



# CHRISTIAN EXPLORATIONS IN THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN DIGNITY

BY SUSAN HAACK, MD, MA, FACOG  
CBHD ASSOCIATE FELLOW

## Introduction

4

**W**hat does it mean to say that humans have “dignity”? The term “human dignity” has become common parlance in recent decades, particularly in political and ethical discourse where its use ranges from titular to foundational. It is trumpeted noisily as the warrant of many autonomous rights and is also the cornerstone of many international documents instituted for the promotion of peace and human rights. The resulting pervasiveness of the term, however, has masked the extent to which its substance has been lost,<sup>1</sup> for despite its prevalence, the concept today remains elusive and largely descriptive, defying definition. “Human dignity,” it seems, is recognizable, yet indefinable.

Historically, the meaning of the term has varied with the philosophical tide, reflecting the particular philosophical framework of the era. Yet despite the fact that “human dignity” is not a specifically Christian term, the impact of Christianity on the concept is nevertheless unmistakable, for while the classic notion of dignity as “worth” in an aristocratic and comparative sense still exists, it has been largely supplanted in the Western world by dignity as egalitarian and non-comparative. This change in meaning is attributable to the importance of

Christian theological anthropology and the Incarnation on Western thought.

There exist several distinctions within the semantic domain of human dignity which must be recognized. In particular, dignity as quality refers to those excellences that set humans apart both as individuals and as a species, and is largely ascribed; conversely, dignity as equality is that dignity possessed by virtue of membership in the human species and is an inalienable aspect of our personhood, understood broadly. The derivation of this dignity is contingent upon the distinction to which one is referring—whether that of quality or of equality—and is the object of much discussion and debate. Opinions regarding the source of dignity vary widely, ranging from one of many human capabilities to that of an inalienable gift of the God in whose image we were created. In considering the options, one must be cognizant of the fact that only a source of dignity grounded in a non-degreed capacity will result in a dignity that can be ascribed to all.

Much of our contemporary understanding of human dignity was birthed out of conflict, with war being the impetus for reflection on the issue, pushing it to the forefront of political discourse. Yet

in the midst of this reflection, its substance has been gutted of any religious understanding, leaving only an empty form. Despite Christianity’s historical impact, it is only in recent decades that this primarily philosophical term has been appropriated by Christian writers as a means for referencing the concept of the *imago Dei* in public discourse, an act that has infused it with greater substance. Recognizing the intention behind this appropriation, many have clamored for elimination of the term, proposing the substitution of terms such as “rights” or “autonomy” which carry no religious presuppositions. Consequently, the controversy over the concept has raised many profound questions: what is entailed in human dignity? Does dignity apply only to humans? How is the dignity of humans different from that of other creatures? And why does it matter? Despite the apparent ambiguity of the term “human dignity,” one’s understanding of the concept has profound implications for bioethical policies including health, gender and work, abortion, stem cell research, animal rights, cloning, and distributive justice.<sup>2</sup>

Christian anthropology has much to contribute to the conversation, for it rests on the centrality of the *imago Dei* and of divine giving as the ground of human

dignity and well-being.<sup>3</sup> We are equal to each other precisely because none of us is the maker of another—we have all received our life equally as a gift from the Creator.<sup>4</sup> For in fact each of us was given infinite significance, as a gift, by a personal Creator, which is the foundation of our human dignity;<sup>5</sup> and of all creation, humankind alone was granted that significance by our creation in the image of God. Moreover, dignity as gift also carries tasks and obligations appropriate to good stewardship of that gift, an aspect lost in a purely secular understanding of the concept. In the end, only a theological anthropology can give us an absolute concept of dignity, one that applies to all humans in all circumstances and conditions, and that can justify our responsibility toward one another. Only the concept of dignity grounded in humankind as created in the image of God bestows the same dignity on all of us, without shadow of turning.<sup>6</sup>

### Historical Development

The idea of human dignity has had a spotty and discontinuous history. Originally conceived as a purely philosophical concept, it first appeared in the writings of the Roman Stoics Cicero and Seneca, where it was a term of distinction indicating “worthiness,” “honor,” or “human excellence.”<sup>7</sup> As such, it was an exceedingly undemocratic concept.<sup>8</sup> The earliest systematic reflection on the concept of human dignity was not undertaken until the late 15th century when Giovanni Pico della Mirandola published an essay entitled, “The Oration on the Dignity of Man” (1486). Mirandola grounded human dignity in a collection of human capacities including the capacity for intellectual achievement, the human ability to emulate the dignity and glory of the angels, the importance of the quest for knowledge and the capacity for ascent and self-transformation by means of free will.<sup>9</sup> Human dignity remained grounded in human capacities for about a century, until the term was commodified by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). For Hobbes, human dignity referred not to meritorious

human excellence but to the value of a human being as determined by the marketplace: “Human dignity, the public worth of a man, which is the value set on him by the commonwealth.”<sup>10</sup> A thicker understanding of the concept of human dignity had to await the reflections of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who maintained that human dignity could not be understood in terms of “value,” because, as an instrumental concept, “value” could not be applied to human beings who are “ends in themselves.”<sup>11</sup> Human dignity signified the intrinsic worth of humanity, rooted in human agency,<sup>12</sup> an understanding that governed philosophical thought until late in the 20th century. It was then that it came under more intense scrutiny from contemporaneous thinkers who moved away from the idea of agency. Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) sought a source of human dignity in human nature and natural law—in the “orthopedia of upright carriage.” Intriguingly, Bloch understood human dignity to be grounded in human rights rather than rights in dignity, as is commonly comprehended.<sup>13</sup> Another contemporary philosopher, George Kateb, approaches human dignity as an existential value, not a moral one, distinguishing between the worth of animals and of humans on the grounds that humans alone are partly “non-natural” (presumably by possession of a mind); hence humans have an incomparably higher status than any animal and alone can serve and be stewards of nature.<sup>14</sup>

While the term “human dignity” has been increasingly employed in religious writings of the 20th century, it is not found in Hebrew or Christian scriptures, and hence is not a religious term per se. The Christian term expressing the notion of human dignity was *imago Dei*, humans as the image of God. As noted earlier the impact of Christianity on the concept of human dignity is unmistakable. The Greek notion of comparative dignity was transformed by contact with Christian egalitarian dignity rooted in the notions of humankind as the image of God and of God becoming human.<sup>15</sup> These concepts were later ushered into

philosophical circles through the writings of Kant.

Recent shifts in the secular arena, however, have sought to eliminate the religious voice from the public square and religious presuppositions from secular ideologies, maintaining that religious teachings are mere “props” which always give way to Enlightenment thinking. Accordingly, secularism provides a suitable alternative by doing away with unwarrantable claims about God and the soul and contenting itself with the concept of the mind, a uniquely human possession.<sup>16</sup> Such shifts have prompted a corresponding alteration in terminology among Evangelical and other Christian writers. In an effort to shed “religious baggage,” maintaining the substance of the concept apart from the “religious” form, Christian writers have shifted from use of the term *imago Dei* to that of human dignity. Nevertheless, there have been accusations from the secular community, which has perceived in the use of “human dignity” by Christians a veiled attempt to smuggle religious concepts into the conversation. Disregarding the accusations, some scholars, like Kateb, continue to seek a secular understanding of human dignity, not simply to avoid religious presuppositions, but as a hedge against the loss of the idea of human dignity in the event that “theology goes down.”<sup>17</sup> Such secular perspectives though suffer from a deadly deficiency: a lack of grounding for the concept, for without a judge who is wholly external to us and who ascribes to us our dignity and worth, our self-declarations of dignity are based merely on wishful thinking,<sup>18</sup> and hence shifting sand. Reflection on the nature of humanity and of God simply cannot be pulled apart, since humanity can be understood only by reference to the divine. This fact is apparent in our historical inability to do so.<sup>19</sup>

### Aspects of Dignity

As can be seen from the above discussion, and given the inherent ambiguity of the term “human dignity,” it is essential that one discern the sense in

which the term is being used in any particular context, for several nuances have been recognized and distinguished. For example, Daniel Sulmasy distinguishes between three different approaches to the use of the term “human dignity:”

1) Attributed dignity: also referred to as “imputed dignity,” it is a dignity which is ascribed by others. It is a dignity that is dependent on the beliefs, desires, purposes, preferences, interests, and expectations of another,<sup>20</sup> and as such it can be achieved or lost, recognized or ignored. The instrumental or commodified dignity of Hobbes would be considered a subset of this category.

2) Intrinsic dignity: the dignity or value that something has by virtue of being the kind of entity that it is.<sup>21</sup> For humans, it is an egalitarian dignity that is expressive of the inherent worth of all humans simply by being human. It is a vital aspect of our identity and as such, it is discovered, not ascribed, is inalienable, and is independent of human opinions about a person’s worth. As such, it is the ground of moral entitlements in the socio-political realm.<sup>22</sup>

3) Inflorescent dignity: that dignity which is a function of the expression of human excellence.<sup>23</sup> It is a comparative dignity that focuses on the distinction between humans and other species, not the distinction between individual humans. It is grounded in the manifestation of human moral, rational, and intellectual achievements.

Recognizing that the ambiguity of the term originates in the ambiguous nature of the human being, a being marked by exceptional powers and capacities, but also weaknesses and vulnerabilities, Gilbert Meilaender seeks to distinguish human dignity from personal dignity: human dignity is that which encompasses the excellence of human achievement while personal dignity is that dignity which all possess as human beings even in their weaknesses, a dignity not of the

species but of the individual being.<sup>24</sup> “A person not only shares in the value of the species but also occupies a unique and distinctive position entirely his or her own that transcends species membership. Thus though all human beings share in human dignity they are not interchangeable.”<sup>25</sup> According to Meilaender, the floor of human dignity is the “ethic of equality” observed in personal dignity—the valuing of all humans in light of their common humanity; the ceiling of human dignity is the “ethic of quality” entailed in human dignity—the valuing of life when it embodies certain exceptional human characteristics or enables certain human experiences.<sup>26</sup> In making this distinction between comparative and non-comparative aspects of human dignity, Meilaender attempts to preserve the personhood and sense of dignity of those human beings who lack particular human capacities and to “honor and uphold that peculiar in-between character of human life,”<sup>27</sup> a life that is neither beast nor God.<sup>28</sup>

A distinction between various uses of the term is of vital importance for a proper hermeneutic of any writing that employs the term “human dignity.”

### Sources of Dignity

Just as there are distinct uses of the term “human dignity,” so also there are many divergent opinions as to the source of that dignity. Some alternatives advanced as sources of human dignity are as follows:

1) Human nature: Dignity is seen as species-dependent, inherent in our nature and activity as human beings, a nature which includes our creaturely in-betweenness, and activity which manifests itself in living a life that befits a creature existing somewhere between beast and God.<sup>29</sup> But what activities are included? Do we only consider those excellences of the human creature that set us apart from the beasts, or do we also consider the mundane aspects of how we are born, how we die, and the quality of our relationships?<sup>30</sup> How is our death,

as the destiny of all human creatures, related to our nature? Is it to be acknowledged as an aspect of our creaturely existence or an unqualified evil to be overcome?<sup>31</sup> Meilaender has suggested that “to grow old, to wear down, and even to die—and to know and acknowledge this as part of life’s trajectory—is fitting for a creature who is neither beast nor god, and whose dignity consists in being human.”<sup>32</sup>

2) Embodiment: While Kant universalized the concept of dignity by relating it to personhood and personhood to the rational, moral life, he ignored embodied existence. But dignity must go beyond rational personhood to embrace embodied human life,<sup>33</sup> for the body is our place of personal presence.<sup>34</sup> It must include the respectability of our embodied ordinary humanness. For human life is marked not only by characteristic powers and capacities but also limits and weaknesses associated with bodily existence. Human dignity must honor and uphold that peculiar in-between character of human life.<sup>35</sup>

3) Creatureliness: Closely related to embodiment, this criterion acknowledges that human dignity is a possession of beings who exist in a middling state, a state of in-betweenness, who are neither beast nor God (Aristotle, Augustine), who are a little lower than angels (psalmist), who reside in a realm between the best and the worst we can be.<sup>36</sup>

4) Rationality: Dignity belongs to those in possession of a rational nature, who have the capacity to reason and to make free choices. One consideration, however, is that rationality is a degreed property which would also confer a graduated status on dignity. Can the dignity of a human be rightly based on a property that differs in degree?

5) Autonomy and free will: Human dignity is understood to be so thoroughly grounded in our capacity for



autonomous agency that “human dignity” and “autonomy” are often viewed as synonymous or at least interchangeable. But since autonomy is not an absolute and unchanging possession those who lack autonomy would also lack dignity. Moreover, given the distinctions above, one would have to determine whether such a loss of autonomy would be a loss of inherent or imputed dignity. Correspondingly, some have defined human dignity by our freedom of choice and respect for that freedom, a freedom that entails the ability to be the author of one’s own life. But are these adequate bases for the definition of human dignity? Are freedom and consent of singular importance to our humanity? Does being human mean nothing more than the freedom to shape and reshape ourselves? Or does it also mean honoring the embodied character of our life and affirming some of its limits?<sup>37</sup> In reality, the moral force of autonomy is rooted in our inherent dignity.<sup>38</sup> Persons do not have dignity because they are autonomous; they are autonomous because they have dignity. Respect for persons must include respect for their autonomy, but it cannot be reduced to that alone for to do so would be to render an anemic and shallow definition of humanness and human dignity, one that fails to honor the entirety of our embodied existence.<sup>39</sup>

6) Moral agency or the human capacity for virtue: Closely related to autonomy and free will, human dignity is felt to be a function of our ability to act as moral agents, apprehending distinctions between right and wrong and altering our behavior accordingly. More specifically it may be the human capacity for virtue. Here human dignity is grounded in the ability to exhibit virtue or human excellence, manifested by how we live our lives, not by how long.<sup>40</sup> But again, as a degreed property, it would exclude those who lack the ability to alter the quality of their lives whether

MANDATE, CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

## CBHD'S 20TH ANNUAL SUMMER CONFERENCE Call for Papers & Proposals

July 18-20, 2013  
Trinity International University, Deerfield, IL, USA

# HEALTH AND HUMAN FLOURISHING



**PROPOSALS ARE NOW BEING ACCEPTED**  
for the upcoming CBHD summer conference,  
*Health & Human Flourishing*.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT:**  
[WWW.CBHD.ORG/CALL-FOR-PROPOSALS](http://WWW.CBHD.ORG/CALL-FOR-PROPOSALS)

### Requirements and Deadlines

All contributed papers and posters must be submitted as abstracts of 250-300 words. At the end of the abstract please include the list of materials to be drawn upon. All serious proposals relevant to the study of bioethics are welcome. A CV or resume must be submitted along with the abstract.

In order to present a paper or poster, participants must register for the conference by June 14, 2013.

**Deadline For All Abstracts:**  
All abstracts must be submitted by March 1, 2013.  
via mail or email to:

The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity  
Attn: Jennifer McVey  
2065 Half Day Road,  
Deerfield, IL 60015

or [jmcvey@cbhd.org](mailto:jmcvey@cbhd.org)



due to their physical condition or social circumstances.

7) Relationality: Dignity is believed to have a relational component, but even here, our notions of the relational component vary. Some envision it as a gradated relational property of social status that serves as source of individual distinction,<sup>41</sup> while others find dignity in the relationships which bind and obligate us.<sup>42</sup> This latter understanding can be illustrated by the case of parents and children, who are bound by love and acceptance, not necessarily by choice.<sup>43</sup> Jürgen Moltmann understands this relationality as derivative of our imaging God, an image which involves human beings in fellowship before God and in covenant relationship with Him and others.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, James Luther Mays maintains that our identity and destiny are derived from our relationship to God, a relationship which is not formal and external but constitutive, bestowing on humans our ultimate meaning. As such, it is an existential category, not a biological one.<sup>45</sup> While such human relationality is generally true, it, too, is a degreed property, and one shared in degree with other creatures. Is it, therefore, an adequate

criterion for human dignity?

8) Sanctity: Human dignity is grounded in the sanctity of human life—in the fact that humans, created in the *imago Dei*, are set apart by God from the rest of creation and for His purposes. The term “sanctity” is actually preferred by some over “dignity,” for unlike “dignity,” “sanctity” contains its own justification: in “sanctity,” “set-apartness” is grounded in God, whereas “dignity” has no grounding other than the variegated assertions of others.<sup>46</sup> Humanity cannot be adequately explained apart from our relation to God, a relationship which impacts our concepts of shared human dignity as well as the dignity of each person.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, respect for the dignity of the other is grounded not in our relation to each other but in our relation to God.<sup>48</sup>

9) *Imago Dei*: From the Judeo-Christian perspective, the dignity of mankind has its roots in the fact that every human being is an image and reflection of God. Of all creation, human beings alone are destined to live before the face of God in the fullness of their lives and in all life’s relationships—political, social,

economic, and personal. They alone of all creatures are called to respond to and be responsible to God in the world, acting on God’s behalf. Dignity is, therefore, derivative, arising from the claim of God upon all persons.<sup>49</sup> Humanity’s worth throughout Scripture is not intrinsic but a derivation of creation after God’s likeness. It depends entirely on humanity’s possession by God and on God’s decision to esteem and redeem it.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of dignity must encompass both our origin and destiny. Our origin is in the image of God, but that origin is consummated in the resurrection—the end which was intended from the beginning.<sup>51</sup>

Human dignity is a many-splendored concept that can be realized only through the full recognition of its complexity.<sup>52</sup> Given this complexity, dignity cannot be reduced to any one feature, but must include the aggregate of human capacities including our knowledge, self-consciousness, moral agency, creativity, language and rationality.<sup>53</sup> As noted earlier, however, only a theological anthropology gives us an absolute concept of dignity, one that applies to all humans in all circumstances and conditions.<sup>54</sup>

## CBHD IS NOW ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS FOR OUR...



CBHD is seeking applications from rising and established international professionals and scholars who will further advance contextually sensitive Christian bioethical engagement globally.

**Applications for July 2013 are due January 15, 2013 | Applications for July 2014 are due December 1, 2013**

Visit: [www.cbhd.org/gbei](http://www.cbhd.org/gbei) or contact Jennifer McVey, MDiv, CBHD Event & Education Manager [jmcvey@cbhd.org](mailto:jmcvey@cbhd.org) for more information

## Theological Approach

Christian anthropology rests in the centrality of the *imago Dei* and of divine giving as the ground of human dignity and well-being.<sup>55</sup> We noted earlier that we are equal to each other precisely because we have all received our life equally as a gift from the Creator.<sup>56</sup> This gift encompasses the “poverty of our perfections” making us equal in worth if not equal in talent.<sup>57</sup> For in fact each of us was given infinite significance, as a gift, by a personal Creator which is the foundation of our human dignity,<sup>58</sup> and of all creation, humankind alone was granted that significance by their creation in the image of God. Dignity as gift, grounded in the *imago Dei* and imbued with relational responsibilities implicitly carries tasks and obligations appropriate to good stewardship of that gift and relationship.<sup>59</sup> The reflection on the nature of humanity and of God are intricately tied together, as human “being” is ultimately understood by reference to the divine.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, as a conferred gift, dignity is to be discovered, not in social convention, but in God’s acts toward humankind, in particular the monumental act of salvation through the incarnation of His Son.<sup>61</sup> In addition, humanity cannot be adequately explained apart from an ongoing relationship with God, a relationship which shapes our understanding of human dignity, both corporate and individual.<sup>62</sup> Respect for dignity ultimately is grounded not in our relation to each other but in our relation to God.<sup>63</sup>

A theological approach to human dignity must also refer to both our origin and our destiny, for human dignity is both gift and promise. The human experience of dignity relies on balancing the dignity we possess as a gift with the fuller dignity we are promised and toward which we are called.<sup>64</sup> Our end is in the resurrection, which was intended from the beginning, for our beginning is in the image of God which is consummated in the end, through the Son. It is all of a piece, a part of the divine narrative.<sup>65</sup>

## Current Debate

As noted in the introduction, current perspectives on human dignity were birthed out of conflict: war was the

impetus for our contemporary reflections on human dignity, for it seems that one becomes most aware of dignity when it is challenged or threatened.<sup>66</sup> Yet due to the ambiguous elasticity of the definition of dignity, combined with the fear that the term is a shroud for smuggling religious ideologies into the secular political arena, some have called for its elimination, recommending replacement of the term by “autonomy” or “rights.” They see “human dignity” as an attempt to impose a radical political agenda, fed by fervent religious impulses, onto American biomedicine.<sup>67</sup> But can dignity be reduced to either autonomy or rights without significant remainder? The contemporary crisis in “dignity” has resulted from the fact that modern culture has stripped the concept of human dignity of its original and sustaining theological and ecclesial context without supplying an alternative.<sup>68</sup> To think theologically about dignity as gift represents a very different approach from the discourse about rights to which dignity is often tied in contemporary thought. Dignity as gift carries tasks and obligations appropriate to good stewardship of that gift; rights talk carries no such obligation.<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, others have argued that religious ideas are not only unavoidable, they are necessary for a liberal democracy.<sup>70</sup> Paul Ramsey saw human dignity as entailing respect—not respect that poses a duty to refrain from interfering with the rights of privacy and autonomy of individual self-determination, but respect that poses a duty of responsiveness to the individual, affirming their worth, honoring their wishes, and tending to their needs. He construed the respect of dignity as protection of the vulnerable, not promotion of autonomy.<sup>71</sup> Respecting dignity means “do no harm.”

In an attempt to avoid the metaphysical messiness of the concept of a “nature,” some have advocated varying sets of capabilities that would qualify an entity for the designation of “dignity.” But often the lists include not individual capabilities but societal rights (bodily integrity, being free from violent assault, opportunities for sexual satisfaction, etc.).<sup>72</sup> But if the concept of human

dignity is to be a substantial one, the criterion for dignity cannot be simply accidental attributes or societal attributions, nor can the criterion for moral worth differ in degree. The criterion must be the possession of a property that does not differ in degree, and therefore it must be attributable to our nature. If relationship with God is not foundational to human dignity, that dignity becomes something that can be conferred or withheld by other finite institutions or entities, and hence a mere social construct.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, concern ought to center on persons, not properties.<sup>74</sup>

## Importance of Human Dignity

Despite the apparent inherent ambiguity, human dignity is not an eradicable concept, for it is inextricably linked to our Western concept of human rights. But how does dignity relate to and differ from rights? Some have attempted to distinguish rights from dignity, claiming that rights are possessed equally whereas dignity is a degreed possession or attribute; therefore rights alone should be the basis of public policy and protection, whereas dignity should remain merely a personal or private goal.<sup>75</sup> A unique approach is seen in the writings of Ernst Bloch and Leon Kass, both of whom argue that human dignity is located in the assertion of one’s rights and hence a derivative of rights.<sup>76</sup> Moltmann, on the other hand, has suggested that the distinction is implied in the very terms themselves: since “human rights” is a plural term, and “human dignity” is singular, the singular dignity of the human being takes precedence over the many rights which are entailed in being human.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, since dignity is derived from God’s claim upon all persons, the rights and duties which emerge from this understanding of dignity belong not only to the species but to each individual within the species, and are thus inalienable, indivisible, and are required for the full flowering of human dignity.<sup>78</sup> Dignity in the socio-political realm is therefore the source and ground of the moral status on which our understanding of inalienable human rights is based—the foundation of all human rights.<sup>79</sup> Yet when severed from its theological and ecclesial moorings,



human dignity cannot support the ethical and metaphysical weight that modern “rights-talk” places on it,<sup>80</sup> attesting again to the indissoluble nexus of anthropology and theology.

The concept of human dignity is also crucial to one’s perspective on contemporary bioethical issues such as transhumanism. The key concern is whether human dignity is located in our human nature or in our ability to transcend our human nature. For the transhumanist, human dignity must be defended against the natural limitations and indignities of embodied human life—disease, deprivation, decay, and death. Hence, our dignity is to be discovered in our ceaseless self-overcoming.<sup>81</sup> Yet in this conception, our dignity is contingent upon securing freedom from our own nature, and to the extent that we fail to do so we will remain undignified.<sup>82</sup> So we must consider: what is the place and role of suffering and “indignity” in human dignity? Do such “indignities” detract from our “dignity,” or are they aspects of it? How does the way in which we deal with suffering impact our dignity? Are there limits to be observed in our efforts to remove causes of suffering and improve bodily function? Such questions ultimately lead to considerations of the goal, or *telos*, of life and the role of health, body, and medicine in that light.<sup>83</sup>

There are several arenas in biotechnology that seek to modify human behavior through technological advances such as drugs, neuro-enhancement, or germ line genetic manipulation—techniques which necessarily bypass human agency, raising the question of the role of agency in human dignity. Do such advances, while perhaps raising our attributive dignity simultaneously diminish our intrinsic dignity?<sup>84</sup> Or is our dignity located only in the ends of our efforts, and not the means as well? Some advocates of these technologies maintain that dignity can be augmented through the enhancement of human qualities only when such enhancement is an authentic response or a free and personal choice, thereby maintaining the role of personal agency. Hence a trait acquired through

a voluntary, deliberate choice of technology may be more authentic than that with which we were born; it may add to the dignity of the resulting trait, compared to possession of the trait by default. From this perspective, our self-shaping contributes to our dignity. But it is also acknowledged that such enhancement could potentially lead to a loss of dignity if the process of self-creation is done out of conformity or in response to media—in other words, if the choice is not “free.” The value of enhancement is therefore contingent upon one’s motivation, which is likewise true of refraining from enhancement.<sup>85</sup> But given the pervasive influence of the media in our culture, is such a “free choice” possible today?<sup>86</sup> Moreover, how are we to think of human dignity in light of individuals who lack moral agency?<sup>87</sup> From a Christian perspective, humans are dignified by an act of divine communion; we are drawn by the resurrection into relational communion, a communion by which we are created and recreated—a gift from beginning to end. We have received it and are promised the fullness of the gift in the end. Therefore the primary concept is, and ought to be, not human but divine agency.<sup>88</sup>

Closely related to the issue of the dignity of enhancement is the relationship of human dignity to human flourishing. What does it mean for humans to flourish? For many, material progress is vital to any concept of human flourishing, apart from any notion of immaterial or spiritual flourishing. But as unified beings consisting of an inseparable body and soul, we cannot achieve material flourishing apart from immaterial flourishing, nor can dignity pertain to the physical condition apart from the metaphysical. And yet the converse does not seem to hold: one can be dignified in their character and soul in spite of undignified physical conditions. Is the same true for flourishing? Can one flourish in character in the midst of physical deprivation? Just as there are distinctions between the aristocratic and egalitarian notions of dignity, so too with flourishing: there is a dignity of being as well as a dignity of flourishing, both of which belong to the dignity of

humanity, created in the image of God.

The impact of technologies on what it means to be human brings into focus the question of the relationship between technological activity and “human becoming.” What is the significance of human engagement with its tools and technology? Elaine Graham has suggested that tools and technologies are such an integral part of human material culture that they shape not only our engagement with the world but our very existence in it—our ontology; they are such an inextricably vital aspect of our experience of what it means to be human that we cannot conceive of ourselves independent of our tools and technologies.<sup>89</sup> This observation raises the question of the role and relationship of technologies to the *imago Dei*: As created co-creators is our technological and scientific creativity part of our dignity, or is our dignity derived from the ways in which we use those tools—in the service of goodness and beneficence for our neighbor?

## Conclusion

The concept of human dignity is indeed a nuanced one, encompassing the capacities for excellence found in our species as well as the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of the individual as created and loved by God. It is not bestowed by persons or institutions, and does not derive meaning from any human action or status: it is a gift given and universally shared,<sup>90</sup> encompassing the poverty of our individual and corporate perfections. Rather than a placeholder for ethical biases and commitments, as has been claimed, human dignity in fact reveals a far nobler, more robust vision of what it means to be human, referencing the essential and inviolable core of our humanity. In reality, the term “human dignity” is not as ambiguous as it is complex because the human component of the term is a multidimensional being that defies definition, a creature of in-betweenness, who exists somewhere between the beasts and God. To define human dignity is ultimately to describe the meaning of being human.<sup>91</sup> To be human is to be regarded as a mystery

in a way that is analogous to God as mystery,<sup>92</sup> and hence the dignity which is the mark of our human beingness will always be mysterious. Thus in the ambiguity and paradoxical nature of the term human dignity is located the height of human excellence as well as the floor below which our respect should not fall. It encompasses an ethic of quality as well as an ethic of equality.<sup>93</sup> True human dignity is located in the convergence of the two—of the aristocratic and the egalitarian, of quality and equality, in the dignity of flourishing as well as the dignity of being.<sup>94</sup>

- 1 R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead, "Introduction," in *God and Human Dignity*, R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 2.
- 2 Martha Nussbaum, "Human Dignity and Political Entitlements," in the President's Council on Bioethics, *Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics* (Washington, DC: President's Council on Bioethics, 2008), 374–376.
- 3 Soulen and Woodhead, "Introduction," 19.
- 4 Gilbert Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God: The Dignity of the Human Person* (New York: New Atlantis Books, 2009), 96.
- 5 Peter Lawler, "Commentary on Meilaender and Dennett" in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 279.
- 6 Fraser Watts, "Human Dignity: Concepts and Experiences," in *God and Human Dignity*, 249.
- 7 Daniel Sulmasy, "Dignity and Bioethics: History, Theory, and Selected Applications" in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 471.
- 8 Gilbert Meilaender, "Human Dignity: Exploring and Explicating the Council's Vision" in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 260.
- 9 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola" on-line database at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pico-della-mirandola> (accessed 15 Mar 2012).
- 10 Tomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Dutton, 1950), 104.
- 11 "Dignity," Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dignity> (accessed Feb 18, 2012).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ernst Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), xi, xvii, xxix.
- 14 George Kateb, *Human Dignity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 23.
- 15 Meilaender, "Human Dignity," 261, 284.
- 16 Kateb, *Human Dignity*, 26.
- 17 Ibid., xi.
- 18 Ibid., x.
- 19 Watts, "Human Dignity," 247.
- 20 Sulmasy, "Dignity and Bioethics," 473, 475
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Edmund Pellegrino, "The Lived Experience of Human Dignity," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 517.
- 23 Sulmasy, "Dignity and Bioethics," 473.
- 24 Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God*, 5.
- 25 Ibid., 94.
- 26 Ibid., 99.
- 27 Ibid., 5. Leon Kass recognizes a similar distinction between "basic human dignity" and the full human dignity of human flourishing. Cf. Leon Kass, "Defending Human Dignity," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 299.
- 28 Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, bk. 1, [http://www.constitution.org/ari/polit\\_01.htm](http://www.constitution.org/ari/polit_01.htm) (accessed July 1, 2012).
- 29 Meilaender, "Human Dignity," 275.
- 30 Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God*, 5.
- 31 Ibid., 72.
- 32 Ibid., 73.
- 33 Leon Kass, "Defending Human Dignity," 313. Cf. Nussbaum, "Human Dignity and Political Entitlements" in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 363.
- 34 Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God*, 23.
- 35 Ibid., 5.
- 36 Charles Rubin, "Human Dignity and the Future of Man," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 168.
- 37 Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God*, 80.
- 38 Pellegrino, "The Lived Experience of Human Dignity," 523.
- 39 Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God*, 81.
- 40 Ibid., 17.
- 41 Nick Bostrom, "Dignity and Enhancement," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 176.
- 42 Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God*, 25.
- 43 Ibid., 26.
- 44 Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, Introduction and trans. M. Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 25.
- 45 James Luther Mays, "The Self in the Psalms and the Image of God," in *God and Human Dignity*, 33.
- 46 David Gelernter, "The Irreducibly Religious Character of Human Dignity," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 395.
- 47 Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God*, 18.
- 48 Ibid., 95.
- 49 Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 11, 23.
- 50 C. Clifton Black, "God's Promise for Humanity in the New Testament," in *God and Human Dignity*, 180.
- 51 Hans Reinders, "Human Dignity in the Absence of Agency," in *God and Human Dignity*, 123.
- 52 Don Browning, "Human Dignity, Human Complexity, and Human Goods" in *God and Human Dignity*, 300.
- 53 Kateb, *Human Dignity*, 160, 169, 173.
- 54 Watts, "Human Dignity," 249.
- 55 Soulen and Woodhead, "Introduction," 19.
- 56 Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God*, 96.
- 57 Ibid., 99. Cf. Meilaender, "Human Dignity," 266.
- 58 Lawler, "Commentary on Meilaender and Dennett," 279.
- 59 Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics: Volume 1: Foundations*, William H. Lazareth, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 151-152.
- 60 Linda Woodhead, "Apophatic Anthropology," in *God and Human Dignity*, 234.
- 61 Soulen and Woodhead, "Introduction," 6.
- 62 Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God*, 18.
- 63 Ibid., 95.
- 64 Watts, "Human Dignity," 251.
- 65 Reinders, "Human Dignity in the Absence of Agency," 123.
- 66 Soulen and Woodhead, "Introduction," 9.
- 67 Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God*, 82.
- 68 Soulen and Woodhead, "Introduction," 2.
- 69 Watts, "Human Dignity," 255.
- 70 Gelernter, "The Irreducibly Religious Character of Human Dignity," 388.
- 71 Richard John Neuhaus, "Human Dignity and Public Discourse," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 217.
- 72 Nussbaum, "Human Dignity and Political Entitlements," 377.
- 73 Christoph Schwöbel, "Recovering Human Dignity," in *God and Human Dignity*, 53.
- 74 Patrick Lee and Robert George, "The Nature and Basis of Human Dignity," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 412-416.
- 75 Lawler, "Commentary on Meilaender and Dennett," 283.
- 76 Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, xi; See also Kass, "Defending Human Dignity," 317-318. However in *The Beginning of Wisdom*, Kass sees humans, created in God's image, as sharing characteristics of God, yet existing between beasts and God. For Kass, humans are not good but must become good. In this text Kass doesn't link dignity with rights as he does in his later works. Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 36-40.
- 77 Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 9
- 78 Ibid., 23, 35. See also Mays, "The Self in the Psalms and the Image of God," 36-37.
- 79 Sulmasy, "Dignity and Bioethics" 485.
- 80 Soulen and Woodhead, "Introduction," 15.
- 81 Rubin, "Human Dignity and the Future of Man," 157.
- 82 Lawler, "Commentary on Meilaender and Dennett," 250.
- 83 R. Kendall Soulen, "Cruising Toward Bethlehem: Human Dignity and the New Eugenics," in *God and Human Dignity*, 104.
- 84 Kass, "Defending Human Dignity," 297.
- 85 Bostrom, "Dignity and Enhancement," 183-185.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Reinders, "Human Dignity in the Absence of Agency," 123
- 88 Ibid., 138-139
- 89 Elaine L. Graham, "The 'End' of the Human or the End of the 'Human,'" in *God and Human Dignity*, 263-265.
- 90 M. Douglas Meeks, "Introduction" in *On Human Dignity*, x.
- 91 Ibid., ix.
- 92 Soulen, "Introduction," 22.
- 93 Meilaender, "Human Dignity," 255.
- 94 Nussbaum, "Human Dignity and Political Entitlements," 351.