



## Original Research

# “My Body, My Choice”: A Comparative Study between Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christian Bioethics on the “Absolutization” of Autonomy

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**Abstract:** In contemporary literature and practice, the first principle of bioethics, autonomy, which is defined as the right of individuals to self-determination and self-government, is often idolized and regarded as a moral absolute that must, under no circumstances, be violated. For Christianity, personal free will and individual autonomy stem from our creation in the image and likeness of God; thus, should be highly respected. On the other hand, modern phrases such as “my body, my choice” and “keep your laws off my body,” which are mostly aimed at supporting practices traditionally incompatible with Christian teaching, such as abortion, euthanasia, and gender reassignment, are on the rise in contemporary societies, especially in the West. This article deals with the modern “absolutization” of the principle of autonomy from the standpoint of Christian morality and attempts to comparatively examine the stance of Eastern Orthodox and Catholic ethics on the matter. So, where exactly do the two traditional Christian Churches stand between the respect and the absolutization of autonomy? This question is considered in this paper.

**Keywords:** *Autonomy, Absolutization, Paternalism, Bioethics, Christian Ethics, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy*

## Introduction

According to the ethicists Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, in their extremely influential work *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (2001), the four principles of bioethics are autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice.

Beneficence is the principle of doing good and promoting the well-being of others, which requires healthcare professionals to act in the best interests of their patients. In general terms, the principle of beneficence is “an ethical principle that creates an ethical obligation to act in a way that results in net benefit for another” (McCullough 2018, 117). Non-maleficence is highly connected to beneficence, as, “in professional medical ethics, this ethical principle functions as a limiting condition on the ethical principle of beneficence by ruling out clinical management that is only harmful to a patient clinically and therefore ethically impermissible” (McCullough 2018, 119). This principle requires healthcare professionals to take steps to avoid or minimize harm to their patients, even if it means foregoing a potential benefit. Justice is defined as the principle of fairness and equity in the distribution of healthcare resources (McCullough 2018, 118) and requires that healthcare resources be

distributed in a way that is fair and does not discriminate based on factors such as race, gender, or socio-economic status.

Finally, the first principle, autonomy, is the right of individuals to self-determination and self-government, that is, one's authority to make free informed decisions on one's bodily life and health without any external interference. This, of course, presupposes the intellectual and physical capacity of the individual to do so, as, for example, an infant or young child, a person in a vegetative stage, or an individual suffering from Alzheimer's disease obviously lacks this basic capacity for consent and self-determination (For example, see Owen et al. 2009). In Marina Oshana's definition, autonomous is the person who is able to meet his or her goals "without depending upon the judgments of others as to the goals' validity and importance" (Oshana 2003, 101), while, as Beauchamp and Childress articulated:

The word autonomy, derived from the Greek *autos* ("self") and *nomos* ("rule," "governance," or "law"), originally referred to the self-rule or self-governance of independent city-states. Autonomy has since been extended to individuals and has acquired meanings as diverse as self-governance, liberty rights, privacy, individual choice, freedom of the will, causing one's own behavior, and being one's own person. (Beauchamp and Childress 2001, 57–58)

In opposition to autonomy, paternalism is the practice of limiting one's self-determination and self-government, which is often seen as closely related to attitudes of superiority. Within the context of medical ethics, paternalism is the "interference by an individual, an organization, or the state with the autonomy of an individual justified by appeal to beneficence-based ethical judgment about the protection and promotion of that individual's interests" (McCullough 2018, 221). In other words, paternalism involves a lack of respect for one's autonomy and free will to advance one's good. In this case, besides the clash between paternalism and autonomy, there is an obvious conflict between the latter and the bioethical principle of beneficence (and/or non-maleficence). (For more, see Brudney 2009.)

The article employs bioethics as a foundational lens to analyze the ethical implications of autonomy. Bioethics, therefore, serves as the conceptual framework underpinning the article, guiding the examination of autonomy and its "absolutization" within the contexts of Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christian morality. The methodology employed in the study is comparative textual analysis, drawing from relevant theological texts, including the Scripture, as well as ancient and contemporary pre-modern and modern writings within both Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. This comparative approach provides a comprehensive analysis of the nuanced perspectives on autonomy within these theological frameworks.

Additionally, focused specifically on the concept of autonomy within bioethical discourse, the study potentially overlooks other significant moral principles within Christian traditions. Future research could explore additional bioethical principles and their

implications for bioethical decision-making. Finally, this comparative study, with its findings, consciously limits its scope to Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christian bioethics due to constraints of space. While acknowledging the rich diversity within Protestant traditions, the decision to exclude Protestant perspectives was deliberate to maintain focus and prevent the article from becoming overly extensive. Consequently, the analysis presented herein may not encompass the full spectrum of Christian bioethical discourse. Future research endeavors may explore the inclusion of Protestant viewpoints to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the topic across Christian denominations.

### **The "Absolutization" of Autonomy**

It is a fact that, regarding the ethical consideration of paternalism, there is no unanimity, as some hold that it is always morally comprehensible, while, for others, its impermissibility is not absolute, since there are occasions in which it could be accepted (for more on these diverging views, see Coons and Weber 2013). This has led to intense debates on highly controversial bioethical issues, such as abortion and euthanasia. Typically, religious viewpoints tend to oppose these practices, emphasizing moral imperatives and the sanctity of life, while, in contrast, non-religious perspectives often prioritize individual autonomy and reproductive rights, advocating for the destigmatization of these procedures as fundamental aspects of healthcare. This divergence of opinions also carries unavoidable social ramifications, since it highlights the ongoing societal struggle to harmonize moral obligations with individual liberties (for more on the divergent views between traditional Christian viewpoints and secular social norms on the practices of abortion, euthanasia, and sexuality, see Deane 2023). Even more, it is true that the intersection of paternalism and autonomy evokes considerable divergence even within theological perspectives. As Mark Cherry (2023, 2) writes, within Christianity:

Depending on whom one asks, one will be informed that such choices cause significant harm (e.g., abortion and euthanasia as forms of murder; body modification as denying the goodness of the body that God has provided), or that disallowing such "medical care" violates the basic rights of persons (e.g., abortion, active euthanasia, and body modification as positive expressions of personal autonomy).

Nevertheless, and although Beauchamp and Childress (2001) themselves made it emphatically clear that the principle of autonomy neither is absolute nor does it have superiority over the rest of the bioethical principles, an enormous emphasis on autonomy is given by modern healthcare ethics, which reaches the extreme of its absolutization. In John F. Morris' phrase, autonomy "has gained a 'sacrosanct' status in secular bioethics" (Morris 1998, 3), while, as Mappes and Zembaty (1991, 242) state, "Many discussions in biomedical

ethics presume the importance of individual autonomy, stressing the right of autonomous decision makers to determine for themselves what will be done to their bodies. This ‘right of self-determination’ is said to limit what physicians, nurses, and other professionals can justifiably do to patients.”

It is widely accepted that this modern bioethics’ apotheosis of bodily autonomy has its roots in the huge influence of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment in the West, mainly in the views expressed by Immanuel Kant. According to Kant, rational human beings can never exist as means but only as ends in themselves, which means that they have unconditional worth and the capacity to decide for themselves, a capacity that should never be violated (see Kant 1997). And, although, at first glance, the Kantian notion of autonomy seems to perfectly align with the Christian teaching of the value and dignity of the human person, as Alexander J. Lozano (2004, 108) stresses:

It is easy to see how this philosophical approach to autonomy can be used to defend such practices as abortion—upholding the woman’s autonomy to choose and denying the personhood (rational nature) of the embryo/fetus. Likewise with proponents of euthanasia and assisted suicide who argue that terminally ill persons have the autonomous right to choose the time and manner of their death. This near absolute view of autonomy and self-determination finds support in the legal arena in relation to the concept of privacy.

For Christian theology, these philosophical notions of autonomy belittled the ethical value of the human body, while, even more, as several contemporary Christian ethicists, in both the West and the East, saw, Descartes’ anterior extremely influential theory, according to which, the human body is nothing more than a machine subject to examination and alteration gave birth to modern Western dualism (Nelson 1992). All these have led to the belief that human beings now have the absolute freedom to do whatever they want with their bodies, a philosophy which, as the theologian Mary Healy saw, has led to a “cultural landscape littered with broken families, lost human dignity, lonely individuals and deep moral confusion” (Healy 2005, 2). What is, however, the stance of Catholic and Eastern Orthodox bioethics on the matter? Is, for them, the fact that, as will be examined subsequently, Christianity recognizes human free will and firmly and undeniably respects personal autonomy enough to speak of the absolutization of the principle or are there really instances where the principle could, or even should, be violated?

## **Autonomy in the Bible**

Before delving into the stance of Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Christian bioethics on autonomy, it is necessary to first examine the pertinent scriptural passages. One could argue that the Bible takes a somewhat contradictory stance on the matter. On the one hand, already

from the first two chapters of Genesis, from "the beginning," as Christ Himself later called it (Mt 19:4, Mt 19:8),<sup>1</sup> the Bible explicitly speaks of the fact that human beings are the only creatures made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26–27), which reveals their superiority within the rest of creation as well as the human person's unassailable dignity. Because of this dignity, human life is considered sacred, while, within Creation, only human nature is associated with reason and free will and this is what justifies the inalienable human rights and our undeniable right to decide autonomously for ourselves. Moreover, God's command to Adam regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil implies that he has the freedom to choose whether to obey or disobey: "And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it, you will certainly die'" (Gen 2:16–17). The warning of consequences for disobedience implies the ability to make independent decisions, which suggests that Adam and Eve possessed free will, as their choice to eat from the forbidden tree demonstrated their capacity to exercise their own judgment and make moral decisions.

On the other hand, for the Scripture, the definite existence of autonomy in human nature does not mean that every autonomous human choice is correct. In other words, free will is the freedom of man to voluntarily choose between good or evil, which offers him the free choice of moral or immoral life. Whoever chooses the former will be rewarded by God's grace in the afterlife, while the one who chooses the latter will be eternally condemned. As God Himself mentioned in Deuteronomy, "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live" (Deut 30:19), while, in the words of Paul, "I have the right to do anything,' you say, but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything,' but I will not be mastered by anything" (1 Cor 6:12). After all, "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor 5:10) and it is this ultimate eschatological judgment that calls for a righteous life of rational and autonomous moral choices.

Moreover, in the third chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Apostle Paul expressed one of his most famous teachings regarding the human body, namely that it is the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16) and a member of Christ Himself (1 Cor 6:15), while he later adds, "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price." (1 Cor 6:19–20). Paul, therefore, besides showcasing the sanctity of the human body, in contrast to the several philosophical and religious dualistic approaches of his time, such as Platonism and Origenism, that undermined its value and dignity, highlights that it does not belong to

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<sup>1</sup> All scriptural translations follow the New International Version (NIV).

human beings but to God, as it constitutes His very temple. As the Apostle saw, humans have nothing of their own, not even the parts of their own bodies, which are ruled by Christ, who “bought” us all. Thus, in the Bible, on the one hand, humans have the undeniable and complete freedom to autonomously decide for their bodily life, while, on the other, nothing belongs to us, not even our own flesh itself. However, the latter, as St. Nicodemus of Mount Athos saw, does not negate the freedom and autonomy of man, but instead “reveals our connection and loving relationship with Christ” (Rizos 1989, 455).

Ultimately, the Bible advocates for what the Apostle James calls, the “law that gives freedom” (Jas 1:25, 2:12), that is, the perfect law of God. Only through this law and not through one’s arbitrary autonomous law, human beings can voluntarily achieve real freedom in Christ. After all, even Jesus Christ Himself denied His own autonomy and will, obeying this law of His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, where, although His Spirit was “willing”, His flesh was “weak” (Mt 26:41): “Going a little farther,” Mark writes, “he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. ‘Abba, Father,’ he said, ‘everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will’ (Mk 14:35-36). Jesus, thereby, revealed the real humanity of His nature, which the Bible invites us to follow, since Christians are called to imitate the earthly works of Christ, to become like Him, and, through Him, to reach the Father (Soprthony 2010, 174). In the God-inspired words of Paul:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Phil 2:5–8)

### **The Stance of Eastern Orthodox Theology**

Let’s examine, now, the stance of Eastern Orthodox bioethics on the matter. For Orthodox theology, the terms “image” and “likeness” of God are strictly distinct, as the former is our spiritual kinship with God, while the latter constitutes the tendency towards the eschatological end, which will be experienced not only spiritually, but also bodily, after our bodily resurrection. Thus, it is humans’ duty to constantly improve physically, mentally, and spiritually in the earthly life, until they reach this very end, perfection, deification, or else theosis,<sup>2</sup> in the next one. God’s likeness reveals man’s *ayteksousio*, as Orthodoxy calls it, our free will to create a relationship of love and communication with God and constitutes the fulfillment of our volition to resemble the Creator, reaching the ultimate fulfillment of our existence. This freedom allows humans to choose autonomously between good and evil. It can be said, therefore, that humans continuously navigate from image to likeness, from the

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<sup>2</sup> Theosis, in the Greek language, means “deification” and, for Eastern Christian theology, is the union with or the resemblance to God.

created to the uncreated, from the imperfect to perfect. As Andrew Louth put it, to be created in the image and likeness of God means "that we have been created with some kind of affinity for God which makes possible a process of assimilation to God, which is, presumably, the point of human existence" (Louth 2013, 148).

In addition, for Eastern Orthodoxy, which is highly personalistic, "every human being is a unique and unrepeatable prosopo (person), but all these unique and unrepeatable persons are homoousia, are of one identical ousia (essence). Therefore, a human being realizes its hypostasis as prosopo only when it finds itself in a communion of love with all other persons" (Yannaras 1968, 21). Personhood is identified in all human beings, as personhood and humanhood are not confirmed by biophysical, medical, or social capacities and assessments but by the source of life, God, while it is conferred by the changeless, perfect God and not by any kind of perishable development and alteration. In the words of Patriarch Bartholomew, "with our birth, we are given the ability to give the world back to Him and it is only in this act of offering that we become genuinely human and truly free" (Bartholomew 2010, 116). It is a firm Orthodox position that the fact that only human nature is associated with reason, free will, and dignity stems from our kinship with God. Without this basis, "the Declaration of Human Rights remains meteoric, rights are distorted, anthropocentrism replaces theocentrism, and individuality falsifies human life" (Mantzaridis 2008, 197–98).

Based on all these, and since one of its most important teachings is free will, i.e., the freedom that derives from humankind's creation in God's image and likeness, Orthodox bioethics undeniably respects autonomy and recognizes one's right to decide for oneself. On the other hand, free will is not necessarily good, as it can easily lead to evil and, even though humans were created sinless, they can, through the exercise of their *ayteksousio*, become sinful, since only the divine nature is truly sinless. As St. Theophilus of Antioch asserted, the human being is either completely mortal or immortal and everyone is receptive to both situations (Theophilus 1970, 11), while, in St. Methodius of Olympus' view, the human flesh oscillates between perishability and imperishability but, due to lust, according to original sin, it chose the former (Methodius 2002).

For Orthodox bioethics, autonomy is not associated with personal arbitrariness, but with the eschatological fulfillment of the person and this is exactly why, although Orthodox theology respects autonomy, it does not conform to the excessive emphasis given to it by modern healthcare ethics. What matters most is not the blind respect for some bioethical principle, even if that principle is autonomy, but the ultimate salvation of the soul. Violation of autonomy, that is, as mentioned, paternalism, can, therefore, be considered moral if spiritual salvation can only be achieved through this very violation. Even more, even if the absolutization of the principle of autonomy respects each person's particularity, in the end, it proves to be a chimera, since "if the individual is absolutized, the communion or community disappears and with it also society" (Gombos 2019, 113).

Ultimately, for the Orthodox Christian, due to the fact that freedom dependent on passions could never be real freedom, if the autonomous choice of the patient is driven by passion, it would make no sense for him/her to choose any treatment by themselves. In order for patients to consent, what is important does not depend only on what they *want* to do but mostly on what they *have* to do. As Tristram Engelhardt put it, Christians must draw authority “not from the consent of particular individuals nor from conclusions to discursive moral philosophical arguments, but instead from the experienced revelation of the requirements of God” (Engelhardt 2000, 356). Furthermore, every decision cannot be value-neutral, but one that leads to salvation, as Orthodox bioethics, with its eschatological outlook and character, “relocates every moral concern within the all-encompassing and all-demanding pursuit of the kingdom of heaven” (ibid., 366). Only through this eschatological perspective “are bioethical dilemmas properly resolved and man is not limited to the narrow confines of perishable cosmic materiality” (Mavropoulos 2023, 77).

## The Stance of Catholic Theology

Moving to Catholic theology, the *imago Dei*, as the Catholic Church calls it, i.e., our creation in God’s image, due to which, personal dignity must be recognized in every human being wholesale (Kim 2015), is the very first principle of Catholic ethics (Ashley 1985). The image of God refers to human free will, co-creativity, and intellect, while it also means our natural capacity to have a personal relationship with God (Dei Verbum, 34).<sup>3</sup> As St. Thomas Aquinas saw, even though in all creatures there is some kind of representation of God “as trace”, just like smoke represents fire without depicting it, in rational creatures alone, “possessing intellect and will, there is found the representation of the Trinity by way of image” (Aquinas, q. 45, a. 7).<sup>4</sup> Within creation, therefore, only angels and humans are able to resemble God. Nevertheless, although there is indeed a resemblance between humans and God, the Son is the only perfect image of the Father (Aquinas, q. 35, a. 2).

In addition, the *imago Dei* is what bestows on humans their freedom of choice, or else free will, which, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, “is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man” (Gaudium et Spes, 17). Freedom, in the definition of St. Anselm, is “the ability to keep rectitude of will for the sake of this rectitude itself” (Anselm 2000, 197), and only through this freedom can human beings be directed toward goodness (Gaudium et Spes, 17). According to Aquinas, in contrast to animals, which are moved solely by their passions, the sources of human freedom are intelligence and will, a freedom that the Thomist ethicist Servais Pinckaers calls “freedom for excellence.” “We are free,” Pinckaers says, “*not in spite of*

<sup>3</sup> All the English translations of all papal documents and other official Catholic Church documents are taken from the official website of The Holy See (<https://www.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>).

<sup>4</sup> All the translations of *Summa Theologiae* (ST) are taken from the New Advent website (<https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>).

*but because of* our natural inclination to truth and beatitude. The attraction of the true and the good are the foundation of our freedom and orientate it" (Pinckaers 1986, 212).<sup>5</sup>

However, although the Catholic Church fully respects the right of one to freely make choices for his or her life and self and recognizes the autonomy of the human person, human self-determination and freedom are not completely autonomous or absolute, since they exist "within a covenantal relationship with God" (Petri 2016, 168). Thus, due to the fact that human persons made, and keep making, bad use of their freedom, the absolute autonomy that modern bioethics often suggests is rejected. In the words of Benedict Ashley, "Death has its origin in the sin of free and responsible creatures, who voluntarily chose an 'idolatrous' autonomy over the gift of God" (Ashley 1985, 108). Even more, our autonomy can only be a limited one, since it is not self-acquired, but bestowed by the Creator, who is the only one who can enjoy perfect and complete autonomy. Genuine autonomy is the one that recognizes, "the dependence of freedom on truth" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 34), which is God, while complete and absolute human autonomy leads to subjectivism and individualism. Through God, the rightful human autonomy is not dismissed, "but is rather re-established in its own dignity and strengthened in it" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 41).

The Catholic teaching, therefore, rejects complete and absolute autonomy, which "does little to support the value of human dignity and the respect for all life" (Morris, 4). Yet, it does not adhere to complete heteronomy either. Instead, what it suggests is, as the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* put it, *participated theonomy*, in which free will and human reason freely participate in the wisdom, providence, and truth of the perfect God (*Veritatis Splendor*, 41). This is why the Catholic Church strongly believes that the personal autonomy and freedom of human beings are not limitless. In the words of the prolific and eloquent pope, John Paul II, "one must necessarily recognize insurmountable limits to the possibility of man's domination over his own body and its functions; limits which no man, whether a private individual or one invested with authority, may licitly surpass" (*Humanae Vitae*, 17). Ultimately, the Catholic stance on the matter is beautifully summarized in the pope's work *Fides et Ratio* (107):

Different philosophical systems have lured people into believing that they are their own absolute master, able to decide their own destiny and future in complete autonomy, trusting only in themselves and their own powers. But this can never be the grandeur of the human being, who can find fulfilment only in choosing to enter the truth, to make a home under the shade of Wisdom and dwell there. Only within this horizon of truth will people understand their freedom in its fullness and their call to know and love God as the supreme realization of their true self.

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<sup>5</sup> Contrary to the "freedom for excellence," William of Ockham's idea, according to which, freedom does not derive from both will and reason, but only from the former highly influenced Catholic ethics for many centuries (See Petri 2016, 24–31 and Pinckaers 2001, 327–78).

## Conclusion

Autonomy, which is one's capacity to make voluntary decisions about their healthcare, without external coercion or interference, is one of the four principles of bioethics, alongside beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. Even though all four bioethical principles are considered crucial to modern health care ethics, autonomy, in contemporary societies, due to the immense impact of the philosophical approaches of the Enlightenment and the Renaissance, is often over-emphasized to the extent of even being absolutized and idolized. Given the utmost respect that Christian theology gives to personal freedom and human integrity, based on the fact that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, one could, falsely, assume that Christian ethics would align with this apotheosis of the principle of autonomy.

Despite, however, any different followed methodologies and formulations, for both Orthodox and Catholic theology, although autonomy and free will are highly respected, the bioethical principle of autonomy is not absolute, as only God's autonomy is truly absolute and free. Eastern Orthodox ethics, with its strong emphasis on eschatology, holds that the final, eternal salvation of the human person is paramount, therefore, respect for and compliance with any bioethical principle is of secondary importance. Catholic ethics, in turn, with its rejection of both complete autonomy and complete heteronomy and its *theonomous* character, adheres to voluntary, free, and reasonable conformity to God's law. Thus, the absolute character that modern healthcare ethics often tends to give to the first bioethical principle is not accepted by either Eastern Orthodox or Catholic bioethics.

Finally, it has to be clarified that this does not apply only to the specific bioethical principle in question, but to all four bioethical principles. As the important Catholic ethicists John Finnis and Anthony Fisher wrote, "the four principles of bioethics' have their rational basis and truth only within the wider set of moral principles. Outside that context, they demarcate a rather legalistic ethic while also, paradoxically, providing labels for rationalizing almost any practice" (Finnis and Fisher 1993, 31). For Christianity, the four bioethical principles, autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, instead of being absolutized, should be seen as nothing more than a mere aspect of a general approach to health care ethics, integrated into the general moral duties, values, norms, and virtues of Christian morality.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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