

HUMAN DIGNITY THROUGH ASSUMING OBLIGATIONS: A CIVIC VIRTUE APPROACH

*La dignità umana attraverso l'assunzione di obblighi:
un approccio basato sulla virtù civica*

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ABSTRACT: We typically think of preserving human dignity through the development and enforcement of rights, but the declaration *Dignitas Infinita* also includes the intriguing possibility that human dignity is fostered through exercising a capacity to assume obligations. The article develops this idea and argues for a civic virtue approach of prudential judgment between the extremes of illegitimate usurping of authority and dereliction of duty. The discussion helps show that the preservation of human dignity also involves engagement with the norms and laws that help a political community determine appropriate obligations of office, as these, together with a general disposition to take-on responsibility, are part of what it means to manifest human dignity.

KEYWORDS: Rights and Responsibilities, Virtue Ethics, Civic Virtue, Civic Friendship, Social Trust.

RIASSUNTO: Abitualmente pensiamo alla salvaguardia della dignità umana mediante lo sviluppo e l'applicazione dei diritti, ma la dichiarazione *Dignitas Infinita* include anche l'interessante possibilità che la dignità umana sia promossa attraverso l'esercizio della capacità di assumersi degli obblighi. L'articolo sviluppa questa idea e sostiene un approccio basato sulla virtù civica del giudizio prudenziale tra gli estremi dell'usurpazione illegittima dell'autorità e l'abbandono dei propri doveri. La discussione contribuisce a mostrare che la salvaguardia della dignità umana implica anche la considerazione delle norme e leggi che aiutano una comunità politica a determinare gli obblighi appropriati di una carica, poiché questi, insieme alla disposizione generale ad assumersi responsabilità, fanno parte di ciò che significa manifestare la dignità umana.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Diritti e responsabilità, Etica della virtù, Virtù civica, Amicizia civica, Fiducia sociale.

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Paragraph 27 of *Dignitas Infinita* is the shortest paragraph in the Declaration.¹ In Italian it reads:

La dignità dell'essere umano comprende così anche la capacità, insita nella stessa natura umana, di assumersi degli obblighi verso gli altri.

This is translated into English as:

Human dignity also encompasses the capacity, inherent in human nature, to assume obligations vis-à-vis others.

Much academic and political focus is, understandably, instead on the rights that pertain to human dignity, because there is concern that goods proper to human dignity are not being realised, which in turn undermines the respect due to that dignity, and the experience of it. Human rights act as a defence against the wrongful will of another, particularly a defence against degenerate political leadership.² If dignity is not defended, the respect due to it is omitted. Alongside affirming the type of rights needed to protect human dignity, however, *Dignitas Infinita* points in paragraph 27 to responsibilities proper to our dignity.

Why is the paragraph on obligations so short? It may be that rights are a general defence of dignity, and so they can be more easily articulated in abstract. Responsibilities, on the other hand, are relationally particular; they may be harder to extrapolate across political communities, across time. Without conceding that rights are not relational,³ I think this point rings true: it does seem that major incursions on human dignity in history give us solid grounds for timeless affirmations of corresponding rights that aim to bulwark against any such repetition of history. When it comes to responsibilities, however, these are grounded in needs, which have a presentist tinge.

The need for a “presentist tinge” in the adoption and fulfilment of obligations is clear in the thinking of the Catholic Church’s 266th Pontiff, Pope Francis, who took to heart the parable of the lady and the judge:

In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying,

¹ DICASTERY FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Decl. *Dignitas Infinita*, April 2, 2024.

² N. MALCOLM, *Human Rights and Political Wrongs. A New Approach to Human Rights Law*, Policy Exchange, London 2017.

³ J. FINNIS, *Natural Law & Natural Rights*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011², 199.

“Grant me justice against my opponent.” For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”⁴

We see here that part of the moral life is encouraging others to fulfil their duties, and for others to do their duties even if they do not desire to. The widow is not so much exercising her rights as demanding that the judge fulfil his duties. In comparison, an exclusive focus on rights minus responsibilities can be distorted. Austen Ivereigh amusingly reports that, before becoming Pope, ‘Bergoglio said Jesus would tell people at the Last Judgment: “Go away from me because I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat, for you were busy blaming the government.”’⁵

It may therefore be that paragraph 27 is short because many of our responsibilities pertain to our particular “offices”—that is, the particular roles we play in society, be that priest, king, judge, mother. The exhortation ‘*Monstra te esse matrem*’⁶ is in tune with this: we ask Mary to *show thyself to be a mother*; that is, help us as a mother would help us, as the most perfect of mothers would help her children. It is her “office” that helps us know the kind of responsibilities she has and the way she will deliver on them. Offices, in this way, are particular and cannot be claimed to be equivalent for all human beings. While it is difficult to therefore detail the taking on of responsibilities in abstract, there is nevertheless an important reminder in *Dignitas Infinita* that part of our dignity is the capacity to assume obligations. What is this capacity and how does it actually work? How can we get a better handle on the way in which the assuming of responsibilities functions in a society oriented toward the common good?

Let me first offer a suggestion as to why this is not a straightforward question. As an individual, it seems I cannot simply declare that I have an obligation over others without legitimate and common recognition

⁴ Luke 18:2-5. *The Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Bible Press, Nashville 1989.

⁵ A. IVEREIGH, *The Great Reformer. Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope*, Henry Holt, New York 2014, 312.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 208 (emphasis in original). The Latin phrase originates from the hymn *Ave Maris Stella*.

of the obligation. How does one go about appropriately assuming an obligation? Taking-on obligations illegitimately is usurpation, ‘the act of taking control of something without having the right to, especially of a position of power’.⁷ Indeed, one can rightly pray for humility not to insert oneself unnecessarily in the affairs of others: ‘From the desire of being consulted... deliver me, O Jesus!’⁸ But is not a type of taking charge precisely what the Declaration *Dignitas Infinita* is saying is inherent in human nature: ‘the capacity [...] to assume obligations’?

Here is a second problem: it seems that determining whether and how one should assume obligations is not something one can solely deduce from a metaphysics of the human person—however accurate that metaphysics is—as the justness of assuming obligations involves an irreducibly communal dynamic of human recognition. One has to be very careful that this is not understood to mean that a community can generate whatever set of obligations it likes in fulfilment of this aspect of human dignity. It does not mean, for example, that so long as democratic processes are engaged, including respect for human rights and procedural fairness, society’s suggested array of obligations are just. It should also not be understood to mean that a coherent account of authority cannot be developed in line with a sound metaphysics of human nature. The claim is rather that competing possible obligations are navigated through an understanding of the likely cooperative help from the relative talents and virtues of those available, prudentially applied to the needs of the moment. Much of the present difficulty that has arisen within liberal democracy involves thinking that correct procedures or correct starting commitments will guarantee a just arrangement of goods or just relationships, a position most neatly epitomised by John Rawls.⁹ But a society that appropriately respects fundamental human rights and procedural fairness (e.g. rule of law and due process) may still poorly arrange social,

⁷ ‘Usurpation’, in *Cambridge Dictionary*, Cambridge University Press (2025): <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/usurpation>.

⁸ LEO XIV, *Address to Participants in the Meeting of Studies on Cardinal Rafael Merry del Val*, October 13, 2025.

⁹ For criticism of Rawls on this point, see R. NOZICK, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Basic Books, New York 1974; A. SEN, *The Idea of Justice*, Penguin Books, London 2009; J. FINNIS, *Rawls’s A Theory of Justice, in Human Rights and the Common Good* (Collected Essays: Vol. III), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, 72-75.

political, religious and moral obligations. We need an account of the way in which the natural law operates for the determining of these types of obligation in situ, even though they are circumstantial in the sense of particular to a time and place—particular to a community’s moment of need in its unfolding journey. When we are on a ship, in rocky waves, and lose our captain overboard, we have to quickly say who is the new captain. Some unity is needed in order to get the job done, even if we are not yet perfect moral exemplars. As St Thomas Aquinas writes,

it is evident that several persons could by no means preserve the stability of the community if they totally disagreed. For union is necessary among them if they are to rule at all: several men, for instance, could not pull a ship in one direction unless joined together in some fashion. Now several are said to be united according as they come closer to being one. So one man rules better than several who come near being one.¹⁰

Our capacity to lead is part of our human dignity, and helps maintain the common good of the boat’s survival. Making a good, even if necessarily quick, decision about who should replace a lost captain is not something deducible from a metaphysics of the human person nor through reference to a general theory of human rights. Instead, it is about our habits of generating normative obligation in situ, which is our civic virtue. It is a way we apply our practical reasoning as a community to the needs of the moment.

Articulating the appropriate way of assuming obligations brings us into the domain of virtue—the balancing of actions in order to arrive at habitual disposition towards the good. Civic virtue operates between the extremes of, on the one hand, usurping authority unjustly and, on the other, shirking responsibilities “de officiis.” An easy example of usurpation might be the collecting of taxes without authority to do so, for example the mafia charging protection money. An easy example of shirking responsibilities de officiis might be the car mechanic saying the car is fit to drive without checking all its parts work sufficiently.

An “office of responsibility” is often understood to indicate something formal, for example involving tort obligations, or describing a formal position in the constitution, such as a “State Official” or “National

¹⁰ THOMAS AQUINAS, *De Regno ad regem Cypri*, Divine Providence Press, Bismarck 2014 [c. 1267], 18.

Official.” But morally-speaking there is little significance in the distinction between legally-described roles and a-legal roles, if both involve mutually-recognised moral responsibilities. The English word “office” is from the Latin “*officium*,” in turn contracted from “*opificium*,” which is a mixture of “*opus*” (work) and “*facere*” (to do/make).¹¹ This helps show how the taking on of obligations is not, in its basic understanding, too discriminate between obligations that are official or not, in that an office engages the obligations involved in the work one does, with work being something that is expressly at the service of others, expressly social and oriented towards the common good.

To return to our original question: if human dignity involves the capacity to assume obligations, on what basis do we say this has been properly done? Put another way, in what way can the assumption of obligations be understood as part of the natural law? The natural law is ‘the participation of the eternal law in the rational creature.’¹² The natural law is the way in which we find expression for the goods of the universe and creation as pertains the structure and positive capacities of human nature. As our nature is that of a rational animal, the eternal law participates in us through the gift of reason, something that is brought to its fullest in unity with our other traits and appetites to form an integral whole worthy of dignity as adopted children of God.¹³ In this sense, it is not just that we are special in our capacity to love; we are also lovable in our capacity to reason and make good choices. God creates a world that brings out the best in our capacity to reason, giving us things we can learn about and enjoy, including things of moral depth that allow for full manifestation of our reason and judgment, which is all just another way of describing the eternal law’s participation in us, the natural law. In this way, the “natural law”

¹¹ ‘Office’, in *Etymonline*, Douglas Harper (2025): <https://www.etymonline.com/word/office>.

¹² ‘[P]articipatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura lex naturalis dicitur.’ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars, London 1964-1981 [1265-1274], I-II, q. 91, a. 2, co.

¹³ “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (Romans 8:14-17).

describes a domain of activity, a domain of law or *a way things get ordered through the beautiful prism of human nature*.

Be that as it may, describing what the natural law is in abstract does not, unfortunately, get us fully to the point of determining our social obligations, nor how we should properly go about assuming such obligations, which makes it limited in the same way as described for general metaphysics. This may be somewhat controversial to Thomists, so it is important I explain what I mean here, and hopefully also describe the limits to that claim. Metaphysics looks at the being of things: what they are and how they are, and what explains what they are, which inevitably involves why they are, too. As such, metaphysics can provide definitional understandings of the human person and the principles of human nature that explain human beings' operation, unity and distinctiveness, universally and in abstract. The metaphysics of the human person thus forms the basis to our understanding of human dignity, because it articulates aspects of human distinctiveness that make clear the necessity (the absolute necessity) of respect for human dignity as a matter of justice. Because metaphysics explores the nature of things, its findings are not swayed by momentary counter-examples, such as a capacity of nature not being manifest presently in a particular individual. Metaphysics gives us the ability to identify goods of the species of human nature regardless of whether they are currently or repeatedly exercised. Metaphysics does not consider beings outside of time, but it is in this manner timeless in the sense that it involves appreciation of the nature of things regardless of present demonstration. This is probably why there is seemingly endless collision between metaphysics and post-Enlightenment science, because the latter tends towards demonstration and inductive reasoning, whereas the former tends towards abstraction and deductive reasoning. That is, of course, a simplification, but I think there is some truth to it in helping explain why post-Enlightenment scientists can sometimes think that metaphysics makes assertions without evidence, whereas scholastic metaphysicians can sometimes think post-Enlightenment science fails to grasp the complete whole—the *why and what* of creation and being. (Of course, the post-Enlightenment scientists would be the ones making the mistake, because true metaphysics is in tune with inductive reasoning with respect to all four Aristotelian causes, which is why one can confidently talk about what humans *tend*

to do as evidencing their nature.)¹⁴ Being abstract and oriented towards universal conclusions, metaphysics lacks, however, sensitivity to political circumstance—the place of a people on their collective journey. That might seem like a trivial concern, and indeed it is trivial for the question of what goods and rights are due to the human person wherever they are. But it is not trivial for the question of determining obligations. What we are obliged to do involves us in assessing the current mood of possibilities, as well as the types of goods that are within reach and to be appropriately prioritised. There may, for example, be a hierarchy of virtues in abstract (placing love at the top), and yet sometimes a present need to prioritise a particular virtue or set of goods (such as justice) in order to pursue a common good.¹⁵ The choice of a “lesser” good of justice over charity is not in contradiction with charity, because the achievement of a common good through the right virtue at the right time will be, in this case, the only way of retaining the capacity for love in its fullness at the communal level. The virtues, however set in stone in the natural law, thus remain open to a diversity of emphasis and application at each moment of a community’s journey through history.

On what basis can we posit with any confidence how obligations should be assumed? Here I would like to exploit a minor difference between the English version of paragraph 27 and the Romance language versions. In Italian (the original language used to prepare the Declaration), *Dignitas Infinita*’s appeal to our capacity to assume obligations finishes with the phrase, ‘verso gli altri’, which might ordinarily be translated as ‘towards others’. The meaning is that our human dignity encompasses the capacity to assume obligations towards others. That is reinforced in other Romance languages, where in Spanish there is described the capacity to assume obligations ‘hacia los otros’, and in French, ‘à l’égard d’autrui’. But the English version offers a slightly different approach, albeit fully compatible, stating that we have a capacity

¹⁴ For efforts in this regard, see M. MIDGLEY, *Beast and Man. The Roots of Human Nature*, Harvester, Hassocks 1979; A. MACINTYRE, *Dependent Rational Animals. Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Open Court, Chicago 1999; R. HURSTHOUSE, *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001.

¹⁵ D. BURBIDGE, *A/the Common Good*, «American Journal of Jurisprudence» 69/1 (2024) 15-28.

‘to assume obligations vis-à-vis others.’ ‘Vis-à-vis’ can be equivalent to the other translations and the original, but it can also be understood slightly differently, in that it fails to specify exactly which way the obligation is directed, and could be equivalent to saying something like ‘human dignity also encompasses the capacity to assume obligations *‘with respect to others’* or *‘regarding others’*, rather than *‘towards others’*’.

I would like to use this trivial difference in language as an opportunity to illustrate how a civic virtue approach can help us understand this aspect of human dignity. ‘Vis-à-vis’ actually makes use of an Old French word ‘visage’ meaning face (originally from the Latin ‘visus’, a look, vision), such that ‘vis-à-vis’ describes being ‘face-to-face’. It was originally made popular in English in the mid-18th century as a term used for horse-drawn carriages that brought people along while they faced each other.¹⁶ I think the image of people facing each other while travelling is an intriguing simile for what a political community is, and may help communicate the way in which civic virtue helps bring about a balanced assumption of obligations. Finding the balance between the evil extremes of usurping obligations, on the one hand, or the dereliction of appropriate obligations, on the other, is no easy task, and it requires a communal praxis of knowing when one is in charge of something and when not. Society develops reputational norms to help establish this vis-à-vis one another, and honours or rewards displays of virtue in order to foster shared appreciation of the appropriate and heroic assumption of obligation.

In nurturing a culture of roles and responsibilities, a community mitigates the coordination problem of not knowing who should lead and who should follow. Such a dilemma is not easily described as ethical, because following someone sometimes means letting them make important ethical decisions, which could sometimes amount to an avoidance of ethical deliberation on the part of the follower. Assigning someone the role of a leader may mean they are *made* culpable for decisions, entailing that one has, in effect, reduced one’s own culpability. We should always act in conscience, and assigning responsibility to someone (or choosing to follow their direction) is in itself an act one is responsible

¹⁶ ‘Vis-à-vis’, in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2025): <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vis-%C3%A0-vis>.

for taking. But that only partially addresses the question. Oftentimes people take on responsibilities themselves (which is indeed the essence to the principle of subsidiarity)¹⁷ such that the relevant question for a newcomer is whether to follow or not. In this way, it is often not possible to bequeath a position of responsibility as a single individual, nor start from scratch as a community in identifying a need for leadership and assessing all the details of the task before assigning who should take charge. All this means we must instead develop habits of mutual recognition of responsibility that are in line with the needs of our community and allow for the full realisation of human dignity through an effective culture of obligation-making and obligation-receiving. It is for this reason that newcomers can appropriately and justly take on roles that are less attended to, in response to existing specialisations of labour. The difficult fostering and maintenance of habits of obligation is the realm of civic virtue, which necessarily therefore involves sacrifice for the sake of producing trust.¹⁸ The sacrifice is both in terms of those who take on extra responsibilities, and those who suffer the consequences of others' decisions being imposed on them. A willingness to suffer is at the core of what it means to assume obligations: ultimately it is about taking on a vulnerability and liability for the sake of others and the common good. The good man enters a 'Room of Tears' as he is given important responsibility, and would like to step down when the special status is no longer needed by the community. '[T]he poor man obviously breaks down at being elected.'¹⁹ In this way, civic virtue is 'vis-à-vis' others in that the capacity to assume obligations, inherent in human nature, is both towards others and in response to their need and willingness to be led, which is a virtuous exercise of their social nature in recognition of our common interdependence. And, as we know, allowing others to help you, especially by accepting that someone is granted responsibility

¹⁷ D. BURBIDGE, *The Inherently Political Nature of Subsidiarity*, «American Journal of Jurisprudence» 62/2 (2017) 143-164.

¹⁸ D. ALLEN, *Talking to Strangers. Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2004.

¹⁹ A quote from Christopher Whitehead in CNN, *Conclave trivia: Why cardinals are locked in, popes' houses ransacked* (March 13, 2013): <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/13/world/europe/conclave-fun-facts/index.html>.

over you, is no easy task. Ivereigh describes that ‘Bergoglio liked the way Latin had “mercy” as a verb, *miserando*, and so created the Spanish *misericordiando*—an activity of the divine, something God does to you. “*Dejáte misericordiar,*” he would tell the guilt-ridden and the scrupulous, “let yourself be ‘mercy’d’.”²⁰

²⁰ IVEREIGH, *The Great Reformer*, 12 (emphasis in original).

