

HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMAN ENHANCEMENT:

A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

As an important concept in contemporary ethics, human dignity is often appealed to in the context of debates concerning the ethics of human enhancement. As Allhoff et al. have pointed out, there is still, and it is likely that there will continue to be much debate about what constitutes enhancement.¹ For the purposes of this article, enhancement implies making something better than it was before, and here we are talking about technological, genetic, or chemical improvements to normal, healthy human beings. Enhancement is therefore distinct from therapy, which would involve

¹ F. Allhoff, et al. Ethics of Human Enhancement: 25 Questions & Answers. *Studies in Ethics, Law, and Technology* 2010; 4: doi:10.2202/1941-6008.1110.

making some ‘abnormality’ more ‘normal’. Enhancement is about making something better than ‘normal’. For example, enhancements range from the now commonplace, such as vaccines which permanently alter a person’s immune system, to the still theoretical, such as modifications of a person’s genetic material to provide superior intellect, moral goodness, or even millennial lifespans. Potential enhancements may also be mechanical, such as bionic limbs or the implantation of electronic chips to augment brain function.

Like other areas of bioethical debate, references to the concept of human dignity with respect to enhancement often encounter the problem of ‘dignity talk’. Through an examination of appeals to dignity in the literature on the ethics of human enhancement, this article argues that the problem of ‘dignity talk’ arises due to reductionist accounts of human dignity that situate human worth in one or other characteristic of being human rather than understanding the concept as an affirmation of the worth of each human individual as a complex, historical, multidimensional whole. As a possible solution, a multidimensional understanding of human dignity is proposed that can function in both a descriptive and a normative manner in the human enhancement debates.

DIGNITY TALK

As is true for many other areas of ethical debate, the debates concerning human enhancement have encountered the problem of ‘dignity talk’. Dignity talk is where two sides of an ethical debate both appeal to the concept of dignity as a

sort of argument-ending trump card. This phenomenon appears to be a consequence of the entronement of human dignity as both the basis and end of human rights in the United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, such that a denial of a particular right is interpreted as a violation of dignity. The problem is clear: if both sides appeal to the same concept as the key to their argument, the debate ends in a stale-mate, or worse, a shouting match.

The debate on human enhancement can be broadly categorised as a debate between two camps: Nick Bostrom (himself a transhumanist) calls them Bioconservatives and Transhumanists;² others, such as Roudit, Baumann, and Heilinger talk about bioconservatives and bioliberals.³ The specific terms used are not important for the purposes of this article. What is important is that there seem to be two camps: those largely opposed to human enhancement, and those largely in favour of it.

With respect to human dignity, those opposing enhancement might claim that enhancement violates human dignity. Conversely, those in favour of enhancement might claim that human dignity obliges us to pursue enhancement or that enhancement at least does not violate human dignity. In other words, for the pro-enhancement group, not to use technology to better humanity may

² N. Bostrom. In Defence of Posthuman Dignity. *Bioethics* 2005; 19: 202-214.

³ J.A. Roudit, et al. Human enhancement and perfection. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2013; 39: 647-650.

constitute a violation of human dignity. There are sub-categories within these two very broad positions, of course, and, indeed, as with all generalisations, in many ways even this broad categorisation may not do justice to the nuance present in many of the arguments. Nonetheless, this appears to be how the line has been drawn in the literature.

In light of this dignity talk, some scholars have called for the dismissal of human dignity from the discussion.⁴ I maintain, however, that such a dismissal does not solve the problem. Instead, dismissal tends to sidestep the problem, temporarily, until the next criterion, be it autonomy, or respect for persons, or whatever, encounters a similar semantic ambiguity.⁵ Moreover, the argument will be made below that the notion of human dignity, precisely because it affirms the worth of a complex human whole—in a way that ideas like respect for autonomy do not—remains a very useful term in the context of debates about enhancement.

To see this, it is necessary to look more closely at how dignity is used in these debates. What might the protagonists of the two positions, the bioconservatives and the transhumanists, mean when they call upon the notion of human dignity? Or, wherein do they see the value or worth of the human individual?

⁴ R. Macklin. Dignity is a useless concept. *BMJ* 2003; 327: 1419-1420.

⁵ S. Visciano. Nanotechnologies, Bioethics and Human Dignity. *Journal International de Bioéthique* 2011; 22: 17-36, 206.

WAYS OF TALKING ABOUT DIGNITY

When one starts to interrogate how the concept of dignity is used in enhancement debates, and what the different protagonists use as the basis of their understandings of human dignity, one discovers a variety of approaches (Table 1).

First, there are those who maintain that human dignity is inherent and inviolable, something human beings always already have. This group can be broken up into two sub-groups: species membership and capacities. Second there are those who think of human dignity more as something that is mutable, and which can be acquired or realised, or indeed lost, during the course of one's life. These too can be broken up into two subgroups: self-worth and behaviour.

Table 1: The Varieties of Human Dignity in the Enhancement Debate

1. Dignity that Human Beings Always Already Have	2. Dignity that Human Beings Acquire
1a. Species Membership	2a. Self-worth
1b. Some Capacity or Capacities	2b. Behaviour
Being in Relationship over Time	

1. Dignity as something human beings always already have

Broadly speaking, when, as in the first group (1.), human dignity is talked about as something all human beings always already inherently have, as a sort of ontological inviolable worth, the arguments underpinning these claims can be distinguished into two kinds.

1a Species Membership

The first kind (1a) argues that all human beings have dignity simply because they belong to the human species. Francis Fukuyama grounds dignity in such an ontological way in the human species to argue against unbridled biotechnological progress. Fukuyama argues that though human beings evolved from animals, there was an ‘ontological leap’ in our evolution that gave rise to a unique set of characteristics, or what he calls a ‘Factor X’ that distinguishes us from animals and provides us with a nature that is uniquely human, and hence worth respecting. Fukuyama’s position remains distinctly ontological and it fits squarely into the species-membership category: ‘Every member of the human species possesses a genetic endowment that allows him or her to become a whole human being, an endowment that distinguishes a human in essence from other types of creatures.’⁶

⁶ F. Fukuyama. 2002. *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux: xiii.

Whilst species membership conceptions of dignity are typically used to criticise enhancement (or at least radical enhancement, e.g., Nicholas Agar),⁷ a possible way of affirming the worth of species membership, whilst still arguing in favour of, rather than against, enhancement, is a transhumanist position that values the human species so much that enhancement is necessary for the very survival of the species in the face of the inevitable advance of technology (the Singularity). On this view, transhumanists will take the evolution of the human species to the next level.⁸

1b Capacities

The second kind (1b) tries to argue that human beings have dignity because of specific capacities supposedly unique to human beings. The most common capacity appealed to is human reason or rationality. Others include autonomy, conscience, and the capacity to love. What is important in this 1b understanding is that it emphasises the possession of the capacity, not its actual development. The possession of the capacity alone is sufficient to warrant respect; how well developed the capacity is, is not relevant.

In making a case for why transhuman enhancement would, at the very least, not *violate* human dignity, Ronald Sandler and John Basl state,

⁷ N. Agar. 2010. *Humanity's End : Why We Should Reject Radical Enhancement*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁸ O. Masson. Turning into Gods: Transhumanist Insight on Tomorrow's Religiosity. *Implicit Religion* 2014; 17: 443-458.

If the basis for moral status is psychological capacity, then human dignity is a sort of moral status that human beings have in virtue of the psychological capacities that most human beings have (or that most would develop under ‘normal’ circumstances).⁹

They go on to argue that transhuman modification of the capacities would violate dignity *only* if it diminishes or removes these capacities. On this view, putting wires into the brain such that pushing a button repeatedly would result in a state of perpetual pleasure and the ignoring of all other activities or concerns¹⁰ is not an enhancement at all precisely because it violates these capacities. Enhancement may of course quite conceivably improve these capacities, and the associated potential for human activity, such that if these capacities alone are our basis for dignity, then one could argue that enhancement supports human dignity and furthers human flourishing.

Note, however, that it is also possible to argue against enhancement by grounding human dignity in a particular capacity or capacities. Enhancement might change a capacity so fundamental to our humanity that one could no longer speak of the new being as having *human* dignity. Many who do so refer

⁹ R. Sandler & J. Basl. Transhumanism, human dignity, and moral status. *American Journal Of Bioethics* 2010; 10: 63-66.

¹⁰ N. Bostrom. 2008. Dignity and Enhancement. In *Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics*. President's Council on Bioethics, ed. Washington, D.C.: President's Council of Bioethics: 173-207. Note, Bostrom also rejects the idea that this would constitute an enhancement.

to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* where everyone is blissfully content and controlled by the world power, oblivious to their autonomy. Others fear the enslavement of humans by post-humans who have more advanced capacities, or indeed the engineering of humans with inferior capacities as a sort of slave race. Ruud Ter Meulen, however, following Charles Taylor, argues that dignity means that one's identity is recognized by others and that one is recognized as a being of equal value by others, regardless of the degree of difference in identity. This conception of dignity requires that one be part of a community of shared values, which in turn depends on the 'capacity to express and to share values.' Whilst enhancement does not preclude the continued possession of this capacity per se, Ter Meulen suggests that, since technological devices do not possess this capacity, 'any being composed of such devices will be at risk of losing the capacity to participate in the commonality of values that is essential for recognizing dignity or for being recognized as having dignity.'¹¹

¹¹ R. Ter Meulen. Dignity, Posthumanism, and the Community of Values. *American Journal of Bioethics* 2010; 10: 69-70. See also C. Taylor. 1991. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Eva Feder Kittay (At the Margins of Moral Personhood. *Ethics* 2005; 116: 100-131) similarly suggests that a cognitively enhanced superchimp would not be able to really flourish because it would not be able to make all the connections, usually associated with flourishing, with either human beings or other chimpanzees.

2. Dignity as something human beings acquire

In addition to views that describe human dignity as some immutable worth already present in all human beings, there are those that conceive of human dignity in a more mutable sense.

2a Self-Worth

First among these are those that understand human dignity as (2a) something more akin to a sense of pride in oneself or a conscious sense of one's own worth as a human being living a meaningful life, worthy of the respect of others. In the enhancement debate, there is a link between this view and the capacities-based view, though the emphasis is different. Unlike the capacities view, which says that enhancement is good or bad based on the effect that it has on particular capacities, this view talks about enhancement as good or bad based on the extent to which it facilitates the realisation of a sense of self-worth, a sense of achieving a meaningful life well lived through the development of these capacities. So, whereas both of the former understandings of human dignity are concerned with dignity in the third person, 2a is very much about dignity in the first person.¹² As Martha Nussbaum has argued, there is no point in just affirming the dignity of all human individuals if we are not

¹² S. Pinker. 2008. Session 5: Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics. In *The President's Council on Bioethics Transcripts*. <https://bioethicsarchive.georgetown.edu/pcbe/transcripts/march08/session5.html>.

also concerned about how those who are capable of experiencing their own dignity actually experience it for themselves in a subjective sense.¹³

In the context of enhancement, this understanding of dignity has been appealed to with regard to life extension technology. Paul Baltes describes how research into aging is showing that while the ‘young-old’ are living healthier, happier, more autonomous lives than people a few decades ago, the ‘old-old’ are showing increased age-related deterioration. According to Baltes, this is a threat to human dignity, not simply because of the deterioration in ‘basic human characteristics, including abilities for intentionality, independence, identity, and social integration’ (which would be more a 1b approach), but because this means that they are not able to live in an autonomous way that enables them to exercise their human rights. So he supports technologies that would delay the onset of these maladies beyond the natural time of death.¹⁴

One could also argue against enhancement on these grounds, as Fabrice Jotterand has attempted to do by appealing to the work of Holmes Rolston III.

¹³ M. Nussbaum. 2008. Human Dignity and Political Entitlements. In *Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics*. President's Council on Bioethics, ed. Washington, D.C.: President's Council of Bioethics. Note, Nussbaum is not saying that we should not affirm dignity in this third-person sense, only that such an affirmation has little meaning if we are not also concerned about how people who are capable of experiencing this dignity themselves do experience it.

¹⁴ P.B. Baltes. Extending Longevity: Dignity Gain -or Dignity Drain? *Max Planck Research* 2003; 3: 15-19.

Rolston develops the idea of what he calls human ideational uniqueness. By this he means that humans form a unique symbolic sense of self, and an idea of the dignity or worth of that unique self.¹⁵ Drawing on Rolston, Jotterand argues that technology leads to homogenisation and hence technologically enhanced humans would not be unique enough to support a sense of their dignity as self-worth.

2b Behaviour

Second, in this category of dignity as something that we acquire, there are those who focus not so much on one's own sense of self-worth, but on the realisation of one's human dignity through one's moral behaviour (2b). We often speak, for example, of dignified behaviour, or living or dying with dignity.

Possibly the most significant advocate of this view in the enhancement debates is Nick Bostrom, who makes a distinction between human dignity or *Menschenwürde* and Dignity as a quality.¹⁶ By making the distinction, it seems he wants to avoid any accusation that human dignity in the sense of basic respect and equality before the law would be undermined by enhancement. What he does argue is that a person's dignity as a quality would be fostered through enhancement. Bostrom draws on the work of philosopher Aurel Kolnai

¹⁵ H. Rolston, III. 2008. Human Uniqueness and Human Dignity. *Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics*. President's Council on Bioethics, ed. Washington, D.C.: President's Council of Bioethics: 129-153.

¹⁶ Bostrom. Human Dignity and Bioethics.

to explain what he means by dignity as a quality. Dignity in this sense is a virtue, a certain way of being and behaving. Quoting Kolnai, dignity comprises:

First—the qualities of composure, calmness, restraint, reserve, and emotions or passions subdued and securely controlled without being negated or dissolved Secondly—the qualities of distinctness, delimitation, and distance; of something that conveys the idea of being intangible, invulnerable, inaccessible to destructive or corruptive or subversive interference. ... Thirdly, in consonance therewith, Dignity also tends to connote the features of self-contained serenity, of a certain toned-down but yet translucent and perceptible power of self-assertion ... With its firm stance and solid immovability, the dignified quietly defies the world¹⁷

And this virtue, this being dignified, commands a response of admiration and respect for both beauty and moral goodness. Consider the likes of Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela. It is this admiration of beauty and moral goodness that distinguishes it simply from dignity as status. So, by appealing to Kolnai, Bostrom is suggesting that enhancement can help humans to be better people, more morally good people, more dignified people. Or as Glenn and Dvorsky

¹⁷ A. Kolnai. Dignity. *Philosophy* 1976; 51: 251-271: 253-254. Quoted in Bostrom. Human Dignity and Bioethics.

have put it ‘Dignity is as Dignity does.’¹⁸ We acquire dignity, we realise dignity, through our moral behaviour.

Interestingly, Leon Kass, who mostly opposes enhancement, also has a conception of dignity related to how we behave. Just as Bostrom distinguishes *Menschenwürde* from dignity as a quality, so Kass distinguishes basic dignity from what he calls ‘the full dignity of being human.’ For Kass, it is precisely the limitations of our human existence—our mortality, our needs, and so on—that make it possible for us to realise the fullness of our innate excellences as moral beings. He too uses Mother Teresa as an example, suggesting she is dignified not because she is better than someone else, but because she exemplifies the full realisation of our inherent human possibilities. So-called enhancement that would meddle with this such that it is no longer excellent to realise the fullness of one’s humanity through moral behaviour would be unacceptable. In words similar to Kolnai’s, Kass says that the concept of dignity ‘still conveys the presence and active display of what is humanly best.’ And that includes, ‘Courage, moderation, generosity, righteousness, and the other human virtues’.¹⁹

¹⁸ L.M. Glenn & G. Dvorsky. Dignity and Agential Realism: Human, Posthuman, and Nonhuman. *American Journal of Bioethics* 2010; 10: 57-58.

¹⁹ L.R. Kass. 2008. Defending Human Dignity. In *Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics*. President's Council on Bioethics, ed. Washington, D.C.: President's Council of Bioethics: 297-331.

Being in relationship over time

Given the four possible conceptualisations of dignity identified so far, it should come as no surprise that references to dignity in the enhancement debates frequently seem to muddy the water rather than aid ethical reflection on the matter—a point already made by critics of the concept of dignity. For example, it is interesting to note that both Kass and Bostrom highlight two different kinds of dignity in a manner similar to what has been done here, i.e., a distinction between a dignity that all human beings (or persons) inherently have and one that is more contingent, and yet arrive at different conclusions. That said, this article aims to show that the concept is nonetheless valuable to the discussion, not by separating out the different conceptions, but by holding them in a dynamic tension, since their object, the human individual, is the same. In order to do so, it is worth reflecting on a dimension of our human existence that both is necessary for all of the aforementioned conceptions of dignity and provides us with a way to connect the apparently disparate conceptualisations. That dimension is *relationship*.

All of the understandings of human dignity depend on the relational aspect of being human. Species-membership (1a) implies relationship because one is related to all members of the species as well as related in a different way to beings and things not of the human species. Capacities (1b) imply relationship because they only mean something relative to the world in which they appear. For example, autonomy only makes sense in a world of possible choices, the capacity to love only makes sense in a world of possible objects of that love,

and so on. Self-worth (2a) implies relationship because self-worth is built up based on one's moral interactions with the world and with others. For example, self-worth can be diminished when one is shamed or humiliated by others, and strengthened when one is treated with kindness and respect. Self-worth grows when one believes one is doing something that is morally right, and diminishes when one feels guilt about doing something morally wrong. And the behavioural dimension (2b) implies relationship because, to have any meaning, it requires others to recognise who you are and what you do as having dignity and being worthy of respect.

Moreover, this being-in-relationship also contains a relationship to time and history. As a member of the species, one is in relation to the history and future of humankind. One is also in relationship to one's self over time. Whilst one has capacities, their presence and function changes over time. For example, one's autonomy is almost non-existent in one's infancy, develops to a peak in adulthood, and then, for many, deteriorates as one reaches extreme old-age.

The notion of being-in-relationship-over-time is also helpful in the consideration of dignity because it enables us to explain how dignity can be *both* something we already always have, *and* something we can acquire or lose.

Types 1a and 1b stand outside of time. They are metaphysical claims. Types 2a and 2b, by contrast, are embedded in time, and consequently are also contingent. So, we move from the idea that all human individuals always already have dignity, because they possess a particular capacity or set of capacities, to the idea of dignity as something we acquire or lose through the

application of these capacities in the context of our relationships to other members of our species and the rest of reality. It is because of our capacities that we are able to develop a sense of self-worth and engage in moral behaviour. One's sense of self-worth can be vulnerable to changes in time and relationships. One will feel better about one's self when one believes that one has done the morally right thing. One will feel guilt, i.e., feel worse about one's self, when one believes that one has done the morally wrong thing. Finally, it is in and through one's behaviour in relationships over time that one acquires dignity as a quality as judged by others in one's society. When we say that someone like Nelson Mandela had dignity, it is frequently in the latter sense, and only makes sense in light of his actions over the course of a lifetime.

This idea of being-in-relationship-over-time is highlighted here because it is very helpful in making sense of the problem of dignity talk and in finding a possible solution that does not require the dismissal of the concept of dignity. Instead, it furthers the usefulness of the concept of dignity for our ethical reflection and discussion on the question of human enhancement.

THE MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF THE HUMAN INDIVIDUAL

Reductionism as the cause of dignity talk

Returning to the problem of dignity talk, you will recall that this is when two sides of an argument both appeal to dignity as the ultimate criterion

underpinning their case, ending in an impasse. With regard to enhancement, this means that those in favour of and those against enhancement both appeal to dignity, claiming that their approach supports or at least does not violate dignity, while the alternative violates dignity.

The above analysis of the use of human dignity in these debates, however, has revealed that often the problem is not the appeal to dignity per se. Rather, the problem is that the underlying assumptions that the different protagonists have with regard to the ground of dignity is different. In other words, what appears to be happening is that frequently protagonists seem to be using dignity not to refer to the worth of the human individual per se, but rather to a particular feature that they deem to be the basis or ground of human moral worth. If this is all that the concept of dignity is good for, then Ruth Macklin would be right to call for its dismissal,²⁰ or at least for a clarification of the language such that one talks about the dignity of species-membership or the dignity of autonomy, and so on.

However, this leaves an important question unanswered, one which is critical to the enhancement debates: is such a reduction of the human individual to a specific feature—a feature deemed to be supremely valuable, i.e., as the sole basis of dignity—a sustainable position? The answer must surely be no, since each of these features on its own also has serious limitations if it is to be used as the sole moral criterion. To illustrate the point, consider the following examples

²⁰ Macklin.

of what would happen if we took dignity to refer to only one of the four features identified in Table 1.

If human dignity only refers to species-membership, then in terms of the ethics of enhancement, only interventions that would be deemed to alter our membership of the species would violate human dignity—certain genetic interventions, perhaps. But this would leave open an enormous array of other possible enhancements, ranging from extreme plastic surgery, to the use of steroids in sport, to injecting one's children with human growth hormone to increase their height,²¹ and many more.

If human dignity only refers to the possession of some capacity or set of capacities, then this would probably prevent enhancements that radically diminish those capacities, for example, that would make us less autonomous. So something that enhances our moods, but that removes our free will would not be considered acceptable. However, again, a wide range of other possibilities are left open, including those that may 'alter the species', such as trans- or post-human interventions, as long as they preserve or enhance that 'essential' capacity. In this case, for example, there would be nothing in the concept of human dignity that would help to consider the ethical implications of human-machine hybrids.

²¹ T.H. Murray. 2009. Enhancement. In *The Oxford Handbook of Bioethics*. B. Steinbock, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 492-516.

If human dignity is only understood as self-worth, then there may be very few enhancements that would be considered taboo. What Thomas H. Murray calls the ‘liberty’ argument²² in favour of enhancement largely falls into this conception. One can do anything one likes to improve one’s self-worth, perhaps with the limit that one only does so in ways that do not undermine other people’s self-worth. The problem here is that then we have no way to critically examine ‘enhancements’ that may indeed have a significant impact on others, for example, using technology to create ‘designer babies’.

Finally, if human dignity is only understood as a quality appraised by others, then this is open to the vagaries of social norms, such that what some might consider good or beautiful is considered normative. Stoicism in the face of adversity may be considered dignified, but there is a real question as to whether being as stoic with the help of drugs, or surgically altering one’s brain, is quite so admirable. Moreover, this could also lead to a moral distinction in which being ‘enhanced’ is itself seen as morally good. The consequence would be that those who choose not to, or cannot be ‘enhanced’ may be treated as morally inferior and subjected to all the prejudices associated with such distinctions.

Multidimensionality as a solution to dignity talk in the enhancement debates

What is important, then, is to avoid a simplistic reduction of human dignity effectively to an affirmation of the supreme worth of one or other feature of the

²² Ibid.

human individual. Instead, as the above reflection on the idea of *being-in-relationship-over-time* has revealed, we need to remain ever aware of the fact that human dignity refers to the worth of the human individual as a whole, as a *Gestalt*. That whole is somehow *more* than the sum of its individual parts. And it is this whole who has worth, who has *dignity*.²³ Thus, a concern for human dignity should be more than just respect for autonomy or respect for persons (cf. Macklin)—though such a concern can quite legitimately contain these aspects in addition to others. A human individual cannot be reduced to being just a member of a species or just autonomous, or just someone who thinks well or badly of him or herself, or just a series of moral behaviours in a society. Instead, a human individual is a complex interaction of all of these things in relationship over time. A human individual is an embodied (Species membership), meaning-seeking and meaning-making (Self-worth) subject (Capacities), in relation to all that is (Behaviour). That is to say in relationship

²³ Such a multidimensional conception of dignity is also helpful in addressing the question of why we might consider people with severe cognitive disability, i.e., people who are not and will never be autonomous in the traditional sense, as nonetheless possessing an equal dignity in the sense of an equal moral worth commanding our respect. They too are historical beings in relationship, and it is precisely this being in relationship that grounds the claim that they too possess dignity. They belong to our species, are capable of receiving our care, can be humiliated, and can act in ways that bring joy to others. As Eva Kittay has argued, we are all some mother's child. See E. Kittay. 2005. Equality, Dignity and Disability. In *Perspectives on Equality: The Second Seamus Heaney Lectures*. M. A. Waldron and F. Lyons, ed. Dublin: Liffey: 95–122.

to the world, to other embodied subjects, to institutions, to time and history, and to transcendence.²⁴

So, if we accept that dignity is synonymous with the affirmation of moral worth, and that to affirm human dignity is to affirm the moral worth of the human individual as a multidimensional whole, what are the implications of this for the enhancement debates? Or put differently, what does the concept of human dignity offer to our reflection on the morality of human enhancement that other concepts do not? I propose two implications: (1) the concept of human dignity can serve a descriptive function in the enhancement debates, and (2) it can also serve a normative function in the debates.

The Descriptive Function of Human Dignity

A simple definition might say that ethics is about finding ways to recognise, evaluate, and act on value or the good. Yet, both in theory and in practice, ethics is frequently about navigating one's way through a world of competing goods, or of goods with inevitable downsides, rather than making easy decisions between obvious goods and obvious evils. This means that simple solutions and one-size-fits-all answers are not always available in practice. This is true for the issue of human enhancement as much as it is for many other issues of bioethical concern.

For every example of 'enhancement' that most people might intuitively consider to be a violation of dignity, like the wire-headed man mentioned

²⁴ L. Janssens. Artificial Insemination: Ethical Considerations. *Louvain Studies* 1980; 8: 3-29.

above, there are others that most people would see as enhancing or at least respecting dignity. For example, the use of vaccines, which, given the fact that they permanently improve our natural immune function through altering our biological make-up, could arguably be called an enhancement that respects dignity in that it furthers human flourishing.²⁵

Navigating one's way through this complexity is the work of ethics. Now, while it is frequently tempting to try to find one-size-fits-all solutions to this complexity, these often lead to a reduction of ethics to a legalistic proceduralism. This can be bad for a number of reasons, not least because it can lead to the related problems of moralism (we're good and they're evil) and relativism (we're all correct in our particular contexts). In order to avoid such pitfalls, an approach that takes this moral complexity seriously for human beings as meaning-seekers and meaning-makers would seem necessary. Such an approach must take seriously not only the many goods and values at stake, but also the multidimensionality of the human person as irreducible to one or other characteristic. In this sense, then, ethics is about making moral decisions and undertaking moral behaviours that have existential meaning for one's own life and the lives of others.

Human dignity, insofar as it refers to the worth of the human individual as a multidimensional whole, can serve a descriptive ethical function to help us to focus the questions of value at stake in relation to a given 'enhancement', and

²⁵ J. Sachs. Weapons of mass salvation. *Economist* 2002; 365: 101-102.

to understand why others may think differently about the same technology. In other words, starting from the basic premise that most protagonists would wish to affirm the moral worth of human individuals (see the normative function below), we can then enter into a meaningful discussion of which particular aspects are relevant to a particular enhancement, our respective understandings of the aspects, and why they are important. At the same time—and this is why it is better not to dismiss dignity—dignity resists any tendency for us to reduce the sum of value to any one feature, which means that credence must also be given to other aspects of being human in reflecting on what values are at stake, and the complex interaction of those values.

This will also help to overcome some of the apparent polarity that is evident in the literature. When we use human dignity in this way we see that many of the protagonists, for example, Kass and Bostrom, actually share similar concerns, even though they arrive at different conclusions about the best course of action. They are both concerned about the basic moral worth of all human beings, they are both concerned about respect for autonomy, they are both concerned about how we can best live a morally meaningful and fulfilling life and they are both concerned about the implications of enhancement for society and its evaluation of human moral behaviour.²⁶ The fact that they have different understandings of some of these values, and place different emphases on particular aspects, is

²⁶ Interestingly, the fact that both Bostrom and Kass affirm a basic dignity or *Menschenwürde* means that, even within the enhancement debates, there is room on both sides for an argument in favour of the equal moral status of those who are severely cognitively impaired.

revealed by our asking in the first place, ‘what do they mean by human dignity?’ Or in other words, ‘what do they deem most valuable about being human?’

Moreover, by uncovering their similar concerns—in addition to possible different emphases of aspects—we may find that the deciding feature has nothing to do with the worth of the human. For example, a better explanation may be found in the contrast between more optimistic versus more pessimistic views on humanity’s moral capacity, the status quo, the future, progress, science, technology, and so on. Thus, the concept of human dignity, in its descriptive function, also helps to reveal the other questions of value that are at stake in the debates.

The Normative Function of Human Dignity

The charge could be made, however, that, even if we accept the descriptive function of human dignity for the ethics of enhancement, all this does is lead to a kind of ethical relativism, such that almost anything can be justified depending on one’s conceptualisation of human dignity. Yet, human dignity, properly understood as referring to the human individual as a multidimensional reality, *can* serve a normative function in the enhancement debates. This may not be as strong a normative function as some of those who have appealed to dignity might like it to serve. For example, it cannot be used to absolutely prohibit or prescribe all enhancement. The multidimensionality of the human individual and the moral complexity of the values involved alone should make

this obvious. Nevertheless, it does serve a normative function, and this function is threefold.

First, it is normative in that it affirms that whichever position one is arguing for with respect to a particular enhancement technology, one *must* be able to show that this is good for human individuals as meaning-seeking and meaning-making embodied subjects in relation to all that is. It cannot be good only for one or other feature to the detriment of other features. For example, extending my life past its normal biological limit without also ensuring that I remain intellectually and morally competent does not seem like much of an enhancement.

Second, it is important to note, here, that human dignity affirms the worth of human *individuals*. This means that it is not adequate to show that a particular enhancement would be good for a particular individual (e.g., that human growth hormone injections for an individual who is only slightly below average height may increase his height and give him advantages in society), but also that it would be good for all of humanity—the sum of individuals (injecting all children with growth hormone would be futile because it would simply increase the average height).²⁷ This aspect of the normative function then also serves to focus the debate on questions of justice. The just access to and distribution of medical treatments is already a challenging issue such that people in developed nations tend to have far easier access to life-saving treatments, as well as to

²⁷ Murray.

preventative medicine, such as vaccinations. Moreover, the research into treatments for ‘first-world problems’ tends to attract more funding than potentially life-saving research into diseases that typically affect people in developing countries. In the case of enhancement technologies, then, if enhancement led to a further exacerbation of these disparities, for example by substantially increasing the lifespan of those who could afford it to the detriment of those who cannot, arguments could be made against it on grounds of justice: such enhancement would not be good for all of humanity.²⁸

Third, human dignity is normative in that it helps us to set certain limits to what would be considered reasonable enhancements. So, those enhancements that are clearly good for human individuals on the whole in the multidimensional sense would be widely endorsed, and those that are not good on the whole, are also generally not endorsed, by both bioconservatives and transhumanists. Both sides would reject the idea of the wire-headed man as a legitimate enhancement to human dignity on the one hand, and both sides would largely support the

²⁸ In addition, another consideration of justice would concern those who are severely cognitively impaired. Given that there are already those who argue that such human individuals do not have a moral status equal to other ‘normal’ human beings, enhancement of human beings to create a post-human super-race, might only further exacerbate conditions that make such claims seem self-evident. A multidimensional conception of human dignity should at least call such claims into question, and possibly serve as the basis of an argument to assure that enhancement would not lead to the dehumanisation or demonization of those who are cognitively impaired.

legitimacy of vaccinations on the other. In light of a multi-dimensional understanding of human dignity, it is reasonable to do so because the former reduces the human person to a particular sensation, and the latter opens up greater opportunities for the living of a meaningful life in relation to the world and others as a whole.

Thus, the normative limits that human dignity seems to set for enhancement concerns those interventions that would change something so fundamental to our being human that it would rightly be considered a violation of human dignity. Such ‘enhancements’ would include anything that so radically alters our genetic make-up that we are no longer talking about human beings,²⁹ or so radically diminishes a capacity essential to our understanding of what makes us human, e.g., our autonomy, or which makes it impossible to engage meaningfully in moral behaviour so as to develop a sense of self-worth, or which would constitute condoning behaviours that we would not normally consider to be morally worthy or dignified. As a corollary to this point,

²⁹ This article deals with the concept of *human* dignity. Hence the emphasis too on the necessity of being a member of the human species. This is not to deny the meaningfulness of talking about the dignity, i.e., moral worth, of other beings. For example, one may wish to ascribe dignity to persons, where persons are understood as any being that displays certain rational capacities. These debates are not dealt with in the present article. Nonetheless, I do maintain that being a member of the human species is important, since it as members of this species, and, at the moment at least, still with members of this species that we engage in our moral discussion.

however, it also means that many of the most hotly debated enhancements will be those that concern these limits (e.g., genetic modification).

Within these limits, however, there is a lot of room to move. This is part of the moral complexity of human enhancement technologies. Whilst it may be possible to quite clearly identify certain technologies that almost certainly would be morally bad and wrong, there would be many where there may be a number of morally acceptable options, of which some may be morally better than others. In such cases, though human dignity may not be able to serve as a definitive criterion, a multidimensional understanding of human dignity may still help to point us in the direction of good and better answers. At the same time, by highlighting the moral complexity inherent in our being multidimensional and especially historically-situated beings, human dignity calls us to always be humble in our assertions regarding the moral rightness or wrongness of particular enhancements. The Utopias and dystopias of the future are both possible, and we can never be absolutely sure to which our moral decisions with regard to enhancements will lead us. Yet, our concern for the worth of all human individuals compels us onward, with caution and humility, even in the face of this uncertainty.

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