Deciphering Dignity

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"Dignity" has become one of the most frequently invoked, but rarely defined, words in bioethics. It plays a prominent role in international declarations (Council of Europe 2001; UNESCO 2005) and domestic policy recommendations (President's Council on Bioethics 2002; 2008), but its precise meaning and function are generally unarticulated. Although some commentators defend dignity's role in these documents (Kass 2008), a growing number of critics argue that dignity is not a well-developed ethical principle, but rather "a useless concept" (Macklin 2003) that is reflexively cited in policy discussions "as a moral stop sign" to prohibit certain biomedical activities (Meltzer 2008).

Fabrice Jotterand's article, "Human Dignity and Transhumanism" (2010), underscores the need for a systematic approach to evaluating dignity claims in bioethical discourse. Although various themes animate his piece, Jotterand's principal aim is to repudiate the claim, made by Nick Bostrom and other transhumanists, that individuals can enhance their dignity through technological modification (Bostrom 2005; 2008). In particular, Jotterand contends that the transhumanists' view of *posthuman dignity* is incompatible with the vision of *human dignity* invoked in the UNESCO Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (UDBHR). The trouble with this argument—not just for Jotterand, but for anyone relying on the Declaration's vague notion of human dignity—is that it is difficult to make normative comparisons without first clarifying dignity's meaning.

Jotterand's response to this predicament is puzzling. Initially, he acknowledges that without sufficient content, dignity lacks the moral weight to contribute to discrete debates in bioethics. Nevertheless, he proposes to use dignity in a similarly "loose way" to reject the transhumanists' belief that posthuman dignity is compatible with human dignity. Later in his critique, Jotterand appears to recognize that he cannot engage in a conversation about posthuman dignity unless he is willing to infuse human dignity with "particular metaphysical assumptions." Jotterand therefore posits, as he nears the end of his article, that human dignity is characterized by one's "right to be left alone," "unique identity," and "irreplaceability" (45). Ultimately, he concludes that these characteristics of human dignity are incompatible with posthuman dignity.

As Inmaculada de Melo-Martín's commentary in this issue demonstrates (2010), Jotterand's discussion of dignity at times obscures more than it enlightens. Much of this confusion could be remedied if Jotterand—and others who imbue dignity with moral salience—followed the advice he offers to the transhumanists: to reflect on dignity's meaning and clearly enunciate the "metaphysical assumptions" that underpin one's view of it.

To that end, I offer a brief taxonomy of dignity to illustrate the various meanings of dignity that animate the debate between Jotterand and Bostrom. This taxonomy is not comprehensive; dignity functions in additional and different ways in other contexts. The aim here is more modest: It is to begin deciphering dignity in a way that illuminates the moral claims at the crux of Jottrand's disagreement with the transhumanists. I first highlight the features of each form of dignity, and then discuss how the taxonomy might clarify the issues at hand.

Equality as dignity. The phrase "human dignity"—as it appears in the UDBHR and is understood by Jotterand—is chiefly concerned with what I call *equality as dignity*. This notion of dignity instills all humans with equal worth on the basis of their membership in the human species. Equality as dignity has several defining elements. First, it is a universal feature of humans.[1] All people, regardless of their different abilities or status, have the same degree of dignity and are owed the same level of respect. Second, it is a permanent and static trait. This type of dignity cannot be enhanced, nor can it be diminished or destroyed. It is a "native entitlement" (Rolston 2008, 129).

Status as dignity. One of Jotterand's concerns, which I discuss shortly, is whether "a transhuman being would have the same... status compared to what we currently consider a human being" (45). The form of dignity that troubles Jotterand is *status as dignity*. It was used pervasively during the pre-Enlightenment period to denote people or institutions of high rank. Although it is invoked less frequently today, it can exist anywhere in which a social hierarchy deems some individuals or institutions more worthy of respect than others. *Status as dignity* is inegalitarian; it cannot survive in the absence of a power differential. Furthermore, because one's dignity depends on one's social status, *status as dignity* is best described as an acquired, rather than an intrinsic, trait. Finally, it is a contingent quality, not

1. Commentators differ on precisely which feature of humanity grounds *equality as dignity*. Jotterand adopts the position, espoused by Holmes Rolston (2008), that each person's claim to a unique identity confers all humans with dignity. Given space constraints, I do not take a position on which aspects of humanity are dignity-conferring.

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a permanent one. It varies with one's social status, and can be gained or lost, just like a political title.

Virtue as dignity. When Bostrom contends that technological modifications can enhance dignity, he is not referring to *equality* or *status as dignity*; rather, he is focused on what I call *virtue as dignity*.[2] We invoke this form of dignity when we describe people who behave (or fail to behave) in ways we deem virtuous. People who persevere in the face of adversity, maintain composure in spite of fear, and display self-control despite great suffering are considered dignified. Those who display, among other traits, vulnerability or depravity are regarded as less dignified. In some cases, people's behavior is so humiliating, shameful, and demeaning that we deem their conduct undignified. As this metric illustrates, *virtue as dignity* can be enhanced or diminished on the basis of one's acts. In this respect, it is performative, variable, and contingent.

Collective virtue as dignity. Jotterand notes that some critics of transhumanism, such as Leon Kass and Francis Fukuyama, reject enhancement technologies "because they could undermine our humanness or our dignity as humans" (45). These scholars are expressing a concern about our *collective virtue as dignity*. A central feature of this notion of dignity is that it is iconographic. It views each person as an icon of all humans. When an individual acts or is treated in a manner perceived as degrading or dehumanizing, not only is that person's *virtue as dignity* diminished; so too, is our *collective virtue as dignity*. Prohibitions on cannibalism and baby selling, for example, exist because even if individuals consent to such acts, the acts themselves offend our idea of a dignified society; they threaten our *collective virtue as dignity*.

Applying this taxonomy to the debate between Jotterand and Bostrom brings the nature of their disagreement into finer relief and suggests ways in which each could further sharpen his analysis. Jotterand raises (at least) the following three objections to Bostrom's view: (1) Transhumanism jeopardizes our *equality as dignity*, (2) transhumanism risks creating a hierarchy of humans in which some have more *status as dignity* than others, and (3) the use of enhancement technologies may diminish our *collective virtue as dignity*. Recalling the features of each type of dignity, I consider these arguments in turn.

Jotterand's first objection rests on his twofold belief that the unique identity of each person is the basis of *equality as dignity* and that transhumans will not have a unique identity. It is not clear, however, that these premises must hold true. *Equality as dignity* need not be grounded in Rolston's theory of uniqueness, but even if it were, Jotterand would need to prove that transhumans lack uniqueness. His argument that "technology, by its very nature, tends toward conformity" (45), ignores that technology—whether a bionic limb or a cognitive-enhancement chip—is added to an existing, unique person.[3] People with cochlear implants do not lose their individuality because their lives are enhanced with technology. Moreover, *equality as dignity* is not a characteristic that admits of degrees; it is permanent and unchanging. Enhancement technology cannot diminish or destroy it.

The fear that transhumanism may create a Brave New World in which transhumans have more *status as dignity* than humans is an idea, however, with some traction. As Bostrom concedes, "the rank of humans would suffer" with the creation of transhumans, particularly if transhumans came to occupy the distinguished societal positions previously held by ordinary humans (Bostrom 2008, 196). Bostrom does not seem particularly worried about the injustices this outcome would create, making this one of Jotterand's stronger points.

Jotterand's approach to Bostrom's use of *virtue as dignity*, however, is curious. Rather than confronting Bostrom's argument that technological modification can enhance an individual's *virtue as dignity*, Jotterand describes how technological modification might threaten our *collective virtue as dignity*. He explains, through an example involving the use of memory transfer technology and "spare selves," that the "availability of anthropo-technological devices" will cause us to "trivialize human life" (45). Bostrom, however, not only acknowledges that certain modifications might diminish an individual's *virtue as dignity*, he admits that some modifications might imperil *collective virtue as dignity*. The ongoing challenge for Jotterand, then, is to directly address whether these alterations can augment *virtue as dignity*.

Jotterand's work is an important reminder that dignity is not one concept, but rather many conceptions. Regardless of its form, however, dignity's usefulness as an ethical norm depends on our ongoing and careful attention to its meanings and features. ■

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2. Bostrom refers to this form of dignity as *dignity as a quality*, and he ascribes it to nonpersons as well as persons. I use the language of *virtue as dignity* because (1) virtue is *the* quality that underpins Bostrom's category, and (2) this commentary leaves open the question of whether nonpersons can possess *virtue as dignity*.

3. Some enhancements could be accomplished prenatally, but individuals born with such enhancements would have a unique identity.

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