Is the concept of human dignity of any use in bioethics? Does it shed important light on the whole range of bioethical issues, from embryo research and assisted reproduction, through biomedical enhancement, to care of the disabled and the dying? Or is it, on the contrary, useless? at best a vague substitute for other, more precise notions, at worst a mere slogan that camouflages unconvincing arguments and unarticulated biases?¹

This stark dichotomy defines the debate over human dignity. In December 2005, the U.S. President’s Council on Bioethics met to consider Human Dignity as a Bioethical Concept. The transcript of the sessions reveals that the Council quickly agreed that human dignity is useful in bioethics, and moved to questions more at the heart of the issue: What is human dignity? Where does it come from? What implications does it hold for bioethics? We give our answers here.

What is human dignity?
Dignity is, simply, the quality of being worthy of esteem or respect.² Human dignity, then, is the recognition that human beings are worthy of esteem or respect. Words that come to mind here include value, worth, importance, and significance. The Encyclopedia of Bioethics defines the primary use of human dignity as an attribute of all human beings that establishes their great significance or worth.³ A Guest Commentary in Ethics & Medicine concludes that human dignity is: The exalted moral status which every being of human origin uniquely possesses.⁴ The same article offers the following detail:

Human dignity is at its core an ontological reality irreducible to perceptual esthetic categories. The word dignity is thus appropriate to beings who are substances and not mere collections of
properties. Dignity bespeaks something inseparable from human nature, something placed there, something shared by all people. One comprehends dignity less through reason and more through intuition, in a way that is comprehensible to human reflection universally. No scientist or physician has ever observed human dignity; it is an inference. Forever escaping the nets of scientific measurement, dignity defies devaluation. 

Why, though, is this so?

Where Does Human Dignity Come From?
At the heart of many of the complex biotechnological developments that the President?s Council and others grapple with is the question of what it means to be human. Is it some capacity or some combination of capacities that makes an individual uniquely human and therefore the possessor of dignity? Is it demonstrating autonomy, rational thought, self-awareness, freedom? Or is there something innate to human beings? Is human dignity about doing or being?

If human dignity is rooted in capacities, in what humans can do, then human beings can be reduced to performance, and dignity can be gained or lost according to ability. To the contrary, human dignity is an inherent aspect of human beings, the result of being created in the image of God: ?Human beings are constituted by their bearing the divine image (imago Dei), and from that fundamental fact flows their unique and inviolable dignity as persons.? 

Because human beings bear God?s image in this world, we are his representatives, stewards of his creation. Our stewardship extends not only to animals and plants and earth, but also, in some way, to one another. In short, we are tasked with caring for one another. Christian faith communities have a long history of involvement in medicine as a key way of fulfilling this mandate.

What Implications Does Human Dignity Hold for Bioethics?
How do we connect the irreducible value of all human beings to specific issues in bioethics such as cloning, embryo research, access to healthcare, end-of-life suffering, and the like? This is where the hard work of bioethics lies.

The fact that all human beings have an innate and irreducible dignity means that all deserve equal respect and treatment. No human being lacks human dignity; therefore no human being should for example be subject to the risks associated with cloning or to willful destruction in the first days of life. At the same time, every human should have fair and equal access to the care his or her condition requires, and should be supported and comforted by a community of people in life?s final days and hours.

Arriving at conclusions on these issues may seem easy, but connecting with integrity to human dignity requires reflection, interpretation, and translation. This is the task that The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity, amongst other groups, has taken upon itself in its labor to educate, equip, and engage.

While all human beings have an innate and irreducible dignity, it is important that we recognize it is possible to lose sight of one?S own dignity. In disability and sickness, it is the sense of dignity, not dignity itself, which is lost. It is the duty of bioethics and healthcare to restore this sense of dignity. Further, it is possible to be treated in ways inconsistent with one?S dignity. The
recognition that each and every human equally possesses dignity serves as motivation for treating one another properly; that is, with dignity.

**Conclusion**

Human dignity is the fundamental issue in bioethics and every account of human dignity is inevitably based on a view of what it means to be human. Human dignity is properly grounded in the view that humans bear the image of God. Consequently, every member of our human family is of inestimable worth and must be protected and treated with utmost respect at every stage of life. It is gratifying to see that in considering this vital issue the President’s Council on Bioethics has upheld dignity, not devalued it.

**References**


5. Ibid., 8.


**Podcast Episode:**

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