

The Dignity/Worth of Persons: Foundational Concept or Empty Rhetoric?

James Franklin

University of New South Wales, Sydney

Society for Christian Bioethicists Conference, 12 Oct 2024

Abstract: The dignity of persons has been much used as a slogan in Christian ethics and bioethics in recent decades, culminating in the Vatican's 2024 document, *Dignitas infinita*. However, it does not have any standard philosophical explication, and it is not apparent if or how it fits into earlier Christian ethical perspectives, whether Thomist, Biblical or virtue-ethical. Some ethicists, such as Alasdair MacIntyre in his 2021 lecture 'Human dignity: a puzzling and possibly dangerous idea?', have condemned the idea as dangerously empty rhetoric. Jeff McMahan writes that "the notion of human dignity often functions in moral and political writing as a rhetorical substitute for argument," while Ed Feser says "Shouting 'human dignity!' does exactly zero work in justifying claims about abortion, euthanasia, etc." It must be admitted that the notion has not been given adequate philosophical (or theological) explanation.

The talk aims to do that, based on the author's book, [The Worth of Persons: The Foundation of Ethics](#). It is argued that the worth or dignity of persons supervenes (as a matter of metaphysical necessity) on certain properties that humans have: rationality, consciousness, the ability to act freely for reasons, individuality and others. Beings that have those (non-moral) properties necessarily have moral significance and standing. That has implications for ethics in the sense of what to do – for example, the role of rationality in giving humans worth implies a right to education, which allows rationality to be perfected.

Consideration is given briefly to how a worth-of-persons foundation of ethics fits into both Catholic natural law perspectives and Biblical ones based on the statement of Genesis that humans are "made in the image of God." Finally a sketch is given of what bioethical issues are and are not solved by attention to human dignity.

"Dignity" is a word that has been central to Catholic ethics especially since about 1940. It appears as an overarching and basic concept, as if it's at the heart of what Catholics have to say about ethics – sometimes Protestants too. It is also a means of connecting the Catholic position with ones of wider appeal such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Let's run quickly through a few examples of what has been said about human dignity. The

Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it right at the beginning:



Preamble: Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world ... 😊

Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience ... [Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948] 😊

The 1965 Vatican II document on religious freedom, *Dignitatis humanae*, begins “A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man ...” 😊

Dignitas infinita in 2024 begins: “Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter. This principle, which is fully recognizable even by reason alone, underlies the primacy of the human person and the protection of human rights. In the light of Revelation, the Church resolutely reiterates and confirms the ontological dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God ...”

But, there’s also been fierce (and rather colourfully expressed) pushback, from both non-Christian and Catholic ethicists. Some examples: 😊

Ruth Macklin’s 2003 paper, “Dignity is a useless concept”:¹

“ appeals to dignity are either vague restatements of other, more precise, notions or mere slogans that add nothing”

Steven Pinker, “The stupidity of dignity”² “The problem is that "dignity" is a squishy, subjective notion, hardly up to the heavyweight moral demands assigned to it ... Once you recognize the principle of autonomy, Macklin argued, "dignity" adds nothing.”

Jeff McMahan “the notion of human dignity often functions in moral and political writing as a rhetorical substitute for argument,”³

Some Catholic ethicists have been just as scathing: 😊

Alasdair MacIntyre in his 2021 lecture ‘Human dignity: a puzzling and possibly dangerous idea?’⁴ 😊

Ed Feser: “Shouting ‘human dignity!’ does exactly zero work in justifying claims about abortion, euthanasia, etc.”⁵

OK, they don’t like it. 😊

The critics have some justifiable points:

- “Dignity” is recent and doesn’t fit naturally into traditional Catholic natural law ethics (into Kantian ethics, maybe) (it’s not incompatible either with natural law ethics either, it’s just hard to see the relationship)
- It purports to be a heavy-duty notion but is usually not supported by a heavy-duty philosophical explanation, such as a metaphysics of the human person
- Worth is not about action – it’s an inherent property of whatever has it – and so it’s not clear how exactly it bears on the rights and wrongs of action such as euthanasia, or on rights and duties, or virtues etc.

So let’s address the last two of those questions. What is the metaphysics of the human person that will explain dignity, and how does that imply truths of ethics in the sense of the rightness of actions?

I’ve attempted that in my book *The Worth of Persons: The Foundation of Ethics*.



First, a word about language: I take it that “dignity” and “worth” are the same thing: I prefer the word “worth” to the word “dignity” for two reasons: Firstly, an Anglo-Saxon word is always better than a Latin one: more direct. Secondly, if you use “dignity”, you need to distinguish the inherent or ontological meaning of dignity from other meanings, as in “he considered hard work below his dignity”, or “lying in a hospital bed with nurses wiping your bum is undignified”. Treatments of dignity often start by distinguishing several meanings, by the end of which the reader is exhausted and in no mood to delve into the relevant meaning, usually called “ontological” dignity.⁶ But distinguishing ontological dignity is the start of the process, not the end. [pause] Let’s get onto what gives humans worth (or dignity).

So here are the main ideas of the book, in brief :



- First, ethics is not *fundamentally* about what to do – about right actions, duties, virtues, human rights ... (though those things are ethically important)
- There’s something more basic. Take this question: why is the death of a human a tragedy but the explosion of a lifeless galaxy just a firework? “Tragedy” is a moral notion, pointing to the moral importance of the kind of thing that can be the subject of tragedy. (But it’s not about what to do.)
- The phrase “the worth of persons” names what it is that gives humans their moral importance – what makes what happens to them morally significant.
- It’s possible to say what properties of humans give them their worth – in philosophical jargon, the properties on which their worth supervenes. Their height and colour are not morally relevant, but their rationality and emotional structure are. The traditional answer to what gives humans worth is rationality: That’s a start, in that an intellectual kind of rationality is an important feature distinguishing humans from the rest of creation; but a little narrow. I suggest adding as bases for the worth of persons: consciousness, emotional structure, capacity to act freely for reasons, the

unity and diversity of the mind, individuality and a few others, with the whole integrated package making humans unique and supremely important.

I've noticed that people have difficulty with the notion of "supervenience", as if it's an obscure technical notion of metaphysics that's hard to understand. Not really, and there's



something helpful about it from, of all people, same article 'The stupidity of dignity': "Macklin



Pinker. He says, in the argued that bioethics has

done just fine with the principle of personal autonomy--the idea that, [watch carefully what happens next]

because all humans have the same minimum capacity to suffer, prosper, reason, and choose, no human has the right to impinge on the life, body, or freedom of another."

Actually, Macklin didn't say that – he's made that up.

does say: Those inherent properties confer moral had them, you'd have to respect that being as having his "because", you understand supervenience.



But look carefully at what he standing – if any other being rights etc. If you understand

The question then is, what the relation is between the worth of persons, an inherent quality, and right actions. Does the worth of persons imply particular moral positions, such as the wrongness of the death penalty?

This is a tricky question and needs a lot of care to answer. In principle, the worth of persons does have consequences – strictly logical consequences – for what ought to be done. But typically some further premises are needed; and typically, those premises involve a deeper understanding of the bases of human worth in human nature, such as rationality, emotional



structure and so on, as listed above. Let's take just three examples.

The wrongness of murder is easy. It does follow directly from the worth of persons. Because persons are worth something, their being deprived of existence is an evil and hence it's wrong to bring it about.

Self-defence is difficult, just because the worth of two persons conflicts. That's what explains why there is a dilemma.

The right of humans to education (Universal Declaration Article 26) follows from the worth of persons, but with the additional premise that rationality is one of the bases of worth. Knowledge is a perfection of rationality, and education is what enables that to happen. So



rational beings have a right to it.

If you do plan to take the worth of persons seriously, a number of issues arise; including but not limited to:

- Do the severely cognitively disabled have worth, or do they lack rationality and so lack worth? What about potential rationality?

- Do humans have equality of worth? Why or why not?
- What about animals? Rainforests? Artworks? Do they have some lesser kind of worth that explains why they somehow appear in moral duties?
- What is the relation to the traditional Aristotelian metaphysics of species and essences – the kind of thing discussed in Hershenov’s talk?
- What is the relation to Christian theological views of humans as the “image of God” and to the doctrine of the Incarnation?

Good questions, but of course in 20 minutes I can’t deal with them. Some discussions in my book.



However as I’m addressing a mixed Christian group, I’ll say a little about the theological connection. I suspect Protestants and Catholics may have different views on this:

- traditionally there’s a connection between dignity and the statement of Genesis that God made humans in his own image. That’s correct, but at the same time worth is something that can be urged on atheists, because it’s inherent to humans and not the result of a relation, such as resemblance to God. Augustine says “Man’s excellence consists in the fact that God made him to His own image by giving him an intellectual soul which raises him above the beasts of the field.” He seems to mean that rationality is inherent to humans, and in fact resembles God.
- It’s been argued that humans being a species suitable for Incarnation reflects human dignity in some way. True, but did the Incarnation confer dignity or did pre-existing dignity mean humans were appropriate and crocodiles not?
- The worth of persons is inherent to human nature and is not conferred: by society, God or anything else. If in fact humans, as we know them to be, were the result of a random evolutionary process across aeons of time without divine input, then we would still have the same inherent worth; because it’s inherent, and supervenes on the properties we actually have (not on the history of our origins).

Finally, let me review what you can expect from a metaphysics of worth or dignity and what you can’t.

What worth/dignity does do (in the foundations of ethics)

What it does is explain the *foundations* of the more “applied” moral notions like rights, duties, virtues and care. If an entity is of worth, destroying it is bad and so it has a right to life; care makes sense only when directed to something of worth, and so on.

What worth/dignity doesn’t do

It doesn’t resolve dilemmas: Feser is right that just talking about dignity or worth won’t decide on difficult questions about abortion and euthanasia. Foundations don’t resolve

dilemmas. What they do is explain why there is a dilemma in the first place – why there’s moral weight on each side of the dilemma.

Worth can’t decide where the boundaries of being human are: It would be fair to say that as it’s inherent, birth can’t be a boundary between not having worth and having it, but it won’t tell you how to regard an embryo soon after conception. You need something else to decide that. And if you accept that those at the end of life have full human worth, it still doesn’t tell you what ought to be done about VAD. The debate about that is much the same as before (except that an option of getting rid of them as “lives not worth living” is out).

In conclusion: worth, or inherent dignity, is a perfectly intelligible concept and one we can’t do without as a foundation of ethics.

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC300789/>

² <https://newrepublic.com/article/64674/the-stupidity-dignity>

³ Jeff McMahan, Human dignity, suicide and assisting others to die, <https://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/files/humandignitysuicideandassistingotherstodiecopypdf>

⁴ Christopher McCrudden, Alasdair MacIntyre’s critique of human dignity: a response, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/ljusclr189&div=5>

⁵ Feser: <https://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2021/11/macintyre-on-human-dignity.html> [some refs to his own]

⁶ E.g. Marcin Paweł Ferdynus, Is Dignity Still Necessary in Health Care? From Definition to Recognition of Human Dignity, *J Relig Health*. 2024; 63(2): 1154–1177.