



TEACHING HUMAN DIGNITY

What is Human Dignity?

AN EXPERT GUIDE BY MELISSA MOSCHELLA





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Introduction

What is human dignity? What is its basis? Does every human being – regardless of age, size, state of health, or condition of dependency – possess equal and intrinsic dignity?

Questions about human nature and human dignity are at the heart of basically every contemporary controversy in our society. Think, for example, about life issues, such as abortion or assisted suicide, or debates about marriage, sexual morality, and gender, or even problems related to racial justice. All of these topics turn on two key questions: Who counts as a human person with dignity, every human being, or only those who are sufficiently mature or independent or healthy? And second: What is the human person? And here there are two possibilities. The first, which can be called body-self dualism, views the person as essentially a “mind” or “self” – a thinking, feeling, willing thing – that inhabits but is not identical to a human body. According to this dualist vision, the body is merely an extrinsic instrument that the true, inner self uses, like a car that I ride around in. This view implies that those human beings who, for example,

are unconscious or unable to think due to immaturity or disability, do not count as human persons. Body-self dualism is contrary to reason, experience, and common sense – and also contrary to Catholic teaching, according to which the human person is a unity of soul and body, and the body is an intrinsic and essential aspect of the person. In other words, as will be explained below, the body is not something exterior to the person, but rather the body is the person. Understanding this is key for all of the contemporary issues already mentioned.

These two fundamental questions – Who counts as a human person? And what is the human person? – will be the focus of the following sections, which will first outline the vision of the Catholic Church, particularly as articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, and then analyze that vision from a philosophical perspective in order to understand it more deeply and show that it is fully compatible with the conclusions of rational reflection.

An Overview of Catholic Teaching on Human Dignity

The book of Genesis tells us: “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying, be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it...” (Gn 1:27-28). This brief passage is crucial for the Church’s understanding of human nature and human dignity. First, the passage tells us that human beings are created in the image of God, which the Church sees as the root of human dignity. Second, the passage makes clear that man and woman are distinct and complementary, but equally

created in God’s image and therefore equal in dignity. It also indicates, in the command to “be fertile and multiply,” that this complementarity between man and woman is directed toward marriage and procreation. Finally, in the command to subdue the earth, the passage also highlights the dignity of human work as a share in God’s creative action. All of these fundamental human realities – marriage, procreation, work – are manifestations of God’s image.

But what does it mean to say that human beings are made in God's image? One of the most important discussions of this topic in the Church's magisterium can be found in *Gaudium et Spes*, which states that being created in God's image means that we are "capable of knowing and loving [our] Creator" (12). In this way the document highlights two human capacities as a special manifestation of God's image: intellect, which enables us to attain knowledge, and freedom, which enables us to love.¹ The document speaks of the intellect as "[sharing] in the light of the divine mind" (15), and of freedom as "an exceptional sign of the divine image within man" (17). It is important to clarify, however, that in speaking of freedom the document is not referring to the ability to do whatever we feel like, but rather freedom to do the good, which means freedom to love God and neighbor.

This focus on intellect and freedom might lead us to think that the human body is not itself part of the image of God. But this would be a mistake. *Gaudium et Spes* emphasizes that the human person is a unity of body and soul, and that the body therefore also needs to be treated with dignity as an essential aspect of the human person: "Though made of body and soul, man is one.... Man is not allowed to despise his bodily life, rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and honorable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day" (14).

Human beings image God not just in their intellectual capacities but also in their bodies. The dignity of the body,

and the way in which the body manifests the image of God, is revealed most fully in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Jesus fully reveals the dignity of the body in several ways.

First, in the Incarnation, the Second Person of the Trinity became man, taking on a human nature – both body and soul. Our bodies are therefore an image of the body of Jesus. And as *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us,

“Being created in God’s image means that we are “capable of knowing and loving [our] Creator””

Jesus promises us that our bodies, like his, will be raised up in glorified form in the Kingdom of God at the end of time. Jesus also reveals to us that God is a Trinity, a communion of persons, and this helps us to see how our bodies – especially the complementarity of male and female² – manifest the image of God. For the creation of human beings as male and female highlights that we are made for communion. And in a special way in marriage, man and woman become one flesh through a mutual and total self-gift, a self-gift that is inherently oriented toward the procreation of children as a sign and embodiment of their love and union. Thus the family, made possible by the sexual-reproductive complementarity of men and women, is an image of the communion of divine persons in the Trinity, in which the Holy Spirit proceeds from the mutual self-gift of the Father and the Son.

In sum, the Catholic Church teaches that every human being is made in God's image, and that this is the ground of our dignity. The Church highlights our intellect and freedom as special signs of the divine image, but also emphasizes that human beings are a unity of body and soul. Jesus' Incarnation, his promise of bodily resurrection, and his revelation of the Trinity help to fully reveal the dignity of the human body.

¹The Church holds that these capacities are part of human nature and therefore that all human beings possess these capacities, even though some – such as very young human beings or those with certain illnesses – may not be able to exercise them. This will be explained further in the next section from a philosophical perspective.

²The complementarity of male and female is multifaceted, but ultimately stems from sexual-reproductive complementarity – i.e., the fact that each of us only has half of a complete human reproductive system, and that for humans (as for other mammals) the complete organic unit of reproduction is not the individual but the mated male-female pair. This is also the reason why marriage, understood as a conjugal union, is a special relationship that is different in kind from friendship and requires special commitments (to exclusivity and permanence) that friendship does not require. Marriage unites two people not only in mind and heart (as friendship does), but also involves a genuine union of bodies, the coming together of two distinct organisms to form one organic unit with respect to the capacity for reproduction. And because our reproductive system is unique (all of our other bodily systems are complete within the individual organism), the only way to achieve genuine bodily union with another person is by joining the two halves of the reproductive system in sexual intercourse. This is also the reason why the Church holds that sexual intercourse should be reserved for marriage, for only in marriage is this bodily union combined with a corresponding union and commitment at the level of mind and heart, and only in marriage will the children who are the natural fruit of this union be assured of the committed and unified love of both mother and father.

A Philosophical Account of Human Dignity

At the beginning of his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, St. John Paul II writes: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.” We see the complementarity of faith and reason at work in reflection on the concept of human dignity. Faith teaches us that all human beings possess intrinsic dignity because they are created in God’s image. Philosophical reflection can help us to unpack these theological concepts, offering a clearer understanding of what it means to say that humans have dignity and are made in God’s image. Philosophy can also provide us with the tools to explain the equal dignity of all human beings on the basis of reason alone, independent of Biblical revelation or religious faith.

“If you have moral status, others have an obligation to treat you with respect, to act in ways that give due consideration to your well-being or rights.”

WHAT IS DIGNITY? The first concept that needs to be clarified is the concept of dignity itself. What does it mean to say that human beings have dignity? In the most fundamental sense, to possess dignity is to have what philosophers call

“moral status,” or “membership in the moral community.” If you have moral status, others have an obligation to treat you with respect, to act in ways that give due consideration to your well-being or rights. For example, if a fly is buzzing around my office and annoying me while I am trying to work, I would have no moral qualms about swatting the fly or shooing it away. By contrast, if an annoying colleague entered my office and interrupted my work, I could not (or at least should not) hit him with a fly swatter or brusquely shoo him away. I would, instead, have to respectfully indicate that I am busy and do not have time to chat. This is because the colleague (annoying as he might be) has dignity or moral status, while the fly does not.

What is the basis of this fundamental dignity or moral status that human beings possess? Why can’t we treat a fellow human being the way we would treat a fly? From a philosophical perspective, human dignity is grounded in the fact that humans are beings with a rational nature. To say that all humans possess a rational nature is to say that all humans, because of the type of being we are, possess the basic natural capacity for rationality. Because dignity is based on the type of being we are, on our nature as rational beings – rather than on what we can do – it is equal and unchanging for all human beings.

What is Rationality?

To understand why rationality is the ground of our dignity, and to defend the claim that all human beings possess the basic natural capacity for rationality (even if they cannot currently manifest that capacity), it is first necessary to offer a deeper account of what rationality is. Rationality encompasses two, closely related capacities: the capacity for conceptual thought (intellect) and the capacity for free

choices (will). The capacity for conceptual thought is the capacity for knowledge that goes beyond sense perception, knowledge of universal concepts, like the concept of “tree,” which captures an essence that is shared by many individual things but is not exhausted by any of its instantiations, or the concept of “dignity,” which is not a material thing at all.³

³ There are some skeptics who argue that all of our concepts are radically subjective and do not necessarily correspond to objective reality outside of our minds. If this were really true, however, it would be utterly impossible to communicate with anyone about anything, for all of our communication rests upon a largely shared understanding of the concepts and objects about which we are communicating. Indeed, miscommunication and misunderstanding occur when we use concepts in radically different ways or refer to them with ambiguous language - e.g., if somebody refers to the “bank” thinking of a river bank, but is misunderstood to be referring to the local branch of PNC. The fact that these misunderstandings are the exception, not the rule, and that we can generally identify them when they occur, indicates that we are in fact operating with more or less the same concepts, and this in turn is an indication that our minds are capable of reliably perceiving reality. Further, if we really could not trust that our perceptions correspond to reality, we would be completely paralyzed and unable to do anything, for how would we even be confident that, for instance, we will not fall into an abyss when we take our next step? Note that here I am talking about perceptions and concepts, not about the words we use for those concepts, which are conventional. One may call a tree a dog, just as (in Spanish) one may call a tree un arbol, but the underlying concept remains the same.

Closely related to our capacity for conceptual thought is our capacity for free choices. A free choice is a choice that is not caused or determined by anything other than the choice itself. This capacity for free choices is the flip-side of our capacity for conceptual thought, for it is rooted in our ability to grasp and act for a variety of intelligible goods, goods like friendship or knowledge or integrity that go beyond the fulfillment of emotional or biological inclinations, goods that provide us with reasons for action. Each of these goods offers a distinct benefit, a distinct reason for action, and thus when we choose to pursue one good rather than another – for instance, to study rather than call a friend, or to pursue a career in education rather than law – that choice is not caused by biochemical reactions, rational necessity, or anything other than the choice itself.

“It is nonetheless a truly God-like capacity that enables us to introduce a genuinely new chain of causality into the world with every free choice.”

What this means is that, unlike non-human animals whose behavior (as far as we can tell) is determined by a complex chain of biochemical reactions to internal or external stimuli, human beings have the capacity to literally be uncaused causes of their actions, sometimes called the capacity for agency. Here we see a powerful resonance with the theological claim that human beings are made in God’s image. For, throughout the Western philosophical tradition, God is often characterized as the uncaused cause of all that exists.⁴ While our agency is drastically more limited than God’s – we can be uncaused causes only of our actions, not of existence itself – it is nonetheless a truly God-like capacity that enables us to introduce a genuinely new chain of causality into the world with every free choice.

It is also crucial to note that our rational capacities – our intellect and will – are spiritual capacities, meaning that they have no physical component and are not rooted in

any bodily organ. We know that this is the case because the objects and activities of our rational capacities transcend the limits of material things, which are always particular and finite, confined to a particular space and time.

The objects of our intellect, for example, include things that are not immediately present, things like unicorns that have never existed, and immaterial things like the concept of dignity – which cannot be seen, touched, smelled, tasted

or heard – and are potentially infinite. By contrast, the objects and activities of capacities that are rooted in a bodily organ are always limited by the physical structure of the organ. For instance, our capacity for hearing is limited to sounds

within a certain frequency range, due to the structure of our ears (particularly the cochlea). We are also unable to hear in the absence of sound; sound waves need to be present and hitting our ears now for us to be able to hear. If our rational capacities were rooted in a bodily organ, they would also be limited in the same ways. But as we have seen, our rational capacities transcend these limits – they are universal, potentially infinite, and do not require the physical presence of their object – which means that these capacities must themselves be spiritual. The significance of this will be discussed further below.

WHY IS RATIONALITY THE GROUND OF DIGNITY? Having explained what rationality is, we are now in a position to understand why the possession of a rational nature is the ground of dignity or moral status. In other words, we can now explain why it is morally acceptable to swat a fly, but not an annoying coworker. The reason is that the coworker is a rational being, while the fly is not, and only rational beings are agents capable of free actions for which they are morally responsible.

⁴The reason for this, in brief, is that once we come to recognize that everything in the universe is caused by something else - e.g., I came from my parents, who came from their parents, etc., all the way back to the first human beings, whose bodies evolved (perhaps) from some other primate species, who in turn evolved from some other species, which ultimately arose from the first life forms, which themselves arose (perhaps) from a combination of chemicals, which themselves must have come from something else, and so on, we come to recognize that there must be some first cause of this long chain of causes, some ultimate explanation for the existence of all of the contingent realities that exist. This first cause must itself be an uncaused (and therefore non-contingent) being, or the problem remains unresolved. Thus many philosophers (even those without access to Biblical revelation) have argued that there must be some necessary being who is the uncaused cause of everything else, and this being is referred to as God.

Further, while non-rational beings can be helpful to human beings in a variety of ways, non-rational beings cannot freely cooperate with us in the pursuit of genuinely shared goods. Despite the common saying about dogs being man's best friend, genuine friendship – which requires mutual willing of the other's good – is possible only between rational beings, and only others who share our rational nature can unite with us in the pursuit of common goods like knowledge, athletic excellence, musical performance, or religious worship. This does not mean that there are no moral limits on the way we treat non-human animals, for cruelty to animals degrades our character, inclines us toward cruelty to humans, and disrespects the Creator. Nonetheless, for the reasons mentioned above, only those who share our rational nature, have the capacity for moral agency, and are potential partners with us in the pursuit of shared goods are members of the moral community with dignity and moral status.

HUMAN BEINGS ARE RATIONAL ANIMALS: This emphasis on our rational capacities should not lead us to embrace body-self dualism, identifying the self with a mind (or cerebrum⁵) – understood as a conscious, thinking thing – and viewing the body as external or accidental to one's personal identity. Rather, following Aristotle's famous definition, we should recognize that human beings are *rational animals*, and that both our rationality (intellect and will) and our animality (body) are essential to our nature.⁶ Another way of expressing this is to say that we are a unity of body and soul. How do we know that this is the case, and that the dualist view is false?

The dualist view runs contrary to our common-sense experience of ourselves as bodily beings, and it cannot account for the seamless connection between bodily activities like sense perception, which rely on our sense organs, and mental activities like simple judgments in which we identify the objects of our sense perceptions (e.g., the tall green and brown thing I see outside my window) with universal concepts (e.g., tree). Clearly, the person who looks

outside the window and thinks, "That is a tree," is a single substance who is both an animal capable of sense perception and a rational being capable of conceptual thought. Further, if the body and the person are not one and the same thing, some of our most basic moral judgments would make no sense. For instance, we think that assault is a more serious crime than vandalism (more serious in kind, not just in degree) because it is a crime against oneself, not just one's property, and that rape is a personal violation, even if the victim is unconscious and never finds out about it later. These judgments make no sense unless we hold that I am my body, a view which is compatible with the claim made above that our rational capacities transcend the limitations of the body in certain respects.

HOW DO WE KNOW THAT ALL HUMANS ARE RATIONAL? I argued above that all humans possess intrinsic and equal dignity because all humans possess a rational nature, which is the ground of our dignity. But how do we know that all humans possess a rational nature? What about those human beings who do not manifest their rationality, like embryos or babies, the severely mentally disabled, or those suffering from advanced dementia? Answering this question requires recognizing that the nature of a species is revealed in the capacities of the mature, healthy adult, for we (like other animals) are temporal beings whose inherent capacities unfold over time. In this sense, we are like Polaroid photos. When the photo first comes out of the camera, all you see is a dark black square. Over time, however, the image – which was there all along – begins to reveal itself until it can be seen clearly. The same is true with human beings, whose rational nature is present from the moment when sperm and egg fuse to form a new human life, even though it will take many years for that nature to fully reveal itself. For all human beings, if not prevented from doing so by some external cause such as illness or injury, do begin to manifest rational capacities once they have reached a certain level of maturity. This means that the root capacity for rationality must have been present all along. Otherwise the regular and predictable

⁵Some contemporary versions of body-self dualism are materialist – i.e. they deny the spiritual nature of our rational capacities – and thus identify the person with a functional cerebrum.

⁶This definition does not come directly from a single text, but is implied in a number of Aristotle's works, including *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7 and *De Anima* II.3.

manifestation of rational capacities in humans at a certain stage of development – but not in cats, dogs, dolphins or any other animals – would be quite mysterious and inexplicable. But there is nothing mysterious about the fact that humans (like other living things) are temporal beings whose natures unfold and manifest themselves gradually.

Everyone implicitly recognizes that this is the case, for everyone expects that a human being will begin to talk and manifest rationality in other ways by a certain age. If this fails to occur, we consider this a symptom of illness or disability. But we don't consider our cat's inability to speak to be a sign of illness, because we know that cats don't have a rational nature. Thus we implicitly recognize that every human, from the very beginning of life, possesses a rational nature, even if he or she cannot manifest that rationality due to immaturity or to some external impediment such as disease or injury.

“The nature of a species is revealed in the capacities of the mature, healthy adult.”

Another philosophical account of the claim that all human beings are rational, even those who cannot manifest their rationality, is based on an understanding of human beings as a unity of body and soul. What makes a human body human is that it has a distinctly human organizing principle, reflected in (but not reducible to) our distinct genome. That distinct organizing principle is what Aristotle called the *soul*.⁷ Non-human animals also have a soul, understood in the Aristotelian sense as the principle of an organism's life, unity, and organization. For non-human animals, the soul can be understood in contemporary biological terms as the information coded in the organism's material structures (especially, but not only, the DNA), which account for the organism's identity, organization, and unity. The human soul, however, is not reducible to the biological information that organizes and unifies the body.

For, as already argued, human beings are rational, capable of activities that transcend the limits of the body as such, and thus the human soul is the principle not only of bodily life, identity, and unity, but also the principle of rational activities. This means that whenever a living human body is present, we know that a human soul (including the soul's spiritual powers of intellect and will) must also be present, even if, due to immaturity or illness, those powers cannot manifest themselves.

“Rationality is a spiritual capacity that cannot be reduced to brain function, even though it relies on the brain for its exercise.”

RATIONALITY AND THE BRAIN: Fully understanding the above arguments also requires a clarification of the relationship between rationality and the brain. A relatively healthy, mature brain is needed to exercise rationality, because our intellect needs the brain to present suitable objects to it, in much the same way as our eyes need light in order to see. One way of understanding this is to consider how our thinking is always aided by images and words (which are a way of “materializing” abstract concepts). When we want to think about the nature of a tree, for instance, we call to mind the image of a tree, not the image of a squirrel. When we are trying to understand abstract concepts like dignity, we need concrete examples – like the example of the fly versus the annoying coworker – to help us grasp them. This is why humans whose brains are insufficiently developed – due to immaturity, illness, injury, or an inadequate environment (as in the case of feral children who lacked exposure to human language during a critical phase of brain development)⁸ – cannot exercise their rational capacities. Nonetheless, as argued above, rationality is a spiritual capacity that cannot be reduced to brain function, even though it relies on the brain for its exercise.

⁷ *De Anima* II.3

⁸ The following documentary provides a helpful overview and analysis of the most famous cases: *Wild Child: The Story of Feral Children*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vjZq6TS668> For an in-depth account of one particular case, see Harlan Lane, *The Wild Boy of Aveyron* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

We can therefore say that rationality really is present, as a spiritual capacity rooted in the soul, even in those human beings who cannot exercise it due to immaturity, illness, or other factors.

CONCLUSION

In summary, from a philosophical perspective, we can understand dignity as the possession of moral status or as membership in the moral community. All human beings possess intrinsic and equal dignity because all human beings possess a rational nature, which includes the capacity for conceptual thought and the capacity for free choice or agency. Human beings are essentially rational animals, and thus our bodies are an essential aspect of our personal identity which must also be treated with respect, not as objects of use or manipulation. Further, because human beings are essentially rational animals, whenever a human organism is present, we know that a human person with a rational nature is present, even if that person is unable to manifest his rational capacities. These conclusions – though based on reason alone – dovetail perfectly with the theological claim that all human beings possess intrinsic and equal dignity because all are created in the image of God.



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