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Human dignity: a philosophical and theological approach

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SUMMARY

We all use the term “human dignity” both often and gladly. This term exists also in legislation, such as declarations and constitutions of some countries, beginning from UNESCO, WHO, Council of Europe, and they all have the same inspiration to achieve the same goal: protection of human dignity. Human dignity seems as a principle connected with the protection of life itself, protection of health, and is also connected with research. But, today it is far more difficult to determine the meaning of this term and on what grounds it is based. Is human dignity something objective or is it grounded on cultural values that vary throughout history?

Is the primary finding of human dignity in its self-determination against the power of the community, i.e. state? What do philosophy, and Christian theology have to say on dignity and what are the bioethical implications of our time?

The author first introduces us to the development of the meaning of the term “human dignity”, starting from the pre-Christian time, through the Christian perception of person and one’s dignity, philosophical notion and grounds of human dignity, to then give the idea of dignity according to bioethical standards.

Key-words: Dignity, Interpretation of the Bible, Christian ethics, Kantism, Philosophical foundations, Social control over science, Genetic engineering.

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RÉSUMÉ

DIGNITÉ HUMAINE : UNE APPROCHE PHILOSOPHIQUE ET THÉOLOGIQUE

Nous utilisons tous fréquemment et allègrement le terme « dignité humaine ». Ce terme existe aussi dans la législation, dans les déclarations et les constitutions de certains pays, à commencer par l'UNESCO, l'OMS, le Conseil de l'Europe. Ils ont tous la même inspiration d'atteindre le même objectif : la protection de la dignité humaine. La dignité humaine semble être un principe relatif à la protection de la vie elle-même, à la protection de la santé ; elle est également reliée à la recherche. Mais, aujourd'hui il est nettement plus difficile de déterminer la signification de ce terme et les fondements sur lesquels il est basé. La dignité humaine est-elle quelque chose d'objectif ou est-elle fondée sur des valeurs culturelles qui varient au cours de l'histoire ?

La première découverte de la dignité humaine se trouve-t-elle dans son auto-détermination contre le pouvoir de la communauté, c'est-à-dire l'état ? Que disent la philosophie et la théologie chrétienne sur la dignité et quelles sont les implications bioéthiques de notre époque ?

L'auteur nous présente d'abord le développement du sens du terme « dignité humaine », en partant de la période pré-chrétienne, en passant par la perception chrétienne de la personne et de sa dignité, la notion philosophique et les fondements de la dignité humaine, pour ensuite donner l'idée de la dignité selon les normes bioéthiques.

Mots-clés : Dignité, Interprétation biblique, Christianisme, Kantisme, Fondement philosophique, Contrôle social de la science, Génie génétique.

INTRODUCTION

The man is magnificent in his permanent and uncontrollable scientific and technical progress, in his research of nature and himself, in his constant search and perception of the truth. Admiring all this, at the same time we started to be afraid of this enormous advance as the man tends to forget the moral judgement of his action and he lost the unique vision of himself and his deepest mystery in the world. Therefore, the topic of human dignity or the dignity of an individual is imposed as a crucial question of the life itself and especially of the human life.

What gives the man dignity which he permanently attributes to himself? Why do people feel the need and duty to help other people similar to them? We can witness the fact that today there are many international institutions and organizations that try to help people

in the fight against hunger, in disease prevention and against violence.

There is always one answer, seen from the religious or humanist point of view: the man and his dignity. Human dignity is an universally accepted term for all people and it is essential while talking about freedom, justice and peace. It is a specific mark only for people which makes them equal and raises them above other beings on the earth. The man has the right on the food, protection and help of congeneric species. According to this, the General declaration on human rights says that all people have the same dignity and the same rights.

Human dignity seems to be a principle related to the protection of life, health and scientific research on man. However, it is much more difficult to define this term and its basis. Is human dignity objective or it is

based on cultural values which change throughout the history?

Can human dignity be found in his self-determination as opposed to the power of a society or the state? What does philosophy say about dignity and what Christian theology? Which are bioethical implications for today's world?

1. HUMAN DIGNITY: CONCEPTION

While speaking about human dignity, a question should be asked: what is it based on? As the man is a person, carrier of some rights and duties which are realized in a society, it is important to explain the basic terms in order to understand the right meaning of the term human dignity. Today the term of human dignity is present in legislation, such as international declarations and constitutions of some states, starting with UNESCO, General Declaration on Human Rights, World Health Organization, Council of Europe etc. All these declarations and constitutions seem to have the same ethical inspiration: to protect human dignity. Human dignity is a principle related to the protection of life, health and research itself.

The General Declaration on Human Rights, issued on December 10, 1948, in its first article says: "All people are born free and equal in dignity and rights"¹. The concept of human dignity seems to be closely connected with the idea of basic rights and that is the reason why every man has certain rights.² As human dignity is a basis and precondition for all the rights that should be provided, it is inevitable to examine it.

1.1. Roman conception of human dignity

For the Romans, the term "human dignity" meant the degree, the position or the power possessed. It is a role a person has in the society. In this sense the word *dignitas* has two aspects. The first refers to distinction (*distinguo*), i.e. something that differs a man from somebody else, especially while speaking about social

position. The other aspect refers to a *virtus*, i.e. an efficient merit a person got and therefore has *dignitas* as a position that requires honour and respect.³ It is well known that one of the most precious values of the roman society ordered to each citizen to build his own and family dignity.⁴ It socialized the term dignity which is present even today.

According to one definition "dignity" is a generosity a man has due to his position, quality of his own temper which should be respected by himself. This definition is present today when we are told to pay attention to our dignity or we consider that somebody has lost his honour and dignity.

The term dignity is given to the whole picture that a man has about himself in public, e.g. his face expresses dignity. Occasionally, dignity, as a term, is applied to the service a man has in the society (judge, bishop) and sometimes is impressed on arms. However, in the classical period there is no notion about *the legal term*, but about *ideologic one*.⁵

Dignity is not synonymous with power, as the power can force to obedience and dignity makes us respect it at will. In this sense, dignity can be hurt easily, but it remains indestructible.

1.2. Dignity according to biblical conception

Judeo-Christian tradition strongly emphasizes human dignity, which is based on its revelation, i.e. on theology. Namely, according to this vision a man has no dignity by himself, but it is given to him by somebody who made him for love (compare Post 1.31). The human dignity becomes a feature of human nature, which results from God's mercy. The man is an only being on the Earth that God talks to directly. This is a sign of sublime dignity which cannot be taken from a man. It is God's gift and therefore it is good by itself. Who has this dignity is raised above other creatures, but he became responsible to God on whose own image he has been made (Post 1.26).

The importance of human dignity is not in the fact that God created it, because God created all other

1. Comp. United Nations. General Declaration on Human Rights. Text according to: Human Rights–Human dignity, Phylosophic-theological reflections. I. Koprek (ed). FTI, Zagreb, 1999, p. 11.
2. Comp I. Macan, Čovjek i njegovo dostojanstvo. Razmišljanje o ljudskih pravima. In: Ljudska prava..., p.80.
3. Compare United nations, General Declaration on Human Rights, text according Human rights-human dignity, philosophical and theological considerations. Koprek, I., FTI, Zagreb 1999, p.11.
4. Comp. Das Staatsdenken der Romer, Munchen, 1973.
5. Comp. F. Bartolomei, p. 88, note 2.

creatures, but in his similarity to God. The man got the highest dignity which is based on similarity. Dignity unifies the man with God because it reflects God's essence and places him on the top of all creatures. At the same time, it is the end of the period of cosmic chaos. The act of creating a man, as God's decision, is very interesting. The life, offered to a man by the God, is a gift in which God gives to his creature a part of himself. The man becomes a living soul.

The man is a creature that God created for himself, as his interlocutor and co-creator, and the man was created in the image and likeness of God. He is a sublime *dignitary* although he remains a created, dependent and confined creature. The man finds his dependence and confinement in the very nature of creation. The Bible wants to emphasize the main fact: the personal God, God of communication places in front of himself a man-the person who is oriented to his relationship with others (God, brother, nature). Differently from the Greek man, who tends to define all the things, to determine their essence and to consider them separately in ontologic prospection, the Biblical man tends to *talk* and describe his relations (historic prospective). Therefore, the Bible never defines God, nor man or the world, but it mentions only the stories which speak about the relations with God, man and. The man is node of all relations: he is *nefes* (understood in our sense of a person), in his relation to God he is *ruah* (ghost) and in his relation to the others and the world he is *basar* (body). These stories show that the man conceives himself as an active, creative and responsible creature. He is not an absolute master of himself or of the life in the world, but only a responsible administrator. He does not create *ex nihilo*, only God does so, and the man controls.

The Christianity emphasizes another fact: *although the man is created in the image and likeness of God, he has lost his dignity due to his sin, he damaged this image and needed somebody who could restore his dignity*. Jesus Christ could do it and he became savior of the mankind.

1.3. Philosophic interpretations of human dignity

Biblic and Christian conception of human dignity will be completed with the conception of man as a

reasonable being. The mind makes the man what he is, it enables him to live morally, i.e. to direct his own life to good and bad. In this sense a man is an unique and unrepeatable being who possesses his dignity and can answer God in his wisdom and morality of his life. He is a subject who freely and willingly takes the position of his moral demand.

The concept of wisdom is taken from Greek phylosophy, Platon first who considers a man an reasonable animal "trained for science" and then from Aristotel who views a man as "the only animal with mind" which enables him to distinguish good from bad, right from wrong, useful from useless. Therefore, the man has some "divine element" which elevates him and makes him moral.

It can be said that throughout the Christian tradition human dignity is raised, protected and strengthened due to this basic theologic conception.

St. Thomas places the man on the top of all creatures in nature. The man is "a person, the most perfect thing in the nature, something that survives in its rational nature".⁶ The man is created "in the image and likeness of God" and he can direct his commitments to God. It gives him sublime *dignity*. In his cognition and love for God, the man respects God and repays him everything God gave to a man (according to the Book of Genesis and Wisdom) (12,10).

Famous G. Pico della Mirandola in his speech about human dignity glorifies the man's ability of self-determination. He is convinced that the man's greatness and dignity result from his constant effort to understand the sense of thing, to learn the real truth meditating about the universe and exploring it to understand its deepest sense. The man is center of the visible reality and can raise or fall which depends only on the man himself.⁷

Christian-thomist conception of human dignity starts to change after the appearance of Enlightenment. The German phylosopher Kant was the first to do it. His attitude about human dignity is based on the concept of "value". He establishes the relation between the value and dignity. He starts from the fact that a man is raised to the dignity of a person, i.e. above any other value and it cannot be considered a means to achieve our goals, but only the goal in itself. It means that he possesses his dignity, his absolute inner value which

6. St. Thomas, *Contra Genitiles*, III, 110. "Persona significat id quod est perfectissimum in tota natura, scilicet subsistens in natura rationali".

7. Comp. G.Pico della Mirandola. *Discorso sulla dignità dell'uomo*. La scuola. Brescia. 1987.

makes other beings respect him as a goal which he has in himself, as a creature who possesses a value which is not relative as the prices, but always remains intrinsic and has dignity.⁸

Kant considers that everything with its price can be substituted with the thing of the same value, while something that exceeds every price is always higher and has no counter-equality, but only dignity. Dignity of a reasonable being consists of the fact that it is not subjected to any law that was not passed by itself. Therefore, morality is *conditio sine qua non* of the legal autonomy which is manifested in human dignity. Therefore, moral and humanity are the only things that have no price.⁹

Kant uses not only the terms "means" and "goal", but also "value" and "dignity". The term "value" derives from economy of that time, but it became a philosophical concept. The value was first evaluation of one thing compared to another. That's why values could be considered equal and transform into prices. In Kant's philosophy there is a value which can not be substituted, i.e. value which has no price as it is not comparable. It is absolute or internal value which becomes normative because it can determine the price of all other things. According to Kant such "absolute" or "internal" value is dignity which exists only in man as a reasonable being. The man is a being which has its moral identity, rationally-practical responsibility to himself and ability to rational self-determination.

In this conception it is easy to understand the hierarchy of values whose top and final goal is human dignity as an absolute value which can never be substituted. It differs the man from other creatures so that it is to be recognized and respected. Such an order should not be denied by any reasonable being in the world and the peak is self-respect. It makes all the subjects equal.

Dignity should be recognized, but each individual should look for his own dignity. Besides, who despises others, despises himself too, because all people are

members of the same humankind. In this way, Ego and Alter are equalled.¹⁰

The first reaction to Kant's conception of human dignity is found in the French constitution of 1789 (French revolution) which announces that all people are born free and equal. Dignity is related to "human rights". These two terms have been practically inseparable since then.

Luhmann defined human dignity as "the condition of man's successful self-promotion of his own individual personality"¹¹ which gives a social dimension to the conception of human dignity.

Podlech will emphasize the functional concept of dignity. Namely, according to him the concept of dignity should be directed legally and understood in the context of:

- personal and social life safety;
- legal equality of all people;
- protection of human identity and integrity;
- limitation of the power of state towards an individual;
- respect of one's body integrity.¹²

Some theologians at the end of 20th century develop the idea that a man can dominate his instincts by the power of his morality and it raises him above other beings and gives him the power of spiritual freedom, which is the peak of his dignity.¹³

Even the 2nd Vatican Council remains faithful to the Biblical scheme and bases human dignity upon the creation, redemption and eschatological encounter of the creature and the Creator in the ordeal.

1.4. Bioethical consideration of human dignity

In the era of the internet, cybernetics and genetics, human dignity has obtained an extremely important

8. Comp. N. abagnano, *Dizionario filosofico*. Utet, Torino, 1961, voce "Dignità".

9. Comp. *ibid.*

10. Barolomei, p.82.

11. Comp. Bartolomei, p.86.

12. Comp. *Ibid.* p.87.

13. Comp. B. Schueller. *L'uomo veramente uomo. La dimensione etica dell'uomo*. EDI OFTES. Palermo 1987.

place. Today, we all tend to emphasize the human right to the freedom of communication and self-determination but also the right to our own dignity. We talk about the dignity to live and die, the patient's dignity etc. Dignity implies body and soul and while speaking about the man and human researches, his genetic code, it is required to determine some ethical rules and behaviour, but the legal principles as well.

A famous Italian lawyer Francesco d'Agostino says that all the contemporary philosophers and bioethicists frequently use the term human dignity. This has become the crucial word for them which appears in the Convention from Strasbourg on human rights and dignity where it is mentioned three times.¹⁴ We can conclude that this term should become the basis of European bioethics. It could be a hidden common idea of European Committee for Bioethics (Cdbi), as well as the legal principles concerning the relation between bioethics and international law.¹⁵

However, a French physician and moral theologian Bruno Cadore noticed that the frequent use of this term is not followed by its clear interpretation, at least in legal terms. According to his opinion the realization of decision making (on what should be done) in technomedical advance and the man's conception of the same advance should be closely related. Reference to dignity should not be an argument a priori because the principle of human dignity is the principle of experience and practical wisdom. We should never neglect the relation between human dignity and creativity.¹⁶

The question of dignity is not bioethical primary concern, but bioethics defined it. Apart from being a social topic, bioethics is a man's moral reflection over his new scientific powers. The concept of human dignity, which should be related to ethical questions and dilemmas, requires to ask ourselves about "something" in human nature that should be respected. The conception of human nature is closely connected with the man's wish to "live well" or "blissfully", so his technical and scientific power which enables him to go deep into himself should respect it. Consequently, bioethical argumentation on dignity has three aspects:

1. dignity speaks about untouchableness of a person which is a true human reality;
2. dignity means more than reality, i.e. it means the quality which obligates and requires unconditional respect;
3. dignity means autonomous ability of a person who has become an object of treatment.

Cadore calls these aspects "appeals for dignity" which should not be infringed, especially when a person is unable or dependent of somebody else. In these conditions the man's dignity as a patient should be recognized.¹⁷ The scientific development and advance is not a problem, as well as the experiments in the field of genetics and biomedicine. The real problem is present in the orientation of these sciences and in their attitudes about the life and the man.

2. DIGNITY AND HUMAN EXPERIMENTS

I would like to state a thought of C.S. Lewis from 1947 that the man will master himself with his own eugenics, prenatal condition, creating public opinion with the propaganda instead of real psychology. "Human nature will last surrender to a man".¹⁸

What is permitted or not permitted in science? Who should decide on the basic scientific criteria and how far should it develop? These are the actual questions discussed all around the world which provoke acrimonious debates?

Scientists, philosophers, ethicists, sociologists, physicians, theologists and the public participate in the discussion. But, it is frequently forgotten that the most important is philosophic question about the life, man and real values of human life and the life of all living creatures in the world. As we live in a pragmatic mentality, a question could be asked if the society is obliged to maintain old people who have become dependant of social help in order to decrease the food needs. Maybe in very near future a political party could be formed which will promote eutanasia as a social

14. Comp. F. D'Agostino. Bioetica e dignità dell'essere umano. In: C.M. Mazzoni, Un quadro europeo per la bioetica?. Leo S. Olschki ed. Firenze, 1998.

15. Comp. N. Lenoir, B. Mathieu. Les normes internationales de la bioéthique. Puf. Paris. 1998.

16. B. Cadore, L'argument de la dignité humaine en éthique biomédicale. In: Le supplément, 1994, n. 191, p. 73-98.

17. Comp. Chiodi, tra cielo e terra. Il sensi della vita a partire dal dibattito bioetico. Cittadella Editrice. Assisi. 2002. p.101-112.

18. C.S. Lewis. The Abolition of Man. New York. The Macmillan Company, 1947.

and economic policy? It is not only about politics and economics, but about greater moral values and questions.

Who can give the answers to today's scientists on what is absolutely right or wrong? Who can determine and make a judgement on basic ethical principles when the modern societies are secularized and the religious principles are not listened to? In our world decisions should be made and principles established, because the science, connected to the interest of profit, will determine its own rules which are deprived of human attitudes and ethical sensibility.

The answers should be found, as always when we speak about normative ethics, in two ethical and normative theories: deontologic and theologic. According to deontologic theory the moral judgement does not depend on the consequences which result from actions (contrary to proportionalism), or the action is *contra naturam* or *ex defectu iuris in agente*, i.e. is the agent of the action permitted to do it?

Theologic theory is followed by those who judge according to the consequences (proportionalism) which derive from the actions, biotechnological science in this case.

In the case of biotechnology, as always when we speak about bioethics and normative ethics, there are two difficulties: one that refers to the evaluation of empiric data and the other that refers to axilogic data that should be applied.

In order to determine ethical principle in the field of biotechnology, we still miss a detailed cognition about the science itself and we are in danger to judge it on the basis that it could become. Biotechnology is a relatively new science and is still developing and connected to the industrial interest. It seems that the estimation of individual and well established applicative possibilities and not global biotechnology is the basis for a good moral estimation of this science, as well as genetic engineering.

If we know that this science is able to modify genes, to substitute and eliminate them, we should establish that it is *contra naturam* because the man intervenes in the natural process and modifies it according to his goals. However, it would be a condemnation of genetic engineering and research which could be very useful to the mankind. Even if applied on a man, if the research is *therapeutical*, it can not be considered unpermitted, even less if applied in vegetative and animal world.

At this point we should mention the second deontologic principle, referred to by many other scientists and believers: *illicitum ex defectu iuris in agente* (unpermitted because the agent has no rights on it). It is not natural to modify and shift genes and the man has no right to do it. If considered biblically, the man has the right to change, adapt and repair the nature, but he has no right to interfere in the development, especially the genetic one. From this point of view every biotechnological procedure should not be permitted because the man has not got a permission and he disrupts the natural order. Therefore, biotechnology is unnatural and unpermitted.

Theologically, the consequences of a procedure should be considered to establish if it is aimed to the improvement of an individual and mankind in general. While speaking about the application of genetic engineering on the vegetative world, it should be established if it is good and reasonable, therefore permitted, if the research is aimed at the improvement of the mankind, such as food production.

It is quite the same with the research and application on the animal world. The animal has its value, but when a superior value is threatened it becomes the value-means. It happens in cases when the man's health and wellbeing are threatened. According to this principle we eat meat. Accordingly, trials on animals, important for man and his health are permitted, but the animals should not be hurt.

Taking into consideration technological science, we can conclude the following:

1. If used in diagnostic procedures (diagnosis always follows the cognition and wants to establish what is healthy and what is ill), it is permitted on all living creatures, even the man.
2. If used in therapeutic procedures, biotechnology is permitted, because its main aim is to cure.
3. If used in alternative aims, i.e. to modify the natural process, create unknown plants or animals, especially in cases in which new creatures would destroy the natural ones and their development and the food would be harmful or poisonous to a man, it should not be permitted.

3. SOME CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES

Christianity emphasizes that the man can be only an aim, but never a means of a research or a procedure. The present Pope Benedict XVI says that “every new scientific discovery should serve the integral good of a person, with constant respect for his or her dignity”¹⁹ It means that genetic interventions should be based on certain principles respecting human dignity and integral good of a person. In this sense, determination of ethical principles in genetic interventions should consider the human complexity and great changes in the fields of genetics. It is well known that human dignity can not be related to human genes and his DNA, but the genes do not delete differences among human beings. Therefore, we talk about the principle of “non-discrimination” which is promoted in human rights, in physical and genetic factors. This principle confirms the Christian view of human dignity which says that each man is the same and possesses the same dignity because it is made in the image and likeness of God (see Post, 1,26). According to Christian points of view, new information and cognition, as well as technical abilities should be accompanied by ethical questions and ethical principles. However, ethical questions are not answered, as genetics develops rapidly. Tomorrow other new questions will seek for answers.

Generally speaking, genetic engineering implies several ethical problems. The main problems can be related to 1. research, 2. diagnostic application, 3. therapeutic application²⁰, while recently the problem has been related to alternative engineering (eugenics). Accordingly, the ethical problems of genetic engineering are related to:

- the safety of experimental laboratories
- drug research obtained by genetic engineering techniques,
- genetic diagnosis and new problems imposed by medical diagnostics;
- human genes invention or DNA sequences;
- human genome project;
- problems of prenatal diagnostics, cloning and human embryos experiments²¹

Some Christian principles should be the following:

1. *Confidentiality.* This principle should be based on the spirit of love which requires confidence in human relationships. The protection of confidentiality is important for confidence. In order to protect the man’s privacy, the data about his genetic constitution should be confounding, except in cases when the man decides to reveal them. It is obligatory to reveal the information in a case when the harm can be done by keeping the genetic information secret. This principle is found in the Gospels according to Mt 7.12 and St. Paul (Fil 2.4).
2. *Truthfullness.* Researchers are obliged to tell the truth. It means that while speaking about the results of a genetic research, the truth should be told to the public and the individual as well, without holding out false hope.
3. *Relieving and preventing pain and suffering.* This is a human, but highly Christian principle and duty. (comp. Dj; 0.38; Lk 9.2). Therefore, the main aim of human genetic intervention should be the treatment or prevention of diseases and pain and suffering relief. Genetic modifications of bodily or mental characteristics should be done with great care, in order to prevent the abuse and unknown biological risks.
4. *Freedom of choice.* The man is free and if able to make a reasonable decision, should decide whether or not undergo genetic testing. He should decide on the information obtained by genetic testing, except in cases when it can harm other people. The moral decision can include the avoidance of a known risk by giving up child-birth due to serious congenital defects. As such decisions about procreation and genetic testing are deeply personal, a man should make them taking into consideration a general good.
5. *Human dignity.* People are more than a sum of their own genes. Human dignity cannot be decreased by genetic mechanisms. People should be treated with dignity and their individual quality should be respected and not divided according to their genetic heritage. ■

19. Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, *Dolentium Hominum*, XXI, no. 61, 2006 (1), p.7.

20. divided according Italian bioethicist A. Serra, comp. L. Ciccone, *Bioetica. Storia, principi, questioni*. Ares. Milano 2003, p. 206.

21. *ibid.*, p. 207.