

Vasil Gluchman  
(واسیل گوجمان)

2. I will return to the problem of correlative duties later in a different context.
3. Dieter Birnbacher points out that various authors often use the concept of human dignity in their discussions just to avoid problems with the presentation of rational arguments (Birnbacher, 1996, p.108). I think that in many respects this is true also about their use of the concept 'intrinsic value of man' that they directly connect with the concept and value of human dignity.
4. I do not think that to derive the value of (human) dignity from the value of life (i.e. to put it, to certain extent, on a biological basis) means that we, in some way, degrade humanity. On the contrary, I believe that this approach creates a real basis for dignity, human dignity included, and also creates clear reasons for its protection, support and development. For a further discussion on this point see also my study (Gluchman, 2002, pp.119-137).
5. Brad Stetson divides dignity into internal and external (earned) and claims that the former is universal and the latter can be universal but does not have to be. The internal dignity is theoretical, while the external one is practical and it is reflected in behaviour. According to him, dignity is the essence that creates an ontological basis for delimitating the difference between humans and animals (Stetson, 1998, pp.15-17). I believe that the author uses here a methodological approach that I cannot agree with. The very fact of assigning human dignity to human beings cannot create a basis for the claim that human dignity determines the distinction between humans and animals. The correct approach would be the opposite way of reasoning. On the basis of a clearly defined criterion we come to a conclusion that animals do not have such capacities that are possessed by human beings, so it follows that animals cannot have the dignity that we assign to human beings.
6. For helpful comments, I am particularly grateful to Jon Sorum, Dieter Birnbacher, Göran Collste, and Philip Pettit.

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a number of important conclusions. One of them is that all human beings, including infants, mentally or morally immature children and mentally disabled people, have the dignity that belongs to the members of the species *Homo sapiens*, and which I expressed in mathematical terms by the number 1. This degree of dignity belongs to all human beings simply because they were born as a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, regardless of their future qualities and capacities, their future conduct, or their successes or failures in life. On this basis we accord human dignity to all human beings, reflecting our esteem and respect for human life, and on this basis we consider all human beings morally equal. Unlike Collste, we do not derive human dignity from the equality of people, but we derive their moral equality from their human dignity; that is from the fact that they exist as human beings. This basic degree of human dignity that is assigned to all human beings gives rise to correlative moral duties that apply to all moral agents and reflect the need to protect and respect all human beings because of their moral equality based on their human dignity.<sup>5</sup> (At this place we are not concerned with the number of problems that can arise in connection with human dignity, e.g. in relation to abortions, euthanasia, death penalty, etc., since the scope of this work is limited).

### 3. Conclusion

We can conclude our examination of (human) dignity by summing up. Dignity is a concept that we use to describe an aggregate of values and qualities of someone or something that deserve esteem and respect. The primary value that creates the right to have dignity is life. The degree of dignity according to a particular life form depends on its place in the evolutionary scale. Human beings are the highest form of life so they possess the highest degree of dignity.<sup>6</sup>

### Endnotes

1. In my examination of the essence, content and consequentialist aspects of human dignity, I will intentionally not discuss the idea of human dignity in the context of the history of philosophical and ethical ideas. In cases when I touch some other conceptions of human dignity, I will exclusively refer to contemporary conceptions (mostly the conceptions from the turn of the century).

animals (we can mention apes and dolphins) and human beings, is the existence of qualitative differences. There exists an evolutionary chain of various forms of life from acellular and unicellular organisms to vertebrates that include mammals, the qualitatively highest form of life on earth. Having accepted the existence of life as the initial criterion for assigning dignity to live forms, we also need a qualitative differentiation between individual forms of life and between the degrees of dignity that we can assign to them on this basis. Living things are assigned a degree of dignity depending on their position on the evolutionary scale. So mammals are assigned a higher degree of dignity than lower life forms and human beings possess a higher degree of dignity than other mammals.

There is no mystery here, no secrets about the sanctity of human life. Human life is worthy of esteem and respect and human beings deserve their human dignity simply because they represent the qualitatively highest form of life. We can accept this on the basis of the fact that life itself is believed to be the primary value that is worthy of esteem and respect, so it is life as such that is accorded dignity. The actual degree of dignity that belongs to individual life forms depends on the level of their development and on their position on the evolutionary scale. To express this (at least approximately) in mathematical terms, we can say that the degree of dignity in case of individual life forms moves, for example, on the scale between 0,0001 and 1. The number 0,0001 reflects the degree of dignity of acellular organisms and 1 reflects the degree of dignity that belongs to human beings. The degrees of dignity of other life forms can be placed in between. Following this, we can speak not only about human dignity, but also about the dignity of animals, plants and about the dignity of other life forms. The actual degree of esteem and respect that we assign to individual life forms depends on the qualitative level of the given life form. Consequently, this also determines variations in the degrees of dignity that we assign to these life forms. In normal circumstances this approach allows us (according to our possibilities, needs or necessity) to preserve life on the earth and respect individual life forms. But since I do not believe that there exists an absolute value (i.e. a value that must be respected absolutely because it is simply inviolable), I think that in some, exceptional circumstances (if it is necessary to protect other values) it is possible to violate the dignity of any life form, the human life form included.<sup>4</sup>

What are the consequences of this line of reasoning? We can say draw

human beings. We can hardly say that we do not care about whether we are alive or not; whether we were born to live our life in this world or not. So the value and the meaning of human life reside in the fact that we exist, that we live, since this fact creates the basis for everything else. I am not sure whether we can speak about some intrinsic value of life, but I am quite positive that the primary value of life lies in its very existence, in the fact of being alive. This fact creates the basic precondition for our living a valuable life, a life that we want to live (although we are not always successful, whether for objective or subjective reasons). We can accept this fact without connecting it with some mystery or without searching for some explanations of the 'mystery' of life. Life is like a vessel that needs to be filled up and it depends upon us what content we decide to put into it. Following this, we can say that the existence of life creates the basis for assigning dignity to the living. It is a value that is worthy of esteem and respect.

But this line of reasoning brings us back to the problem that we have already encountered. If the very fact of the existence of human life is enough to assign human dignity to human beings, then also other forms of life deserve to be assigned dignity. We have to accept, then, that also animals and plants have their dignity because they are living organisms, and we could continue in an endless listing of all life forms that, if we follow the logic of this argument, should have their dignity. We will decide later whether this is true, but at this point we can state one important thing. If we accept that the existence of life is the criterion for assigning dignity to living organisms, then we narrow the group of those that have the right to possess dignity because we have excluded inanimate nature and everyday objects. But what about animals and plants? Shall we believe that these too have a right to possess their animal or plant dignity, simply on the basis of the fact that they too are living things? Can we say, for example, that unicellular organisms such as amoebas have the right to be accorded the same dignity as human beings and should be treated with the same esteem and respect? Let us think about the similarities and differences between these two forms of life. People, animals and plants have, for example, different modes of reproduction. These differences are undoubtedly significant from the perspective of biology, but they do not create a sound basis for a radical differentiation between those organisms that should be accorded the same level of dignity as humans and those that should not. So we need to take our reasoning further. One of the significant distinctions between individual forms of life, e.g. between the life of a unicellular organism,

not create these things in His image, but they are also God's creation. And if they are God's creation just as a human being is, why should these things not have their dignity? Although they are not created in 'God's image', they are often superior to humans. An earthworm, for example, can regenerate a lost body part. . Can humans, the lords of creation, do the same? The sea turtle can live for two hundred years, much longer than humans. On what basis, then, do we believe that we possess a dignity that makes us superior to all other creatures, when we are merely one species of God's creatures and in many respects an inferior species at that?

Neither Collste nor any of the other twentieth century Christian authors presented in his work who regard the intrinsic value of human life as the source of its sanctity gives a clear answer to the following question: What is the source of the intrinsic value of human life? Should we find the source in life itself, regardless of its quality? Life itself is only the primary value, the condition for realization of a lot of other values; it is more or less only potential that should be realized. Some say that this intrinsic value is reason (Aquinas), others that it is soul (Thomasma), others that it is God's will, and still others say that it is human relations that give value to human beings (McCormick and Häring). If we exclude soul and God's will from our consideration (since they belong more in the sphere of theology and religion than in the field of philosophical ethics), then we find that we are left with little that could be the basis for the intrinsic value of human beings, the existence of which would justify assigning human dignity to them.<sup>3</sup> So what is a possible solution of this problem? Rationality, (self-) consciousness, free will and responsibility are all capacities that can be assigned only to moral agents, so they cannot be used as a criterion for human dignity in the case of all human beings. Collste's opinion that these capacities should be understood as the capacities of the whole human race and not just of individuals also does not provide a solution. According to him, if a human being lacks certain human capacities due to a defect, it does not mean that other humans, too, lack these capacities. In contrast to all other animals, the disposition is there (although not developed in an appropriate way) since these capacities are characteristic of human species, but they are not characteristic of animals (Collste, 2002, p.169).

What is probably more important is an answer to the question whether life, or human life in itself has a value, a meaning. If we can answer this question, then we may find a reason why we should assign dignity to

plants? Or should we treat them in the way that the Roman slaves were treated, i.e. as speaking tools (if they are capable of speaking at all). Can we be satisfied with the belief that only some human beings (i.e. only moral agents) have human dignity and others do not? In that case, the question arises as to how it is possible that those who at first do not have human dignity—i.e. infants and children—later possess it. Although the average age of human beings is rising, a significant number of people have not reached the age group from 15 to 18 years (i.e. the age when the achievement of mental or moral maturity is expected), which means that this part of humankind, together with the mentally disabled, would be deprived of the right to be seen as having human dignity. This would amount to an effective moral discrimination against these people.

If we tried to avoid the problem by stating that we will regard mentally fit children as potential holders of (human) dignity, just as we consider them to be potential moral agents, we would not be successful because such an approach would deprive them of the right (possessed by other human beings) to be protected and respected by other moral agents. The point that I am making here is that the act of assigning human dignity to someone also produces the correlative duties that arise for moral agents in their relation to the holder of (human) dignity.<sup>2</sup>

On what basis, then, should we respect human beings that are not fully responsible moral agents? It seems that the only acceptable answer is that the basis of human dignity is that which they share with other beings and that is life. Let us try to search for a solution to our problem by stating that human dignity is assigned to all human beings, to all *Homo sapiens* on the basis of their very existence. The fact of existing itself is the reason for assigning human dignity to human beings. But then we can ask why we should assign dignity only to the species *Homo sapiens*, and not to animals, plants, inanimate nature or everyday objects. One possible answer is that human dignity can be assigned only to human beings. Let us suppose that this is correct. Can we, then, speak about the dignity of animals, the dignity of plants, the dignity of inanimate objects (e.g. the dignity of rocks), or the dignity of everyday objects (e.g. the dignity of a table)? It seems a bit absurd. So let us try a different line of reasoning. Christianity bases its idea of human dignity on the thesis that the value of a human being resides in the fact that his or her life is a gift from God, who created humankind in His image. According to the Biblical legend, however, God also created animals, plants, rocks and, through human activity, he also created the table. It is true that He did

There is almost no philosophical work that would elaborate upon the problem and clearly identify the qualities and values on the basis of which it is possible to speak about human dignity. Some philosophers simply state that human dignity is ontologically or metaphysically given, that people are born with it (A. Gewirth, P. Jones). Others see the essence of human dignity in the qualities that can be possessed only by moral agents (M. Ossowska, P. Pettit), while still others connect human dignity (*Menschenwürde*) with a certain social minimum of rights (D. Birnbacher), etc. The first position avoids a deeper consideration of the problem by using a non-specific and vague statement about certain given qualities, the second position defines human dignity so narrowly that many human beings (e.g., infants, mentally immature children and the mentally disabled) cannot be said to possess it, and the third position reduces the concept even further, so that it is a mere problem of allocating rights. None of these positions, however, explains what the basis of human dignity is.

What qualities and values could create dignity? What qualities and values are worthy of esteem and respect? Collste and many other authors put forward the qualities of rationality, (self-) consciousness and free will. If we are to believe that the qualities and values that create human dignity should be those that are really worthy of esteem and respect, then we can express doubts about the correctness of Collste's opinion because, for example, rationality can also be misused for aims that are in no case worthy of esteem and respect. The same can be said about (self-) consciousness and free will. The very fact that they exist does not mean that there is a reason to consider them worthy of respect and esteem. Let us think, then, about some other qualities that could fulfil the criterion better. For example, when Aristotle defines virtues (*aretê*), he numbers among them such qualities as justice, friendship, generosity, temperance, and honesty. If we apply the Aristotelian approach to our problem, then all these virtues (*aretê*) can be really seen as worthy of esteem and respect. Then we could perceive them as creating the values and qualities on the basis of which we can speak about dignity. However, all these virtues (*aretê*) are related to the conduct of such individuals as responsible moral agents. But what are we to do with those who do not fall into this category yet (e.g., children) or those who will never have a chance to belong into the category (e.g., mentally disabled people)? Are we prepared to say that these human beings do not possess (human) dignity? Is it so that they do not have a right to be protected by us? How should we behave toward them? In the same way we behave toward animals or

in general, but it cannot be a primary value that creates (human) dignity. In the work *Human Being and Morality in Ethics of Social Consequences* I wrote that 'we have to accept that all members of humankind are morally equal because of the commonality of their being' (Gluchman, 2003, p.137). So what is the relation between equality and human dignity? Is equality an attribute of human dignity or is it not? My opinion, quoted above, suggests that it is human dignity that forms a precondition for moral equality. But what is the meaning of this idea if we confront it with Collste's opinion? Do we have human dignity because we are born equal or are we equal because we have human dignity?

I have already stated that dignity is a body of qualities or values that we believe to be worthy of esteem and respect. However, equality is not a quality or value that we can possess at our will; others must give it to us. This means that equality is not a value that living creatures are born with, but it is an acquired value that they get from other subjects that believe them to be equal. But the same question is brought to our attention again and again: On the basis of what qualities and values do the other subjects consider these creatures equal? We can answer that it is on the basis of the fact that they attribute them with (human) dignity. But on what basis is human dignity attributed to these creatures? Is it on the basis of the fact that they possess qualities and values that inspire the feeling of esteem and respect? But what are they? This is a serious question that needs to be answered.

Another attribute of dignity that Collste presents in his work is respect and esteem. But can we say that respect and esteem inspire respect and esteem? Can we perceive respect as being both a primary and a secondary value? Hardly. Can we treat respect or esteem as inborn qualities? Hardly. It is only others that can give us both respect and esteem since we are not born with them. If we say 'to respect human dignity', we probably mean that it is necessary to respect the value of human beings, which could also mean that we believe that human beings are worthy of protection. But again we surely face a question about the source of the value of human beings that makes them worthy of protection. Does the fact that we use the concept 'human dignity' mean that we imply that dignity can be attributed also to other life forms? Do we use the expression 'human' to make the difference clear? Maybe. At least I hope that this will be clarified during our further examination of the problem. But let us return to the problem of those qualities and values that are worthy of respect and esteem and that create dignity. What qualities and values could they be?



on the questions that arose from my reading of this work. I would like to consider these questions in the context of my conception of the ethics of social consequences (seen as a form of non-utilitarian consequentialism), in which human dignity plays a decisive role, together with humanity, moral rights and positive social consequences. Another impetus that gave rise to my interest in the examination of the idea of human dignity was the opinion I encountered in certain authors that moral values can be classified as either deontological or consequentialist. Following this division, they claim that human dignity (or respect for persons) represents a deontological value, i.e. a value that has no place in consequentialist theories of ethics.<sup>1</sup> In the first part of my work I will examine the meaning of the concept 'human dignity', in the second part I will discuss the consequentialist perspective on the value and meaning of human dignity and in the third part I will define three types of relations between consequences and human dignity.

## 2. A concept of human dignity

The first question we face is: What is dignity? On what basis can we speak about the dignity of something or someone? The first working hypothesis is that dignity is an aggregate of certain valuable qualities and values. To accept dignity, then, means to accept values or qualities that we believe to be valuable, or worthy of esteem and respect. The second working hypothesis is that dignity is a result of these values and qualities, as reflected in one's conduct and behaviour; i.e. in the kind of behaviour that confirms the values and qualities that we attribute to dignity. What then are these values and qualities that create dignity? Collste states that the basic attributes of dignity are equality and respect (Collste, 2002, pp.202-203). Let us examine to what extent these attributes are among the qualities and values that create dignity. I believe that values and qualities that create dignity are primary and not secondary, just as I believe that dignity is a primary and not a secondary value. When he lifted up equality and respect as the attributes of dignity, Collste certainly meant equality of all human beings and respect for all human beings. But, in my opinion, we can accept the idea of the equality of all human beings only if we believe that there is something on the basis of which we can perceive them as equal. At this point a question arises: What is the reason (value or quality) on the basis of which we consider all human beings to be equal? The equality of all human beings is only a consequence of our acceptance of human dignity, or, if you like, dignity

## A Concept of Human Dignity

Vasil Gluchman\*

### Abstract

*This paper argues for acceptance of dignity as a concept that we use to describe an aggregate of values and qualities of someone or something that deserve esteem and respect. The primary value that creates the right to have dignity is life. The degree of dignity according to a particular life form depends on its place in the evolutionary scale. Human beings are the highest form of life so they possess the highest degree of dignity*

**KeyWords:** *Collste, dignity, life, human life, human dignity.*

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### 1. Introduction

In philosophical literature we often come across concepts that at first glance seem to be quite clear, but on further examination turn out to have a surprising number of different interpretations in the works of various authors. I realised this fact when I was reading the work of Swedish author Göran Collste *Is Human Life Special? Religious and Philosophical Perspectives on the Principle of Human Dignity* (Collste, 2002). The author presents various perspectives on the problem of human dignity, but often he just touches on a number of questions without trying to offer answers. Collste's book inspired me to continue in my reflections

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\*. Institute of Philosophy and Ethics, Presov University, Presov, Slovakia.  
gluchman@unipo.sk