

Dignitas infinita and the Worth of Persons

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I'll talk mostly about the foundational ideas at the beginning of [Dignitas infinita](#), then say something briefly about a couple of the controversial conclusions such as on capital punishment and gender.

The document begins with sections on the foundations of ethics. They're very unlike other views on the topic, such as Thomist natural law theory, virtue ethics or utilitarianism. It

starts: 😊

"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 ..." [Take a moment to absorb it]

😊 I emphasise a few things: the inherence of dignity in human nature, the accessibility to reason alone, and the connection nevertheless to humans being in the image and likeness of God.



There are three things you could think about dignity as so used:

- That it's a good idea and important
- It's a bad idea, or
- It's a platitude without much content

I believe it's good and important, 😊 and it agrees, quite closely, with the theory I gave in my book, [The Worth of Persons: The Foundation of Ethics](#). I'll get to that.

But maybe the most natural first thing to think is that "dignity" is a platitude. There are lots of concepts that we're all in favour of, but they don't mean much, they're high-sounding but too content-free: Like progress, common sense, world's best practice, Australian values, school spirit: What does school spirit commit you to, except that there is to be more cheering at the football?

These notions, you might suspect, are used when someone is trying to put a fast one over. As one professor of moral philosophy at Oxford puts it, “the notion of human dignity often functions in moral and political writing as a rhetorical substitute for argument.”¹ That is a fair challenge: if the notion of dignity is to be used, it has to be explained.

One reason for thinking that the idea of dignity is not a platitude is that there are some very smart philosophers attacking it. Alasdair MacIntyre gave a talk in 2021 titled, ‘[Human dignity: a puzzling and possibly dangerous idea?](#)’ [which Xavier was present at, he may tell us more], and he’s been [followed by Ed Feser](#), a leading Thomist natural law theorist. Those are very intelligent and well-informed guys and it’s worth looking briefly at what they say as it clarifies what has to be explained about dignity. MacIntyre says that talk of human dignity only got going from the time of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and it’s spread everywhere without gaining any useful content. This quote from Feser gives a flavour

of what they don’t like: 😊

‘Shouting “human dignity!” does exactly zero work in justifying claims about abortion, euthanasia, etc. because what human dignity amounts to and what it entails are themselves no less contested than those issues are. In order to show that respect for human dignity rules out those things, you need to do the hard work of setting out the natural law reasoning that shows that they are intrinsically evil. But once you’ve done that, talk of “human dignity” drops away as otiose.’²

MacIntyre and Feser are right about several things: First, dignity is a novelty. Though there’s some background in Kant, the use of dignity in this foundational ethical sense is a post-war fad, in human rights circles and in Catholic circles (for example the Vatican II document *Dignitatis humanae* and in the Catechism). Benedict XVI says that the Church’s ethics [quote] “is based on man’s creation ‘in the image of God’ [...], a datum which gives rise to the inviolable dignity of the human person and the transcendent value of natural moral norms”³, but that is false. Traditionally, the Church’s ethics is not based on dignity but on Thomist natural law theory, which is different and doesn’t include a foundational notion of dignity (though it might be compatible with it).

They’re also right that the concept of dignity and its relation to claims about what is right and wrong hasn’t been well explained philosophically.

So let me tell you about my effort to do that, in *The Worth of Persons: The Foundation of*

Ethics: 😊

But first, just to speak briefly 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. Anglo-Saxon words are short, clean and

¹ Jeff McMahan, Human dignity, suicide and assisting others to die, <https://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/files/human-dignity-suicide-and-assisting-others-to-die-copy.pdf>

² Feser: <https://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2021/11/macintyre-on-human-dignity.html> [some refs to his own]

³ Caritas in Veritate, 45.

blunt; whereas Latinate vocabulary is multisyllabic, cerebral, equivocal and predominantly obfuscatory if not totally unintelligible. [See what I mean.] 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”. As Xavier explained, the *Dignitas infinita* document distinguishes three other meanings of “dignity”, which is fine, but something of a distraction from the main game. So I ask you to switch to “worth of persons” for the moment. But that’s just a matter of language. Worth and dignity are the same.

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.
- And if you look at moral issues of right and wrong, virtues etc, they all lead back to the worth of persons. For example, the basic reason why murder is wrong is not a command of God or the greatest happiness of the greatest number, but the badness of being dead, which matters because the person killed matters.
- 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 is rationality: 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.” 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. [that needs a lot of thinking about: I can only give headlines here.] (If you’re wondering what happens with humans that appear to lack some of those features, like ones suffering dementia, then their tragedy consists in the fact that they do, as humans, have those properties, but can’t exercise them.)
- Humans have equal worth.
- The worth of persons is inherent to human nature and is not conferred: by society, God or anything else. (Here the wording of *Dignitas infinita* is sometimes dubious, because it sometimes suggests God does confer dignity by loving humans.) 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). If we are, on the other hand, made in the image and likeness of God, the result is the same. Worth belongs to us because of how we are.

There are questions about the possible worth of cats, rainforests etc but we can't go into it at the moment.

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? *Dignitas infinita* says it "violates the inalienable dignity of every person, regardless of the circumstances,"⁴ giving the impression that the wrongness of the death penalty follows directly from the worth of persons without need of any further premises. Is that right?

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 a few varied 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.

The classic case of killing in self-defence exhibits well what can be expected from a foundation in the worth of persons and what can't. In that case there is a conflict between the right of the person under attack to live and the right of the attacker to live. Both of those are based on the worth of the two persons: without that you don't understand why each should have a right to life. The worth of persons doesn't resolve the dilemma. What it does is explain why there is a dilemma in the first place: namely, that both persons in conflict have worth and hence it's bad if either dies.

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.

Cases like sex change as discussed in section 60 of *Dignitas infinita* are more difficult but the worth of persons perspective does have something to say about how you should approach them. The document says that "The dignity of the body cannot be considered inferior to that of the person as such," meaning the body in its sexed form, and says "It follows that any sex-change intervention, as a rule, risks threatening the unique dignity the person has received from the moment of conception." A worth of persons perspective will say that you need to investigate how being embodied does contribute to human dignity, and that psychiatric as

⁴ DI 34.

well as philosophical evidence will be relevant. Psychiatry has clarified how body image and identity is a different, more mental, entity than the physical body, which raises the possibility of mismatch between the two. I certainly believe that the epidemic of confused teens being given puberty blockers and having their breasts cut off is the major new medical scandal of our time; but the case is different with mature adults who have grown up always aware of a mismatch between their sex organs and their internal sexual identity. What they ought to do is not easy to say, but a worth of persons perspective suggests the need for a lot of listening and psychiatric research before issuing moral instructions. The fact that the bases of worth are so heavily mental (rationality, emotional structure and so on) suggests that in understanding human identity we give a lot of weight to body image, body schema and social image relative to physical bodily qualities. Once you've said that colour and size are irrelevant to human worth, you might be wary of the relevance of other physical properties. I saw this on Facebook this week <https://themindsjournal.com/this-is-what-your-hand-size-says-about-your-personality/>



Sure, you can explain to me why that's different, but still, let's be careful about moving from physical properties to morally relevant mental ones ...

I'll end with a comment on the word "infinite" in the title of the *Dignitas infinita* document. Does that word do any work? As an ex-mathematician, I don't much like loose uses of "infinite" and I prefer a traditional alternative like "absolute" worth or dignity. But if you think that, this may give you pause. Peter Singer, in his characteristic where-angels-fear-to-tread way, asks this question: if you're rushing into a burning building, should you save one child or 200 pigs? He says that the answer to how many pigs outweigh one baby may not be 200, but it isn't infinite. So the question about whether human dignity is "infinite" could have some genuine meaning.

In summary: dignity or worth is a contentful idea. It's essential to understanding what ethics is all about.
