



Human Dignity from an Ethical Perspective: The Fundamental Moral Claim for Individuals and Society

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“Respect for human dignity is the inalienable condition
of every democratic constitutional state.”

Jürgen Habermas

Introduction¹

In modernity, human dignity is a central concept in ethics, philosophy, politics, and law. It is regarded as both a normative guiding principle and a binding foundation for human interaction. Accordingly, all human actions must respect and uphold human dignity, however it is defined. In this sense, human dignity constitutes not only a moral standard but also a legally enshrined principle. This is evident, for example, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948, as well as in the Basic Law (Grundgesetz, GG) of the Federal Republic of Germany (1949), which proclaims the inviolability of human dignity in its opening article: “Human dignity shall be inviolable.” Similarly, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000) affirms that human dignity must be both respected and protected.

Despite its central normative and legal significance, the precise meaning of “human dignity” remains contested. What exactly does human dignity denote? And on what ethical grounds can this concept be justified? It is evident that the notion of human dignity, along with the claims derived from it, is not free from philosophical controversy.

Some critics have dismissed it as an “empty concept,” arguing that it lacks sufficient moral or legal substance to serve as a foundation for duties, rights, or claims to protection. Indeed, shortly after the concept gained prominence in philosophical discourse in the late eighteenth century, Arthur Schopenhauer subjected it to sharp criticism. He argued that the so-called human dignity is nothing more than an “empty phrase,” lacking any objective foundation, and merely a rhetorical expression intended to evoke moral sentiment without providing genuine philosophical justification.² In contrast to such skepticism, other philosophers have assigned fundamental importance to the concept and its normative implications. For Robert Spaemann, “[H]uman dignity consists in the fact that human beings exist for their own sake and are not means to any end.”³ Human dignity represents the idea of the absolute and unconditional nature that gives meaning to all moral action.⁴

In order to avoid possible misunderstandings and unnecessary discussions, we must distinguish between two aspects of human dignity: an anthropological (descriptive) aspect and a strictly ethical (normative) aspect. When the concept of human dignity is associated with culturally diverse views of humanity, such as certain conceptions of humans as social beings with different lifestyles and family structures, or with certain religious beliefs, we are primarily operating in a culturally and temporally conditioned space that is subject to the law of particularity and non-generalizability. For example, there is an African tradition in the sub-Saharan region—to take an example from a different cultural context—which sees human dignity (*muntu* in the Bantu language) as determined by the connection with the clan members of the present, the deceased, and those yet to be born. This intergenerational and concrete conception stems from a strong local tradition and can hardly be universalized in its particular form, i.e., declared binding on all cultures. On the other hand, focusing on the ethical core of human dignity has the advantage of revealing structures

of entitlement that can be formulated—albeit in a very formal way—as a generally binding basis for individual, social, and state action.

I will address these questions below by first outlining the historical and philosophical development of the idea of human dignity, highlighting its irreducible ethical core elements, and finally reflecting on its significance for the present and the future in as concise a manner as possible. Few concepts in modern reflective culture and ethical tradition have such a complex and astonishing history, composed of different layers of reflection, without which the modern term used in law and politics cannot be understood.⁵

1. Historical and Philosophical Foundations⁶

In the ancient world, the concept of universal human dignity did not yet exist.⁷ In ancient Greece, dignity (*axíoma*, *timé*) was considered something measured by social rank, but also by virtue and achievement. Dignity was therefore expressed in different degrees depending on social status. Furthermore, only free men were considered full citizens, while women and children, slaves, and foreigners were excluded. Nevertheless, Plato and Aristotle laid the foundation for later reflections on the special and outstanding position of humans in the cosmos. Plato recognized humans as beings who participate in the divine world through their reason and, in this respect, they occupy a prominent position. Aristotle describes humans as “*zoon logon echon*,” rational beings, a definition that would later become a core element of the definition of human dignity. This context of discovery and definition applies only to Western cultures, even if this insight is of universal significance or, as Enlightenment philosophy later clarified in different terms: The capacity for reason is part of the transcendental endowment of human beings.

It was not until Roman antiquity that the concept of “*dignitas humana*” (human dignity) was coined. Here, dignity referred to social status and honor: The higher someone stood in society, the more dignity they were

accorded. However, the concept changed with the Roman philosopher and politician Cicero (106-43 BC). In his view, humans possess dignity through their gift of reason, which distinguishes them from other living beings, especially animals. He states: "Nature has created us for community and given us reason, through which we rise above animals."⁸

Through the gift of reason, every human being is endowed with dignity, regardless of their origin or status. And it is precisely this dignity that obliges them to act morally and to respect others. This view is not yet to be understood as universalistic in the modern sense, since women, children, and slaves are excluded from it, but it forms an important bridge to Christianity, which in its early days linked human rationality with the *theologoumenon* of man being created in God's image—as described in the first book of the Bible—and thus attributed a comprehensively universalistic character to human dignity, regardless of origin, gender, or status. Thus, in the 13th century, the theologian Thomas Aquinas, drawing on ancient traditions, saw human dignity as rooted in human reason and free will, understood as gifts created by the Creator, in whose image and likeness man is made (*Summa theol.* I-II, Introduction). However, the practical implementation of this insight remained limited in medieval church society, because feudalism and the class system determined the social hierarchy and, in a certain sense, also the degree of dignity. Human dignity remained largely an abstract, general theological category without any decisive impact on the social and ecclesiastical order. Thus, it was only natural that even great theologians such as Ambrose and Augustine kept domestic slaves, even if they treated them humanely.

In Renaissance humanism, the idea of human dignity reached a new peak. In his thoughtful "Oration on the Dignity of Man," Italian philosopher *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (1463-1494) states that God gave humans freedom to realize their full potential and shape the world. And it is precisely this freedom that makes them unique beings in the cosmos. Thus, human dignity becomes an expression of human self-

determination—and, as Pico adds with remarkable clarity, for better or for worse. Let us allow him to speak for himself: “We have made you neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of yourself, you may fashion yourself in whatever shape you shall prefer.”⁹ Self-determination is at the heart of Renaissance humanism. Pico interprets human dignity as the ability to determine one’s own destiny, to shape oneself and to have control over one’s own being. This idea, which appears here for the first time, is frequently found as a fundamental element in the current debate on human dignity.

The Judeo-Christian tradition confers a new dimension upon the concept of human dignity. In fact, many treatises on human dignity begin by referring to the “image of God” in which humans are created, as described in the creation story in the Book of Genesis (Gen. 1:26f). This reference has the advantage of evoking a broad spectrum of associations, since it is well established that this early Jewish *topos* has exerted a decisive influence on the historical development of the idea of human dignity, albeit often in complex and indirect ways. For many individuals, the belief that human beings are created in God’s image constitutes a decisive foundation and a powerful motivation for solidarity with human concerns. Yet the question remains: What precisely does this assertion mean?

Biblical studies¹⁰ have long shown that the *topos* of humans “as the image and likeness of God” (*tselem Elohim*) is a fundamental basis of biblical anthropology and ethics. Originally, however, this notion does not represent an ontological statement concerning human essence in the metaphysical sense—for Semitic thought does not operate with such abstract categories—but rather a functional statement describing human roles and responsibilities. All human beings are understood as representatives of God on earth. This representative function, once reserved exclusively for the king as the earthly representative of divine sovereignty, is here extended to humanity as a whole. Human dignity, in

this context, consists in the fact that human beings, acting on behalf of God, bear responsibility for shaping, governing, and preserving creation, as well as for caring for it.

Christian theology later interpreted this representative function as expressing the idea that human beings are endowed with sovereignty, that is, with dignity. This dignity is not acquired through merit, achievement, or social status, but is granted unconditionally and irrevocably through the creative act itself and thus possesses universal validity. Despite its considerable explanatory and motivational power, grounding human dignity in such a specific theological anthropology entails a significant limitation: Its binding force extends only to those who share the underlying religious convictions, while those outside this framework remain excluded from its justificatory basis.

From the perspective of Judeo-Christian faith, rationally accessible accounts of human dignity retain their validity. Nevertheless, the biblical *topos* of the image of God provides an additional hermeneutical depth and motivational force accessible only within the prerequisite of faith. This limitation becomes evident in the historical example of the 1948 deliberations on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When Brazil proposed including an explicit reference to the image of God, the proposal was rejected by a large majority on the grounds that reference to a specifically biblical concept could not adequately represent a religiously and ideologically pluralistic global community.¹¹

Consequently, the declaration adopted the neutral and universally accessible concept of human dignity without grounding it in any particular religious tradition. From a religious perspective, however, this does not constitute a new justification of human dignity, but rather the absence of its deepest interpretive foundation. Within the biblical framework, human dignity acquires an absolute character; it is inviolable and cannot be subordinated to or weighed against competing values. When the biblical tradition speaks of human beings as

representatives of God, this signifies that human dignity constitutes the unique representation of the absolute within the finite world. For a secular world, this is an imposition, perhaps even an unbearable thought, for it was not without reason that Nietzsche regarded dignity as something to be achieved, rather than something to be respected. Precisely because such a decryption and codification of human dignity seem to be lost in a society where everything is threatened by mercantile laws, we must constantly remind ourselves that the absolute nature of human dignity depends on conditions that society cannot provide, but at best can only call for.¹²

2. Core Elements of the Modern Concept of Human Dignity

In modern times, the concept of dignity was decisively and comprehensively shaped and reformulated by the Enlightenment. Its essential elements determine modern legal discourse (constitutions) and human rights debates.¹³ Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) in particular placed human dignity—sometimes using different terminology¹⁴—at the center of his moral philosophy. According to Kant, humans possess an inalienable dignity because they are not merely a means to someone else's ends, but always an end in themselves. It should be noted here that we are dealing with an extremely narrow definition of human dignity, the advantage of which lies in its comprehensive acceptability— independent of culturally and religiously determined views of humanity; it is also capable of setting an ethical framework within which dignity can be represented.

The central passage in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) reads:

In the kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. What has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent, what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity.¹⁵

And dignity is possessed solely by rational beings, namely humans, who are capable of moral claims, responsibility, and humanity. Animals do not possess these abilities and may therefore be assigned a price and traded. Humans, on the other hand, must not be weighed against other ends and subordinated to them. Humans are “ends in themselves” (intrinsic value). This is why, Kant concludes, I must recognize every other person as an “end in itself” and never use people as a mere means to an end (second formulation of the categorical imperative). Put another way, the core of human dignity consists in humans respecting themselves and others as equal and equivalent moral subjects capable of responsibility.

This sets two decisive points of emphasis: Compared to antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, human dignity is no longer grounded in religion but in reason—specifically the fact that humans are capable of reason, morality, and responsibility. The ultimate rational justification for human dignity lies in the recognition of this fact; failing to recognize it leads to an intuitively perceived contempt for “humanity,” which we, based on experience (*a posteriori*), recognize as something to be respected or desired.

Unlike in Renaissance humanism, human dignity is not simply self-determination, but self-purposefulness and a specific form of self-determination that Kant calls autonomy (literally: self-legislation). It is a form of self-determination that adheres to rules derived from reason itself. For example, only moral rules exhibiting a certain universalism—applicable to all rational beings—can be considered justified. This corresponds to the logic of not self-contradictory reason. The prohibition of killing, for instance, presupposes that I can trust that I will not be arbitrarily deprived of my life; what I demand of others is also a duty I owe to myself. The rational justification lies in this universality.

It is striking how formal this definition of human dignity is. It is not tied to concrete images of humanity—i.e., it is not filled in anthropologically—but is ultimately defined by two essential characteristics of human beings: reason and responsibility. Once human dignity is tied to cultural prerequisites, it becomes negotiable and subject to cultural comparison.

However, several important consequences arise from this formal description: Firstly, this leads to a strong *egalitarianism*. Human dignity as an intrinsic value belongs to all people, regardless of whether they realize these typical characteristics or are even capable of realizing them. What is decisive is not current realization, but innate ability (potentiality). Even individuals who do not or cannot manifest self-awareness, language ability, creativity, or morality do not forfeit their human dignity. There is no gradation of dignity. This equality applies especially to undeveloped and impaired humans, as they claim the same dignity as others.¹⁶

Secondly, there is strict speciesism: Human dignity is inherent to all members of the species *Homo sapiens*. Robots, for example, would not be bearers of human dignity, even if they were superior to us in some abilities.¹⁷

Thirdly, this implies the non-gradability of human dignity. Human dignity cannot be graded. There is no “more” or “less” human dignity. It is either possessed or not. Similarly, one is not more or less of a person.¹⁸

This framework provides an irrevocable normative basis for the formulation of fundamental human rights. These rights are grounded in fundamental claims, deriving their legitimacy and exigency from them. While a full justification would require detailed reasoning, the following immediately apparent conclusions can be directly drawn from the core concept of human dignity. Holders of human dignity

possess protective rights that can be inferred from this principle¹⁹: Exercising the right to self-determination, along with the corresponding duty of responsibility, requires a minimum level of freedom in action and decision-making. Self-determination is realized through concrete expressions of freedom, which must be determined consensually and deliberately rather than deductively. In this way, human rights represent a universal consensus that was achieved through extended deliberation.

Moreover, the right to self-determination is inseparable from the right to a certain quality of life, since a dignified existence presupposes conditions that allow it. Dignity is thus reflected in living conditions. It is also intrinsic to the human purpose that individuals must be protected from contempt, humiliation, objectification (such as torture), instrumentalization (such as participation in research without consent), and extreme external control (such as enslavement). This moral claim extends to protection against racial, religious, or ethnic discrimination, because dignity is not contingent on achievement, ethnicity, or belief.

Importantly, these are not only rights but also obligations: The moral concept of human dignity entails that individuals must grant others the rights they claim for themselves.

3. Historically Significant Category²⁰

These ideas directly influenced the political upheavals of the 18th century. In the American *Declaration of Independence* (1776) and the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789), the equality and freedom of all people was formulated for the first time as the basis of the state. Although the explicit concept of human dignity was not included, the broader idea of universal dignity—preexisting all rights—entered political modernity.²¹ French philosophy played a central role in shaping the Declaration of Human Rights, but the concept of human dignity assumes a different emphasis than in the German

tradition, particularly in comparison to Kant. Kant conceived dignity as an inviolable and absolute value arising from individual autonomy. In the French tradition, by contrast, dignity is primarily relational, social, and political. It is less a metaphysical foundation of human destiny than a quality to be recognized and enforced in social relations. Dignity emerges from mutual social recognition of individuals as free beings with equal rights.

J.-J. Rousseau linked dignity with freedom and equality. For him, dignity is attained only when individuals are not subjected to arbitrary authority and can live under social conditions that provide both external freedom and moral self-respect.²²

The challenges posed by industrialization, colonialism, and especially the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century severely tested this ideal. The Holocaust, involving the systematic extermination of millions, represented a radical breach of the notion that every human possesses inviolable value. In response, the United Nations declared in the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.” Article 5 further asserts: “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.” Reason and conscience, whatever their interpretation, establish responsibility and accountability, define what constitutes a person, and underpin human dignity—an enduring legacy of the Enlightenment.

Today, human dignity remains a guiding principle, though it is contested. In debates over biotechnology, artificial intelligence, migration, and social justice, the meaning of human dignity must continually be renegotiated. What are the essential conditions for realizing human dignity? Philosophically, the concept has evolved from

a religious notion to a universal humanistic principle. It continues to serve as a moral anchor, establishing equality of all people, irrespective of origin, culture, or achievement. Its history is ongoing, a continuous challenge, and an evolving process of deepening and clarification.

4. Conclusion

The history of human dignity mirrors humanity's ongoing journey toward self-understanding and moral maturity. It stretches across centuries—from the hierarchical notions of ancient societies, through the Christian conception of humanity as created in God's image, to the modern framework of universal human rights. Central to this evolution is the recognition that human value is not conferred externally but is intrinsic, inherent to every individual—a principle that continues to challenge and inspire. In this sense, human dignity constitutes a foundational norm that precedes both law and politics.

Throughout history, each era has reinterpreted this insight while simultaneously confronting its own contradictions. Today, human dignity stands as a universal ideal; yet it remains one that must be vigilantly defended and reaffirmed in every generation. Ethically, it provides an indispensable foundation for moral action, setting normative standards while delineating boundaries. At its core, it demands the recognition of human beings in their singularity and inviolability.

Far from being a mere theoretical abstraction, human dignity is a practical imperative, underpinning the pursuit of justice, humanity, and social solidarity. In the face of contemporary challenges—from rapid technological innovation to global crisis, it serves as a critical benchmark for responsible and reflective action. In a world marked by pervasive violence and inequality, the inextricable link between human dignity and peace becomes especially salient. Nelson Mandela is said to have observed that "Peace is not merely the absence of conflict, but the creation of an environment in which all people can live in dignity." This

insight underscores that genuine and sustainable peace is achievable only when human beings are respected and safeguarded from marginalization. Accordingly, the formulation and implementation of peace policy must consistently prioritize the protection of human dignity.

Notes

¹ Cf. Adrian Holderegger, *Ethische Perspektiven*, chapters related to human rights (Menschenwürde und Menschenrechte) (Aschendorff Verlag Münster, 2021), 71-133; Paul Tiedemann, *Was ist Menschenwürde? Eine Einführung*, 2nd ed. (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: Darmstadt, 2014); *Menschenwürde. Begründung, Konturen, Geschichte*, eds. Gerhard Brandmüller and Kurt Seelmann (Würzburg, 2008); and especially K. Schüttauf, 25-40, in *The concept of Human Dignity in Human Rights Discourse*, eds. David Kretzmer / Eckart Klein (The Hague [Kluwer Law International] / London / New York, 2002).

² Cf. Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Basis of Morality," in *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*, Volume 3 (Cambridge University Press, 2009) (*Über die Grundlegung der Moral*, 1841).

³ Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something'*, trans. Oliver O'Donovan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) (*Personen. Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen 'etwas' und 'jemand'* [Stuttgart, 2006], 40).

⁴ Cf. Micha H. Werner, "Streit um die Menschenwürde. Bedeutung und Probleme eines ethischen Zentralbegriffs" [*The Dispute over Human Dignity: Meaning and Problems of a Central Ethical Concept*], in *Zeitschrift für medizinische Ethik* 46(2000): 259-272.

⁵ Cf. Doris Angst, Heike Baranzke et al., "Philosophie der Menschenwürde" [*Philosophy of Human Dignity*], in *Zeitschrift für Menschenrechte / Journal for Human Rights* 4(2010): 1-234.

⁶ Cf. Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its History and its Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2023).

⁷ Cf. Paul Tiedemann, *Menschenwürde (Human Dignity as Legal Concept. A Philosophical Clarification)*, 51ff.

⁸ Cicero, *Laws (De Legibus)*, I,12.

⁹ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, "Oration on the Dignity of Man," in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, eds. Ernst Cassirer et al. (University of Chicago Press, 1948), 547.

¹⁰ Article on Urmensch [Original Human], in *Lexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Lieferung 260 (Stuttgart, 2025), 866-896; article on Menschenwürde [Human Dignity], in *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie*, Bd. 15, Neukirchen-Vluyn 200, particularly 11-39.

¹¹ Cf. Wolfgang Vögele, "Christliche Elemente in der Begründung der Menschenrechte und Menschenwürde im Kontext der Entstehung der Vereinten Nationen" [*Christian Elements in the Justification of Human Rights and Human Dignity in the Context of the Emergence of the United Nations*], in *Ethik der Menschenrechte. Zum Streit der Universalität einer Idee* [*The Ethics of Human Rights: On the Dispute over the Universality of an Idea*], ed. Hans-Richard Reuter (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 103-133.

¹² The theological perspective is not addressed here, but see Konrad Hilpert, "Die Idee der Menschenwürde aus der Sicht christlicher Theologie" [The Idea of Human Dignity from the Perspective of Christian Theology], in *Menschenwürde. Philosophische, theologische und juristische Analysen* [*Human Dignity: Philosophical, Theological, and Legal Analyses*], ed. Hansjörg Sandkühler (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 2007), 41-56.

¹³ Cf. Heiner Bielefeld, *Menschenwürde. Der Grund der Grundrechte* [*Human Dignity: The Foundation of Fundamental Rights*] (Berlin: German Institute for Human Rights, 2008).

¹⁴ Cf. Oliver Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity* (Berlin: de Gruyter Brill, 2011).

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 42, (*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785); See also Heike Baranzke, "Menschenwürde zwischen Pflicht und Recht: Zum ethischen Gehalt eines umstrittenen Begriffs," in *Philosophie der Menschenwürde, Zeitschrift für Menschenrechte* 4, no. 1 (2010): 10-24, here 17-21.

¹⁶This raises important questions in the field of medical ethics, which deals with issues surrounding the beginning and end of life. This highly nuanced discussion cannot be addressed here.

¹⁷As general as this statement may appear, it must be emphasized that scarcely any other issue within this field is as controversial as the question of whether prenatal—and particularly embryonic—human life possesses dignity. The answer to this question depends not only on biological facts, such as the point at which the necessary conditions for personal life are fulfilled, but also on the legal-philosophical question of the extent to which legal justifications—for instance in the context of embryo research or gene therapy—may be invoked.

¹⁸ At this point, I must set aside the debate with Peter Singer, who, in his work *Practical Ethics* (1979), radically rejects the thesis that every human being possesses equal dignity from birth (cf. the human rights tradition), and instead attributes the status of a person to human beings only insofar as they are capable of realizing their needs and interests.

¹⁹ Cf. Christopher McCudden, *Understanding the Human Dignity* (British Academy/Oxford University Press, 2023).

²⁰ Cf. *The Cambridge Handbook on Human Dignity. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Markus Düwell/ Jens Braarvig et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

²¹ Cf. Paul Tiedemann, *Menschenwürde [Human Dignity]*, 17-32. The term human dignity was explicitly introduced into the documents of the international community only after the Second World War.

²² Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men,” in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’égalité parmi les hommes [Genève 1785] [1755]*).