Kirchhoffer, D G. 2013,
The concept of human dignity in tertiary campus ministry: More than hot air,
Journal of the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association,
Vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 15-24.
Downloaded from: www.tcma.org.au

The concept of human dignity in tertiary campus ministry: More than hot air

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Abstract

In light of recent criticisms of the concept of human dignity, this contribution offers a proposal for the continued relevance of the concept for tertiary chaplaincy. It is important to consider the concept of human dignity in tertiary chaplaincy because: many higher education institutions continue to identify human dignity as a key value; the kinds of ethical issues that tertiary students face will often involve appeals to human dignity; and the religious connotations that have come to be associated with the concept fall within the scope of chaplains. Nevertheless, there have been recent calls for the concept of human dignity to be dismissed from ethical discourse as unhelpful. In ethical debate, dignity can be unhelpful when it leads to 'dignity talk', when there is disagreement about whether it is something human beings always already have or something that is realised through human activity, or when it conceals what people think is really at stake. In response to these criticisms, this contribution proposes a model for understanding human dignity that affirms the value of the human person as a multi-dimensional, historically-situated being in relationship to all that is, a being who is faced with difficult moral choices through which he or she makes meaning in his or her life. This model has both descriptive value in helping us to understand why people do what they do, and normative value in helping us evaluate what should be done.

Keywords

Chaplaincy in higher education, campus ministry, ethics, human dignity.

INTRODUCTION

Human dignity has become a familiar term in contemporary discourse, and it is likely that most people who use it have some idea of what they think it means. Yet, the winds of change may be upon us with respect to the widespread use of the concept of human dignity. Serious challenges have been posed to the usefulness of the concept of human dignity for contemporary ethics, and whether gentle breeze or gale force polemic, these criticisms cannot be taken lightly.

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Therefore, this contribution will consider the efficacy of the concept of human dignity for contemporary tertiary chaplaincy in three steps. First, we'll explore some of the reasons why it might be important for chaplains working in the tertiary sector to reflect on the concept of human dignity. Second, we'll take a closer look at these winds of change that are gaining strength with regard to the use of the concept of human dignity in ethical discourse, and their potential impact on chaplaincy work. Finally, this contribution will propose one way to revitalise our understanding of human dignity that does not so much oppose the winds of change but rather sees them as an opportunity to build wind farms that turn human dignity into a useful, and sustainable, concept for ethical discourse—a concept that is of both descriptive and normative value to our ethical reflection.

1. DIGNITY IN TERTIARY CHAPLAINCY

The following considers the role of the concept of human dignity in contemporary tertiary chaplaincy from three perspectives: the official discourse of tertiary institutions, student experience, and the concept's religious connotations.

Official Discourse

Human dignity should be a relevant concept to those working in tertiary chaplaincy because universities themselves often appeal to it, be this in learning outcomes, graduate attributes, mission statements, or policy documents.

Australian Catholic University (ACU), for instance, as one might expect from an explicitly Catholic tertiary institution, mentions human dignity in official discourse on numerous occasions. For example, the first of its graduate attributes is to "demonstrate respect for the dignity of each individual and for human diversity." The university counts "promotion of ... the dignity of the human person" among the key values that drive its educational philosophy, and, in its mission statement, ACU states that "In its endeavours, it is guided by a fundamental concern for justice and equity, and the dignity of all human beings" (Australian Catholic University 2012).

The point is that in the tertiary education context, like many other contexts, it is claimed that the notion of human dignity should play a pivotal, if not indeed foundational role in our ethical and moral formation and discourse. This is most evident when one considers how central the notion of human dignity appears to be in international human rights discourse, as demonstrated by Article 1 of the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

Student Experience

In addition to the 'official' status of human dignity, there is a second reason that the concept of human dignity may be important in tertiary chaplaincy. Many of the encounters that chaplains have with students are encounters focussed on issues of morality and the particular moral and ethical challenges that students may be facing in their own lives (Clifford 2006).

These moral issues, and this is not surprising given human dignity's status in the aforementioned 'official' discourse, may well be peppered with references to human dignity. Situations involving unexpected pregnancy, or ailing or seriously ill friends or relatives, are obvious examples that might lead students to ask moral questions in which the language of human dignity might come into play. Yet, when one considers the many changes that are taking place in student life—for example, the fact that increasing numbers of students are combining work and study, or that an increasing number of students in Australian universities don't come from Australia (James et al. 2010)—then there are a wide variety of moral spaces in which the concept of human dignity may be invoked. Consider issues, for example, of harassment, bullying, or discrimination in the workplace or society at large (or indeed in the tertiary institution itself) on gender, ethnic, racial, or religious grounds.

Religious Connotations

Which brings us to a third reason why the concept of human dignity might be important in the context of tertiary chaplaincy, namely, that it is, for many religious people, an articulation of the belief that all human beings are created and loved by God. This is evident, for example, in the strong connection in Roman Catholic writings, both official and otherwise, between the concept of human dignity and the idea that human beings are created in the image of God (see, for example, the Second Vatican Council's 1965 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World—Gaudium et spes). In Islam, too, human dignity is an absolute value applicable to all human beings, who are a manifestation of God's will (Pal 2011).

In other words, in religious settings, it is almost impossible to separate the belief in the dignity of every human individual from the implicit or explicit belief that God loves human beings. Thus, even though encounters in chaplaincy may not always be explicitly religious, insofar as the concept of human dignity has become embroiled in strongly religiously-coloured ethical debates—for example, those surrounding abortion and end-of-life decisions—it is almost impossible to avoid at the very least religious overtones in these discussions.

Therefore, human dignity is an important concept for tertiary chaplaincy because it is a defining feature of much of the official discourse of contemporary society, because this in turn means that the concept is likely to come up in one way or another in the kinds of ethical issues about which students might want to talk to chaplains, and finally because the connection of human dignity to religious concepts, both in official and public discourse (for example, on the internet), means that any discussion of human dignity in the context of chaplaincy is likely to be interpreted by the students, or those they tell, as implicitly reflecting faith convictions. This may, of course, be both a barrier and an opening for further discussion.

2. 'DIGNITY IS A USELESS CONCEPT': THE WIND OF CHANGE?

It is precisely the growing awareness that the invocation of the concept of human dignity in ethical discourse can be a barrier to meaningful discussion that has led in recent years to a 'wind of change' in dignity discourse. Though there may be some degree of general agreement as to what human dignity might mean, there would seem to be sufficient differences in interpretation to warrant a call by some critics to have the concept of human dignity banished from our ethical discourse. Moreover, once one starts to apply the concept and actually use it in ethical situations, one starts to encounter the real challenges: one discovers that whilst most people might agree that human dignity should be respected, when it comes to concrete ethical debate, there is often disagreement.

This has led several scholars, particularly those working in the field of bioethics, to criticise the concept of human dignity as useless, vacuous, and indeed even stupid (Macklin 2003, Bagaric & Allan 2006, Pinker 2008)—or, as I have rather provocatively put it in the title of this contribution, as just hot air. From once being the bastion of ethical arguments, as illustrated in the earlier reference to human dignity's foundational position in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there are a growing number of critical voices that are calling for its dismissal because of the confusion it apparently causes, and because of its alleged inefficacy in resolving ethical debates.

These criticisms should be taken seriously. Three problems stand out due to the likelihood of their coming to the fore when human dignity is invoked in chaplaincy contexts, particularly when students are seeking guidance on the kinds of ethical issues described already.

The Problem of 'Dignity Talk'

The first and most glaring problem is what I have termed 'dignity talk'. Dignity talk is where two opposing sides of an ethical dispute both appeal to the concept of human dignity to underpin their claims, and moreover, they make this appeal in a manner in which human dignity is not so much an argument, but a weapon with which to bludgeon the opposition into submission, an argument-ending, self-evident, normative trump card!

This was demonstrated to me again recently in one of the ethics classes I teach. The students had been set a task that centred around an online discussion of whether or not, as Peter Singer has suggested, all Australians should donate five per cent of their income to a charity that serves to meet the most basic needs of those living in extreme poverty in other parts of the world (Singer 2009). What was interesting about this task is that they were asked to explain their position using a theory of values. The class preceding the discussion had addressed Daniel Sulmasy's ideas regarding a theory of values, and in particular the idea of the intrinsic value of human beings per se, for which Sulmasy reserves the term Dignity with a capital D (Sulmasy 2010). What was fascinating was that whilst most of the students could see the point that children in Africa could be said to have dignity (or Dignity) as some intrinsic value, when it came to suggesting that relatively affluent Australians should therefore be compelled by law, out of respect for this dignity, to donate to charities that provide basic goods, that save lives through provision of clean drinking water, or vaccines, or medical care, or food, or education and so on, they were quick to say that this would not be a good idea because it would diminish the goodness of the charitable act for the giver. It would be an offence to the intrinsic value of the giver's happiness. The giver would no longer be able to feel good about him- or herself, and, therefore, concluded the students, charitable donations should remain voluntary. Yet, many of these are the very same students who would oppose abortion or physician-assisted suicide on the grounds that to allow these would be an offence to human dignity. Moreover, they would argue that the law must legislate to save the lives of human beings who have intrinsic worth, dignity, as human beings per se in these cases. Nonetheless, they opposed such legal enforcement of actions that would save lives in Africa on the grounds that this would diminish their dignity as givers by compelling them, rather than allowing them to freely choose, to engage in good works.

Dignity is not only used as a sort of debate ending trump card. When one starts to interrogate what people in these contexts actually mean by human dignity one discovers that they don't always agree.

Human Dignity: Something We Have Or Something We Acquire?

The first problem encountered upon interrogating the use of human dignity in contemporary discourse is two distinctly different uses of human dignity. On the hand, there is the idea of human dignity as some sort of inherent worth, some sort of always already present and inviolable value that inheres in every human person (Sulmasy's 'Dignity'). It is something that all human persons already have and it cannot be taken away. Moreover, it is supposedly inviolable. This is typical of many of the more explicitly religious understandings of human dignity (Sulmasy, for example, is a Catholic Franciscan Friar as well as a medical doctor). It is arguably what the students just mentioned, following Sulmasy's lead, had in mind when they affirmed that children in Africa do have dignity.

This can be contrasted with an understanding of dignity as something to aspire to, to obtain, the end or fulfilment of our humanity. We talk about living with dignity, for example, or deserving to be treated with dignity. This is not necessarily about dignitaries, or the idea that dignity only inheres in people of a particular class, although that too is not unrelated. What is in play here is rather an experiential, psychological understanding of human dignity as a kind of pride or sense of self-worth, such that a perceived offence to one's dignity is not an offence to some abstract notion of one's intrinsic worth, but much more to one's concrete self-perception as worthy, as having dignity (Gilligan 1997). In the example above, this is what the students seemed to mean when they resisted the suggestion that the five per cent donation should be obligatory. Their self-fulfilment, their sense of self-worth, would be diminished if they were forced to do something, rather than freely chose to do it because they thought it was the morally right and good thing to do.

This means that if an ethically useful concept of human dignity is to be defended, either it must be shown that one of these conceptions is false, or an account of how human dignity can be both something we already have and something that we seek to acquire must be developed.

The third challenge, and perhaps the most challenging—because, potentially we could cope by just always explicitly making a distinction between the dignity we have and the dignity we acquire when

we use dignity in those different senses—is that there really is no such thing as human dignity after all.

There Is No Such Thing as Human Dignity

By interrogating what people really mean when they appeal to human dignity in a fashion consistent with what I have described as 'dignity talk', one might conclude that the concept of human dignity is really just a façade, and that human dignity, because it is a term seemingly endowed with a mysterious normative power thanks to its inclusion in human rights documents, is in fact really just representing another claim, such that when one argues for a particular course of action based on respect for human dignity, one indeed means something else. If we consider again the case of the students, it might be far more accurate to suggest that they oppose abortion and physician-assisted suicide based on a belief that it would be an offence not to human beings but to God the giver of life. In other words, it is not human dignity that is at stake, but God's dignity. And it might, therefore, be more accurate to say that they oppose legislation that compels them to give to charity because this would undermine their autonomy, which is essential to their sense of self-worth as morally good beings. In other words, sometimes, especially in public discourse, when people say 'respect human dignity' they really mean respect autonomy, or respect physical human life, or respect my belief that God made me, or respect my desire to be respected. When that is the case, then Ruth Macklin (2003) may be right, human dignity may be useless because it masks what people think is really at stake.

Thus, an adequate defence of the concept of human dignity will have to show that human dignity cannot simply be reduced to one or other feature of the human person. Moreover, it will have to demonstrate that the concept offers something more to ethics than any of the individual features, such as autonomy, alone.

To conclude this section, it must be affirmed that there is a problem. The way in which human dignity is frequently used in contemporary ethical discourse—the rise of dignity talk— is a problem because it means we are more often faced with unconstructive shouting matches than with genuinely clear and constructive ethical argumentation.

What this contribution proposes is a model that overcomes the challenges that have been raised. It is a model that offers us a way to think of human dignity as grounded not in one or other feature of the human person, nor indeed in the idea that we are made in the image of God, although this still remains a helpful idea, but precisely as referring to the value of the human person as a multi-dimensional, historically-situated being in relationship to all that is, a being who is faced with difficult moral choices through which they make meaning in their lives.

3. THE COMPONENT DIMENSIONS OF HUMAN DIGNITY MODEL

The following demonstrates how this model, which has already been developed in detail elsewhere (Kirchhoffer 2009, 2013), makes the concept of human dignity valuable for both descriptive and normative ethics. This will be done with reference to the case of a convicted criminal who violently and repeatedly attacked guards and fellow inmates, no matter what punishment he was given for it (Gilligan 1997).

This man justified his violent behaviour by stating that he had to defend his dignity and he would kill whomever he had to in order to do so (Gilligan 1997). The first task of ethics, at the descriptive level, is to understand why this man does what he does. This aspect is arguably very important in the context of chaplaincy, or indeed any counselling role. We must first understand why people do what they do if we are going to avoid the trap of moralistic judgment. The second, the normative level, is to determine whether he is right or wrong to do so. One should not just dismiss the concept of human dignity because this man uses it to justify violence. One should see his self-justification as an invitation to begin to do ethics, to begin to try to understand what he means by human dignity and how this affects his moral behaviour. Then, at the normative level of ethics, one can begin to evaluate his understanding and his behaviour.

Table 1. The Component Dimensions of Human Dignity

Component Dimension	Already	Not Yet
Existential	Have (Potential)	Acquire (Fulfilment)
Cognitive	Inherent Worth	Self-Worth
Behavioural	Moral Good	Morally Good
Social	Others' Dignity	My Dignity

Descriptive Level One: What does he think human dignity is?
First, in order to understand why this man does what he does, we can ask what he thinks human dignity is. According to the model, at an EXISTENTIAL level, human dignity is something that all human beings always ALREADY have. They have it because, as human beings, they all have a share in a given set of capacities, like reason, love, free choice and so on. Yet, at the same time, the very nature of these capacities makes human beings thinking, feeling, acting subjects. Consequently, human beings naturally desire to realise the potential INHERENT in these capacities as a sense of SELF WORTH. They want to consciously (thinking) feel good (feeling) about themselves (subjects) and take pride in the lives they lead (acting). They want to fulfil their potential. The alternative is alienation (a loss of a sense of being a subject), meaninglessness (a lack of any sufficient reason for existence), and despair (a feeling that leads ultimately to a cessation of action). This is illustrated by the way in which the students mentioned above felt that to make charitable donations compulsory by law would remove the meaningfulness of the use of their capacities for morally good ends, in this case acting for the good of the dignity of starving children in Africa.

These capacities, however, as well as the fact that human beings are each historically situated in a unique set of relationships, mean that they may all have slightly different ideas about what constitutes a dignified life, which determines the kind of 'good' life they aspire to. It was interesting to note, in this regard, that not only did the students feel they shouldn't be compelled to give, but also that they should be allowed to choose which cause they would support. In other words, whilst acknowledging the needs of children in Africa, they argued that they felt it would be more worthy to support flood victims in Brisbane. In the case of the violent man, he equates dignity with a sense of self-worth that is dependent on the respect he feels (hence, it is part of the Cognitive-Affective Component Dimension) others show him. In his case, he only feels he is respected if he perceives others as fearing him.

Descriptive Level Two: What shapes his understanding of human dignity?
Second, having answered what he thinks dignity is, we can ask, still at the descriptive level, what social influences, mores, and circumstances might contribute to his understanding of dignity? Being ALREADY always historically situated means that human beings learn their ideas of what dignity is, and of what constitutes a dignified, respectful, and meaningful existence, from their interactions with others, and with the concrete moral norms of their society and its institutions. In the case of the students, they may think it un-Australian not to give help to fellow Australians. In the case of the violent man, he may have grown up in an honour culture. In an honour culture a man's dignity (his worth) is equated with his ability to defend his honour in the face of insult or humiliation. It is a culture in which to live without this kind of respect is to live in shame—a life not worth living— and a culture in which justice often means violently punishing or shaming those who offend one's honour, one's sense of dignity (Gilligan 1997).

Descriptive Level Three: How does he use this understanding to rationalise his acts?
Our third, descriptive question is how does this man's understanding of human dignity enable him to rationalise and justify his behaviour, in this case, violently attacking other people? At the level of the BEHAVIOURAL Component Dimension, the link between dignity and moral behaviour, is that human beings acquire dignity (their sense of Self-Worth), through MORALLY GOOD BEHAVIOUR. We applaud all behaviour that we consider to be morally good and, in doing so, we

confer dignity on the morally good person. For example, we think of Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela as having dignity, not by virtue of their status but by virtue of the moral goodness we see them as having embodied, and hence realised, through their behaviour. In the case of the violent man, we have said that there is a norm in his culture that considers it morally good and just to punish violently those who offend one's dignity. The result is that he tries to realise his dignity, his sense of self-worth as a meaningful human being, through behaviour that he believes to be morally good, or at the very least, morally justifiable.

The advantage of this descriptive analysis is that it helps us to avoid a moralistic condemnation of the man as simply evil. It makes it more difficult to demonise him. This is important because, otherwise, it becomes possible to say that the 'demon' has no dignity. Yet, we have already affirmed that every human being, including this man, still has a basic inherent dignity that rests in his or her potential to lead a morally meaningful life in relationship with others. Therefore, instead of demonising him, we are able to recognise him as a human being like us, struggling with his existential situatedness and seeking to give meaning to his life. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we have to condone what he does.

This is where the normative level of the Component Dimensions of Human Dignity model comes into play. This model can be used not only to understand his moral behaviour but also to critique his beliefs and behaviour.

The Normative Level

The first problem is that this man's understanding of dignity is purely egotistical. He ignores the fact that dignity, properly understood, is multi-dimensional, like the human being. Thus, human dignity also refers to the INHERENT WORTH of all human beings. This inherent worth is a MORAL GOOD. That means it is an end in itself. The reason for this is that without it, none of the rest makes sense. It is only because we are human beings, already possessing a range of capacities, that it is even possible for us to conceive of our own dignity, or to desire a sense of self-worth or to engage in moral behaviour.

The second major problem is that he attempts to secure his dignity (MY DIGNITY) by diminishing or destroying the dignity of others (their INHERENT WORTH which is a MORAL GOOD). Therefore, because he destroys rather than pursues a moral good, namely the inherent worth of others, his behaviour cannot be said to be MORALLY GOOD. Thus, it cannot confer true dignity (which is seen to be realised through morally good behaviour). His understanding of human dignity and the behaviour that it justifies are ultimately self-defeating, because they result in a vicious, self-deceptive, moralistic cycle. In other words, his vision and behaviour are in contravention of the Social Component Dimension. The Social Component Dimension holds that MY DIGNITY (our dignity) can only truly be realised when everyone's (OTHERS') dignity is realised, that is, when everyone has realised their own sense of self-worth in a way that affirms the dignity of others. And that ideal is obviously NOT YET the case.

4. THE ALREADY AND THE NOT YET

Finally, a word on the notion of the Already and the Not Yet. The fact that the fullness of dignity has not yet been realised for everyone also serves a critical function. It stands as a caveat to the ideological certainties that human beings are so easily seduced into believing. It is a warning that reminds us that our humanity, though dignified, is nevertheless flawed, not only because it is always already conditioned by a particular historical situatedness, but also because, in the pursuit of the universal ideal of dignity, we are always in danger of being too sure that we have found the ultimate way to bring the Not Yet to fruition. Thus, it represents an 'eschatological proviso' (Metz 1968) that says that as we work to realise our own dignity and the dignity of others, we should do so humbly in the hope that the means we choose to reach our end are indeed worthy of the end we seek to attain. In the words of the prophet Micah, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord

require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8, NRSV).

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