

## HUMAN DIGNITY IN ACTION: CAN A CONCEPT BE A GAME-CHANGER?

*La dignità umana in azione:  
un concetto può cambiare le regole del gioco?*

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**ABSTRACT:** These reflections explore human dignity, recognized as a common category across philosophical and religious boundaries, including the Kantian tradition and evangelical statements. Despite its broad acceptance, defining dignity remains challenging, as the Kantian adagio serves more as a limiting concept lacking metaphysical foundations. A crucial theological point involves the concept of “infinite dignity” ascribed to created beings, which risks “divinizing” dignity and obscuring the fundamental distinction between the finite creature and the infinite Creator. Moving forward requires paying close attention to the nuances individuals bring while resisting objectification and the absolutization of self-defined autonomy.

**KEYWORDS:** Human Dignity, Infinite Human Dignity, Creator/Creature Distinction.

**RIASSUNTO:** Queste riflessioni esplorano la dignità umana, riconosciuta come categoria comune che attraversa i confini filosofici e religiosi, comprese la tradizione kantiana e le affermazioni evangeliche. Nonostante la sua ampia accettazione, definire la dignità rimane difficile, poiché l'adagio kantiano funge essenzialmente da concetto limitante privo di fondamenti metafisici. Un punto teologico cruciale riguarda il concetto di “dignità infinita” attribuito ad esseri creati, che rischia di “divinizzare” la dignità e di oscurare la distinzione fondamentale tra la creatura finita e il Creatore infinito. Per andare avanti è necessario prestare molta attenzione alle sfumature che gli individui apportano, resistendo all'oggettificazione e all'assolutizzazione dell'autonomia auto-definita.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** Dignità umana, Dignità umana infinita, Distinzione tra creatore e creatura.

Human dignity is widely regarded as the common category that is able to move across philosophical and religious boundaries, it looks like a point of convergence between the Kantian tradition and the personalist traditions, e.g. the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), art. 1: “*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights*”. It is a passpartout.

In its present-day choir of voices, the evangelical tradition uses it: e.g. “Man is made in God’s image, every individual has an intrinsic dignity” (*Lausanne Covenant* 1974, art. 5); “Men and women have an ‘intrinsic dignity’ because they are created in God’s image to know him, love him and serve him” (*Manila Manifesto* 1989, art.1); “We treat every cultural and ethnic group with dignity and respect on the basis of the value they have for God in creation and redemption (Acts 10:35; 14:17; 17:27)” (*Cape Town Commitment* 2010 1.7.b).

The Kantian adagio i.e. “every rational human being possesses inherent worth and dignity, and must be treated as an end in themselves, not merely as a means to achieve another’s goal” is more of a limiting concept than a definition. It does not identify who is man and why and on the basis of what dignity is to be ascribed to humanity. Whether we like it or not, there is always a metaphysics involved. In and of itself, the Kantian definition is good as long as its metaphysical foundation is taken for granted and implied.

I am not persuaded that the definition of “dignitas” in terms of it being “infinite” (e.g. Declaration *Dignitas infinita* of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024), is appropriate for created beings. In order to fill the metaphysical vacuum, the risk is to “divinize” dignity. It’s a theologically subtle, yet crucial point.

Ascribing infinity to dignity seems a disproportionate title. Human dignity is said to be infinite: without limits, without external criteria, without beginning and without end. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that only God’s glory is “infinite” and that everything else (even human life!) is conceivable and livable within the realm of the “finite”.

God is the Creator, we are creatures. He is infinite, we are finite. His life is infinite, ours is finite. However important and responsible we may be, we are not bearers of infinite dignity. Only God is, not because someone has recognized it, but because He is God. At stake is the fundamental distinction between Creator and creature, which is a cornerstone of the biblical worldview. Indeed, for the Bible, human

sin is precisely “wanting to be like God” (Genesis 3:5) and therefore idolizing oneself.

The biblical faith, from the narrative of Genesis and throughout Revelation, values life as created by God and, at the same time, values its finitude. *Bios* is not the exclusive center that defines humanity, but is an integral part of a composite network of identity. On the other hand, even though God has given “dignity” to creatures, none of them possess “infinite” dignity. Only God has it. From the “sacredness of life” to “infinite dignity,” the fundamental theological error of Catholic ethics remains. Biblically, life must be defended and promoted with other categories that recognize life as a precious and finite gift, always under and within God’s infinite providence.

More generally, I think we now face the challenge to disagree on who is human and what constitutes humanity to be recognized as *locus* of dignity. We use the category of dignity, but we no longer agree on who is the entitled subject (e.g. fetus, dying person). The Kantian reference to “rational being” has become attached to a performative spectrum rather than being associated to a created status of the human being made in the image of God.

In the three-perspectival approach to ethics (e.g. John Frame),<sup>1</sup> the norm is to be related to the situation and the people involved. The players are always part of the triangular conversation that takes place. So there is always the color, the sound, the smell of the individual take on things to be considered.

Perhaps a mistake done in the past was the objectification of dignity and the pre-determined categorization of it. Individual interpretations and experiences of it were not heard. With the absolutization of individual autonomy, the risk is now to make dignity a self-defined and ever-changing property that has no inter-personal, external standards. While having a “thick” view of dignity, the need is always to pay attention to the persons involved, being ready to listen to them and to appreciate the nuances that they bring.

<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see L. DE CHIRICO, *La pratica dell'uno e del molteplice: l'etica delle prospettive*, «Studi di teologia» 34/2 (2005) 156-165.

