

# *T*RANS- HUMANITIES

---

**Title : Human Dignity and the Ethics of Human Enhancement**

Author(s) : Dónal P. O'MATHÚNA

Source : *Trans-Humanities*, Vol. 6 No. 1 (2013), pp. 99–120

Published by : Ewha Womans University Press

URL : <http://eiheng.ewha.ac.kr/page.asp?pageid=book10&pagenum=060600>

Online ISSN : 2383-9899

---

All articles in *Trans-Humanities* are linked to the Homepage of KCI and  
Ewha Institute for the Humanities and can be downloaded:

[www.kci.go.kr](http://www.kci.go.kr) & <http://www.trans-humanities.org/>



**이화여자대학교**  
EWHW WOMANS UNIVERSITY

---

# Human Dignity and the Ethics of Human Enhancement

---

Dónal P. O'MATHÚNA (Dublin City University)

## I. Introduction

Within bioethics, human dignity is a concept that has brought much positive attention to the value of all humans and the importance of their ethical treatment. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights views dignity and inalienable rights as “the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” (United Nations). Dignity is an underpinning idea that has been incorporated into various conventions of human rights that seek to practically improve the lives of all human beings. Examples of these include the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations). These documents assert that dignity is an intrinsic or inherent quality of all humans, and that all humans are equal in dignity.

The Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights incorporates human dignity in a number of ways (UNESCO). Respect for human dignity is the central aim of the Declaration (Article 2.c); is the first principle governing the whole field of biomedicine (Article 3); is the main argument against every form of discrimination (Article 11); is the framework within which cultural diversity is to be respected (Article 12); and offers the interpretive key to all the provisions of the Declaration (Article 28). Little wonder that it has been claimed that, “For the defense of rights, the idea of human dignity is indispensable in all circumstances” (Kateb 42).

Human dignity in these documents is seen as the source of rights. It is viewed as something inherent to human nature; it is not earned or achieved, nor granted by human agents, but discovered. It is something all humans have simply because they are human. By implication, it cannot be lost by, taken away from, or diminished in any human. As Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (United Nations). This has significant implications for how humans should be treated.

In spite of numerous references to human dignity in rights declarations, the term is usually not defined in those documents. Much debate occurs over the definition of dignity without any one definition being universally accepted. As will be discussed below, the lack of such a definition has been seen as a serious limitation to the concept's value. My response is that some of this confusion arises from the term dignity being used to describe very different dimensions of dignity. A number of different dimensions of dignity will be described below to bring some clarity to these discussions.

One particular definition of dignity will be used here as a starting point for the rest of the discussion. This views human dignity as: "The exalted moral status which every being of human origin uniquely possesses. Human dignity is a given reality, intrinsic to the human substance, and not contingent upon any functional capacities which vary in degree" (Cheshire 10). This definition clearly distinguishes two important dimensions of dignity that will be discussed further: the inherent and the contingent. The exalted status is both an important dimension of dignity and the target of much criticism. News media and history provide much evidence that humans sometimes are not exalted or do not act with dignity. Rape, torture, and racism show that sometimes certain humans are not viewed as having much dignity. How we treat other species and the environment is sometimes so undignifying that it leads some to claim that human dignity is a form of speciesism. This raises serious questions in the context of enhancement about whether our pursuit of the posthuman is somehow an affront to our human dignity, or whether enhanced posthumans will be viewed as having dignity.

The previous paragraph exemplifies how easy it is to slip between two uses of the term dignity. On the one hand, inherent dignity is asserted as the source of our privileged status. We view actions such as rape, animal cruelty, and environmental exploitation as undignifying because they fall short of some standard expected of those who have dignity. But the dignity intrinsic to humans is different to the degree of dignity revealed in our behavior. This second way of using the term describes situations where a person's dignity has been increased or decreased. It conveys a sense of dignity that is not inherent, but is variable and dependant on one's circumstances. For this reason, clear distinctions are needed between the different dimensions of dignity.

## II. Dignity's Dimensions

Lee and George note that at least four different dimensions of dignity can be identified. Those who defend the inherent dimension of dignity hold that this is a natural capacity that does not need to be developed or manifest to any degree. Some hold to such dignity for theological reasons, such as the belief that humans are made in the image of God, but others hold to it for secular reasons. These can include the complex combination of rational, emotional and relational capacities in humans or their ability to be autonomous moral agents. Inherent dignity is often equated with being human, and thereby dismissed by some as speciesist. However, dignity is not necessarily limited to humans. It can be extended to those with a similar nature. For example, if we were visited by extraterrestrials who had a nature similar to ours, many would hold that they too would have inherent dignity. Likewise, those coming from a theological foundation accept that God and certain other spiritual beings have inherent dignity because of their natures. Inherent dignity is based on being a certain type of being, not necessarily a human being. As such, posthumans could very well have dignity and we humans would have an obligation to treat them with dignity.

The second dimension is what I will call circumstantial dignity, and this reflects the variable aspect. Classic notions of dignity were based on social hierarchies. The original meaning of dignity (*dignitas*) is still captured in the English term 'dignitary.' These are people we esteem with more honor because of their position or accomplishments. The winner of an Olympic Gold Medal is viewed more highly than the one who gets the Silver Medal. When a person struggles with agonizing pain, or lives in deplorable conditions, we often state that their dignity has been stripped from them. In various circumstances, some act with dignity, while others respond in undignified ways. However, when the term is used this way, it usually means something different to what we mean by inherent dignity.

A third dimension is our own sense of our dignity. For example, people who are tortured may feel like they have lost their dignity. Living with certain illnesses or disabilities may leave people feeling like their lives are undignified. Jonathan Mann, a long-time advocate of human rights, captures this dimension. "Damage to human dignity may have more serious adverse effects on physical, social, and mental wellbeing than infectious disease" (Horton 1084). In spite of inherent dignity, actions can diminish a person's sense of

dignity, and by implication, other actions can promote one's sense of dignity. But this is different to claiming that a person's inherent dignity has changed.

The last dimension of dignity to be discussed here is the way that humans act at odds with what is viewed as dignified. Steven Pinker claims that part of why dignity is of little value is that it provides little guidance to how we should act. For example, we agree to let doctors do things to us that many would view as undignified. "Modern medicine is a gantlet of indignities. Most readers of this article have undergone a pelvic or rectal examination, and many have had the pleasure of a colonoscopy as well. We repeatedly vote with our feet (and other body parts) that dignity is a trivial value, well worth trading off for life, health, and safety" (Pinker). Yet the fact that we have such reactions reveals that we find such actions to be at odds with how we normally touch and interact with one another.

These various dimensions of human dignity are long-standing and important to recognize. For the rest of this paper I will discuss only the first two dimensions: inherent dignity and circumstantial dignity. Debates over the usefulness of human dignity in bioethics, especially in the context of enhancement and emerging technologies, sometimes fail to distinguish clearly between these dimensions. As a result, the discussions can be less than fruitful. I will argue that clearly distinguishing these two aspects of human dignity will help to show how human dignity provides clear guidance on the question of human enhancement.

Inherent dignity is based on humans having a status and worth that sets them apart. "Human dignity captures the notion that humans are uniquely valuable and therefore ought to be esteemed highly" (O'Mathúna, "Dignity" 13). This dimension is not one that comes in degrees or gradations. One either has inherent dignity or does not. Gilbert Meilaender says that human dignity expresses the essence of human nature—the core idea of what it means to be human. He concludes that this is part of our nature as "strange, 'in-between' sorts of creatures—lower than the gods, higher than the beasts" (Meilaender 4). Our nature is a mysterious combination of god-like characteristics and beast-like ones that leads to our inherent value. Everyone who is human has this status, so all humans are equal in status and inherent dignity. This has massive implications for justice and the equal treatment of all humans.

Part of the debate in bioethics over human dignity centers on attempts to identify which actions are dignified and which are not. For people in pain at the end of life, euthanasia is seen by some as a means towards death with

dignity; for others, taking the life of a patient is an assault on human dignity. Some reject dignity because it can be used to support both sides of an argument. Yet in each case, 'dignity' is being used to represent a different dimension of human dignity. Proponents of euthanasia view it as a means of improving circumstantial dignity; opponents view it as an assault on inherent dignity (Sulmasy 17). Recognizing these two dimensions is crucial to facilitating clear debate.

My view is that in the debate over the ethics of enhancement, recognition of the two dimensions of dignity is important, but often overlooked. These two aspects should be clearly distinguished, but sometimes they are conflated or their relevant differences ignored. When we watch Olympic athletes, and claim they exemplify human dignity, this is circumstantial dignity. We are not thereby claiming that those who do not attain the Olympic standard have less inherent dignity. Similarly, when we see people being treated in undignified ways, or who are unable to achieve their full potential, or who live in abject poverty, and we say their dignity is diminished, we do not thereby claim that they have less inherent dignity. Nor should we claim that it is ethical to treat them differently than those who live more dignified lives. Instead, because of their inherent dignity, we have an ethical responsibility to address the reasons for their diminished circumstantial dignity. The recent critique of human dignity sometimes fails to recognize these two dimensions, which has important implications for how the concept is used in bioethics. This general critique will be examined further in the following section.

### **III. Recent Critique of Human Dignity**

#### **1) Lack of Clarity**

Ruth Macklin's editorial "Dignity Is a Useless Concept" has triggered a re-examination of human dignity in bioethics. Part of her critique is that the concept is too vague. She argues that dignity remains unclearly defined. In ethics, she notes, dignity is used as part of the arguments both to support and to oppose euthanasia. Because of this lack of clarity, she claims it is a useless concept that "seems to be nothing other than respect for autonomy" (Macklin 1419).

However, just because a concept is unclear, or defined and used in different ways, does not necessarily mean it is without value or cannot be known. Terms

such as ‘love’ and ‘justice’ have been discussed and debated for centuries, yet we do not reject the importance of the concepts that these terms seek to capture. Macklin’s and Pinker’s critiques can be summarized as a principle that “disagreement about what constitutes human dignity means there is no truth on the matter” (Beckwith 96). Such a conclusion does not follow from the observation of disagreement, and the principle is self-refuting. If disagreement invalidates a claim, and I disagree with this principle (which I do), then this disagreement undermines the principle’s validity.

## 2) Religious Objection

Another objection to dignity is based on its religious connections. Macklin thinks that the widespread use of dignity in rights documents may be due to the many religious sources that refer to human dignity. While Greek and Roman thinking contributed to early ideas about dignity, Christian theology played a significant role in the concept’s development (Lewis 93). Such religious roots are valued by some, but others reject dignity on this basis. Pinker claims that dignity is a stupid concept, with interest within medicine “fed by fervent religious impulses” (Pinker). Because of this, and for other reasons, he has little use for dignity. Suspicion of religion lends support to posthuman questioning of dignity, given that even while critiquing humanism, posthumanists admire “humanism’s suspicion toward ‘revelation and religious authority’” (Wolfe xvi).

Human dignity does have religious origins, particularly in the Judeo-Christian teaching that humans are made in the image of God (based on Genesis 1). However, this should not lead to dismissal of the idea. Concepts such as ‘love’ and ‘justice’ are discussed in secular contexts, but they are deeply rooted in religious writings also. Religious sources may posit different views or implications for the concepts, but the fact that justice is discussed frequently in the Bible, for example, does not undermine its value or legitimacy. Quite the opposite: religious ideas have contributed greatly to ethical understanding. As Jürgen Habermas wrote, “Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love” (Habermas 150-51).

On the other hand, dignity as a unique status bestowed on humans by a higher power has been blamed for giving humans an overly high view of

themselves. This, it is alleged, has led humans to believe they can do what they want with non-human species and the environment. However, examining the concept in its biblical origins shows that being an image of God was not only about status, but about significant ethical responsibilities. Even if a religious basis for inherent dignity is accepted, its implications for bioethics are not straight-forward, as the following example illustrates.

Enhancement has been examined within the context of religious views of human dignity since at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The *Oration on the Dignity of Man* captures this tradition, where God is reported to tell humans: “We have made you neither of heavenly nor of earthly stuff, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with free choice and dignity, you may fashion yourself into whatever form you choose” (Pico della Mirandola). This seems to open up the idea of going down the transhuman path of enhancement. We have freedom and autonomy to shape ourselves. However, the author goes on to provide some cautious balancing points. He continues that “we must take earnest care about this, so that it will never be said to our disadvantage that we were born to a privileged position but failed to realize it and became animals and senseless beasts.” This older religious discussion captures the great potential of moving towards enhancement because of our dignity, but also the importance of careful ethical, philosophical, and religious analysis to ensure that enhancement does not undermine our dignity.

This passage highlights that even though humans have high status, other principles and issues must be considered. In the Judeo-Christian account, human creation is followed immediately by a discussion of stewardship. Humans were never supposed to exploit the environment, but were to be caretakers of the Earth; they were to cultivate it so that it would flourish, not exploit it for their own wishes and desires. We were never meant to do what we wanted with our own nature or with Nature. In this way, animal rights activists and environmentalists who denounce the arrogant ways that humans have exploited other species and the environment should find support in the theological basis of human dignity. This is not just about status, but about status with privileged responsibility.

Tragically, the heights of humanity have been matched by the depths of depravity. From a theological perspective, while humans have a special status, they also need spiritual rebirth, moral instruction, and character transformation. The idea that dignity gives us the right to do what we want is not in keeping with its religious origins, even if religious authorities have

used it to justify unethical practices. Inherent dignity should be seen as a gift that is received with gratitude, and comes with a responsibility to act with gratitude. This is the basis of empathy with others who find their circumstantial dignity diminished, and the theological basis of treating others as we would wish them to treat us.

Human dignity should not be dismissed because of its religious roots, yet without those roots it had been difficult to justify the inherent dignity of humans. George Kateb claims a secular basis for inherent dignity can be found, but acknowledges the challenges of this enterprise. “If we could first believe in the more-than-human entity of monotheism, there would then be no problem about the nature of and reason for imputing dignity to every individual and to the species. Who could deny it?” (Kateb 25). At the same time he wonders if it is just “wishful thinking” to “have an absolutely trustworthy judge that is wholly external to us and that tells us what our worth is, what our dignity is based on” (Kateb x). Answering that question takes us well beyond the remit of this essay, but points to the complexity and depth of the issue. Kateb develops an extensive argument for the unique status of humans based on recent findings in psychology, neurology, and sociology. These findings, independent of religion, point to a unique set of abilities and capacities which gives humans a special position with accompanying opportunities and great ethical challenges. For those who reject any religious basis, challenges remain to identify an acceptable basis for inherent dignity.

### 3) Posthuman Critique

Another critique of human dignity has developed within posthumanism. This claims that human dignity is a lingering aspect of humanism that has supported a view of humans that is anthropocentric and speciesist. Human dignity not only helps us value one another, but leads to arrogance. As such, it justifies claims that humans are of greater value than other species and even than the environment itself. As noted above, while this use of human dignity is not part of its religious roots, examples are given of how religion has contributed to human arrogance. Part of the posthumanist critique seeks to take away the privileged position that human dignity entails.

Early developments in posthumanism sought a model “that removed the human and *Homo sapiens* from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information, and cognition” (Wolfe xii). This involved “a fundamental change or mutation in the concept of the human” (Wolfe xvii).

Bioethics has been viewed by some within posthumanism as inherently humanistic because of “the belief in the intrinsic dignity and superior value of the human” (Zylinska 36). Because of this, another posthumanist claims, “A successful ethics is not possible, given human nature as presently constituted” (Seidel vii). Instead, he continues, we need “a proper transformation of humans to posthumans,” achievable “if as a species we undergo an appropriate . . . controlled evolution” (Seidel vii; 20). Part of the posthuman critique is to remove any distinctive boundary between the species; to demonstrate that no limits are fixed. Before continuing, it is important to examine what is meant by posthumanism, and the related term, transhumanism.

#### **IV. Posthumanism and Transhumanism**

Much disagreement exists over the definitions of posthumanism and transhumanism. Cary Wolfe claims that posthumanism is very different from transhumanism because of their differing relationships with humanism. “My sense of posthumanism is the opposite of transhumanism, and in this light, transhumanism should be seen as the intensification of humanism” (Wolfe xv). Transhumanism accepts many humanist assumptions, and claims we need to break free of the boundaries of human nature. Technology, science, and reason are viewed as the means to take control of human evolution and move beyond human nature.

Transhumanism has been defined by Nick Bostrom as “an outgrowth of secular humanism and the Enlightenment. It holds that current human nature is improvable through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods” (Bostrom, “Human Dignity” 202-03). As such, transhumanism is an active promoter of human enhancement by technology. Bostrom has been a vocal proponent of enhancement as an ethical pursuit. Bostrom holds that posthumans “may have indefinite health-spans, much greater intellectual faculties than any current human being—and perhaps entirely new sensibilities or modalities—as well as the ability to control their own emotions” (“Human Dignity” 203).

Wolfe sees posthumanism as a philosophical critique of humanism, along

with a re-emphasis on embodiment. He critiques the humanist focus on the purely material dimension of human nature which has led to a neglect of embodiment. Wolfe's description and definition of posthumanism contains a number of legitimate and valuable critiques of humanism and transhumanism. Viewed in this way, posthumanism raises many important points, especially for bioethics. The scientific materialism that underlies the critique of inherent human dignity is problematic (Beckwith). While important distinctions exist between posthumanism and transhumanism, they are united in their view of human dignity. Both approaches deny a fixed, inherent dimension to human dignity because they hold that all constructs should be subject to change. This is a view of human dignity that needs careful analysis.

### 1) Posthuman Dignity

One aspect of humanism that Bostrom wants to retain within transhumanism is its view of dignity. Humanism has accepted the inherent dignity of humans, and used this as the basis for human rights and autonomy. Bostrom claims that transhumanism allows people to "embrace technological progress, while strongly defending human rights and individual choice" (Bostrom, "Human Dignity" 203). Yet other posthumanists like Wolf claim that Bostrom is depending on a view of dignity that he also seeks to reject. Wolfe cites with approval Foucault's claim that, "At least since the seventeenth century what is called humanism has always been obliged to lean on certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science, or politics" (Wolfe xiv). Bostrom wants to hold to an inherent view of dignity, while at the same time denying that there is any unchanging aspect to human nature. He claims that dignity lies in "what we are and what we have the potential to become" (Bostrom, "Human Dignity" 213). The latter is variable and contingent, something we have yet to attain. As such, it is not inherent dignity, but circumstantial dignity. Yet in doing so, Bostrom has conflated these two dimensions, with the result that human dignity becomes variable. If that is the case, the basis for equal rights for all humans is gone. Instead, rights and dignity become contingent on one's abilities and circumstances.

## V. Critics of Transhuman Enhancement

Transhumanism has been criticized on the claim that its technological transformation of humans would be dehumanizing and undermine human dignity. This argument is promoted by those Bostrom calls bioconservatives. They claim that rejecting the inherent nature of human dignity eliminates one of the pillars of equality and equal rights. Bostrom responds that bioconservatives question the dignity of the posthuman. While some bioconservatives may make this argument, this is not necessarily what all do, especially not religious objectors. Bioconservatives who critique posthumanism from a religious perspective acknowledge some sort of superhuman being who has enough dignity to warrant following and trusting with one's soul. The religious concern is not that beings with abilities that exceed those of humans do not have dignity.

Bioconservatives are concerned that in the pursuit of a hypothetical posthuman vision, we lose sight of, and undermine, the dignity that we have. We do this in at least two ways: we become less contented with the abilities we currently have; and we fail to see the inherent dignity in each and every human, even with the weaknesses and failings that every human has.

To address the problems in Bostrom's argument, I will look at his response to Leon Kass, one of the well-known bioconservatives. Bostrom holds that there are two main criticisms of posthuman enhancement in regards to human dignity. He claims that these criticisms arise from two fears, not from carefully developed arguments.

### 1) Bostrom's Response to Fear of Loss of Dignity

The first fear Bostrom addresses is that enhancing people to the point of becoming posthuman is degrading and undignifying for humans. He cites a passage from Leon Kass to exemplify this fear. "To turn a man into a cockroach—as we don't need Kafka to show us—would be dehumanizing. To try to turn a man into more than a man might be so as well. We need more than generalized appreciation for nature's gifts. We need a particular regard and respect for the special gift that is our own given nature" (Kass 19-20).

Bostrom responds with dismay that "someone as distinguished as Leon Kass" ("Human Dignity" 205) would continue to believe that human nature is a guide to what is desirable or right. He claims that Kass ignores the fact that Nature does not distribute its gifts very well. Some people are born into

poverty, some have few talents, and diseases inflict people differently. Furthermore, human nature contains a susceptibility to murder, rape, torture and cheating which is horrific. Some of what nature provides should be rejected, such as capacities that might be overcome or enhanced by new technologies.

While Bostrom claims that Kass advocates using nature as a guide to what is right, he fails to see that they are talking about two different dimensions of human dignity. Kass claimed in his original article that each species has an inherent nature and it is wrong to try to change that, either by diminishing or enhancing that nature. Instead, Kass says, we need to develop a greater appreciation for the special gift that is our given, inherent nature. Bostrom in his response addresses circumstantial dignity. He lists various circumstances that strike out against human dignity, such as poverty or disease, or human actions that are incompatible with human dignity, such as torture.

Bostrom either completely misunderstands Kass, or has failed to read the rest of the paragraph he quotes from Kass. In that same section, Kass states clearly that the mere givenness of something does not help us determine whether it should be accepted with gratitude, improved with training, taken under control, or opposed like the plague. He lists unwelcome natural circumstances that rival Bostrom's list. He explicitly denies that nature by itself shows which things should be changed or resisted, and which accepted as is.

Kass develops his argument around two meanings of the term 'given.' By the givenness and giftedness of nature, Kass does not mean the variable circumstances and opportunities that people encounter. In the same paragraph quoted by Bostrom, Kass explains the two meanings of 'given.' One is the idea of something received, like a gift is given. Each of us has been given varying levels of health or intelligence or material possessions.

Kass also discusses a second meaning of given: the givenness that something is definite and fixed. For example, it is given that  $1 + 1 = 2$  and that gravity exists. The nature of the world is that certain things are given. They are set, and we need to work within the boundaries of the natures of these things. Kass notes that environmentalists have long pointed out the dangers of intervening with complex biospheres that we do not fully understand. Situations where people have rushed in where angels fear to tread have had dire consequences, and led to the promotion of the precautionary principle (O'Mathúna, "Precautionary").

This inherent aspect of 'given' is what Kass is discussing when he brings

up the comment about cockroaches and humans that Bostrom quotes. In this context, Kass notes that each species has its own given nature. There are boundaries to what each species can do and become. Part of human dignity is to recognize this given human nature, accept it, and work within its bounds. This includes accepting our limitations, such as those in knowledge and wisdom. Kass notes that viewing things as natural “will not *by itself* teach us *which* things can be fiddled with and which should be left inviolate” (19). We are finite; we do not know everything; and we should not try to control everything. When we act as if we know more than we do, we make mistakes. These can have unintended consequences, in spite of our good intentions. We need to remember and appreciate this, not ignore it.

Posthumanism rejects this second meaning of givenness, and in doing so goes too far. Posthumanism has an ideological commitment to rejecting boundaries and notions of fixed natures. But nature shows us repeatedly that there are limits to the changes we can successfully introduce. Complex systems have tipping points which lead to dramatic changes. Animal breeders know there are limits to how far they can modify species without introducing devastating problems. As dogs become more highly bred, they take on other attributes that make them less fit to survive. As fruit-flies are experimentally mutated in the lab, the changes become detrimental not advantageous. Once again, the precautionary principle speaks loudly against unbounded changes.

The inherent dimension of human dignity is Kass’s focus in this section. Bostrom does not see this, and claims that Kass ignores the importance of using medicine and biotechnology to address ill-health and disease around the world. However, Bostrom ended his quote from Kass before getting to the end of Kass’s sentence. The concluding phrase in the original paragraph is: “We need a particular regard and respect for the special gift that is our own given nature (and, by the way, also that of each of our fellow creatures)” (Kass 20). Kass reminds us that part of viewing our nature and dignity as inherent is remembering that all humans are of equal dignity and therefore worthy of our concern and help. I will return to this aspect later.

Bostrom conflates the two aspects of human dignity and misrepresents what Kass actually states. Kass goes on to discuss that medicine is about responding to the unequal givens of human life: correcting the diseases and disabilities that unequally detract from the full experience of human dignity. Medicine is not about controlling Nature, but about aiding Nature’s powers of self-healing (Kass 19). But Bostrom would turn medicine into a power to

control and direct Nature.

Bostrom also criticizes Kass for an overly negative view of future posthumans. Kass mentions a number of dystopian futures described in philosophical and fictional literature. Bostrom takes Kass's example of *Brave New World*, and disagrees with its interpretation. "The brave new worlders themselves are a dehumanized and undignified lot. Yet posthumans they are not" (Bostrom, "Human Dignity" 206). He claims it is "exceedingly pessimistic—and unsupported" to view this future as the inevitable outcome of posthuman enhancement.

Instead, Bostrom blames the problems in *Brave New World* on social engineering and totalitarianism. "Transhumanists argue that the best way to avoid a *Brave New World* is by vigorously defending morphological and reproductive freedoms against any would-be world controllers" (Bostrom, "Human Dignity" 206). Fiction and history, he argues, point to the dangers of allowing governments to curtail these freedoms. People should be free to choose the types of enhancement they want.

Ironically, however, Bostrom has argued elsewhere that someone like world controller Mond is exactly what will be needed to control human choice. Control of human evolution, he writes, "would require the development of . . . one independent decision-making power . . . a global regime that could enforce basic laws for its members . . . In order to be assured of stability, it would not only have to lack external competitors but in its domestic affairs would have to be regulated in such a fashion that no internal challenges to its constitution could arise" (Bostrom, "Human Evolution" 349). In spite of Bostrom basing his ethical argument for unfettered access to enhancement technology on personal autonomy, he notes that "those who want to avail themselves of radical life-extension would have to agree to limit the rate at which they bring new people into the world" (Bostrom and Roach 127). The contradictions raise serious concerns about his whole argument.

## 2) Bostrom's Response to Fear of Discrimination

The second fear that Bostrom claims people have about posthumanism is that it will lead to discrimination or violence against the unenhanced. George Annas has called for certain enhancements to be declared "crimes against humanity" because of the potential threat to humans from posthumans (Annas 238). Science fiction tends to anticipate future conflicts. In H. G. Wells' *Time Machine*, the selectively bred Morlocks dominate and hunt the Eloi, in *Brave*

*New World*, the Alphas rule over the Betas and Deltas, and in *Gattaca*, genetic technology gives the “valids” preference over the “in-valids” (O’Mathúna, *Nanoethics* 185).

Bostrom dismisses such literary concerns. “The scenario in which ‘the enhanced’ form a pact and then attack ‘the naturals’ makes for exciting science fiction, but is not necessarily the most plausible outcome” (Bostrom, “Human Dignity” 208). He notes that society currently has many people with a broad range of abilities who live in harmony and peace with one another. Bostrom does not mention the parts of the world where peace does not reign, or the history of violence, discrimination and genocide often perpetrated by those who believed they are superior to other groups of humans.

Once again, in spite of basing his argument on autonomy and freedom, Bostrom introduces limitations on that freedom. “The would-be creator of a new life form with such surpassing capabilities would have an obligation to ensure that the proposed being is free from psychopathic tendencies and, more generally, that it has humane inclinations” (“Human Dignity” 208). How could this be done? Kevin Warwick claims to be the world’s leading expert in cybernetics and is, I believe, more realistic. He claims that as we humans develop artificial intelligence and robots, they will eventually far surpass our intelligence. Then, if we are lucky, they will keep us as pets or in zoos. He claims this is just the way survival of the fittest works.

While this may be more realistic, it certainly does not herald a very dignified future for humans. Bostrom claims that we should trust those who are already more enhanced to know how to guide future enhancement. “Those who have a certain high capacity are generally better judges of the value of having that capacity or of a further increment of that capacity than are those who do not possess the capacity in question to the same degree” (Bostrom, “Why I Want” 118). To those who have, more should be given.

This points to the underlying injustice at the root of such enhancement. The focus on continual enhancement leads to a clamoring after perfection. Those who have more become focused on gaining even more. When the inherent dignity of human nature is rejected, and its boundaries denied, the endless grasping for more and more becomes undignified. Instead, we should emphasize our common inherent dignity and work within the traditional goals of medicine to bring all people to a more dignified standard of living and healthcare.

When dignity is acknowledged as inherent, there is an acceptance of its

givenness and its boundaries. We are not self-made. “We did not generate our genetic heritage. We were given much by those who helped us in our formative years. Our parents or primary care-givers were central, so were the friends, neighbours, relatives, teachers, coaches, doctors, nurses and myriads of others who helped us become who we are today. This should lead to a sense of gratitude and humility” (O’Mathúna, *Nanoethics* 155). As Kass states, it should lead to “an attitude of modesty, restraint, humility” (19).

This interconnectedness with others should serve as a call to humble gratitude for all that we have been given. Much of this has not come from our smartness or prowess, but from the gifts that others have given us. For some, this includes a belief that our lives are gifts from God; for others, this can be seen as stemming from what we have been given by our family and communities, or as the gift of Nature.

With that comes a recognition of the inherent dignity of other humans. Rather than focusing on how we can get more of whatever we already have, we become concerned about the circumstances of others. We see that we have a responsibility to help others rise out of undignified circumstances and experience a more dignified life. Viewing our lives as gifts helps here also. “And as gifts, they bring responsibilities to use them well. For those to whom much has been given, much is expected. Using them well means using them for more than our gratification and pleasure. It includes using them for the good of others” (O’Mathúna, *Nanoethics* 156).

This has very practical implications for bioethics. Promotion and funding of enhancement research will divert funding and resources away from research that helps those living in undignified circumstances today. Two maps of the world make it very clear that today’s enhanced economies do not care for the world’s unenhanced (Worldmapper). The distribution of physicians around the world contrasts greatly with the distribution of people with HIV. Those with most medical need have the fewest medical doctors to help them. The Global Health Workforce Alliance notes that “we are all tasked with the responsibility to make a difference for the one billion people in the world who face a daily struggle to get basic health care from a skilled worker.” The posthuman enhancement project will further divert attention and resources from those who have the least to those who already have the most. That is unjust.

If we take away the idea of the inherent dignity of all humans, and therefore that all are entitled to equal dignity, and replace this with the idea that dignity

arises by gaining more abilities and enhancing what we have, those who live in undignified circumstances will continue to be neglected. With that, it will be easier to ignore the responsibility we all have to help improve others' circumstances so that they come closer to the level many of us already have.

## V. Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to refer to Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1843 short story *The Birth-Mark*. Aylmer is a great scientist, happily married to Georgiana. However, she has a birthmark on her cheek which he views as a mark of "earthly imperfection" (Hawthorne 7). Her husband grows increasingly dissatisfied with the blemish and becomes obsessed with finding a way to remove it. In modern terms, he wants to enhance her beauty. Georgiana eventually agrees to take the remedy he has developed. It works. But as the birth-mark fades, her life begins to fade. With her dying breath she says to Aylmer. "You have aimed loftily! ... with so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best that earth could offer" (Hawthorne 19).

Aylmer, like other real and fictional scientists, pushed the boundaries of science without cautiously evaluating his motivations. Literature shows that there is wisdom in humbly accepting that some things ought not to be done. Science is a human enterprise and, like other human activities, can be impacted by personal ego, economic gain, and the search for control and power. The pursuit of perfection is not a dignified goal for medicine or science. Accepting the givenness and inherent dignity of life is a sign of moral courage and an important balancing point against the reckless pursuit of perfection or power. The inherent dignity of life helps us accept what we have with gratitude and generosity, and provides a framework to work through circumstances that can be undignified.

Aylmer also reminds us of how much we don't know. As he experimented, both his assistant and Georgiana cautioned him. He replied with great confidence that they should just trust him. Bostrom and the transhumanists ask us to trust that they know what they are doing. Such scientific hubris should set off warning signals. Science and technology have done much good, and contribute greatly to our current living standards. But they have also led to harm in certain instances, even with the best of intentions. While this raises the uncertainty of predicting consequences, positive or negative, we know

that while transhumanists pursue perfection, many in the world will die from a lack of basic healthcare, food and clean water. For now, justice is the clearest argument against enhancement therapies for the sake of the dignity of those alive today.

## Works Cited

- Annas, George J. "The Man on the Moon." *Science Fiction and Philosophy: From Time Travel to Superintelligence*. Ed. Susan Schneider. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 227-40.
- Beckwith, Francis J. "Dignity Never Been Photographed: Scientific Materialism, Enlightenment Liberalism, and Steven Pinker." *Ethics & Medicine* 26.2 (2010): 93-110.
- Bostrom, Nick. "The Future of Human Evolution." *Two Hundred Years After Kant, Fifty Years After Turing*. Ed. C. Tandy. Palo Alto: Ria University Press, 2004. 339-71. Vol. 2 of *Death and Anti-Death*.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "In Defense of Human Dignity." *Bioethics* 19.3 (2005): 202-14.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Why I Want to be a Posthuman When I Grow Up." *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity*. Ed. Bert Gordijn and Ruth Chadwick. Berlin: Springer, 2008. 107-36.
- Bostrom, Nick, and Rebecca Roach. "Human Enhancement: Ethical Issues in Human Enhancement." *New Waves in Applied Ethics*. Ed. Jesper Ryberg, Thomas S. Petersen, and Clark Wolf. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 120-52.
- Cheshire, William. "Toward a Common Language of Human Dignity." *Ethics & Medicine* 18.2 (2002): 7-10.
- Global Health Workforce Alliance. *Adding Value to Health*. 2010. <<http://www.who.int/workforcealliance/en>>.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Birth-Mark." *Being Human*. Ed. President's Council on Bioethics. Washington, DC: President's Council on Bioethics, 2003. 5-20. <<http://www.bioethics.gov/bookshelf/reader/chapter1.html#reading>>.
- Kateb, George. *Human Dignity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Lee, Patrick, and Robert P. George. "The Nature and Basis of Human Dignity." *Ratio Juris* 21.2 (2008): 173-93.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Time of Transitions*. Cambridge: Polity, 2006.
- Horton, Richard. "Rediscovering Human Dignity." *Lancet* 364 (2004): 1081-85.
- Kass, Leon. "Ageless Bodies, Happy Souls: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Perfection." *The New Atlantis* 1 (2003): 9-28.
- Lewis, Milton. "A Brief History of Human Dignity: Ideas and Application." *Perspectives on Human Dignity: A Conversation*. Ed. Jeff Malpas and

- Norelle Lickiss. Dordrecht: Springer, 2007. 93-105.
- Macklin, Ruth. "Dignity Is a Useless Concept." *BMJ* 327 (2003): 1419-20.
- Meilaender, Gilbert. *Neither Beast nor God: The Dignity of the Human Person*. New York: Encounter Books, 2009.
- O'Mathúna, Dónal P. "The Place of Dignity in Everyday Ethics." *Journal of Christian Nursing* 28.1 (2011): 12-18.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Taking a Precautionary Approach to Nanotechnology." *Nanotechnology Development* 1.e6 (2011): 26-30.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nanoethics: Big Ethical Issues with Small Technology*. London: Continuum Press, 2009.
- Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni. *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. 1486. <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/oration.asp>>.
- Pinker, Steven. "The Stupidity of Dignity." *The New Republic*. 28 May 2008. <<http://www.tnr.com/article/the-stupidity-dignity>>.
- Seidel, Asher. *Immortal Passage: Philosophical Speculations on Posthuman Evolution*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.
- Sulmasy, Daniel P. "Human Dignity and Human Worth." *Perspectives on Human Dignity: A Conversation*. Ed. Jeff Malpas and Norelle Lickiss. Dordrecht: Springer, 2007. 9-18.
- UNESCO. *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights*. 2005. <<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/bioethics/bioethics-and-human-rights>>.
- United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. 1948. <<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. 1966. <<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant*. 1966. <<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm>>.
- Warwick, Kevin. *In the Mind of the Machine*. <[http://www.kevinwarwick.com/mind\\_of\\_the\\_machine.htm](http://www.kevinwarwick.com/mind_of_the_machine.htm)>.
- Wolfe, Cary. *What is Posthumanism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Worldmapper. <<http://www.worldmapper.org>>.
- Zylinska, Joanna. *Bioethics in the Age of New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.

## Abstract

Human dignity supports the equal value of all humans and their ethical treatment. While human rights conventions use the term frequently, it is rarely defined. The term dignity is used differently, and two dimensions are described in detail. Inherent dignity is an intrinsic dimension held by all humans and is the basis of equal rights for all humans. Circumstantial dignity is another dimension, but is variable and changeable. This is in mind when circumstances are said to enhance or diminish someone's dignity. The recent critique of dignity arises in part because of conflation of these two dimensions. Others reject dignity because of its religious connections. Such criticisms will be responded to in defense of dignity.

Posthuman and transhuman enhancement also raise questions about the value of dignity because of its roots in humanism. Nick Bostrom defends posthuman dignity while critiquing Leon Kass's bioconservative position. Bostrom's argument will be critiqued because of his failure to distinguish between inherent and circumstantial dignity, and his misunderstanding of Kass's claims.

In contrast to the transhumanist enhancement project, inherent dignity points to the givenness and limitations of human nature. This indicates the importance of developing gratitude for human nature and avoiding an endless pursuit of perfection. Such an approach is not antagonistic to medicine and science. Instead, it places priority on improving the circumstantial dignity of all human beings, especially those who live without their basic needs being met. Their inherent dignity places a moral obligation on those with resources to help them. Medicine and science should focus on relieving their needs, not enhancing those who already have most needs met. Justice for all humans based on their inherent dignity is proposed as a significant argument against the ethics of transhuman enhancement.

**Keywords:** human dignity, intrinsic dignity, circumstantial dignity, posthumanism, transhumanism, enhancement, image of God

**Dónal P. O'MATHÚNA** is Senior Lecturer in Ethics, Decision-Making & Evidence in the School of Nursing & Human Sciences and an Affiliated Scholar in the Institute of Ethics at Dublin City University, Ireland. He has authored peer-reviewed papers on ethical issues in nanotechnology, healthcare, and disaster relief. He published *Nanoethics: Big Ethical Issues with Small Technology* (Continuum, 2009). His research interests also include conducting systematic reviews of healthcare interventions, and examining the role of emotion in teaching ethics.

Received: 1 November 2012  
Reviewed: 14 January 2013  
Accepted: 31 January 2013