conducive to proceeding beyond the world of sentient beings.



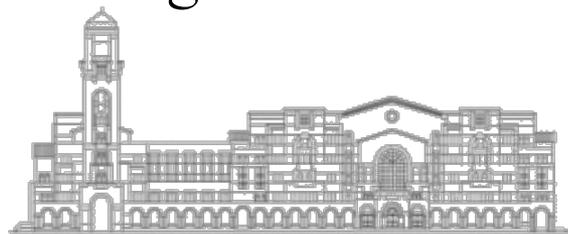
III. A Shift of Bioethical Questions from Entity-centered to Process-oriented Perspective

- Buddhist bioethics primarily serves as a means to liberation or enlightenment.
- In other words, to figure out what is right and to act wholesomely is a crucial precondition to achieve Buddhist goals.
- What makes Buddhist bioethics so unique is simply that it lacks such conceptualizations as “entity,” “rights,” or “dignity” in its bioethical reasoning.



III. A Shift of Bioethical Questions from Entity-centered to Process-oriented Perspective

- In response to suffering in the sentient world and bioethical issues, Buddhism does not try to change reality to meet our endless desires or self-centered thoughts but try to adjust our desires or thoughts to be in tune with reality as it is.
- Buddhism teaches that pursuing the sentient world inevitably involves suffering or uneasiness. Sickness or even death is regarded as an invaluable opportunity to reevaluate one's thoughts and actions.



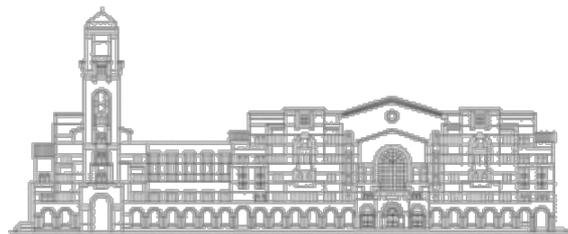
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- What a waste it would be if illness or death were simply considered as “loss of health” or “loss of life” which is to be filled with anxiety, dismay, or confusion if no existential insights were gained about the reality of the process of life!
- We ask questions all the time, especially while engaging in bioethical studies, which in a regular way begins with asking or identifying bioethical questions.
- However, are we asking the right questions? Learning how to ask the right questions should be considered at least as critical as learning how to read or write.



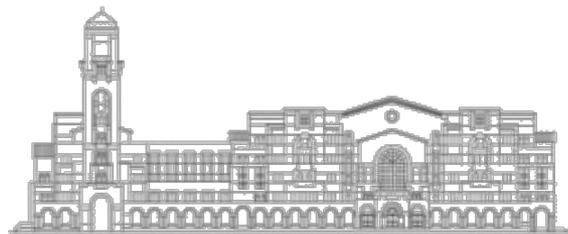
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- After bringing about or encountering a certain bioethical question, people tend to grasp on to conceptualized entities and attributed items therein. In view of such questions not only involving conflicting moral choices and dilemmas but also severely limiting our horizon of vision, it's important to avoid the impulse to ask bioethical questions centering on entities or merely about artificial consequences, but to ask instead about the process.



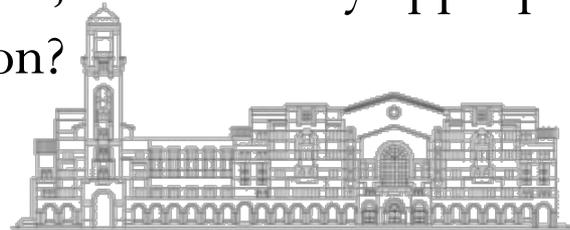
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- Here are some examples of commonly raised bioethical questions:
 1. What is the moral status of human embryos or fetuses?
 2. Does a human embryo or fetus have rights?
 3. What should or should not be done to human embryos or fetuses?
 4. How should we correctly determine when people who are on life support are actually dead before organ procurement can proceed?
 5. What is the right to die?
 6. Is animal testing acceptable when it benefits humans?



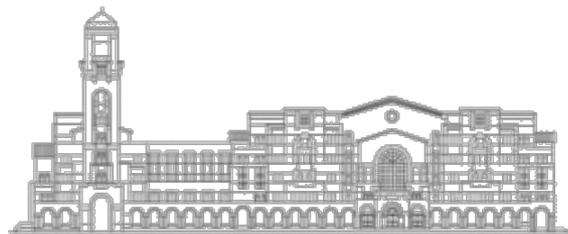
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- From a process-oriented way to approach bioethics, some of the questions can be formulated as follows:
 1. What do we really know about the mental process or life process of sentient beings?
 2. Do we know enough about the mental process or life process of sentient beings to make a bioethical decision?
 3. What is the mental process or life process through which a human embryo or fetus is developed?
 4. Considering the mental process or life process of a human embryo or fetus involved, is it ethically appropriate (or morally right) to have an abortion?



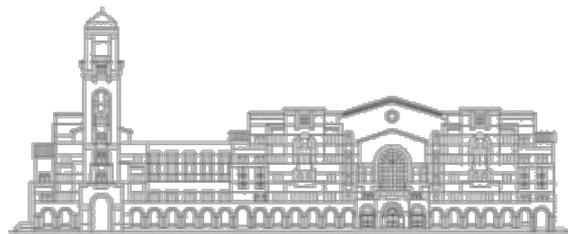
IV. Insight into Emptiness from Process-oriented Perspective

- Using process-oriented questions as a starting point in bioethical inquiry, one cannot either get hold on to reified concepts, nor can one simply resort to established ethical theories.
- Rather, it is imperative to observe first-hand the continuous occurrences in the mental process or life process.



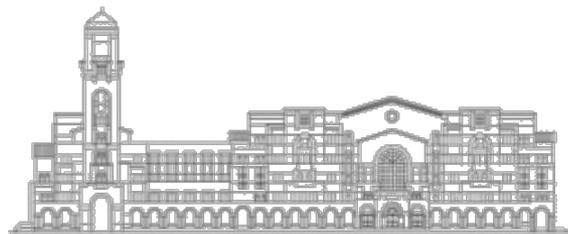
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- One of the core perspectives emphasized in Buddhist philosophy is that everything emerges in the world through conditioned co-arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*), meaning not only that any process of arising is conditioned by related causes and conditions, but also that everything receives its name in dependence on the thought which designates it.
- From such a perspective, the notion of conditioned co-arising implies that phenomena **lack independent existence**.



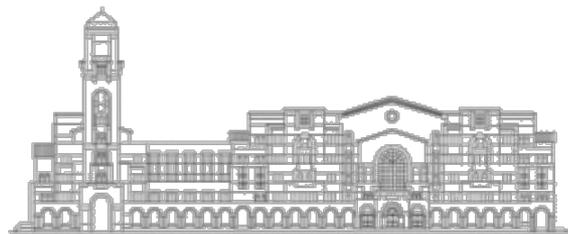
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- This implication is often indicated as **emptiness** (*śūnyatā*): all phenomena are empty of any independent or separate existence or beingness (*bhāvatā; vastutā*) of their own. In the same manner, nothing exists as an independent or separate entity (*bhāva; vastu*).



V. What Can an Empty Vision Offer for Bioethical Exploration?

- Emptiness on the one hand implies the lack of independent existence of entities, on the other hand opens up new possibilities in vision for bioethical exploration. Five points can be highlighted from such a vision as follows:
- **First**, since everything, including every sentient being, is a continuous or even an ever-changing process, one of the basic requirements for bioethical exploration is to observe the process in action dynamically, especially how the phenomena arise, change and cease.



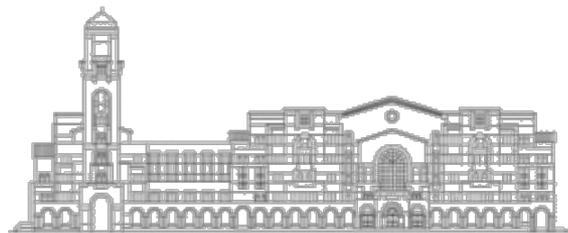
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- **Second**, because of being empty of any independent existence of their own, sentient beings are open to various dimensions not only to develop, but also to be explored. It does not make much sense either to deny any sentient being the so-called “moral status,” or to exclude any sentient being from the sphere of ethical deliberations.
- **Third**, from a perspective of emptiness, numerous pairs of dichotomy that have long troubled discourses on ethics can be easily untangled or discarded. For example, the “is/ought” problem – sometimes characterized as the fact/value distinction – may be pseudo at best in most cases.



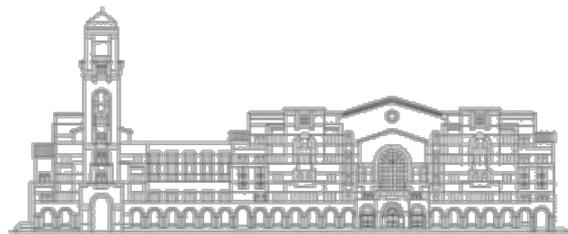
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- **Fourth**, the real challenge is to actually unravel the dynamic relationship with the encountered or intended sentient beings, and along this dynamic process unravel the ethical and moral dimensions.
- **Fifth**, the dynamic relationship with the encountered or intended sentient beings can become better and better along the path of ethical deliberations and practices with an understanding of the line of reasoning stated earlier.



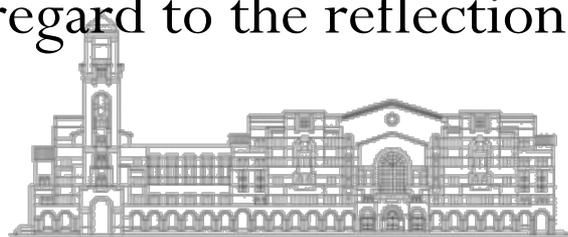
VI. What Can an Empty Vision Suggest for Bioethical Controversies?

- Few areas of academic disciplines have been fraught with as many controversies as bioethics. From discussions on abortion to assisted dying, bioethics tackles some of the most complex and sensitive issues confronting modern society.
- Appeal is often made to individual cases, personhood, personal autonomy, moral status, human dignity, ethical principles, or ethical rules, but with little exploration of the full context or process of the involved sentient beings, or of the wider implications.



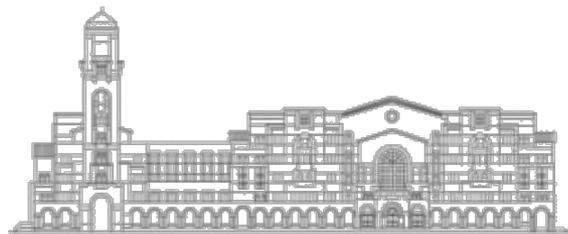
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- It is better to find a proper way to approach and resolve a dispute in bioethics instead of just proceeding to analyze several cutting-edge issues only to end up being lost in controversies.
- To that end, it will first give an account of Buddhist vision of emptiness, not-person, not-self, and not-mine.
- From the Buddhist point of view, something being empty means that it is devoid of inherent existence, i.e., its existence depends on other related conditions. There is nothing in a certain thing that is inherent to that very thing. This insight into emptiness bears significance with regard to the reflection on the ideation of person or self.



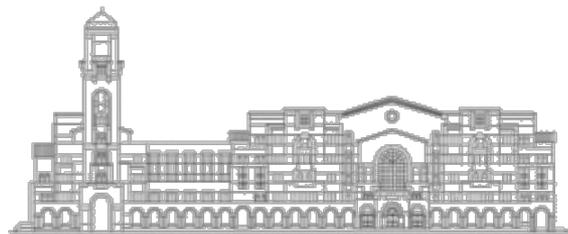
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- These two concepts of person and self seem to be emergent phenomena arising from the process of generating, interpreting, developing, and communicating some ideas.
- In other words, both concepts arise from the application of mental discernment, conceptual identification and division, and interpretative scheme.
- As a product of mental formation, the so-called person lacks the inherent existence of person, and is therefore explicated as **not-person** (*niṣ-pudgala; pudgala-nairātmya*).



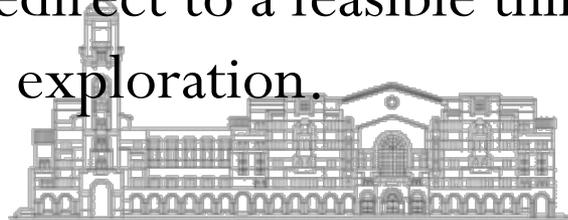
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- In the same vein, the so-called self is devoid of the inherent existence of self, and is therefore explicated as **not-self** (*an-ātman; nair-ātmya*).
- Not only whatever is thought as self is in reality not-self, but also whatever is thought as belonging to or pertaining to self is in reality not belonging to or pertaining to self, and is therefore explicated as **not-mine** (*nir-mama; an-ātmīya*).



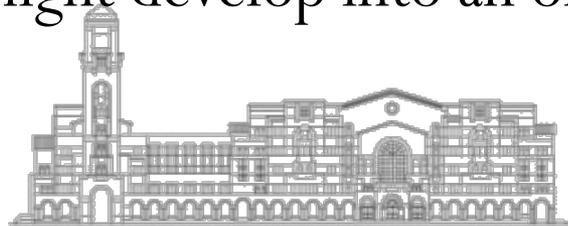
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- The two main sides involved in the abortion controversy are the so-called “pro-choice” or “abortion rights” highlighting the legal right of women and girls to choose whether or not to bring a fetus to term, and the so-called “pro-life” or “anti-abortion” highlighting the legal right of human embryos and fetuses to be born.
- However, it is **not** the focus of this paper to enter a detailed discussion of various assertions that have come up in the abortion controversy.
- The primary focus will be on how to do without the abortion controversy and redirect to a feasible thinking path toward the goals of bioethical exploration.



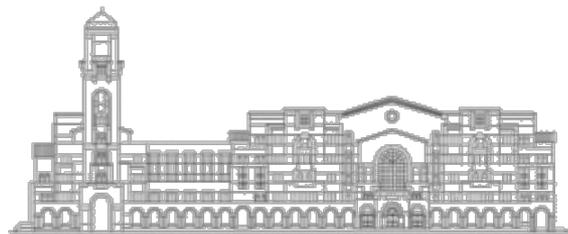
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- **First**, a central matter in the abortion controversy is deciding what we can say about embryos or fetuses. Are embryos/fetuses human persons or only a mass of tissue? The matter of “personhood” arises and the abortion controversy goes on and on. However, from a Buddhist empty vision, ordinary people equally lack the inherent existence of person to begin with.
- A better perspective should be able to bring out the related conditions by which a certain embryo or fetus is caused to arise among sentient beings, and the process through which a certain embryo or fetus might develop into an ordinary person.



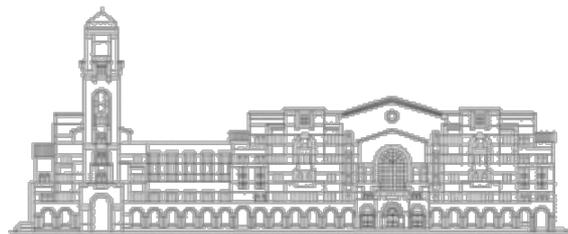
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- **Second**, seeking recourse to ownership rights is another factor embedded in the abortion controversy. To be “pro-choice” is to believe that individuals as owners, especially women and girls, have the rights of ownership, assuring the owners the rights to dispose of their property as they see fit.
- However, from a Buddhist empty vision, no one owns ordinary people, and ordinary people in reality do not belong to anyone as a private, public or collective property.



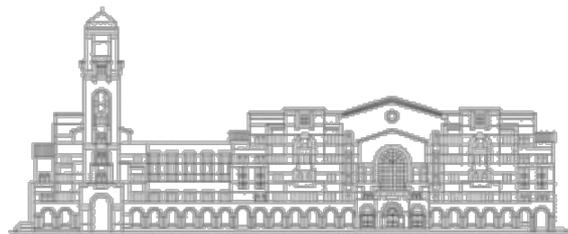
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- In the same vein, no one owns embryos/fetuses, and embryos/fetuses in reality do not belong to anyone as any kind of property to be aborted at will.
- A better perspective should be able to, on the one hand, discard the attachment to ownership rights, on the other hand, regard both pregnant women/girls and embryos/fetuses as two life processes connected by a brief relationship, namely pregnancy.



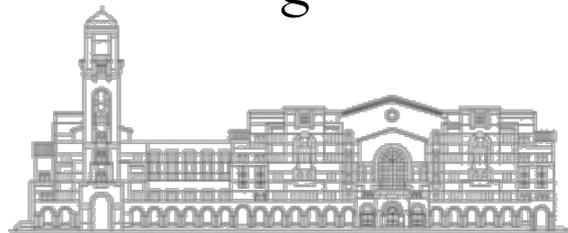
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- **Third**, the notion of “moral status” has occupied a central place in the abortion controversy.
- However, such a notion of “moral status,” in its practical implications, can be used as a convenient tool to discriminate against both the so-called “marginal cases” of seriously immature or radically disabled human beings and non-human animals, and in its theoretical implications, may be very misleading in a way that both confines bioethical discourses within the essentialist presuppositions yet remains ignorant of what moral deliberation is really about.



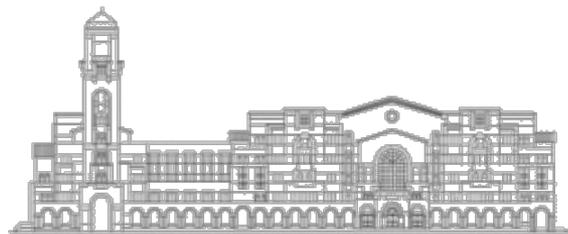
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- Since moral deliberation, on the one hand, is about observing the processes of sentient beings with special attention to related suffering, happiness, mistreatment, development, bondage, and liberation, on the other hand, is about consistently striving to do the right thing based on the intention of friendliness or compassion, a Buddhist empty vision will strongly ask bioethicists, especially in dealing with the issue of abortion, to abstain from applying such misleading phrases as “morally considerable,” “having moral standing,” or “having independent moral status” to sentient beings.



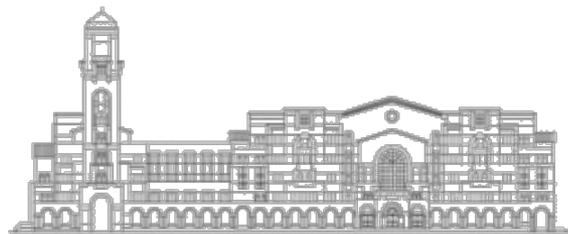
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- **Fourth**, the notion of the sanctity of life has further aggravated the abortion controversy. Some authors are opposed to abortion on the grounds that human life is said to be sacred, holy, or otherwise of such value not to be violated. However, the notion of the sanctity of life is usually applied solely to the human species embodying a flawed form of anthropocentrism.
- While emphasizing the notion of the sanctity of life, most people pay little attention to suffering or evil in the processes of sentient beings.



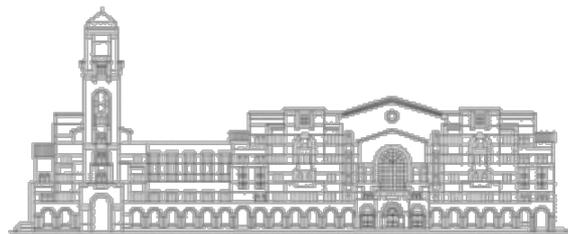
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- Furthermore, the concept of sanctity is not only disputable but also in itself almost incomprehensible. Therefore, it is not advisable to have recourse to the notion of the sanctity of life in dealing with the issue of abortion no matter which bioethical standpoint one might take.



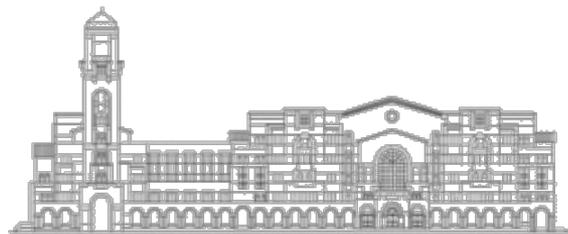
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- A better perspective should care more about suffering or evil in the processes of sentient beings. In other words, if one is to refrain from abortion, it is not because of violating the problematical sanctity of human embryos/fetuses, but because of the suffering that committing abortion may inflict on sentient beings, and because of the evil that may incur while committing abortion.



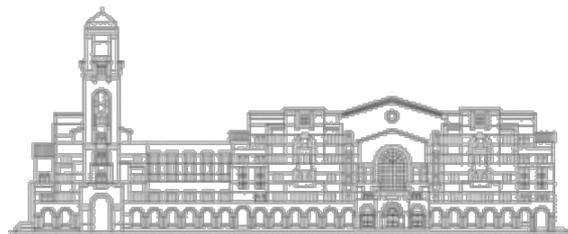
VII. Conclusion

- After taking the issue of abortion as an example in bioethics, this paper has demonstrated that the discourses of abortion in modern cultures are deeply rooted in such ideational terms as “personhood,” “rights of ownership,” “moral status,” and “sanctity of life.” No matter which side of the abortion debate one is on, it is not uncommon that such ideations or conceptualizations are assumed or taken for granted.
- However, the debate about abortion is thus repeatedly misconstrued.



VII. Conclusion

- The main conclusion of this paper is that only so long as we could do without such ideational terms as “personhood,” “rights of ownership,” “moral status,” and “sanctity of life” is there much hope that bioethical inquiry might be on its right track.
- An antidote to misguided thinking in bioethical inquiry is the idea of emptiness – all phenomena are empty of independent entity, personhood, self, or unshared ownership/possession.



VII. Conclusion

- In short, it is advisable to refrain from performing or promoting abortion, not because that one needs to justify one's bioethical position by assuming some problematical ideations or conceptualizations, but because that refraining from abortion is both ethically appropriate and morally right in view of the mental process or life process of the targeted embryos/fetuses.
- Thank you!

