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# Potentiality: Response to Professor John Lizza

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# Decisive Moral Significance of Potentiality

- Active and passive potentiality debate assumes that there is a decisive moral significance of the concept
    - not just “moral relevance”
    - there is disagreement “over whether anencephalic fetuses and infants have the biological substrate necessary for the active potential for intellect and will and therefore whether they should be accorded the same rights and respects as normal human beings.”
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# Same value, same rights for potential and actual X

- On what grounds can we argue for such a moral significance of potentiality?
    - Does potential person has the same rights as an actual person? (seed vs. tree)
  - The moral significance of the question “does X has potentiality for personhood” rests on what makes personhood itself morally significant.
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# Personhood and Potentiality

- ❑ belonging to human species: (embryo is *already* a person) do we justify a higher value of persons in contrast to other species?
  - ❑ particular qualities (intellect, will, etc.): (embryo is *becoming* a person) how do we value such qualities when they are not actualized?
  - ❑ Can we argue for a “potential person” having rights equivalent to an actual “person” rather than a weaker moral worth requiring weaker obligations?
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# Moral Relevance of Potentiality

- Even if not decisive moral significance, potentiality has “moral relevance”
  - Kantian ethics: the focus is on agents with existing rational and moral capacity, self-reflection. While the capacity develops gradually, it certainly lacks in embryos, for example. Only certain weak (imperfect) duties could be derived for potential agents.
  - Utilitarianism: the utility calculation would need to take into account the potentiality weighing it in relation to what it takes to actualize the potential.

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# Proximity / Probability of Realization of the Potential

- This seems to fit Lizza's position on potentiality's ethical significance being dependent on its proximity / probability of realization
  - Potentiality in the beginning of life (stem cells, gametes, embryos), in the end of life (defining death), and in interrupted periods (temporary coma) differ in their moral relevance because of the surrounding factors
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# Potentiality in Different Circumstances

- ❑ Destroying an embryo does not take away the life plans of a person and bringing it into life might mean violating the rights of a person and/or not furthering life-saving research.
  - ❑ A person's life that can be saved after cardiac arrest has moral significance. But the possibility and probability of recovery has to be considered – we cannot have a “try everything forever” rule.
  - ❑ A person in temporary coma clearly has very significant moral value as long as we have means to sustain her and recovery is attainable.
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# Potentiality in Defining Death

- Potentiality and the definition of death:
    - Lizza: “earlier account of irreversibility of such functions was based on the natural history of the biological organism on its own”  
“the modern account must take into consideration the possibility of external intervention.”
    - external intervention: “whether we decide to intervene” – factors like advance directives
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# Death and DCD

- ❑ death, not defined in terms of our “intentions” but rather our “epistemic” understanding of irreversibility of conditions that make us a person
  - ❑ In DCD, the morally relevant question is not whether the donor is dead at the time but rather, whether we have a realistic, conceivable possibility of preventing his imminent death.
  - ❑ the actual question in DCD seems to be about the donor’s interests, and not about the definition of death
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