

## Applying “Dignity” in the Light of the Concept’s Typologies

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### *Summary*

*The concept “dignity” is neither clear nor unambiguous. The author presents two ways in which to typologise this concept as proposed by Daniel P. Sulmasy and Adam Rodziński. The problem is that different philosophers attach different meanings (types) to the term. The author tries to analyse these meanings, which have taken shape in the course of the history of Western philosophy, and also to provide a short review on the development of its most common contemporary interpretation which equates dignity with the presence of autonomy.*

Key words: *dignity; value; person; rationality; autonomy; respect*

### *Introduction*

The concept “dignity” shares the sad destiny of many other philosophical concepts, since there is no agreement about a clear definition even though we encounter many cases of prejudged interpretations of the term. Definitions of dignity usually point to its intrinsic value, something which is characteristic for a human being as a person. This is where we face difficulties when we lack an understanding of what value is and what the human person is. Different philosophers see it differently as do ordinary people in their daily lives.

The article seeks to give an idea of the different approaches to human personal dignity and thus to give it due respect. This analysis is based on articles by American philosophers written for the digest on *Human Dignity and Bioethics* at the request of the President’s Council on Bioethics.

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## 1. *The concept of human dignity in ethics: some classic views*

As mentioned above, dignity is defined as a special kind of value, inherent particularly in the human personality. The question of whether someone can or cannot be considered a person: is a subject of special research: this will be only briefly discussed in the second part of the article in which the author shall be writing on the origins of the concept of dignity, how these are interpreted by philosophers nowadays and also by those of the Modern Age. First and foremost, we shall address different concepts with regard to values and also the ideas behind human dignity in more detail.

There are many theories of value which may be reduced to three main attitudes. The first argues for an object's value which exists independently from an apprehension of it by one's consciousness and which is not determined by the person, but is absolute and inviolable, this being true at least for the highest of moral and personal values. This is what objectivism and realism teach, supported mainly by ancient thinkers from Plato to the Thomists and which has not become outdated in recent times. This approach remains topical as a result, for example, of Max Scheler's and Dietrich von Hildebrand's concepts.

The second approach argues for values being the subjective reaction to certain natural features of objects — their physical and chemical regularities (e.g. John L. Mackie's projectivism). The third argues for values being a sort of secondary feature. They come to the fore during evaluation, they belong ontologically to the relationship between objects and subjects but not to the subjects themselves. Thus, the second and third approaches are actually variations of subjectivism.

In speaking of values, one usually means moral values, or, in other words, the list of principles regulating human behaviour and our understanding of the world as a whole. In these cases, values can be interpreted as certain examples to be imitated, ideals to be aimed for. Aesthetic values also point to a model of beauty which must be implemented. In a sense, it is more difficult to determine the meaning of human dignity. Namely, if an example is impossible to follow, it is inopportune to speak of a certain imperfect individual's value as it is not an example to others but merely a specific human feature. Furthermore, what kind of feature is it? Are all humans endowed with it?

Let us take a look at some concepts of dignity which have become classic. One of them is taken from ancient times. The Stoics connected it to respect and a good reputation. Cicero believed *dignitas* to be less dependent on another's subjective evaluation and more so on one's ability to acknowledge the requirements of human perfection. For example, this kind of superiority loathes a life of luxury and prefers thrifty, strict and intelligent living. Thus, to the human being living in accordance with this requirement is granted an appropriate kind of dignity in society as well as a high official standing (Sulmasy, 2008, 470).

In modern philosophy the concept of Thomas Hobbes piques the interest of researchers. He equated the concept to the price paid for exploiting human effort or, more politely, for human productivity, efficiency and use. This kind of

value cannot be absolute by definition for it depends on another human being’s assertion. Hobbes wrote, »the publique worth of a man, which is the value set on him by the Commonwealth, is that which men commonly call dignity« (Hobbes, 1991, 64) This means that lifestyle does not matter, as Cicero would agree, but rather service to society.

Kant disagreed with Hobbes’ dignity interpretation: he believed that human beings are dignity itself. Kant explains his disagreement with Hobbes’ understanding in his categorical imperative, firstly in its second version: »Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means« (Kant, 2002, 46–47).

The end-in-itself means an objective value rather than conditional, insofar as it is not achieved by our activity which is the case with conditional value. This is the reason why it is a prerequisite of the value which is ascribed to it by us wishfully. Being an end-in-itself, mankind is connected to an absolute limit which restricts all other ends and maxims as well as actions imposed upon us by those purposes and maxims. We can say that it is not the object which we turn into our objective but rather the highest limiting condition for our other ends (Shell, 2008, 336).

When Kant writes that personal dignity is stipulated by a person’s humanity, in other words by one’s belonging to humankind, he means that neither our public status nor even our morals — the things we do — give us dignity but rather that which we are. Peter A. Lawler writes: »To connect dignity with the actual practice of moral virtue produces inequality or undermines the university required for the rational apprehension of moral autonomy« (Lawler, 2008, 243).

Consequently, human dignity is what is inherent in a human being. Immanuel Kant emphasizes this specificity in an appropriate way, saying that humanity is an end-in-itself, having both relative and inner value. This is what he writes in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*: »What has a price is such that something else can also be put in its place as its equivalent; by contrast, that which is elevated above all price, and admits of no equivalent, has a dignity« (Kant, 2002, 52).

The description above means that dignity is not acknowledged empirically and neither is it reduced to a phenomenon or certain personality feature. It is impossible to research a completely “imperceptible” object, however neither can philosophers just put aside something as important as dignity. Therefore, it is not surprising that there have been multiple attempts to find a definition of dignity.

## 2. *Modern perception and corresponding current interpretations in ethics and bioethics*

As a whole, at least three types of such definitions have been developed. Fr. Daniel P. Sulmasy, an American Franciscan researcher, in his non-volumetric but well-grounded study *Dignity and Bioethics: History, Theory and Selected*

*Examples* calls them attributed, inflorescent and intrinsic (Sulmasy, 2008, 470). Although Sulmasy points out mainly these three definitions, the characteristics given by him may also reflect different “zones” encompassed by dignity which have been noticed by particular authors without their noticing other features also. According to Sulmasy’s typology, inflorescent dignity was emphasized by the Stoics, for whom dignity was a specific award. Speaking of those who flourish as human beings, Sulmasy believes that they live a life which is in accord with and expresses human intrinsic dignity. The author also considers such meanings of dignity as being “derived” from intrinsic dignity. This is exactly what we mean when we say that someone “behaves with dignity” or “has lost his/her dignity”. Unlike attributed dignity, inflorescent dignity does not depend on a subjective evaluation, but rather on an objective concept of human perfection.

Attributed dignity is connected by Sulmasy with Thomas Hobbes: it is adjudged, attributed to a person by others which makes it not only conditional (as it provides a service), but also artificial, man-made. Consequently, we ascribe special dignity to those who have been given unique skills, talents or strength.

On the other hand, intrinsic dignity is what every one of us already has just by being human, and is not a result of virtue, public status, skills or strength. Dignity, when used to mean this, indicates »a value not conferred or created by human choices, individual or collective«, it is »prior to human attribution« (Sulmasy, 2008, 473). This is the view of Kant.

So, dignity is a special type of value, particularly characteristic for a human being. Errors in understanding dignity are partly based on incorrect classification. We may say that three types of values correspond to three types of dignity and are ascribed to human beings by various philosophers. Attributive values completely depend on the purposes, hopes, wishes and interests of those making the evaluation. This is the reason why Sulmasy refers to these types of so-called instrumental values as serving a purpose. Unlike the attributive, intrinsic values are not created but rather acknowledged and discovered by us. Acknowledgement of this kind definitely ascribes intrinsic values to those things which truly possess it. However, there is no dependence on the evaluator’s will and realization that the evaluation might prove wrong if we deny the value of what it possesses.

Inflorescent value is characterized by the vitality and flourishing of what has been given an intrinsic value. Virtues are examples of such values: they are not developed for their own sake, but because they indicate something which is inherent in us as humans. In comparison, rose buds blossoming on a bush indicate the fact that the bush is, namely, a rosebush, not a blackthorn.

Intrinsic dignity is a kind of intrinsic value inherent in all human beings because they are a part of humankind. The very fact that we use these words testifies that intrinsic dignity is the basis for inflorescent and attributed dignity. Attributed dignity is ascribed to those already possessing the intrinsic because of their being human, as for example, we do not compliment for the same musical talent pianists and dogs that have simply been trained to press piano keys. In

the same way, inflorescent dignity points to the fact that a human being, having received intrinsic dignity, has “flourished” exactly as a representative of mankind who evidently possesses human characteristics.

It should be noted that a similar classification of dignity was suggested in 1968 by the Polish philosophical anthropologist, Adam Rodziński. The first type, which is the dignity of the personality (*godność osobowościowa*) is characterized by features and attitudes acquired by us, especially our moral state (Rodziński, 1968, 43–49). Both everyday experience and knowledge about personality dynamics speak of the changeability of this type of dignity. Depending on a particular person’s behaviour and reputation, his or her dignity can be “exalted” or “disparaged” to the extent that it is positively or negatively understood by society. It is precisely society that judges a person in regard to this kind of dignity (attributed dignity and — to a certain extent — inflorescent dignity according to Sulmasy). In developing ethics on the basis of personal dignity, we risk reducing it to psychology or the sociology of morality (Biesaga, 2001, 49).

The second type of dignity, which is personal dignity (*godność osobista*), can also be considered subjective or psychological. It is a matter of one’s understanding of dignity, and this may vary. Furthermore, it depends on one’s emotional experience, hidden from the gaze of outsiders, and does not necessarily meet their appraisal. In basing ethics on such a subjective understanding of dignity in order to please everyone around us, we transform it either into a subject of human caprice or into a dictatorship of the state which has a licence to satisfy these caprices, for example, through the legalization of euthanasia.

The third type of dignity to which personalists refer in the building of their ethics definition, is called by Rodziński *godność osobowa* and may be translated as the dignity of the person. It is evident in interpersonal relationships in which we are each other’s “who” not “what”, expressed in Kant’s terms as end rather than means. Both intrinsic dignity according to Sulmasy and the dignity of the person according to Rodziński are connected with our existence as human beings which we neither ascribe to ourselves nor allow society to award or take away from us. The dignity of the person is a particularly reliable foundation for a human rights structure as well as for equity principles, principles of justice and of ethics in general.

As emphasized above, ethicists’ conclusions depend to a large extent on the definition of dignity that they rely upon as the criterion for their teachings. Most errors consist in the lack of ability — or the desire — to see the dignity of the person behind the dignity of the personality and personal dignity, and to see one’s intrinsic dignity behind attributed and inflorescent dignity. It is the author’s opinion that this shortsightedness is connected with the positivist methodology dominant among researchers and the ability just to grasp processes and events, i.e. changes, while unchangeable permanent features remain, at best, in the background of the research. Furthermore, intrinsic dignity seems to slip away when an attempt is made to define it. Therefore, it does not exist as far as science is concerned.

On the other hand, empirical methods focus on the features which humans exhibit in the course of their entire lives. Concepts built on the basis of such features can serve the interests of the majority in society, of the state or of corporations (such as birth regulation, stimulating consumer behaviour, etc.). Therefore, theories which consider dignity to be dependent on the characteristics of a particular person are very popular.

### 3. *How dignity was understood in the Modern Age*

The dignity of a person is closely related to another matter. What do we mean when we speak of the value inherent in a person as such? As was already stressed, the intrinsic dignity which each of us possesses simply because we are human, demonstrates that dignity is innate and absolute. Attributed and inflorescent types of dignity are different. Putting aside the original understanding of the person and focusing on rationality or autonomy (this appears to be a question of inflorescent dignity), which is typical for today's thinking, seems to aim to eliminate the understanding of intrinsic dignity not only as the most important type of dignity but also to eliminate it even as being true at all in regard to the human being.

A generalized understanding of dignity means that it is based on a person's rational nature. It provides us with such features as conceptual thinking, reasonableness and deliberation. Thanks to the faculty of conceptual thinking, a person creates and learns languages, creates works of art, tools and expresses religious sentiment (Lee and George, 2008, 423). However, the main issue is that conceptual thinking includes the intuition of essences, which was called the act of ideation by Max Scheler (Scheler, 2009, 35).

To be more exact, a predominating belief since the time of Descartes promotes the idea that dignity, since it is a special value, is possessed less by humans and more so by rational agents. The rational agent's status is, claims Descartes, the "rank" according to which one lives, a special kind of nobleness or *générosité*. It is not only a matter of *ratio* — although throughout history there have been many ways to define the human being by means of the mind — but also a matter of activity, that is, an active use of intellectual faculties as well as self-possession, self-control.

According to Charles Tylor, Descartes introduces the notion of dignity to the internal dimension: we act in order to strengthen the sense of our value in our own eyes (Tylor, 2001, 152). Thus, such features as strength and self-control, which are connected with an interpretation of dignity of this kind, are transferred to the internal dimension. Human greatness has been understood since ancient times as the dominion of the mind over the passions (e.g. Plato). Descartes seems to enhance this idea with a volitional component: true nobleness is the emotion accompanied by the sense of one's own dignity which makes humans evaluate themselves appropriately. It partly consists in the knowledge that only the self is entitled to command one's will (Taylor, 2001, 154). This is what brings Descartes'

idea close to Kant's. The rational human beings' unique feature has to do with acting according to natural laws unlike other beings and submitting to the regulations which they themselves have created. The source of our dignity is the ability to act in accordance with the demands of our minds, i.e. our autonomy inherent in the moral agent.

Thus, on the one hand, human dignity flows from out of human self-consciousness which singles out the natural and social environment. However, on the other hand, dignity is based on human beings' knowledge of nature and society, i.e. primarily on their ability to change the environment and themselves.

There is a danger, in stressing the active aspect of dignity and sense of self-worth, of excluding those already, or yet unable, to experience an active autonomy from those having dignity. Many contemporaries believe that the act of autonomy is that which detects dignity. This is why, for instance, they take issue with paternalism in medical care, since the principles of paternalism allow denying a patient equity with respect to doctors as rational agents. However, at the same time they do not notice their own defiance against those who are not able to give expression to their ambition to make others respect their dignity. Such people seem to have no dignity.

Consequently, the approach which can be called individualist and which is characteristic of the contemporary European allows for the fact that individuals (or persons), despite their weaknesses, dependencies and mortality, are still able to overcome all unfavourable conditions under which they must exist. A human being must overcome them due to his self-consciousness which »sets him apart from his natural, political, and familial environment« (Lawler 2008, 234). Blaise Pascal called such a creature "a thinking reed" whose dignity is proved in action in accordance with its self-consciousness.

However, self-consciousness is not the only factor which makes a human an original being: namely, there is also freedom. These attributes together give a person the ability to change one's nature in order to acquire characteristics which have not been originally granted to one. In associating the person or "the self" with reflection, modern philosophy, represented by Descartes, has liberated us from corporeal restrictions and later even from moral limits which are imposed upon us as a result of our belonging to society, that is, ties which were established by our common human nature. Consequently, modern technology enables mankind to doubt in the existence of a common human nature and to aim at overcoming humanity itself, that is, to aim for transhumanism.

The author cannot agree with Lawler who emphasizes that precisely »the rational control that would secure our dignity really does point in the direction of transhumanism« (Lawler, 2008, 236). In aiming to surpass our natural limits, by being provided some knowledge due to a certain progress in our thinking, we have learned to put under control processes which once seemed to be natural and beyond our control. Now some of us are trying to achieve more. Our dignity consists in realizing the fact that we are pathetic until the moment we take our own nature under conscious control.



Overcoming one's humanity is just one of the dangers hidden in the modern understanding of a person's dignity. Another danger is the result of stressing autonomy, that is, self-sufficiency, the ability or even the right to act on principles established by ourselves. An ability of this kind allows for the development of higher mental functions, conceptual thinking etc., which closely correspond to inflorescent dignity. However, such an understanding of dignity and of its connection with autonomy originates in the "intrinsic" definition by Kant. Respecting "humanity" means not acting upon another person without his or her consent, according to the great German philosopher. Thus, the Kantian dignity definition fully corresponds with liberal values. »Humanity — wrote Susan M. Shell on this topic — is the capacity that both enables us to think in terms of value at all and orients us toward (without physically necessitating it) full-fledged moral autonomy« (Shell, 2008, 337).

Human beings imagine their own existence as an end and themselves as reference centers. Human existence, the existence of a person has its objective value, but only unless humans acknowledge the law as being equally valid for all. Shell comes to the conclusion that the objective value of a personality for Kant means that we cannot consider ourselves rational unless we allow for a similar value in other human beings, who are also organized in the same way as we (Shell, 2008, 339).

If dignity originates in our ability to act in obedience to our own mind, i.e. autonomously, this is precisely the issue in the case that dignity has been granted to a limited circle of agents who are the only rationally thinking adults. Kant cannot guarantee the status of a human being, particularly that of a person, to an embryo.

#### 4. *Dignity as a basis for equality in regard to the issues of modern medicine*

According to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, »all human beings are born free and equal in their dignity and rights« (UDHR, v). In fact, however, we can see that this principle is sometimes interpreted tendentiously and vaguely. First of all, this is the case when an individual's dignity is made contingent upon a certain set of proper characteristics. It is autonomy, the basic principle of the modern, especially American, mentality that seems to constitute the bare minimum. Ultimately, the reason for dignity is the subject's ability to act on the basis of an autonomous decision (Shell, 2008, 339). As a result of such considerations, it is easy to deny the equality of human beings based on their absolute dignity.

Contrary to most present-day theories, the personalist approach treats dignity ontically, that is, associates it with the very fact of human existence, rather than with the person's ability to manifest certain inherent features. Personalism tries to "dig deeper," below the level of psychological and physiological data; it appeals to metaphysics, and is therefore not recognized by those who reject the



effectiveness of this ancient branch of philosophy. It relies on the obvious fact of belonging to mankind, whereby “obvious” is used here in its usual meaning but also in the empirical sense, since anyone born of a woman is a human being. Similarly, in terms of metaphysics, all expressions of our personality, that is, individual acts of reflection or decision-making are merely accidents. The presence of such acts, as well as their absence has no effect on dignity because the latter refers to the substantive core of the person. As Sulmasy emphasizes, it is not the expression of rationality that makes us human beings, but our belonging to a species capable of rationality. This is why sometimes we call sick or disabled a person who does not demonstrate such attributes (Sulmasy, 2008, 477).

Equality in dignity for all people implies that it cannot be waived or diminished under any circumstances, even when a person is unable to demonstrate the capabilities inherent in his or her rational nature. Similarly, dignity does not depend on the age of the person, nor on the duration of a person’s future life. In the case of the terminally ill patient, the act of respect for his or her dignity is demonstrated in discovering and pursuing the good of the ill person, primarily in taking care of the person’s physical needs, mental health and spiritual needs until the last moment of his or her life. Human life has a special status which derives from the fact that it is the foundation of a person’s dignity, and therefore the destruction of life, though “wrongful”, would not represent an act of respect by any standards.

Referring to the three definitions proposed by Sulmasy, we can say that illness impedes development of inflorescent dignity, but never eliminates intrinsic dignity. The ill person’s intrinsic dignity remains a certain inviolable point of orientation. If we take a closer look at the theses of supporters and opponents of euthanasia, we will see that they apply different definitions of dignity. The former defend attributive dignity (one who is not valued has lost his or her dignity), while some of their opponents argue that courage in the face of illness and death is beneficial to (inflorescent) dignity. Others still, say that one should respect (intrinsic) dignity by considering human life to be sacred regardless, even when an individual’s further life seems to be undignified.

### *Conclusion*

This short analysis of a modern understanding of a person’s dignity allows us to conclude that it means nothing more than respecting another’s autonomy. This definition appears loftier than any of the others. Dignity can be based on utilitarian principles, for instance. In this case, dignity depends on the calculation of pleasure and suffering in a particular person’s life, and allows us to draw the conclusion that pain is contemptible, or to consider someone to be unworthy of the status of a person if in his or her existence there is seemingly more suffering than pleasure.

If we use the attributed dignity definition and evaluate people in accordance with their labour market value, both the unemployed and those unable to ben-

enefit from selling their labour force due to age or illness will be devoid of dignity. On the other hand, we can refer to dignity as being the active use of liberty or the ability to make a rational choice. However, in this case, we also must deal with those who are temporarily or permanently unable to do so. Thus there is a subjectivist scenario after all: we define dignity by our free choice as to what our dignity consists in. However, if this is true, then it follows that we cannot fathom the dignity of the other person, and this consequently renders useless all theories stemming from objective value theories, including Kantianism.

Thus, in his quest to answer the question as to what dignity is, Sulmasy comes to the conclusion that »the argument from consistency claims that fundamental human dignity must be something each of us has simply because we are human« (Sulmasy, 2008, 495).

Finally, what does it mean to respect another's dignity? Firstly, we must remember that possessing this value substantiates our existence in the area of morality which means fulfilling duties as well as claiming the right to expect that similar duties will be fulfilled in regard to ourselves. We can say that being a person provides us with a game which consists of certain strict and permanent rules which, if broken, destroy the game itself and insult all the players. The best example of such a rule can be the above–quoted second version of Kant's categorical imperative regarding means and ends. We must demonstrate respect to all humans so as not to spoil the game. Moreover, we must not consider the quality of the way in which they express their personalities to be an indication of the measure of their dignity. Dignity is determined only by one's belonging to the human race.

Thus, we must respect our neighbours, not only because they have autonomy and interests which they aim to satisfy, but we must, moreover, provide them with our assistance in satisfying their interests because we respect their interests. We can say the same about health: since health is the good of the human being (respect for a person's dignity) we must support it rather than ponder the issue of dignity and personality while analysing the status of someone's health.

Dignity is also based on our readiness to take on duties in regard to another personality. We usually call this readiness mercy or love. Fr. Józef Kożuchowski defines it in the language of philosophy as the human ability for self–relativization, that is, "looking at ourselves and the world from the point of view of extending our centrality (our good)" (Kożuchowski, 2012/3, 214). True respect for a person's dignity lies in recognising it even in suffering or inferiority and in doing this by supporting the life itself of this person, for neither personality nor dignity are possible without life. This must be done continually until the moment of death.

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*Primjena "dostojanstva" u svjetlu raznih tipologija pojma*

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*Sažetak*

*Termin "dostojanstvo" nije jasan ni nedvosmislen. Autorica prikazuje dvije varijante tipologije toga termina prema prijedlozima Daniela P. Sulmasyja i Adama Rodzińskoga. Problem je u tom što različiti filozofi pridaju različita značenja (tipologije) tomu terminu. Autorica nastoji analizirati definicije koje su oblikovane tijekom povijesti zapadne filozofije, te pružati kratki pregled o razvoju njezine najučestalije moderne interpretacije, koja izjednačava dostojanstvo s postojanjem autonomije.*

*Ključne riječi: dostojanstvo; vrijednost; osoba; racionalnost; autonomija; poštovanje*

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