

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 18 | Issue 3

Article 2

7-1-2001

The Twofold Source of the Dignity of Persons

John F. Crosby

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Crosby, John F. (2001) "The Twofold Source of the Dignity of Persons," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol18/iss3/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

THE TWOFOLD SOURCE OF THE DIGNITY OF PERSONS

John F. Crosby

Two sources of the dignity of human persons are distinguished and examined: the rational nature common to all human beings, and the incommunicable selfhood proper to each human being. I have dignity not only because I am a human being with human nature, but also because I am incommunicably and unrepeatably *this* human being and no other. The appeal to the dignity of persons accomplishes very little in moral discourse if this second source of dignity is neglected. I argue that this understanding of personal dignity is at once specifically Christian and available to non-Christians, and I try to clarify this paradox.

Christians claim that persons have an incomparable worth, or dignity, because persons are created and redeemed by God. Paul Ramsey once forcefully asserted this by saying that the dignity of us persons is extrinsic; it is not rooted in what we intrinsically are but rather in how God relates to us. He was making the point that Christians need not be too fastidious about the exact moment of the beginning of each new human person; since persons have their dignity not just from what they are in their own right but much more from what they are to God, we should look beyond the immanent makeup of the zygote to the intentions of God the creator.¹ While I admire the deep theocentric spirit out of which Ramsey speaks in that article, I also think that the dignity of persons is in part grounded in their immanent makeup. It is not conferred by God in a purely extrinsic way. After all, God creates plants and animals and provides for them, but this relation of Him to them does not invest them with anything like the dignity proper to human persons. If we persons were in our immanent makeup indistinguishable from plants and animals, then no conceivable divine attention could invest us with that dignity that we in fact have. In this paper I propose to examine dignity insofar as it is intrinsic to human persons and so examine it without any direct reference to God. We will see at the end that this non-theological explanation of dignity after all has a theological dimension and can be reckoned to Christian philosophy.



I. *Some preliminaries*

An important preliminary remark concerns the way I distinguish between personal dignity and the basic rights of the person. We frequently hear these concepts used interchangeably, but I propose to distinguish them in two ways. First, the rights of a person have a social dimension that is foreign to dignity. Only *another* person can respect or violate my rights. If I commit suicide, one cannot explain the wrong I undeniably do, in terms of me violating my own right to life; it takes a person other than myself to be capable of violating my rights. Just as I cannot steal my own property or commit adultery with my own wife, so I cannot violate my own right to life. But my dignity as person is there for me no less than for others; I can act against my own dignity no less than others can act against it, as when I throw myself away in despair over myself. Secondly, my basic human rights, as they are called nowadays, are not as strictly inalienable as my personal dignity. If I ask another to take my life, then, though I act wrongly, I remove my right as a moral obstacle for the other, and the wrong he does has to be explained in terms other than the violation of my right to life. If I tell someone to help himself to my property, I thereby prevent him from being a thief and violating my property rights, even if I act irresponsibly in offering him my property. In the same way, if I ask someone to take my life, I thereby prevent him from being a murderer, even though I act irresponsibly. Thus I can suspend or block my rights as a morally relevant factor in a given situation. But I cannot remove my dignity from a moral situation in this way. A prostitute may try ever so hard to make herself mere flesh for sale, but despite herself she forever retains her personal dignity, which is inevitably violated by her customers. Since, then, my personal dignity is not just there for others but also for me in relation to myself, and since it is absolutely incapable of being suspended or in any way alienated by me, it shows itself to be something distinct from and deeper than the basic human rights of the person. My concern in this paper is with this dignity rather than with rights.

And one more preliminary. One commonly speaks of depriving a person of dignity by some unworthy or humiliating treatment of that person. But as I will speak here of dignity, unworthy treatment of another is absolutely powerless to abrogate the other's dignity. Dignity is, as I said, intrinsic to being a person, and you would have to first abrogate the other as person before abrogating his or her dignity. Besides, unworthy treatment *presupposes* dignity; a given treatment of another is qualified as unworthy just because it fails to give the other what is due to him or her as a person having dignity. If dignity in my sense were stripped away from a person, then so would be the reason for calling the treatment of that person unworthy. So by dignity I do not mean that treatment of a person which is appropriate to him or her as person, but rather that in a person in virtue of which some treatment is appropriate and other treatment is inappropriate.

II. *Two sources of the dignity of persons*

Let us turn to the traditional account of human dignity given by

philosophers. The Greeks saw the unique dignity of man in his reason; man is a rational animal and in this he is superior to all subhuman animals. The Greek philosophers saw reason as the divine element in man; for Aristotle man never lives in a more godlike way than when he exercises his reason in the way of philosophical understanding. Of course, Plato and Aristotle saw reason at work in nature and in the cosmos, but here creatures only passively undergo reason, being ordered according to a rational plan; man by contrast has an essentially more intimate relation to reason in that he understands the meaning of things with his own reason. Reason is internalized in man as it is in no subhuman being, so that he is not just governed by reason but governs himself with his own reason². The point for us in the setting of this study is that man through his more intimate relation to reason has a greater share in the dignity of reason; since reason enters into his essential definition, he surpasses all sub-rational beings in dignity. Here we have a timelessly valid element of the philosophical heritage of the West.

The rationality of man is so rich and deep an idea that one might wonder whether anything more is needed for a full account of the dignity of persons. In explaining the ethics of the respect we owe each other, in explaining the inviolability that others should recognize in us, do we need to do more than affirm the dignity flowing from the rationality of each human being? I think that we need to do vastly more, and will now try to explain what this more is.

Notice that rationality is something common to all human beings; it belongs to human nature, in which we all share. Reason is not my exclusive possession, for you too have it. This commonness of reason shows itself in a certain way in and through the universal validity of rational activity; whatever I rightly understand as rationally necessary must also be understood by you as rationally necessary. The work of reason is supposed to be impersonal, the same for all, valid for all possible beings endowed with reason. You cannot say that some essentially necessary relation is valid for you but not for me, as if rationality itself varied from one rational being to the next. This commonness goes so far that the idea has crept into Western philosophy more than once that human beings are plural only through their bodies, as if the rational spirit in them were literally one, so that each human being does not have his or her own reason in the same way that each has his or her own body. As against this view we have of course to say that each human being has his or her own intellect and rational powers, no less than each has his or her own body. And yet true it is that the rational activities of each converge with those of all other human beings in the sense explained. Individual though reason be in each human being, it is also in some strong sense common to all; and so the dignity of rationality is a dignity common to all.

But you will ask, why does this commonness of dignity represent a problem for a philosophy of human dignity? I answer that it only represents a problem if it is taken to be the sole source of dignity. You will counter asking what else there is in a human being that is dignity-grounding besides the rational nature common to all human beings. I answer as follows.

Each human being, besides sharing in this common nature, also has something of his own—something his own and not another's—incommunicably his own. Obviously a human being would not amount to an individual being if he were not, over and above all that he has in common with others, also incommunicably his own. And so we find that each of us is a certain composition of what we have in common with others, and what we do not have in common with others. Now notice that the dignity of human beings, as we have so far discussed it, is tied only to our common rational nature and has as yet no connection with that which is incommunicably each person's own. It is not because I am *this incommunicable* human being that I have dignity, but because I am *a human being* endowed with reason. What gives me dignity is not incommunicably my own but is found in every other human being. One may still see no problem for the philosophy of human dignity, and in fact readers following closely will be quick to point out an advantage that seems to be gained by deriving dignity from our common human nature. They will say that the much-celebrated equality of human beings as to dignity is secured, for if that which endows me with dignity also endows you with it, then we are equal in dignity, a conclusion that seems to be of the first importance for the organization of the political community. And one may discern yet another advantage to be gained from this derivation of human dignity. By deriving it from that which is common to all human beings we can readily show how to reach out to other persons so as to acknowledge their dignity. I have only to start with the dignity that I know in myself, and thence to proceed to the other, seeing in the other an *alter ego*, a being in whom the same rational nature that I have exists as it were a second time. In other words, my task is to love my neighbor as myself; and it is our common human nature that makes possible this transition from self to other.

And yet there is a problem here if the account of dignity so far proposed is meant as a complete account. Notice that the incommunicable element in man belongs to man as *person*. One of the best known utterances of the Roman jurists about the person connects being a person with being incommunicable: *persona est sui iuris et alteri incommunicabilis*. It is precisely as person that I am myself (*sui iuris*) and no other (*alteri incommunicabilis*). St. Thomas Aquinas clearly teaches that being a person is not a common nature like human nature that can be shared in by many³; being a person is rather a matter of being an incommunicable individual within some common rational nature.⁴ This means that the account we have so far given of human dignity does not ground dignity in man as person; it is not because I am this incommunicable person that I have dignity, but because I share in the rational nature common to me and many others. This raises the question whether we have yet really taken the full measure of dignity. Is it really true that personhood has nothing to contribute to dignity, that our dignity does not also belong to us in virtue of our being persons?

These doubts grow on us if we consider how difficult we would find it to encounter a notorious proposal of Peter Singer using only the account of dignity given in terms of our common rational nature. Here is the much-discussed passage in Singer's *Practical Ethics* defending a certain kind of infanticide:

...suppose that a newborn baby is diagnosed as a hemophiliac. The parents, daunted by the prospect of bringing up a child with this condition, are not anxious for him to live. Could euthanasia be defended here? Our first reaction may well be a firm 'no,' for the infant can be expected to have a life that is worth living, even if not quite as good as that of a normal baby. ... His life can be expected to contain a positive balance of happiness over misery. To kill him...would be wrong.

Singer proceeds to say that there is a somewhat different utilitarian perspective in which the killing of this infant turns out to be the right thing to do after all.

Suppose a woman planning to have two children has one normal child, and then gives birth to a haemophiliac child. The burden of caring for that child may make it impossible for her to cope with a third child; but if the defective child were to die, she would have another. ... When the death of a defective infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the defective infant is killed. The loss of happy life for the first infant is outweighed by the gain of a happier life for the second. Therefore...it would...be right to kill him.

Singer concludes this passage with the significant statement that his view "treats infants as replaceable."⁵

Our question is whether we can take a principled stand against Singer on the basis of the dignity born of our common rational nature. Suppose that we object to him like this: "the hemophiliac infant has human and hence also rational nature. The infant, having all the dignity that comes from this nature, stands before me as inviolable; no one may directly kill him for the utilitarian reason given by Singer or for any other reason." Is this a decisive response to Singer? Not really; he can grant everything we say about the rational human nature of the impaired newborn, and still hold his ground on infanticide. He has only to exploit the fact that the dignity of persons depends on their common human nature, saying that all that is lost when the hemophiliac infant is killed, exists again in the healthier infant that he wants to make room for. For this new infant also shares in rational nature and so has dignity from exactly the same source and in exactly the same measure as the hemophiliac infant had it. One instance of rational nature succeeds the other; the first is replaced by the second. The loss in terms of dignity that comes from the infanticide is perfectly and exactly annulled by the gain in terms of dignity that comes from the new child who takes the place of the first child. But in addition to this "wash" of gain and loss there is also a gain not annulled by any loss, an absolute gain, namely the gain of full health in the new child. People like Singer might even make bold to say that we are in fact *required* by our respect for human dignity to carry out this replacement, for we show respect for human dignity by seeing to it that human beings live in the greatest possible state of flourishing. And so I say that if we cannot enlarge our account

of human dignity, if we cannot find some way to let the incommunicable personhood of each human being play a role in the grounding of dignity, then we are left with no good answer to Singer. As long as the dignity of human beings is entirely and exclusively tied to that which is common to them all, they are replaceable one by another, and Singer has the last word.

Let me try to bring out a little more this replaceability by means of an extreme example of it. Take any copy of today's *New York Times*. Everything of interest in any one copy can be found in any other copy; no one copy has any point of interest that would distinguish it from the others. In fact, each copy exists simply for the sake of that which is common to all the copies of today's paper; each copy is well made just to the extent that it contains neither more nor less than the other copies contain. Of course, each copy is an incommunicable individual; one copy of the paper is not another. And yet that which is common to all the copies in some sense dominates each individual; the individuals exist simply for the sake of multiplying the common content. This is why any one copy is so easily replaceable by any other copy. If you lose the copy that you first bought, your loss is completely replaced by the purchase of another. In fact, the replaceability of one by another goes so far that under certain circumstances the difference between one and another is indiscernible. If I step away from my desk leaving a copy of today's *Times* on it, I cannot tell when I return whether it is the same copy or a replacement copy that someone has secretly supplied. What is common to the individual copies is so strongly present in each copy that it may be impossible to tell one individual copy from another.

Clearly it is along just these lines that Singer is thinking when he proposes replacing one human infant with another. Killing the hemophiliac infant so as to make room for a perfectly healthy one is just like turning in a frayed copy of today's *Times* for a perfectly clean one. Even if that which is common to many individuals is not just the content of today's news but is the much grander thing of human nature with its power of rationality, the individuals that are taken to be mere instances in relation to the common will still be subject to the same law of replaceability that we see with the newspapers.

Let us then turn our attention to human beings not insofar as they share in the same nature but insofar as each is himself and no other. If we continue the old tradition of using Socrates as a kind of logical dummy, then we can say that we are now turning our attention to Socrates not as a human being but as Socrates, and ask whether Socrates does not have some dignity just by being the person Socrates.

Let us consult those who knew and loved Socrates and ask them whether all that they knew and loved in Socrates could be repeated in some other human being. The human nature of Socrates is in a sense repeated in all other human beings; his being a Greek is in a sense repeated in all other Greeks; his being a philosopher is repeated in all other philosophers; even his famous irony was practiced by at least a few disciples who might have been called specifically "Socratic" thinkers. But those who knew and loved Socrates will not grant that everything that they knew and loved in him can be repeated in others; they will insist that there was in

Socrates something absolutely unrepeatable, they will say that there was a mystery of the man and that Socrates was not a mere instance or specimen of this mystery but that he *was* this mystery, so that a second Socrates is strictly, absolutely impossible.⁶ When Socrates died, a hole was left in the world, such that no subsequent person could possibly fill it. It was not just that a great philosopher died, the likes of which were not likely to be seen again; with this one would push the incommunicable personhood of Socrates into the realm of unusual achievements and miss the mystery of it. The incommunicable Socrates was something ineffable, something too concrete for the general concepts of human language⁷; something knowable through love but not utterable in concepts.⁸

Now I want to say that those who knew Socrates in all that made him unrepeatable were in fact finding worth, dignity, value in him, otherwise they would not have revered and loved him as they did.⁹ I also want to say that what we see in Socrates holds universally. It is not only because I share in the rational nature common to us all that I have dignity, but also because I am the unrepeatable person I am. Whoever gets acquainted with me in all my unrepeatable selfhood, gets acquainted with a dimension of my dignity that would otherwise escape him. Each person is, over and above all the qualities and kinds that each has in common with others, unrepeatably himself or herself, and each has dignity just by being unrepeatable. We have here that aspect of dignity that we can with all precision call the dignity of the human person.

And only when our understanding of the sources of dignity has been expanded to encompass the incommunicable personhood of each human being are we in a position to defend hemophiliac infants against the infanticide proposed by Peter Singer. For now, but only now, can we say that this infant has dignity, not just as the bearer of rational human nature, but as this infant, as this incommunicable newborn person. The hemophiliac infant cannot be replaced, because as person it is absolutely unreplaceable and is invested with dignity in its very unreplaceability. Only now does human dignity bring with it moral protection for the individual person. Only now can the invocation of dignity do the work in moral analysis that we expect it to do. Singer actually agrees with this; however much he may grant us, for the sake of argument, concerning the common rational nature of human beings, he will never grant that the hemophiliac newborn is a person; he realizes that so much dignity would then flow back into the newborn infant taken *as this individual*, that the proposed infanticide would present itself to most people as morally intolerable.

We may come to understand better this specifically personal dignity if we notice the "intimation of immortality" that it contains for individual persons. Let us assume that human beings really were mere instances of human nature. In that case an endless succession of human beings would provide all the immortality that anyone could wish. Their ability to replace each other would allow for an immortality accomplished through mortal individuals continually reproducing themselves. The immortality of man need not bring with it the immortality of any individual human being. But since human persons are not mere instances of human nature, since the final destruction of any one of them would tear open a hole in being that

could never be filled by any subsequent human being, there is a deep point to the immortality of individual persons. This is of course not a finished proof but only, as I put it, an "intimation of immortality" for persons. But it does add something to our understanding of personal dignity. The inviolability of individual persons known to us from our moral dealings with them, becomes an intimation of immortality when persons are considered in relation to death.

Before concluding this section I should add that my distinction between common human nature and an incommunicable human person is only a distinction, and that in an integral personalist philosophy one would have to re-unite the things distinguished. One could show (in another paper) that the very idea of a "mere specimen of rational nature" is absurd; that rational nature cannot be multiplied in interchangeable individuals in the way today's newspaper can be multiplied; that rational nature is such that it can exist only in incommunicable persons. One could even pick out certain elements of rational nature, such as the freedom proper to it, and show the way in which they imply a incommunicable person; or one could proceed from the self-possession of personal being (*persona est sui iuris*, as cited above) to the freedom that is usually reckoned among the powers of human nature. This would mean that the Greek idea of man as having a rational nature already contains in a way the idea of man as person¹⁰, and that the Christian idea of man as person does not overthrow but completes the Greek idea of man as sharing in a rational nature. But I will not try to give a full account of this unity of human persons; the contribution that I want to make here to our understanding of the dignity of man requires above all that I distinguish out, and focus attention on, man as incommunicable person, and that I show in this way the existence of not one but two sources of dignity.

Those contemporary philosophers who in speaking of personal dignity stress the *otherness* of other human beings (for example, Levinas) find dignity precisely in the personal incommunicability to which I have been calling attention. They form a certain contrast to those who speak of the other as *alter ego* and who approach others in terms of our common humanity¹¹; the advocates of radical otherness approach others in terms of what each person incommunicably is. I have argued that both groups of thinkers have a part of the truth; they have divided up between themselves the twofold source of the dignity of persons.¹²

III. *Some objections*

1. One way of objecting to my analysis is by producing counter-examples. One reader objected that if we take away a child's favorite doll and try to replace it with another, the child may insist that the first is irreplaceable and unrepeatable. Here we have unrepeatability yet no dignity of the magnitude of personal dignity; thus when we find unrepeatability and dignity in persons, they may not be connected in the intimate way that I have claimed they are connected. An obvious response to the objection is that the child is very likely personifying its favorite doll, that is, projecting personal life into it; and then it is only in accordance with my account of

personal dignity that the child would find both unrepeatability and incomparable value in its doll. But let us suppose that the child is old enough to avoid such personification. If the child is 13 or 14 years old and if it has had the doll for as long as it can remember, then of course it will not want to hear of a replacement doll. The reason is that the doll has become as if a part or extension of the child, who thus feels she is losing something of her very self in losing the doll. It is as if the embodiment of the child extends beyond the limits of her body and encompasses things that she has grown up with and grown in to. So the doll is irreplaceable, but not in its own right as doll, but in its relation to the child, as a result of the way it has been incorporated into her life. One sees the very great difference to a person, who is irreplaceable in his or her own right, without having to be incorporated into some other. Perhaps we can say that the doll has a derived irreplaceability, whereas a person has a primary, originary irreplaceability.

2. Some might think that in my argument I mean to *infer* from the unrepeatability of persons to their dignity. And they may object that it is after all possible that something could be uniquely, unrepeatably bad; the formal fact of unrepeatability or incommunicability does not seem to imply value or dignity. But I do not mean to propose any such inference. What I mean is instead that this unrepeatable person has value, and he has it, not as just being unrepeatable, but as being this unrepeatable person. Thus you can discover and experience this value, *not by picking out unrepeatability as an abstract moment, but by getting acquainted with the individual person who is unrepeatable*. In fact, once acquainted with some unrepeatable person, it is hardly possible for anyone to fail to experience the dignity of which I speak. This experience of personal dignity through acquaintance with an unrepeatable person has, then, nothing to do with an inference: there is not enough universality in an incommunicable person to support any inference.

3. A keen-thinking logician might say that what I have called the incommunicable in persons resolves itself in the end into something communicable; for *all persons* have this incommunicability, which seems therefore to be common to all of them. The attempt to secure personal incommunicability or unrepeatability seems to destroy itself dialectically, with the result that my two sources of dignity resolve themselves into one. But it must be remembered that what all persons have in common as persons is not some common nature, such as human nature, but rather the fact that each is unrepeatable and cannot exist in duplicate or triplicate. Thus the sense in which human nature is common to all human beings is fundamentally different from the sense in which personhood is common to all persons.¹³ As long as I hold fast to this difference I can continue speaking of the twofold source of dignity in persons.

4. Another objection says that my view exaggerates the importance of that which is incommunicably each person's own. What distinguishes one person from another is in reality peripheral to the person. Put together such things as the place of one's upbringing, the year of one's birth, one's IQ, and you will soon have a set of properties that serves to distinguish one person from all others. But these individuating factors are not central to a person; what is central is his having a soul, having free will, being made for God, and the like. These central determinants of a person are common

to him and all other persons, whereas the determinants of him being himself and no other are relatively peripheral. But that which is relatively peripheral to a person can play no very large role in establishing the dignity of the person; if dignity is to depend on what belongs most centrally to a person, it will have to depend on what is common to him and all persons. Hence the attempt to include incommunicable personhood in the ground of human dignity is misguided.

This objection trivializes what I mean by personal incommunicability. I do not mean merely a bundle of traits which serves to identify a being as this one and no other (even though each separate trait in the bundle is common to that being and to many others). Such a bundle just provides a device for picking out one individual among other individuals and for referring to it with precision; it does not capture that ineffable mystery of a person of which I spoke above, since such a bundle is entirely effable, entirely utterable. Besides, most bundles of traits that happen to pick out one individual could in principle be instantiated by more than one individual; however unlikely it is to be repeated in others, this could in principle happen, and hence the bundle falls short of the unrepeatable person.¹⁴ It follows from my discussion above that the whole conception of personal incommunicability as peripheral is fundamentally flawed; it is simply not true that the deeper we go into the center of a person the more we find that which is common to all persons. Just the contrary is true: we arrive at the center of a person, at the mystery of this individual person, at that which above all engenders love for the person, only when we encounter the person as unrepeatable.¹⁵ It is, then, quite in order to let personal incommunicability play a large role in our account of human dignity.

5. According to another objection, my view compromises the unity of the human species. One may suspect that I am saying of human persons what St. Thomas Aquinas said of the angels, namely that each is its own species, and that human persons are therefore not gathered together in the unity of one human species. And there are indeed weighty reasons, including weighty Christian reasons, for wanting to preserve the unity of the human species. But the unrepeatability of human persons does not prevent them from sharing a common nature, any more than sharing a common nature prevents them from being persons. I have acknowledged this common nature throughout this paper, and have made a point of all that it contributes to the dignity of persons. We can in fact express the unrepeatability of persons in terms which *presuppose* a common nature, as when I say that each human person has human nature *in his or her incommunicable, unrepeatable way*. This "adverbial" way of expressing personal incommunicability inserts it from the beginning within our common human nature and avoids even the appearance of annulling this common nature.

6. A particularly interesting objection, in my opinion, is the one that says that the equality of persons is jeopardized by letting dignity be based in part on persons as incommunicable. As we remarked above, we seem to secure this equality by letting dignity flow from our common human nature, for then dignity arises in each person from the same source. But if we let it also flow from the unrepeatable personhood of each human being,

then this dignity is no longer the same in each person; it is rather one thing in one person and another thing in another. This might seem to open the door to persons differing in dignity, some having more of it and some having less. In this case the appeal to personal dignity could function in moral discussions in "elitist" ways that would yield some very suspicious moral and political conclusions.

To this objection I would first respond that the equality of human dignity is by no means secured by deriving dignity from our common rational nature. For one could still say with Aristotle that man realizes this rational nature more perfectly than woman, that masters realize it more perfectly than natural slaves, and that Greeks realize it more perfectly than barbarians. One can thus still posit large differences in dignity among human beings. The equality of dignity can in fact be better preserved by letting dignity also derive from personal unrepeatability. For you cannot say that one incommunicable person has more dignity and another has less, since you would then be positing some common dignity-grounding quality possessed to different degrees by the two persons. With such a common quality, however, you abandon the incommunicability of the persons who are being compared. *The fact is that by being incommunicable and unrepeatable, persons are incommensurable with each other, they cannot be compared with each other, and because of this a certain equality is established among them.* They are alike in that each is incommunicable and unrepeatable, but more importantly, the comparisons that give rise to more and less dignity are blocked by the incommensurability of persons with each other.

Let us sum up our response to this objection. Dignity belongs to persons *both* because of their sameness in a common nature *and* because of their personal differences one from another: as for the equality of dignity in persons, we get the surprising result that the differences among unrepeatable persons lend more support to this equality than the sameness does. We can also put this result to the test of history; let us just ask whether the equality of man and woman has made its way into consciences because women are now regarded as sharing in human nature no less than men, or because women are regarded as being persons just like men are persons.

IV. *Intrinsic and extrinsic dignity*

One now sees what I meant at the outset in saying I was looking for a personal dignity that is immanent in, or intrinsic to human beings, and so is understandable without reference to God. For what is more a person's own than his existing as this unrepeatable person? How can that which is each person's own be entirely extrinsic to the person in the sense of arising only in relation to God and making no sense apart from that relation? Is it not undeniable that all my claims about the twofold source of personal dignity are indeed intelligible to believer and non-believer alike?

And yet there is the very significant historical fact that human beings were not really recognized by Plato and Aristotle as persons endowed with this dignity. Though Plato in a sense "discovered the soul" and brought its immortality to light for the first time, he does not yet really have the idea of man as unrepeatable person. One has only to recall the passages in Book

IV of the *Republic* where he proposes abortion and infanticide for children conceived unlawfully in the ideal city he is constructing. Perhaps Plato is so taken with his Forms or Ideas that he sees in individuals only instances of the Forms; this would have interfered with him grasping each human being as unrepeatable person. Or perhaps he goes so far in situating each human being in the city-state that he ends up making them mere parts of it; this would have produced the same interference in his intellectual vision. However one explains it, human beings do not yet stand forth in Plato, or in Aristotle for that matter, with that mystery of concrete individuality that makes them persons. This lack in the Greek philosophers is at first glance surprising if I am right in affirming the intelligibility of personal dignity to believer and non-believer alike.

Christian philosophers were the first who brought to light this dignity and its source.¹⁶ If I ask what it is in Christian existence that supports believers in those convictions about personal dignity that I have laid out in this essay, then I would say that it is the experience of the living God of Israel and of Jesus Christ, calling me by name, choosing me, giving me particular tasks for my life, calling me to account for my life at the end of it, dealing with me as if I were the only person, letting me stand before Him face to face, letting His counsels be changed by my petition. This is what awakens and deepens and confirms in me the conviction that I am not just a specimen of rational nature, that I am not replaceable by subsequent persons, that I have an incomparable worth *as this person*. If I were to lose this faith in being personally called by the living God, then my sense of myself would be shaken and my experience of myself as unrepeatable person would receive a severe blow. Other human beings might still take me seriously as person and so preserve in me some sense of my dignity as person, but the loss of the divine partner would greatly weaken my hold on this dignity. It is along these lines that one might unfold the important theocentric truth affirmed by Paul Ramsey, to whom we referred at the beginning.

How then do we put together Ramsey's claim about the *extrinsic* source of personal dignity with my claim about dignity being *intrinsic* to persons? Perhaps like this. Personal dignity is extrinsic in the sense that it comes to light for the first time in the encounter with the Christian God who calls persons, and in the sense that even now it is most deeply experienced in this encounter, and is liable to be effaced in the minds of those who turn aggressively against Christian revelation. It is intrinsic in the sense that, once come to light, it can be understood without constant reference to God and can be verified in our most intimate experience of ourselves and other persons; even non-believers can see at least something of that unrepeatable selfhood with which dignity is connected.¹⁷

One can draw an illuminating parallel with the contingency of the world. Neither Plato nor Aristotle understood, as Christians understand, that the world could as well have never been and that in its place, so to say, there could have been simply nothing. But once the human mind has had the contingency of the world proposed to it, it can never be the same again; it exists henceforth in a new horizon and can never return to that of the ancient philosophers. Even if the relation of the world to God that makes up the full Christian understanding of the contingency of the world drops

out of view, the radical non-necessity of the world remains intelligible to the human mind. We could say that the contingency of the world has an intrinsic and an extrinsic aspect; in its intrinsic aspect contingency means non-necessary existence, in its extrinsic aspect it means total dependency on the will of God who could as well not create or could as well create differently. The former can hold its ground in the human mind without the constant support of the latter. And so with the dignity of persons; even when the relation to God that first reveals and also constitutes the dignity of persons is for whatever reason left out of account, something intrinsic to persons, and so something intelligible simply in terms of the immanent being of persons, remains. What remains is that incommunicability, or unrepeatability, or unsubstitutability of persons that is signed by an incomparable dignity.¹⁸

Franciscan University of Steubenville

NOTES

1. "One grasps the religious outlook upon the sanctity of human life only if he sees that this life is asserted to be *surrounded* by sanctity that need not be in a man; that the most dignity a man ever possesses is a dignity that is alien to him. From this point of view it becomes relatively unimportant to say exactly when among the products of human generation we are dealing with an organism that is human... His [man's] dignity is 'an *alien* dignity,' an evaluation that is not of him but placed upon him by the divine decree." Paul Ramsey, "The Morality of Abortion," in Baird and Rosenbaum (eds.), *The Ethics of Abortion* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), 66, 67.

2. One sees from this that reason is understood in such a way as to comprise what we call freedom, even though the Greeks did only partial justice to freedom. In any case, Greek reason far exceeds the degenerate residue of reason that today goes by the name of instrumental reason.

3. Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 30, a. 4, especially the 2nd objection and the response to it.

4. This important truth finds expression in a certain linguistic usage: philosophers are liable to speak not of "the human person" but of "human persons." See, for example, Parfit's title, *Persons and Reasons*, or Spaemann's *Personen*, or the entry in various encyclopedias with the title "persons." The reason seems to be that "the human person" suggests a common nature shared in by all human persons, whereas "a person" or "persons" expresses precisely the individual of some nature. I must admit that my book, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, would have been more correctly called *The Selfhood of Human Persons*.

5. Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge UK, 1979), 133-34.

6. I suppose it goes without saying that a clone of Socrates would not be a second Socrates, any more than identical twins are two copies of the same person.

7. It is just this ineffability that lets us distinguish the unrepeatability of persons from another kind of unrepeatability. If we consider the concept, "even prime number," it is clear that it can be instantiated in one and only one number, namely the number 2. It seems to be like a person in that, just as there can be only one Socrates, so there can be only one even prime number. But

there is this difference, that even prime number is entirely effable; it is uttered with all precision in the concept, "even prime number." But that in Socrates which can exist only once, and never be repeated, is simply unutterable, ineffable. Socrates is not an unrepeatable person in virtue of clearly defined notes of his being that intersect in such a way as to allow of only one Socrates. Thanks to Linda Zagzebski, who challenged me to think about the unrepeatability that is given in "even prime number."

8. I develop this unrepeatability, or incommunicability, of persons at some length in my book, *The Selfhood of the Human Person* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), especially in ch. 2, "Incommunicability."

9. It is remarkable that in the famous speech where Alcibiades expresses his deep veneration for Socrates, he makes a point of the unrepeatability of Socrates: "...but personally I think the most amazing thing about him is the fact that he is absolutely unique; there's no one like him, and I don't believe there ever was. You could point to some likeness to Achilles in Brasidas and the rest of them; you might compare Nestor and Antenor, and so on, with Pericles. There are plenty of such parallels in history, but you'll never find anyone like Socrates, or any ideas like his ideas, in our own times or in the past..." (*Symposium*, 221 c, Joyce translation)

10. In one place where Aristotle speaks of reason in human beings, he seems to be drawn in the direction of personal selfhood: "This [reason] would seem, too, to be each man himself, since it is the authoritative and better part of himself. It would be strange, then, if he were not to choose the life of his self but that of something else" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1178a, 2-4, Ross translation; my italics).

11. Cf. Alain Finkielkraut, *In the Name of Humanity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

12. In no way do I claim to have given in this section a complete account of the sources of personal dignity. I wanted to call attention to the two sources that have been discussed, especially to the second, but without in any way impeding the search for further sources. For example, if we were to explore the deeper forms of interpersonal solidarity we would find that the very great value that they embody is a source of dignity for the individual persons who are called to live in such solidarity with one another.

13. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches this with all clarity in the *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 30, art. 4. Note especially the *ad 2*, where he says that the personhood of several individuals is not a matter of them sharing in a common *essentia* but rather a matter of them being alike in that each has the same *modus existendi incommunicabiliter*.

14. For penetrating criticism of this bundle theory of individuality, see Jorge Gracia, *Individuality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 64-69, to mention just one relevant passage in his book.

15. Max Scheler argues for just this thesis and in fact regards it as central to his ethical personalism; see my discussion of this whole theme in Scheler in my "The Individuality of Human Persons: A Study in the Ethical Personalism of Max Scheler," *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. LII/1 (1998).

16. Christian philosophers have also thrown new light on our common human nature and its dignity. The fact that the Son of God assumed our nature and has drawn close to each of us through sharing human nature with us, invests it with a dignity that surpasses all that pre-Christian thinkers could have imagined. So we might fruitfully discuss the collaboration of faith and reason in understanding the dignity we have on the basis of our common human nature. I do not discuss this in the present essay, because I am primari-

ly concerned with the other, relatively neglected source of dignity, the one that lies in being this or that unrepeatable person.

17. If one fails to do justice to the intrinsic as well as to the extrinsic aspect of personal dignity, acknowledging only the extrinsic, then one undermines the appeal to personal dignity that we make in deliberations on public policy in a pluralistic society. For personal dignity understood as only extrinsic in the sense of Ramsey seems to make sense only within the community of believers, and non-believing fellow citizens cannot be expected to acknowledge it. This is in fact just the way Ronald Dworkin in his *Life's Dominion* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993) tries to marginalize all talk of the "sanctity of life"; he portrays it as only extrinsic value ("detached" value, in his terminology) and hence as incapable of providing any common ground for the debates on law and policy in a pluralistic society. It is no accident that Dworkin uses for his purposes (pp. 38-39) the essay of Ramsey that we cited above, heartily approving all that Ramsey says about the "alien" character of personal dignity. But I hold that only if there corresponds to the extrinsic, theocentric sanctity of life an intrinsic, humanistic sanctity, can one meaningfully appeal to the sanctity of human life in discussion with those who do not share our faith.

18. Thanks to Patrick Lee, to Norris Clarke, S.J., and to two reviewers at *Faith and Philosophy* for their critical reactions to this paper.