INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY
https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2025.2587029

Homo adorans and the grounds of human dignity

Philip Woodward

Department of Philosophy, Niagara University, Lewiston, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

Human dignity is a complex moral status, including at least four dimensions of worth: *inherent worth*, *unique worth*, *inviolable worth*, and *irreplaceable worth*. What explains why humans are bearers of dignity, so understood? Four families of accounts can be found in the literature: psychological capacity accounts, interest-based accounts, relational accounts, and primitivist accounts. While each of these accounts is able to explain at least one of the dimensions of worth, each forfeits at least one of the dimensions as well. We can draw together the insights of each failed account to build a successful hybrid, as follows. Humans, as such, are stewards of the good: impelled to acknowledge it, to delight in it, to be drawn to worship its ultimate source, but also to be tormented by the deprivation of it. Such creatures are bearers of dignity in all its dimensions.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 20 August 2025
Accepted 5 November 2025

KEYWORDS
Dignity; human nature; worship; rights; Schmemann

1. Introduction

Human beings, despite their wide differences with respect to physical, intellectual, and moral aptitudes, are of exceedingly high and equal moral status, and very few if any non-human animals share this status. In a word, we humans are bearers of 'human dignity' – dignity in virtue of being human, and not in virtue of being wealthy, well-born, gifted, or any other class- or status-marker. This conviction amounts to moral common sense in Western liberal democracies – though it was not always so (as the prevalence of slavery attests) and it may not always be so, as there are even now some vocal dissenters, notably those who suspect that it denigrates our non-human terrestrial fellows.[1] But at present it enjoys widespread and deeply-rooted consensus. It has a storied intellectual history, forged over the centuries by intellectual schools as diverse as Roman Stoicism, Christian theology, medieval scholasticism, and the modern Enlightenment. And it has been codified via the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the moral basis for international law.[2]

I will assume in what follows that humans really are bearers of dignity. But what grounds human dignity? That is the question I take up. I begin by identifying four dimensions of dignity found in the philosophical tradition and the contemporary literature. I then discuss four (families of) accounts of the grounds of human dignity, arguing that each fails hopelessly with respect to at least one of the four dimensions of dignity. But, I propose, each account gets something essentially right as well. We thus need

CONTACT Philip Woodward pwoodward@niagara.edu

a hybrid account that preserves the best insights of each of the four. The centerpiece of the account that emerges is the human capacity *to worship*. This capacity is the key to explaining all four dimensions of dignity.

2. The anatomy of human dignity

To say that humans are bearers of dignity is to say that humans are valuable, they are worth something.[3] But worth comes in many types, and writers in the Western intellectual tradition are not obviously talking about one and the same type of worth every time they discuss something called 'human dignity.'[4] Nor is 'dignity' the only appellation used in the Western intellectual for the worth of a human being. There is in fact a recognizable plurality of normative phenomena that writers have used 'dignity' to denote. These phenomena cluster around four distinct, if overlapping, dimensions of the worth of human beings: unique worth, inherent worth, inviolable worth, and irreplaceable worth.[5] In what follows, I characterize each of these four dimensions of dignity, and then (all too briefly) indicate their intellectual origins in Western philosophy and their reflection in more recent literature.

2.1. Unique worth

Humans are all alike in having a worth that is greater, qualitatively and/or quantitatively, than the worth of non-human terrestrial creatures. This is not, of course, to say that other animals are worthless. And perhaps they have a dignity of their own. But ascriptions of dignity are discriminatory. Humans stand 'head and shoulders' above other creatures with respect to the moral consideration they are owed.

This dimension of dignity can be traced at least as far back as Aristotle's tripart conception of the soul as nutritive, sensate, and rational, where the last of these parts is unique to human beings (described in *Nicomachean Ethics* book I Chapter 7, §9). The Stoics Cicero and Seneca take up Aristotle's emphasis on rationality as unique to humans, treating it as what is particularly ennobling or dignifying about us. As Stephen Darwall summarizes:

> *Human* dignity for Cicero is nothing that could be established by conventional patterns of deference. It is the idea, rooted in the ancient notion of a great chain of being, that distinctive capacities for self-development 'by study and reflection' give human beings a 'nature' 'superior' to that of 'cattle and other animals'. Other species are motivated only by sensory instincts, whereas human beings can 'learn that sensual pleasure is wholly unworthy of the dignity of the human race,' and be guided by this understanding.[6]

The Hebrew Scriptures also seem to assume that there is a metaphysical hierarchy of creatures. Humanity's place is as the appointed superintendent of the animal kingdom yet lower than the angels (Psalm 8). Darwin's claim in *The Descent of Man* that 'The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind'[7] was culturally jarring precisely it seemed to flatten the traditional hierarchical view of nature. But Darwin did not succeed in flattening the hierarchy, even if he removed a traditional justification for it. Contemporary theorists form all sorts of ideological persuasions continue to the defend the claim that human beings, or at any

rate human persons (if these two categories are not coextensive) enjoy a unique moral status among terrestrial creatures, their evolutionary etiology notwithstanding.[8]

2.2. Inherent worth

Humans have worth that is objective and impartial, grounded in their natural properties. Social and legal norms acknowledge (or fail to acknowledge) the worth that is already present in humans; they do not create that worth. Nor does a person have any say with respect to her *own* worth. (This is at least one way to understand the claim that natural human rights 'inalienable'.)

Claims about inherent human worth share ancestry with claims about unique human worth, because the former was invoked as a way to explain or justify unique worth, going all the way back to antiquity. (Recall the Ciceronian claim that humans have a *nature* superior to that of the beasts.) Some contemporary theorists explicitly reaffirm that tradition. Patrick Lee and Robert P. George are paradigmatic: 'One's existence as a person thus derives from the kind of substantial entity one is, a human being – and this is the ground for dignity in the most important sense.'[9]

But there are other motivations, unique to the modern era, for ascribing inherent worth to humans. Thomas Hobbes claimed in *Leviathan* that there is no justice in the state of the nature, because all rights are socially constructed. But subsequent Enlightenment thinkers demurred: not all rights are conventional; some are natural.[10] The trajectory of modern liberal thought has increasingly been to understand 'natural' as *inherent* (rather than, as say, *properly functioning*). This trajectory culminates in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which begins with an explicit reference to 'inherent dignity': 'Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.'

2.3. Inviolable worth

Humans command respect for a suite of rights. Exactly what such respect looks like may depend on a great host of factors; rights can conflict with each other, after all. But a person may not be used as a mere means.[11] A commitment to human dignity is a commitment against the soundness of the utilitarian calculus.

As Reme Debes points out, dignity has long been thought to have a *normative function*, viz., 'to *set off* in our practical deliberations whatever "dignity" is applied to – to guard or protect what *has* dignity.'[12] Rejecting Hobbesian social constructivism about rights requires believing that the objective worth of a person, all by itself, places demands on others. Kant famously framed this point in terms of a duty to treat a dignity-bearer as an end-in-itself: 'That which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself has not merely a relative worth, i.e. a price, but an intrinsic worth, i.e. a dignity.'[13]

Although one continues to find a lot of disagreement about the relationship between dignity and rights, it has become common to claim, or simply to assume, that dignity is the source of rights. The preamble to the United Nations' 1996 *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* is representative, stating explicitly that 'inalienable rights of all

members of the human family … derive from the inherent dignity of the human person.'[14] More recently, Teresa Iglesias reaffirmed this relationship as follows:

> The universal meaning of the concept of *dignity*, as inherent to every human being, expresses the *intrinsic good that the human being is*. The distinct *human rights* articulate those basic *intrinsic goods* proper to, and expressive of, each one's dignity, individually and in community relationships—as dimensions of our very being. These basic goods—guaranteed as rights—must be recognized, respected, and promoted so that the intrinsic good that the human being is himself or herself, personally and as an individual, may be preserved and assured.[15]

2.4. Irreplaceable worth

The loss of an individual human is not fully remediated by replacement with a qualitative duplicate. Now, in a sense, everything is 'irreplaceable': the particular items lost in a house fire are gone forever, even if an insurance company replaces them with perfect duplicates. If the job is done right, all the value lost will be restored (modulo important exceptions: keepsakes, original works of art, and so on whose value partly depends on relational facts about them). But the loss of a dignity-bearer does not admit of similar value-restoration in this fashion, in principle.

Again, the canonical statement of this dimension of dignity is found in Kant: 'In the kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. Whatever has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; on the other hand, whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity.'[16] But the idea can be found much earlier than Kant. John T. Crosby (1996) draws attention to a long tradition of reflection on what is 'incommunicable' about a human person, in the sense of *unshareable* in principle. He writes, 'There is another "definition" of personhood in the tradition … I mean the principle deriving from Roman law, *persona est sui iuris et alteri incommunicabilis*, which we might freely render in this way: a person is a begin of its own and does not share its being with another.'[17] The idea seems to be that while a human person's *nature* is common to all humans, there is yet some aspect of her personhood (Crosby calls it 'selfhood') that is metaphysically unique, and we have not valued a person properly until this unique aspect is acknowledged.

A common theme in the tradition of thought on irreplaceable worth is that there is something *ineffable* about this unique, 'incommunicable' aspect of a person; it is not just sui generis, but *je ne sais quois*. Simone Weil writes that 'There is something sacred in every man, but it is not his person. Nor yet is it the human personality. It is this man; no more nor less.'[18] More recently, Robin Dillon has written that respect for persons is grounded in "the characteristic of being an individual human 'me' – a characteristic which … pulls our attention to the concrete particularities of each human individual. We are … to pay attention not only to the fact that someone is a 'me' but also to which particular 'me' she is.[19]

So much for the four dimensions of worth that can be found in Western discussions of dignity. Even if it is granted that these four dimensions of worth can be traced to one or more historical discussions of some phenomenon or other called 'dignity', it

might be argued the dimensions ought to be unbundled rather than drawn together. Given that our dignity-concept has its origins in multiple philosophical traditions, perhaps it would be better to treat each of these dimensions as so many distinct dignity-concepts.

But I am convinced that the convergence over time of discussions of the four dimensions amounts to a clarification, not a confusion. The four dimensions are facets of a single jewel whose full discovery took the work of multiple philosophical traditions. I will try in what follows to vindicate this convergent intellectual history. I submit that the four dimensions jointly (that is, conjunctively) constrain any purported account of the grounds of dignity. Dignity is thus a complex moral status, and an exceedingly high one. We should seek to explain how humans are bearers of dignity of this rich and multifaceted sort.

I will now discuss four different families of accounts of the grounds of dignity. I argue that each of them fares well with respect to at least one of these dimensions (the dimension in view of which it was, presumably, developed), but at the same time fails miserably with respect to at least one.

3. Four accounts of the grounds of human dignity

I now rehearse what I take to be the four dominant schools of thought with respect to the grounds of human dignity in the contemporary philosophical and theological literature.[20]

3.1. Psychological capacity accounts

Psychological capacity accounts ground human dignity in psychological capacities that are unique to human beings. A variety of capacities have been appealed to, either individually or collectively, as the ground of dignity: the capacity for rationality, for goal-directedness, for self-consciousness, for language, for temporally extended projects, for moral agency, and so on.[21] Since it is widely agreed that human beings do have these capacities, psychological capacity accounts seem tailor-made to explain unique and inherent worth.

It is not uncontroversial that psychological capacity accounts succeed at what they are tailor-made to do. Humans possess the relevant capacities to varying degrees. But – runs an important objection – if dignity is grounded in these capacities, it is obscure, first, why dignity fails to come in degrees, and second, why immature, impaired, or incapacitated humans should exhibit greater dignity than non-human animals who exhibit the same capacities to as high a degree.[22]

A standard response (or family of responses) to this objection is to appeal to higher-order capacities that even immature, impaired, or incapacitated humans possess. It is not true that all humans have the capacity for moral deliberation (say), but all humans have the capacity to develop that capacity, given sufficient maturation or remediation.[23] And since possession of the relevant higher-order capacities does not come in degrees, neither does the possession of dignity. Now, more needs to be said about what it takes to possess the relevant higher-order capacities. But that is work for another time.[24] I will assume in

what follows that some version of this response to the objection is successful. I will assume, moreover, that the success of this response gives us decisive reason to prefer a higher-order psychological capacity account to a first-order one.

Now suppose we add to a higher-order psychological capacity account that possession of the relevant higher-order capacity is *an essential property of being human*. This addendum brings the psychological capacity account into close proximity with the traditional Aristotelian-Thomistic account of human beings as having a *nature*, defined in terms of rationality, that underlies whatever powers happen to be expressed or even possessed at any particular time. When I use the terms 'nature' or 'human nature' in what follows, this is the framework I shall have in mind.

A deeper worry with psychological capacity accounts is that they have little to say about *why* human nature – understood as a suite of psychological capacities of a particular sort – is so valuable. They treat this as a basic normative fact. Now, there must be some basic normative facts, and perhaps the fact that human nature is valuable is one such. But, I suggest, we shouldn't treat a fact as brute before we have tried to explain it. So, while advocates of psychological capacity accounts are welcome to just insist that certain psychological capacities are the natural basis of dignity, without explaining why, we should ask more from our theories than that. If one property is alleged to be the metaphysical ground of another, we should look for an intelligible connection between the two.

With respect to irreplaceable worth, psychological accounts are an abject failure. For if the worth of a person is entirely a function of the value of her psychological capacities, then no objective value is lost if she is destroyed and her nature is replicated in another. For the same reason, it is unclear whether psychological capacity accounts explain inviolable worth. Sure, an advocate of psychological capacity accounts can *say* that anyone with the relevant capacities is inviolable. But why should this be so? Why would the having of certain psychological traits, or of the nature that gives rise to such traits, elevate their bearer to a worth 'beyond all price', as Kant says?

The scorecard for psychological capacity accounts thus looks like this:

Unique Worth	✓
Inherent Worth	?
Inviolable Worth	?
Irreplaceable Worth	×

3.2. Interest-based accounts

Interest-based accounts ground human dignity in our unique interests and/or our unique relationship to our interests. Roger Scruton puts the view as follows:

> Human beings are conscious of their lives as their own; they have ambitions, hopes and aspirations … Hence there is a real distinction, for a human being, between timely and untimely death. To be 'cut short' before one's time is a waste — even a tragedy. We lament the death of children and young people not merely because we lament the death of anyone, but because we believe that human beings are fulfilled by their achievements and not merely by their comforts.[25]

Scruton can be read as appealing either to first-order interests or to second-order interests. On the first reading, humans have interests of a different kind from those of other animals: they have commitments and projects, whereas animals merely have needs and wants. Compare Jason Eberl: 'It is arguable that a person possesses the moral status she does by virtue of her capacity to have *significant interests*, the frustration of which would cause her to experience a degree of harm beyond the pain that merely sentient non-personal animals may experience.'[26]

On the second reading, humans have a different relationship to their interests than other animals do. Humans do not simply have interests, but they take an interest in their interests; they select their interests, identify with them, invest in them, and derive meaning from them.

Interest-based accounts score better than personhood accounts with respect to inherent worth. Humans *have* interests, clearly. Whereas it is controversial whether the having of capacities matters morally, it is uncontroversial that the having of *interests* matters morally. Stifling a creature's interests is, all other things being equal, not good.

It is less clear how to score interest-based accounts with respect to unique worth. On the one hand, is it undisputed that humans have certain interests, at both the first- and second-order, that no other animals have. But on the other hand, it isn't clear why these peculiar interests mark a major moral threshold. Non-human animals do have interests, after all. Why not locate the major moral threshold at the no-interests/interests boundary, rather than the interests/peculiarly human interests boundary? Since there is presumably a great deal to be said on both sides here, I leave the matter open.

When it comes to irreplaceable worth, interest-based accounts are, again, a failure. Observe: it would be perverse to grieve a departed loved one *principally because* her or his interests have been lost to the world. Moreover, someone else's taking up those interests could never restore the value that has been lost – as the interest-based account seems to imply. The underlying trouble is this: if interests are the locus of worth in a person, then the person herself matters only derivatively, as the site of interests. But, as John Tasioulas puts the point, 'People are not simply the "locations" at which the satisfaction or frustration of free-floating interests happen to be instantiated.'[27]

With regard to inviolable worth, the picture is more complicated. On the one hand, a person's interests partly determine how that person ought to be treated, how to care for him, what rights he has, etc. Thus, if acknowledging someone's dignity means respecting that person, the person's interests dictate what such respect looks like in practice. We might say that interests provide the 'content' of inviolable worth – what non-violation entails, practically speaking.

But there is more to inviolable worth than its content. There is also what we might call its 'force.' It is not a conceptual confusion to ask the question, 'But why *must* I respect a person's interests?' We know it is not a conceptual confusion because the utilitarian calculus is a coherent ethical system that denies that we must. The question is a substantive one, and the answer presumably is that the *person* must be respected. As David Velleman puts it, 'What's good for a person is worth caring about only out of concern for the person, and hence only insofar as he is worth caring about. A person's good has only hypothetical or conditional value, which depends on the value of the person himself.'[28] Interest-based accounts can't say this, and thus they leave the force of inviolable worth unexplained.

Here is the scorecard for interest-based accounts:

Unique Worth	?
Inherent Worth	✓
Inviolable Worth	content ✓ force ×
Irreplaceable Worth	×

3.3. Relational accounts

Relational accounts ground human dignity in our morally significant relational properties. If we think of dignity as something like a social rank or status, then presumably dignity must be conferred upon its bearers in virtue of standing in an appropriate relation to whatever entity is authorized to confer it. Suzy Killmister, for example, understands the category *human* as a peculiarly 'global' social kind (and not, that is, a biological or psychological kind). Partly constitutive of any social kind are the privileges conferred on members by the whole group; this is true of being a human just as it is of being a citizen or a family member.[29]

Killmister's is a non-theistic relational account. There are also theistic versions, according to which God, rather than a social group, confers dignity upon human beings. (Phrases such as 'God-given dignity' seem to roll off of the religious tongue, suggesting that, for religious people, a theistic relational account of human moral status is often their intuitive, default position.) For many theologians, the notion of 'being made in God's image' is treated as more basic than the notion of dignity. Theologians have historically used image-of-God talk in the service of (higher-order) psychological capacity accounts – to describe a property that supervenes on the intrinsic nature of a human being. Recently, though, some prominent theologians have argued that this is a mistake. Instead, they suggest that 'image of God' denotes a divine gift or summons or promise.[30] John Kilner, for example, understands our dignity to be a function of the destiny God has in store for us: 'Simply by being "in" the image of God – being en route to a glorious destiny as God's image in Christ – people have an impressive God-given dignity.'[31]

Relational accounts readily explain irreplaceable worth, in stark contrast to the previous two accounts. After all, the relevant conferral-relationships hold between the individual recipient of dignity and whatever the authoritative source is. The individual, rather than her capacities or interests, becomes the locus of worth in these accounts.

By extension, relational accounts can explain unique worth. If God (say) summons each human being individually, thereby conferring dignity upon all, the resulting set of dignity-bearers consists of all and only human beings. Non-theistic versions fare less well, for they leave open the possibility that some humans are not recognized by any moral community and thus lack dignity.[32] That theistic versions have the resources to rule out this possibility seems to count in their favor.

But relational accounts obviously fail with respect to inherent worth. They simply give up on the idea that a human's dignity is grounded in *her* natural properties. Why, we might ask, is this a problem? The reason is that it conflicts with the *impartiality* of human dignity. As Agnieszka Jaworska and Julie Tannenbaum point out, 'A being has moral status only if all moral agents, whether human or not, must show that being the corresponding moral regard.'[33] But no part of relational accounts, of either theistic or

non-theistic varieties, guarantees this. As Johannes Fischer puts it, the relational account 'is in danger of abandoning dignity to caprice.'[34]

Can relational accounts capture inviolable worth? It's not clear. Nicholas Wolterstorff draws an analogy with a monarch who selects some of his subjects as his friends. These honored persons thereby 'acquire new ways of being demeaned, new ways of being wronged, a new ground for respect; and that's possible only if there has been some alteration in one's worth.'[35] Perhaps this is right, but it's not clear that this 'new ground for respect' has force for anyone who does not deem the monarch's choice independently appropriate and who does not defer to the monarch on the point. The question of whether to violate the monarch's favorite seems entirely a matter of what the implications would be, vis-à-vis the monarch, for doing so – which is at odds with the venerable Kantian idea that dignity-bearers are 'ends in themselves.'

Here is the scorecard for relational accounts:

Unique Worth	✓
Inherent Worth	×
Inviolable Worth	?
Irreplaceable Worth	✓

3.4. Primitivist accounts

Primitivist accounts deny that human dignity has metaphysical grounds. They instead take human dignity as primitive. One motivation for primitivism is the failures of the other options. For example, Andrew Bailey and Joshua Rasmussen express doubts that the value of the parts or aspects of a human being can add up to the infinite value of the person as a whole. But since the idea that persons are infinitely valuable is morally indispensable, they provisionally conclude that 'our infinite value is an unexplained explainer.'[36]

A different motivation is phenomenological. Our moral regard for others does not seem to be derived from any principle but is simply called forth in the context of interpersonal encounter. Emmanuel Levinas writes of 'the Face' of the other that commands our regard: 'The face is the fact that a being affects us not in the indicative, but in the imperative.'[37]

Like relational accounts, primitivist accounts deliver irreplaceable worth: for Levinas, it is the individual as such who calls forth our moral regard. Unlike relational accounts, primitivist accounts also unequivocally deliver inviolable worth – but they do so only in the sense of taking inviolable worth as a phenomenological datum.

Like relational accounts, primitivist accounts give up on the idea of inherent worth: while they affirm that humans have worth that is objective and impartial, they deny that such worth is grounded in any natural properties. But unlike relational accounts, they provide no surrogate explanation (in terms of worth conferred). And this is a major problem. It is hard to understand what could be meant by saying that dignity is a real property of human beings, yet it is grounded in nothing. As Wolterstorff puts it: 'Worth, dignity, excellence, does not settle on things willy-nilly; always there's something about the thing that gives it worth, something that accounts for its worth, something on which its worth supervenes.'[38] Sarah Buss goes further: 'No one who believes in the special,

morally significant value of humanity is morally serious if she also believes that the natural properties of human beings do not support this belief.'[39]

What about unique worth? It's not clear what primitivist accounts could say about it. Because they do not seek to *explain* the boundaries of the moral community, they cannot help to *settle* the boundaries of the moral community, when those boundaries are in dispute. When a dog's visage elicits compassionate concern on the part of humans, ought we to characterize such an episode in terms of 'the Face of the other,' à la Levinas? Maybe. Maybe not.

Here is the scorecard for primitivist accounts:

Unique Worth	?
Inherent Worth	×
Inviolable Worth	✓
Irreplaceable Worth	✓

4. Constructing a hybrid account

There are, apparently, profound problems with all of these accounts. And yet I want to suggest that there is something right about each of them as well. What we need is a hybrid account of dignity that synthesizes the insights of all four. I will develop my hybrid account in four stages, each stage extracting insights from one of the four accounts just discussed.

4.1. Stage 1: psychological capacities and inherent worth

Psychological capacity accounts are correct in asserting that certain distinctively human capacities are of great worth to have. But which capacities? And what is valuable about them? Elsewhere I have developed an account of the essential psychological difference between humans and non-human animals.[40] Here I summarize that account.

Among the oldest and most consistently re-affirmed doctrines in Western philosophy is that rationality is definitive of human nature.[41] And nearly as old as that doctrine is the distinction between two types of rationality: *practical* and *theoretical*. If in fact humans are distinguished by their rational nature, it is worth asking whether practical or theoretical rationality is definitive of that nature, or if they are jointly definitive, which is the more basic. Philosophers have famously disagreed about this. Aristotle, for example, characterizes the summit of rationality as theoretical, in terms of *theoria* (from which we get our term 'theoretical') – the intellectual appreciation of reality, usually translated as 'contemplation' or sometimes 'study'.[42] Immanuel Kant, on the other hand, characterizes the summit of rationality as practical, in terms of moral autonomy – the ability to regulate one's actions according to moral rules.[43]

Who is right? I think both are. The capacities for *theoria* and moral autonomy are species of a more general psychological capacity: the capacity to apprehend and respond appropriately to value. Different kinds of responses are appropriate to different kinds of goods, once those goods have been apprehended by the intellect. Alethic and aesthetic goods warrant contemplative wonder. Prudential goods warrant pursuit and promotion.

Moral goods warrant respect and care. Divine goods warrant reverence. And so on. Rationality is definitive of humans, I propose, but only when rationality is understood broadly as the ability to apprehend and respond appropriately to value in all these ways – to *steward the good*.

Which psychological endowments are required to steward the good, i.e., to be rational in my sense? Cognitive endowments, certainly. Stewards of the good need to know what is valuable and according to what priority-ranking, and they also need to know how to respond appropriately. But stewards of the good – at any rate if they are human rather than divine or angelic – employ more than cognitive endowments. They make use of *affective* endowments, as a means of registering value; they feel the value of valuable things. Affective endowments also enable them to desire to respond appropriately to value and to take delight in so responding. And finally, they need *volitional* endowments: they need to have the power to freely and consistently choose to respond appropriately. Thus, the 'rational nature' of persons is a rich suite of psychological capacities, by no means restricted to rationality in the narrow sense of making good inferences.

So much for the capacities constitutive of human nature. I agree with advocates of psychological capacity accounts that these capacities underwrite inherent worth. But how? What is the explanatory connection between the natural fact that we have these psychological capacities, on the one hand, and the normative fact that we are bearers of inherent worth, on the other?

It is obvious that the capacities constitutive of human nature are *prudentially* valuable. Rationality – understood in its cognitive, affective, and volitional dimensions – enables human beings to do just about anything they please: it empowers them to meet or circumvent or remove nearly any obstacle they confront in pursuit of their aims. But this is not yet to say how rationality is valuable in an absolute, dignity-conferring sense.

There are many types of absolute value, and human psychological activity plausibly exemplifies many of them. Acts of enjoyment are bearers of hedonic value. Acts of understanding are bearers of alethic value. Acts of imagination can be bearers of aesthetic value. Perhaps it would be worth trying to explain the inherent worth of human beings in terms of the capacities for acts of one of these valuable kinds. I am rather skeptical that we could explain the *unique* worth of human beings in such terms (though I will not try to defend my skepticism). At any rate, I want to pursue a different tack. The value of human psychological capacities is ultimately grounded not in the value (hedonic, alethic, aesthetic, or whatever) of their characteristic actualizations but in the value of *the objects* at which their actualizations are directed.

My jumping-off point here is Sarah Buss's account of the value of sentience, developed in her 2012 paper 'The Value of Humanity.' Sentient beings can feel pain, and consequently have an interest in not being treated in pain-inducing ways. But that doesn't tell us why the *capacity* to feel pain (or to feel any other affective state, for that matter) is valuable. What is significant about our capacity for sentience is, instead, that it allows us to feel, not just negatively and positively, but negatively and positively *toward* things. She writes,

> Perhaps a creature with no feelings could have positive and negative attitudes toward various things. It seems, however, that we actual valuers all have sensations and feelings of

> various sorts; and it seems that these sensations and feelings—and especially pleasures and pains—are inseparable from our perception of values . . . .were it not for our sentience, we would be incapable of adopting the attitude of appreciation. I want to suggest that this capacity to appreciate the value in things is the capacity to pay homage to them, and that the capacity to pay homage in this way is an important element in human dignity.[44]

In short: our capacity for sentience is of value because it (at least partly) constitutes our capacity to acknowledge value. Now, I submit that acknowledging value requires more than *sentience*. Sentience, as Buss understands it, is an affective capacity (that includes or presupposes representational capacities as well). But, as I claimed above, acknowledging value also requires rich cognitive and volitional capacities. Amending Buss's view accordingly, we get the idea that humans are bearers of dignity because of what their rational nature allows them to do: acknowledge value.

According to Buss, an instrument used for noble ends is, *ipso facto*, worthy of respect: 'Human dignity is grounded, at least in part, in the human capacity to transcend the concerns, needs, and demands of the self in paying disinterested tribute to what warrants this response.'[45] It is a very good thing that the world contains appreciation-instruments. These instruments should be safeguarded and honored. 'Precisely because human beings are capable of performing the sublime service of giving things of value their due, we have reason to acknowledge *their* value by treating them as constraints (though not necessarily *absolute* constraints) on what we can justifiably do.'[46]

What sort of worth is Buss here ascribing to human beings? As I read her, our dignity (this aspect of it, anyway) is a type of *extrinsic*, *final* value.[47] It is extrinsic, because it derives from the value of what we can appreciate. But it is *final*, because it is a form of extrinsic value that commands respect. Shelly Kagan provides the following example of extrinsic, final value.[48] Suppose you are presented with the pen that Lincoln used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. You may well feel moved to pay respects to *this very artifact*, to honor it and preserve it – but only because of its historical significance.

If the Buss-inspired story I have been telling is on the right track, then there is a chain of explanatory connections between the proper objects of human psychological capacities, on the one hand, and human dignity, on the other. The chain involves four distinct types of value-bearer. At the start of the chain, there are (1) intrinsically valuable, appreciation-worthy *entities* and *states of affairs*. These entities and states of affairs are the objects of (2) *psychological acts of appreciation*. Such acts exemplify *alethic* and *moral* value because they are proper responses to cognitively apprehended value in the world. These acts are exercises of (3) *psychological capacities* directed toward such acts. These psychological capacities are thus bearers of *instrumental* value, derivative of the alethic and moral value of their characteristic expressions (which value is in turn derivative off of the value of those expressions' objects). Finally, these capacities characterize the nature of (4) the *persons* who have them. Because persons are bearers of these extraordinary capacities, they are owed respect. The value that inheres in persons, in virtue of their nature, is *extrinsic, final* value.

In sum: that which can respond appropriately to intrinsic value is inherently worthy of respect.

4.2. Stage 2: relationality and unique worth

The natural ground of inherent worth is our rational nature – our capacity to acknowledge value, to 'steward the good'. Since humans, alone among terrestrial creatures, have this capacity, it might seem that the account so far also covers unique worth. But it does not, at least not obviously. For we have not established that the inherent worth of human beings is particularly *high*.

I have said that acts of appreciation have alethic and moral value: such acts involve the recognition and proper response to intrinsically valuable entities and states of affairs. But just how valuable are such acts? In particular, how does the value of such acts compare with the value of the objects toward which such acts are directed?

The answer is not entirely obvious. On the one hand: to love and tend the world is a beautiful thing. Of course, the act of tending would have no moral value whatsoever if there were no value in the thing tended. But once the value of the world is in place, perhaps we should extol the act of properly acknowledging such value even more than we extol the world.

On the other hand: it seems to be part of the posture of acknowledgement that one subordinates one's loving responses to the things loved. The birdwatcher does not think her loving attention a more precious thing than the bird she attends to; if she did, she would no longer offer the attention befitting the creature. So perhaps we should reserve our highest praise for the objects of acknowledgement, and allow that the moral value of a suitable response to those objects is always of a lesser order. But if *this* is the right way to think about the matter, then we have not yet shown that human beings 'are worth more than many sparrows.'

Fortunately, it does not matter which of these is the right way to rank the two sets of values. The reason is that our rational capacities enable us to acknowledge that which is *infinitely* valuable. In our capacity to worship, we become stewards of *ultimate* goodness. Even if our stewarding of the good is always of lesser worth than the good we steward, the good from which our dignity is derived is the greatest possible good, for this good is what our rational capacities are directed toward.

How so? Alexander Schmemann helpfully describes the mechanism whereby our capacities for acknowledgement of terrestrial goods are transmuted into the capacity to worship. Like Buss, Schmemann starts from our affective capacities, although his focus is on a different suite of affective capacities: our desires, and in particular, our hunger. We are incomplete beings; we need to consume in order to live. This craving for consumption is at the root of our basest behaviors, of course. But this is because we have lost the ultimate horizon of our desires, which is a yearning for God. Schmemann writes:

> Man is a hungry being. But he is hungry for God. Behind all the hunger of our life is God. All desire is finally a desire for him. To be sure, man is not the only hungry being. All that exists lives by 'eating'. The whole creation depends on food. But the unique position of man in the universe is that he alone is to *bless* God for the food and the life he receives from him. He alone is to respond to God's blessing with his blessing . . . In the Bible the food that man eats, the world of which he must partake in order to live, is given to him by God, and it is given as *communion with God* . . . All that exists is God's gift to man, and it all exists to make God known to man, to make man's life communion with God.[49]

The hunger-satiation cycle is meant to be a sacramental exercise. We hunger; the world provides the good that we seek, viz., the means of satiation of our hunger; and in such satiation, we have an icon of God's goodness. Thus, the act of eating can be an act of base, self-directed consumption, if the transcendent horizon of our desires is lost; or it can be an act of worship.[50]

But, of course, this discussion of eating is a microcosm of our broader affective posture to the world. Our affective capacities function at one level, to help us navigate the world. But at another level, they enable us to acknowledge God:

> The only natural (and not 'supernatural') reaction of man, to whom God gave this blessed and sanctified world, is to bless God in return, to thank him, to see the world as God sees it … All rational, spiritual, and other qualities of man, distinguishing him from other creatures, have their focus and ultimate fulfillment in this capacity to bless God, to know, so to speak, the meaning of the thirst and hunger that constitutes his life. '*Homo sapiens*', '*homo faber*' … yes, but, first of all, *homo adorans*.[51,52]

If the dignity of human nature is a function of our capacity to acknowledge value, then humans are indeed valuable, but not unequivocally *more* valuable than what they acknowledge. And if the capacity for acknowledgement extends only to the natural world, then it is not clear to what extent our dignity exceeds that of other creatures. But in fact the capacity for acknowledgement extends higher and further: humans have the capacity to acknowledge the infinite goodness of God, i.e. to worship. Commendable, perhaps, is the instrument of creaturely appreciation, but noble indeed the instrument of divine praise.

It turns out, then, that the unique worth of our nature *is* a relational fact about us. And theistic versions of the relational account are right to suggest that our worth derives from God. But those accounts get the mechanism of derivation backwards: it is not (or not exclusively) because of God's attitude toward us but because of our (proper) attitude toward God – that is, the attitude that consummates the nature we have been given – that our nature is uniquely dignified. It is worth noting that the *capacity* for this attitude is what confers unique worth (as Schmemman stresses). Its full actualization constitutes our 'ultimate fulfillment,' but presumably that ultimate fulfillment shall only occur in the eschatological future.

In sum: that which can acknowledge ultimate value is inherently worthy of a uniquely high degree of respect.

4.3. Stage 3: interests and the content of inviolable worth

A significant virtue of the account so far is that it explains why having a rational nature is morally special; it does not simply assert that this is so. But there is a cost to taking this approach, for the explanation instrumentalizes human nature. To say that humans are respect-worthy (as the account so far does) is not yet to say that they are inviolable, that they are 'ends in themselves.'[53]

I will argue in the next section that we can't explain inviolable worth without explaining irreplaceable worth, and we can't do that so long as we restrict our *explanans*

to aspects of human nature. But human nature does have explanatory work to do yet. For it establishes our *interests*. And interests are necessary to flesh out the content of inviolable worth.

But how could our *nature* establish our *interests*? There is no clear *conceptual* connection between the two. The fact that some capacity of mine confers dignity on me does not, *ipso facto*, guarantee that exercising it is in my interests. Maybe what makes my existence add value to the universe is one matter, what makes my life go well for me is another; absolute and prudential value are not conceptually linked. Thus: even if what grounds my inherent and unique worth is my capacity to worship, it remains an open question whether I have, or ought to have, an *interest* in worshiping.

Though a capacity's absolute and prudential value are never conceptually linked, there are cases of capacities where they are substantively linked. These cases involve the capacities without which we cannot function as the kinds of creatures we are, i.e. as beings with a rational nature. Crucially, the capacities essential to rationality have proper objects. As Aquinas puts it: 'The object of the intellect is the universal true,' whereas 'the object of the will, i.e. of man's appetite, is the universal good.'[54] Just as theoretical rationality *aims at the truth as such* (such that one who 'believes' what he knows to be false is not really believing at all, but doing something else with his mind), so also, practical rationality *aims at the good as such*.

Moreover, insofar as we are integrated psychological beings, we must attain the proper objects of our capacities in ways that harmonize rather than divide the self. The flourishing person desires what she simultaneously *believes* to be desirable; what she believes to be desirable she also *wills*. And so forth. A unified cognitive-affective-volitional disposition with respect to some good thing is *love* for that thing. Flourishing persons are lovers of the good.

What this all means is that we persons not only have *the capacity to* apprehend and respond appropriately to value, but we have *an objective interest in* doing so. Our very nature as creatures capable of practical rationality guarantees that we have this interest. Loving the good is what we are built for.

So saying is at least one way to substantiate the theological claim that we are *called* to worship God, to love others, and to be stewards of the earth. We are called *by our very nature* to do so. We can now see the significance of a statement of Schmemann's that I quoted above: 'The only natural (*and not "supernatural"*) reaction of man, to whom God gave this blessed and sanctified world, is to bless God in return, to thank him, to see the world as God sees it' (italics added). Our vocation as stewards of creation and worshipers of the Creator isn't superimposed by the divine will; it wells up from our own nature (even if our *fulfillment* of that vocation depends on divine grace). Nothing more perfectly expresses our natural capacities than the worship of God, and nothing more perfectly orients our common life than the corporate worship of God – i.e. the liturgy.

Interest-based accounts of dignity take their cue from the genuine insight that there is a deep connection between human dignity, on the one hand, and the interests peculiar to human beings, on the other. But these accounts get the order of explanation backward. It is not because of the greatness of peculiarly human interests that our nature is dignified. Instead, it because the dignity-conferring aspects of our nature are ordered in certain ways that we have the peculiar (objective) interests that have.

It is worth noting that because interest-based accounts get the order of explanation backward, they have no principled way to delineate which peculiarly human interests are dignifying and which are not, and thus cannot provide a principled (rather than intuitive) account of the content of inviolable worth. (Are humans distinguished because they can invent things? Pursue long-term projects? Manipulate nature? Develop science? Give themselves self-sacrificially to one another and to God in love? Who is to say?) But an account of objective interests grounded in our essential nature as persons can provide a principled account of which interests make up the content of inviolable worth. To respect a person is, among other things, to promote – or at least, to refrain from stifling – her interest in loving the good. Now, it is not the case that the content of inviolable worth is entirely a function of our objective interest in loving the good. We also have objective interests in mental and physical health, for example (as, presumably, non-human animals have as well). But our peculiar orientation toward the good means that we can harmed and benefitted in ways other animals cannot, and our duties to one another are shaped by these modes of harm and benefit.

In sum: That which can acknowledge ultimate value is inherently worthy of a uniquely high degree of respect, respect that is expressed in concern for one's interests in (inter alia) apprehending value and avoiding deprivations of value.

4.4. Stage 4: incommunicable subjectivity, Irreplaceable worth, and the force of Inviolability

We have now given an account of inherent worth, unique worth, and the content of inviolable worth – in other words, why human nature commands respect and the rough shape that such respect must take. But we have not yet explained why each human person is an end in herself.

To illustrate: suppose I have a collection of musical instruments. All make beautiful music, but one in particular makes music that is incomparably beautiful. I have composed an extraordinary piece of music to be played on this instrument, the performance of which will, alas, cause irreparable damage to the instrument. And now let us suppose that I know the person who built the instrument, and the proceeds from performance will be more than enough to cover the cost of replacement. Do I 'violate' the instrument? I do not. If anything, I honor the instrument – I provide it with the 'swan song' it deserves.

If the illustration tracks our account of human dignity so far, then that account clearly comes up short. For if persons' worth is analogous to that musical instrument's worth, then using a person as a mere means can be an honor to that person – if it is her rational capacities that are being put to use. I suggest that this limitation in our account of dignity so far explains the ambivalence, among philosophers and the folk alike, toward the idea of 'serving a purpose' or 'fulfilling a function'. On the one hand, there can be great meaning in serving a noble purpose. But on the other hand, is it not demeaning to suggest my worth consists in my playing a role in society? Haven't *I* been devalued, even as my capacities are celebrated?

What's missing is the sense in which each person is valuable *qua* unique individual. But how could we explain this? We *cannot* explain it by appealing to more valuable aspects of human nature, as Linda Zagzebski's important work on this topic has made clear:

> If something has infinite value, its value is higher than anything with finite value and equal to other things with infinite value. In short, what has infinite value can be compared in value to other things, whereas what has irreplaceable value cannot be. It is therefore impossible for the same thing to be the ground of both infinite and irreplaceable value.[55]

What Zagzebski here calls 'infinite value' – per her reading of Kant – is, roughly, our inherent and unique worth, i.e. the very high moral status conferred on us by our rational nature. (Elsewhere she expresses doubts that humans have literally *infinite* value, rather than very high but nevertheless finite value.[56])

The problem is not that we need to find some feature or aspect of human nature that is *even more valuable* than the capacity to acknowledge ultimate value. The problem is that the value of a dignity-bearer is something different from the value of that individual's *nature*. As Zagzebski points out, everything about our nature is *metaphysically repeatable*. But the inviolability and irreplaceable value of persons entails that what is morally salient about human persons is *unrepeatable*, even in principle. Compare: suppose I were to insist that my 2015 Ford C-Max is irreplaceably valuable. If you were to ask me why, and I proceeded to describe various aspects of its nature, such as its reliability, smooth handling, good gas mileage, I would not have justified my attitude to you. You would rightly wonder why a replacement wouldn't be just as good.

Following Zagzebski, I want to suggest that there is a non-qualitative, non-relational dimension to human persons. Following Crosby (*The Selfhood of the Human Person*), Zagzebski labels this dimension 'incommunicable subjectivity.' The incommunicable subject is the *bearer* of a dignified human nature, the *bearer* of the acknowledgement-relation (toward what is valuable), the *bearer* of interests.[57] Persons are not, in other words, mere sets of capacities. They are psychological individuals who exercise (both passively and actively) those capacities. There is some*one* who loves the good, and it is this someone who becomes palpably present to us via 'the Face of the other.' The self is the locus of moral concern; her interests matter only derivatively. It is because she is the sort of being that is capable of acknowledging value that *she* matters in the way she does.

Now, what is the explanatory connection between the person's self (in my sense) and the person's irreplaceable worth? Alas, we may be tempted again to look for some account of the *nature* of the unrepeatable self, but this would put us right back where we started, unable to account for why *this* self can't just be replaced with a qualitatively identical self, without loss of value. The explanatory connection must be brute, if it holds at all. Either we must give up on the idea of irreplaceable worth, or we must be primitivists about it – not because it is difficult to put our finger on which feature of selves make them irreplaceably valuable, but because it impossible for any *features* to explain irreplaceable worth, owing to the notion of irreplaceability itself.

Now, we *can* answer a slightly different question, however: why are individual humans irreplaceably valuable, whereas other terrestrial creatures, bearers of other natures – cows with their bovine natures, say – are not? The answer is: because human selves are rational selves, stewards and lovers of the good. It is not inappropriate to see something *godlike* in the infinite depths of a rational soul. This gestalt – this seeing a particular human person as lit from within by the majesty of God – is not exclusive to the Judeo-Christian tradition. It shows up in the work of Seneca, the Roman Stoic:

> God is near you, is with you, is inside you. If you have ever come on a dense wood of ancient trees that have risen to an exceptional height, shutting out all sight of the sky with one thick screen of branches upon another, the loftiness of the forest, the seclusion of the spot, your sense of wonder at finding so deep and unbroken a gloom out of doors, will persuade you of the presence of a deity. And if you come across a man who is not alarmed by dangers, not touched by passionate longing, happy in adversity, calm in the midst of storm, is it not likely that a feeling of awe for him will find its way into your heart? Praise in him what can neither be given nor snatched away, what is peculiarly human. You ask what that is? It is his soul, and reason perfected in the soul. For the human being is a rational animal.[58]

What I want to suggest is that the wonder owed to a human soul (especially one alive to its calling) of which Seneca speaks does not consist entirely in admiration at what that soul is *like* (its virtues, etc.). It is wonder at *who* that soul *is*. It is as though the infinite heights toward which human nature is drawn – the heights of God's own goodness – correspond to infinite depths within the self. If we struggle to say what is irreplaceably valuable about a particular person, we are perhaps suffering the same reticence we would feel if we were asked to express what is irreplaceably valuable about the divine Presence.

So we can say *which* individuals are irreplaceably valuable – persons, stewards of the good – and we can *see that* they are, but we cannot say anything further about *why* they are. It must simply be a basic moral fact about a person that she or he, *qua* particular individual, is profoundly morally significant.

This fact is revealed within, but not constituted by, intersubjective recognition. If Levinas is right, such recognition includes the realization that this person is not to be used as a tool, not even in the service of the dignity of the human race. That is, once we apprehend the person's irreplaceable worth, violating him or her becomes a moral impossibility. The force of inviolable worth is thus a singular force, proceeding not from the shareable nature of persons or from any general moral principles at all but from the preciousness of each irreplaceable self.

In sum: It is a primitive fact that bearers of rational natures have irreplaceable worth, and irreplaceable worth grounds the force of inviolable worth.

5. Conclusion

Let us recap. According to a traditional view, human beings are owed special moral consideration: they are bearers of 'dignity'. Over the centuries, philosophical reflection on the phenomenon of human dignity has revealed that dignity includes at least four different, though closely related, dimensions of worth: *unique worth*, worth that is greater, qualitatively or quantitatively, than the worth of non-human terrestrial creatures; *inherent worth*, worth that is objective and impartial, grounded in our natural properties; *inviolable worth*, worth that commands respect for a suite of rights; and *irreplaceable worth*, worth such that replacement with a qualitative duplicate cannot fully remediate loss.

Ethicists have developed four families of accounts to explain why humans are bearers of dignity. Psychological capacity accounts appeal to our unique psychological capacities (e.g. rationality or autonomy). Interest-based accounts appeal to our unique and

significant interests (e.g. having long-term projects and commitments). Relational accounts appeal to our morally salient relational properties, paradigmatically our being included or honored by other persons or by God. Primitivist accounts resist appeals to any grounding properties, but maintain instead that it is a basic fact about humans that we demand moral consideration.

None of these accounts turns out to be satisfactory, because while each is able to capture at least one of the dimensions of worth, each forfeits at least one of the dimensions as well. I proceeded to build a hybrid account out of the best insights from each account, an account inspired in large part by the work of Sarah Buss, Alexander Schmemann, and Linda Zagzebski.

I constructed my account out of the remains of multiple failed theories. Is the result a garishly Frankensteinian mish-mash? It is not. The account is both theoretically elegant and theoretically powerful.

It is elegant, I say. It appeals to two aspects of human beings: (1) their rational nature (especially insofar as it affords them the capacity to worship) and (2) their subjectivity. These are not two disparate features, but two elements of a unified psychological reality. For there is no such thing as subjectless rationality; psychological capacities must have a bearer. Thus, being rational entails (though, importantly, does not explain) being a subject. Being a subject does not entail being rational, but there is no such thing as a subject (in the first-personal sense) without some type of psychology or other. Rationality characterizes us as the kinds of subjects we are – persons, who flourish by loving the good.

I say that the account is also powerful. It does not merely stipulate that rationality is dignified, but explains why this is so, viz., as an instrument of worship. (The account can thus deflect worries about speciesism that tend to harass defenders of human dignity.) But it not only proposes metaphysical grounds for dignity, it explains the connection between these grounds, on the one hand, and the phenomenology of our moral reactions to one another. What warrants these moral reactions is also what motivates them. That is a happy result.[59]

Notes

1. See e.g. Singer, "Speciesism and Moral Status," Rossello, "All in the (Human) Family? Species Aristocratism in the Return of Human Dignity," and Kymlicka, "Human Rights Without Human Supremacism."
2. The full text of the Declaration is available at https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.
3. In "Dignity," Debes points out that some contemporary theorists (Jeremy Waldron, most influentially) understand dignity in terms of status or standing, rather than value or worth. I will not address this alternative approach, except to say that if one's status or standing has no axiological foundation, it is not clear why anyone should care about it, normatively speaking.
4. As Debes (ibid.) puts it: "There is no single, incontestable meaning of dignity. In fact, there are so many possible meanings that it has become commonplace in the literature to worry about the expansive variety of conceptions, and in turn to worry whether dignity is or has become essentially ambiguous."
5. I don't think that this taxonomy is forced; there are probably finer ways to carve up normative space. Although other taxonomies might serve other purposes just as well,

I tentatively judge my taxonomy to be both *illuminating* and *exhaustive* for present purposes.

6. Darwall, "Equal Dignity and Right," 182. Qtd. in Demes (ibid.). See also Seneca's *Of the Happy Life*, wherein Seneca argues that the Epicureans, by identifying human happiness with pleasures that beasts are capable of, debase human nature, leaving out what is "noblest" in us, viz., our capacity for reason-governed virtuous action.
7. Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 170.
8. See e.g. Warren, *Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things*, and Kagan, *How to Count Animals, More or Less*.
9. Lee & George, "The Nature and Basis of Human Dignity," 410.
10. An early example is John Locke, who grounds natural rights in natural *duties*: "Every one, as he is *bound to preserve himself*, and not to quit his station wilfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought then, as much as he can, *to preserve the rest of mankind*" (*Second Treatise of Government*, book II section 6).
11. This is not equivalent to an absolute prohibition on knowingly causing harm; if some version of the Doctrine of Double Effect is correct, then one may foresee but not intend certain harms (e.g. collateral damage in war).
12. Debes, "Dignity's Gauntlet," 61–62.
13. Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 40.
14. For the full text is available at https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights.
15. Iglesias, "Bedrock Truth and the Dignity of the Individual," 130, qtd. in Debes, "Dignity." Even more recently, Ariel Zylberman writes in that *Dignity and Rights* that "dignity's role is to mark a fundamental form of value anchored in kinds; the role of rights is to function dispositionally by specifying and realizing through duties of recognition the requirements of dignity" (p. 42).
16. See note 13 above.
17. Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 25.
18. Weil, "Human Personality, "50–51. Qtd. in Debes, "Dignity."
19. Dillon, "Respect And Care: Toward Moral Integration," 118. Qtd. in Debes (ibid.).
20. The same qualification I offered with respect to the taxonomy in the previous section applies here, too: while there surely are other useful ways of categorizing the range of views in the contemporary literature, I tentatively judge my taxonomy to be both illuminating and exhaustive for present purposes.
21. A leading representative in contemporary bioethics is Mary Anne Warren, *Moral Status*. For surveys of alternative versions, see Zagzebski, "The Uniqueness of Persons," and Eberl, "The Ontological and Moral Significance of Persons."
22. For versions of this objection, see Norcross, "Puppies, Pigs, and People," and Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, 148ff.
23. See, for example, DiSilvestro, *Human Capacities and Moral Status*, and Hershenov & Hershenov, "Morally Relevant Potential".
24. See the sources mentioned in the previous note. I sketch my own preferred version of this response in "Caretakers of Value," section 6.
25. Scruton, "Eating our Friends." See also Frey, "Moral standing, the value of lives, and speciesism," who accounts for the unique worth of humans in terms of the comparative "richness" of human lives, which is a function of the range and quality of interests open to humans.
26. Eberl (ibid.), 226.
27. See Tasiouloas, "Human Dignity and the Foundations of Human Rights," 308.
28. Velleman, "A Right of Self-Termination?" 611.
29. Killmister, *Contours of Dignity*, 130.
30. See Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, and Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*.
31. Kilner (ibid.), 102.

32. It is also possible that one comes to be excluded, after previously being included – at which point one's dignity is destroyed. "To have one's human dignity destroyed is to be excluded from the human kind – it is a form of literal dehumanization" (Killmister, ibid., 154).
33. Jaworska & Tannebaum, "Persons and Moral Status," 353.
34. Fischer, "The Social Recognition of Human Dignity," 46.
35. Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*,155.
36. Bailey & Rasmussen,"How Valuable Could a Person Be?" 276. Kriegel, in "Dignity and the Phenomenology of Recognition-Respect," also expresses primitivist sympathies.
37. Levinas, *Collective Philosophical Papers*, 21.
38. Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, 147.
39. Buss, "The Value of Humanity," 343. Buss's charge of moral unseriousness is equally applicable to relational accounts. It echoes Fischer's worry about capriciousness.
40. In Woodward, "Caretakers of Value."
41. Boethius defined a person as "an individual substance of a rational nature," synthesizing several centuries' worth of Greek and Roman philosophy and theology. (This definition is found in Chapter 3 of *Liber De Persona Et Duabus Naturis*.) Medieval philosophers proposed minor emendations to this definition but preserved its spirit (for the details, see Williams, "Persons in Patristic and Medieval Philosophy."). Modern philosophers such as Locke and Kant rejected scholastic metaphysics from top to bottom but nevertheless preserved the centrality of rationality in their philosophical anthropology.
42 "If happiness is in accord with virtue, it is reasonable for it to accord with the supreme virtue, which will be the virtue of the best thing. The best is understanding [*nous*], or whatever else seems to be the natural ruler and leader, and to understand what is fine and divine, by being itself either divine or the most divine element in us. Hence complete happiness will be its own activity in accord with its proper virtue, and we have said that this activity is the activity of study [*theoria*]" (*Nicomachean Ethics* Book X, Chapter 7, §1).
43. This position is implied by a number of central claims in the *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*, e.g.: "Autonomy is the ground of the dignity of human nature and every rational creature" (41). Or again: "There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a *good will*" (7), where the will is "a faculty of determining itself to action in accordance with the representation of certain laws, and such a faculty can be found only in rational beings" (35).
44. Buss (ibid.), 349.
45. Ibid., 353.
46. Ibid., 357.
47. See Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," on the need to distinguish this category from the categories of intrinsic value and instrumental value.
48. Kagan, "Rethinking Intrinsic Value".
49. Schmemann, *For the Life of the World*, 21.
50. Intriguingly, Schmemann frames the story of the fall in these terms. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he writes, "is the image of the world loved for itself, and eating it is the image of life understood as an end in itself" (ibid., 23).
51. Ibid., 22.
52. Strikingly, Buss also takes note of the dignifying doxological tendencies inherent in our nature as persons. See Buss (ibid), 352.
53. A point about which Buss is clear-eyed: op. cit., 345.
54. *Summa Theologiae* II.I Question 2, Article 8.
55. Zagzebski, "The Uniqueness of Persons," 419.
56. Ibid., 420, footnote 19.
57. Plausibly, this incommunicable subject gets a nod even from Boethius (see endnote 41): a person is not simply "an instance of rational nature" but an "individual substance of a rational nature".
58. Qtd. in Nussbaum, "Human Dignity and Political Entitlements," 353.

59. For invaluable comments, criticisms, encouragements, and suggestions, I'd like to thank David Hershenov, Kurt Blankschaen, Jim Delaney, Derek Buyan, Lisa Woodward, Chuck Douglass, audiences at the Society of Christian Philosophers 2022 Midwest Regional Meeting at Bowling Green State University and the Romanell Center for Clinical Ethics & The Philosophy of Medicine's December 2022 Workshop at the University at Buffalo, and two anonymous referees for this journal.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Philip Woodward is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Niagara University. His research is on the metaphysics and ethics of human nature and personhood. For a full list of his publications, see https://www.philwoodwardphilosophy.com.

Bibliography

Aquinas, T. *Summa Theologiae*, edited by. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. 1920. https://www.newadvent.org/summa/.

Bailey, A., and J. Rasmussen. "How Valuable Could a Person Be?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103, no. 2 (2021): 264–277. doi:10.1111/phpr.12714.

Buss, S. "The Value of Humanity." *The Journal of Philosophy* 109, no. 5 (2012): 341–377. doi:10.5840/jphil20121095/614.

Cortez, M. *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010.

Crosby, J. F. *The Selfhood of the Human Person*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1996.

Darwall, S. "Equal Dignity and Right." In *Dignity: A History*, edited by R. Debes, 181–201. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Darwin, C. *The Descent of Man*. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1874.

Debes, R. "Dignity's Gauntlet." *Philosophical Perspectives* 23, no. 1 (2009): 45–78. doi:10.1111/j.1520-8583.2009.00161.x.

Debes, R. "Dignity." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. N. Zalta and U. Nodelman, 2023. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/dignity/ .

Dillon, R. S. "Respect and Care: Toward Moral Integration 1." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (1992): 105–131. doi:10.1080/00455091.1992.10717273.

DiSilvestro, R. *Human Capacities and Moral Status*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2010.

Eberl, J. "The Ontological and Moral Significance of Persons." *Scientia et Fides* 5, no. 2 (2017): 217–236. doi:10.12775/SetF.2017.016.

Emery, G. "The Dignity of Being a Substance: Person, Subsistence, and Nature." *Nova et Vetera* (English Edition) 9, no. 4 (2011): 991–1001.

Fischer, J. "The Social Recognition of Human Dignity." *Journal International de Bioéthique* 21, no. 3 (2010), 2010): 43–49. doi:10.3917/jib.213.0043.

Frey, R. G. "Moral Standing, the Value of Lives, and Speciesism." *Between Species* 4, no. 3 (1988): 191–201. doi:10.15368/bts.1988v4n3.8.

Gilabert, P. "Perfectionism and Dignity." *European Journal of Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2022): 259–278. doi:10.1111/ejop.12630.

Hershenov, D. B., and R. J. Hershenov. "Morally Relevant Potential." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 41, no. 3 (2015): 268–271. doi:10.1136/medethics-2012-101306.

Iglesias, T. "Bedrock Truth and the Dignity of the Individual." *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 4, no. 1 (2001): 114–134. doi:10.1353/log.2001.0005.
Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999.
Jaworska, A., and J. Tannenbaum. "Persons and Moral Status." In *Persons: A History*, edited by A. LoLordo, 334–362. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.
Kagan, S. "Rethinking Intrinsic Value." *The Journal of Ethics* 2, no. 4 (1998): 277–297. doi:10.1023/A:1009782403793.
Kagan, S. *How to Count Animals, More or Less*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
Kant, I. J. W. Ellington, Translated by. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. 3rd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.
Kavanaugh, J. F. *Who Count as Persons?: Human Identity and the Ethics of Killing*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2001.
Killmister, S. *Contours of Dignity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
Kilner, J. F. *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015.
Korsgaard, C. M. "Two Distinctions in Goodness." *The Philosophical Review* 92, no. 2 (1983): 169–195. doi:10.2307/2184924.
Kriegel, U. "Dignity and the Phenomenology of Recognition-Respect." In *Emotional Experience: Ethical and Social Significance*, edited by J. J. Drummond and S. Rinofner-Kriedl, 121–136. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.
Kymlicka, W. "Human Rights Without Human Supremacism." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. 6 (2018): 2018): 763–792. doi:10.1080/00455091.2017.1386481.
Lee, P. & George, R. P. (2008). "The Nature and Basis of Human Dignity." In *Human Dignity and Bioethics*: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics, edited by A. Schulman and T. W. Merrill. Washington: United States Govt Printing Office, 2008: 409–434.
Levinas, I. Collective Philosophical Papers, translated by A. Lingus. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987.
Locke, J. *Second Treatise of Government*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980.
Middleton, J. R. *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005.
Norcross, A. "Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases." *Philosophical Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2004): 229–245. doi:10.1111/j.1520-8583.2004.00027.x.
Nussbaum, M. "Human Dignity and Political Entitlements." In *Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics*, edited by A. Schulman and T. W. Merrill. Washington: United States Govt Printing Office, 2008: 351-380.
Rossello, D. "All in the (Human) Family? Species Aristocratism in the Return of Human Dignity." *Political Theory* 45, no. 6 (2017): 749–771. doi:10.1177/0090591716668383.
Schmemann, A. *For the Life of the World*. Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018.
Scruton, R. "Eating Our Friends." *Catholic Education Resource Center*. 2006. https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/environment/eating-our-friends.html.
Seneca, L. A. "Of a Happy Life." In *Minor Dialogs Together with the Dialog 'On Clemency,'* translated by Aubrey Stewart. London: George Bell and Sons, 1900: 204–239. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Of_a_Happy_Life .
Siegel, R. B. "Dignity and the Politics of Protection: Abortion Restrictions Under Casey/Carhart." *The Yale Law Journal* 117, no. 8 (2008): 1694–1800. doi:10.2307/20454694.
Singer, P. "Speciesism and Moral Status." *Metaphilosophy* 40, no. 3-4 (2009): 567–581. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9973.2009.01608.x.
Tasioulas, J. "Human Dignity and the Foundations of Human Rights." In *Understanding Human Dignity*, edited by C. McCrudden, 291–312. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
Velleman, J. D. "A Right of Self-Termination?" *Ethics* 109, no. 3 (1999): 606–628. doi:10.1086/233924.
Warren, M. A. *Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Weil, S. "Human Personality." In *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, edited by S. Miles, 69–98. London: Penguin Books, 2005.
Williams, S. M. "Persons in Patristic and Medieval Philosophy." In *Persons: A History*, edited by A. LoLordo, 52–84. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.
Wolterstorff, N. *Justice in Love*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.
Woodward, P. "Caretakers of Value: A Theory of Human Personhood." *The Philosophical Forum* 55, no. 3 (2024): 251–269. doi:10.1111/phil.12370.
Zagzebski, L. "The Uniqueness of Persons." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 29, no. 3 (2001): 401–423. doi:10.1111/0384-9694.00090.
Zylberman, A. *Dignity and Rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025.