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Is Dignity an Inescapably Religious Concept?
Research Paper

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Abstract

The term human dignity is often used in attempts to shape public discourse. Individuals and groups whose beliefs range across the spectrum will claim that their propositions in regards to the issue are upholding human dignity while their opponents' fail to do so. Religious traditions give a certain interpretation of the term, and many fear that religious beliefs are being imposed through the common invocation of the concept. By examining religious and secular definitions of human dignity, this research paper finds that dignity is not an inescapably religious concept. Secular definitions, however, have certain limitations to serve as viable alternatives: they propose varying definitions that depend on the context of the tradition's theoretical framework. Therefore, in order to prevent the further modification of the meaning of "dignity" to fit a certain narrative, the individuals who appeal to the term in their argumentation should identify the tradition of thought that they are referring to as well. Promotion of transparency concerning values that embody dignity and implications that it infers within the moral framework of both religious and nonreligious traditions could prevent the simplification of the concept for the goal of imposing certain narratives through a strong emotional appeal.

Introduction

Bioethics and morality are closely intertwined. Morality serves as an illuminator for bioethicists to make decisions concerning medical practices. B.A. Brody states that bioethicists regularly make moral judgements about appropriateness and inappropriateness of particular actions.¹ Those judgements are often followed by vehement debates. A specific and narrow set of

¹ Baylor College of Medicine, Brody, B. A., Institute of Religion: Houston, T., & Rice University. (1988). *Moral theory and moral judgments in medical ethics*. Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic.

principles which could be used universally to make ethical judgements does not exist: proponents of various belief systems vociferously argue about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in regards to questions of medical ethics. What is common among these debaters is the frequent use of the term human dignity, which carries significant emotional weight, in support of their arguments. “Human dignity” could even be used by opposing parties in debates about medical practices simultaneously, such as the use of the notion of dignity by both opponents and proponents of euthanasia. Many question whether the term has any usefulness at all. This dichotomy is a consequence of medical ethicists inferring the definition and its contextual theoretical framework from distinct philosophical and religious traditions that use the concept of dignity in their teaching and writing. The difference in how these traditions of thought explain the source of human dignity is a central reason behind a lack of a uniform definition of the term, which subsequently provides a basis for the aforementioned polarization of views in regards to the use of the concept.

The Latin word “dignus”, or “worthy”, serves as the etymological basis for the modern version of the term human dignity.² Discussion about human worth is present in many traditions of thought. David H. Calhoun proposes that the definition of the term “human dignity” should be examined from the lens of tradition of 2,000 years of explaining human worth in a moral framework. For Calhoun, the framework has two main pillars: human exceptionalism and *imago Dei*.³ *Imago Dei*, a theological doctrine in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, asserts that human beings are being created in the image and likeness of God. This religious explanation of the term sets a certain principle through which human dignity should be defined. However, the religious

² Oxford Dictionaries

³ Dilley, Stephen and Nathan J. Palpant, eds. *Human Dignity in Bioethics: From Worldviews to the Public Square*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

definition is problematic for use in a secular context, especially when determining public policy in a country with a separation of church and state. Many are afraid that human dignity is even used as a tool to cover up a religious bias when bioethicists make certain decisions that include a moral judgement. The explanation based on the idea of human exceptionalism seems as an attractive alternative. Many will cite the human ability to reason as a primary distinctive feature of humanity. However, the belief that reason is given to humans and has a transcendental quality might be an impediment to using this definition in a secular context as well. Therefore, the question arises: is the notion of *imago Dei* intrinsic to defining human dignity? Could the term “human dignity” be defined without any religious premise and still carry the same powerful message? Could secular traditions of thought provide a viable alternative definition that could reduce ambiguity concerning its definition and be applied universally in the public discourse? These are the questions that this paper aims to answer in order to positively contribute to current debates in medical ethics.

Religious Definitions of Human Dignity

Religious Definitions of Human Dignity: Judaism

In Judaism dignity is based on freedom. According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: “from the outset, the Hebrew Bible speaks of a free God, not constrained by nature, who, creating man in his own image, grants him that same freedom, commanding him, not programming him, to do good”.⁴ Human beings have the capability to exercise choice and act responsibly: to walk the ethical path.⁵ *Imago Dei* that grants individuals the right to freedom is intertwined with another

⁴ Page 124: Sacks, Jonathan. *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning*. New York: Schocken, 2011. Print.

⁵ Page 177: Norman, Richard Harries, and T. J. Winter. *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation*. [1st ed.]. London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006.

theological doctrine, *imitatio Dei*. According to Altmann, Aramaic traditions of Pentateuch uses the term “*demu*, which means “similitude”, which carries with it the association of *imitatio Dei*.⁶ Leviticus (19:2) urges people to imitate God: “You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy”. In addition, the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a) states that humankind has the duty to imitate the attributes of God from the verse 13:5 in Deuteronomy: “You shall walk after the Lord your God”. This obligation is fulfilled by caring for the sick, helping the poor, and improving the world.⁷ The importance of human dignity, *kvod habriot*, is embedded in the belief that God created humans in His image and likeness and they are obligated to follow the doctrine of *imitatio Dei*.

Another important doctrine connected to the idea of human dignity is “the sanctity of human life”. This religious teaching that human life must be intrinsically valued had originated in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Both Jews and Christians agree that Psalm 8:5-9 explains a notion of intrinsic human worth in poetic terms: “Thou hast made him but little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor”. What distinguishes the Jewish tradition is the belief that the intrinsic dignity of human life is connected with God’s choice of a people which extends only to chosen tribes. This is why Holy War is allowed in certain circumstances.⁸ However, all humans no matter of ethnic belonging are in possession of a certain status. One opinion in the Talmud (ibid. 86a) states that humans possess the same status because “are all the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”. It is important to note that in Judaism the prime duty of

⁶ Altmann, Alexander. “‘Homo Imago Dei’ in Jewish and Christian Theology.” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1968, pp. 235–259.

⁷ Friedman, Hershey H. *Human Dignity and the Jewish Tradition*. Article in the *Jewish Law Blog*. H.H. Friedman, 2008. Web. 8 Nov. 2016.

⁸ Pellegrino, Edmund D., and A. I. Faden. *Jewish and Catholic Bioethics: An Ecumenical Dialogue*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown UP, 1999. Print.

an individual is to see the image of God in the other (pace Levinas).⁹ Therefore, humiliation is seen as a grave violation of human dignity because it disregards the special status of humans and goes against the Golden Rule. Though respecting human dignity is of lesser importance than honoring God and showing obedience to God, it is of great significance in Jewish law. The Meiri, or Babylonian Talmud (Berachot 19b), proclaims that there is no virtue more beloved than *kvod habriot*.¹⁰ Therefore, in the Jewish tradition, the notion of human dignity is closely connected to the concepts of *imago Dei*, *imitatio Dei*, and freedom. The sanctity of human life is intrinsic and is derived from the special statuses possessed by both Jewish tribes and also all people, irrespective of their race or gender.

Religious Definitions of Human Dignity: Christianity

In Genesis 1:27, Christians are presented with the theological doctrine of *imago Dei*: “So God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them”. Not only *tselem*, image, is brought to attention, but also *demu*, likeness, which serves as the basis of the doctrine of *imitatio Dei* discussed earlier in Judaism. From the way that Genesis describes the creation of men as different from the creation of other species it is evident that humans possess a certain status. Many early Fathers of the Church related the special status of humans to the ability to reason. Thomas Aquinas believed human rationality was *sine qua non* of humanity. Reason allows humans to know and love God unlike any other creature.¹¹ That is why the human worth aspect of human dignity in Christianity is not being evaluated based on

⁹ Page 177: Norman, Richard Harries, and T. J. Winter. *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation*. [1st ed.]. London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006.

¹⁰ Friedman, Hershey H. *Human Dignity and the Jewish Tradition*. Article in the Jewish Law Blog. H.H. Friedman, 2008. Web. 8 Nov. 2016.

¹¹ Howard, Thomas Albert, ed. *Imago Dei*. Washington, US: Catholic University of America Press, 2013. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 8 November 2016.

external circumstances, human quality, merit, or accomplishment, but is intrinsic.¹² Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* echoes this idea: “The dignity of this life is linked not only to its beginning, to the fact that it comes from God, but also to its final end, to its destiny of fellowship with God in knowledge and love of him”.¹³ Though different branches of Christianity may have differences in theological doctrines related to *imago Dei*, it is beneficial to discuss human dignity in an ecumenical fashion due to the interest of all of the Christian traditions in the concept.

The idea of the sanctity of human life present in Judaism is also an important part of Christianity. It is derived from the notion of humans being capable of knowing and loving God, unlike other living beings.¹⁴ This emphasizes that humans have a transcendental aspect to them and are exceptional. What differentiates Christianity from the way other Abrahamic faiths view *imago Dei* is that to Christians Jesus Christ represents the truest image of God. He “is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Hebrews 1.3). Humans are in the image of God only in so far as they reflect Christ.¹⁵ In addition, the teaching of Christianity focused on the Trinity also affects the definition of human dignity. Currently emphasis is placed on the Augustinian relational aspect: because human beings are made in the image of the Triune God means they able to relate to God and each other in a profound way, just as each Person of the Trinity relates to each other.¹⁶ God made humans to be relational creatures. God requires

¹² “Human Rights and Human Dignity.” *Gregorianum* 60.3 (1979): 423. Web.

¹³ “Evangelium Vitae (25 March 1995) | John Paul II.” *Evangelium Vitae (25 March 1995) | John Paul II*. Web. 08 Nov. 2016.

¹⁴ “Human Rights and Human Dignity.” *Gregorianum* 60.3 (1979): 423. Web.

¹⁵ Page 177: Norman, Richard Harries, and T. J. Winter. *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation*. [1st ed.]. London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006.

¹⁶ Page 161: Norman, Richard Harries, and T. J. Winter. *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation*. [1st ed.]. London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006.

justice in relations between human beings: "Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind" (Genesis 9:6). Theologian Charles Lock states that for a Christian the concept of *imago Dei* requires at least relationships with God, relationships of humans with one another, and creation.¹⁷ Therefore, it could be concluded that a Christian definition would include doctrines of *imago Dei*, *imitatio Dei*, sanctity of human life, and both rational and relational aspects of human character. Human dignity is intrinsic, transcendental, and imposes certain obligations for a Christian way of life.

Religious Definitions of Human Dignity: Islam

Islam believes that man is created in God's image and therefore is endowed with dignity. Affirmation of human dignity is found in the Quran: "We have bestowed dignity on the children of Adam (laqad karramna bani Adama) ...and conferred upon them special favours above the greater part of Our creation" (Q. 17:70).¹⁸ Like Judaism but unlike Christianity, Islam regards the image of God as innate and permanent: a human cannot lose it by acting unethically. Human worth is present at all times because man is an embodiment of the divine image at all times.¹⁹ Quran commentator al-Alusi's observes that "everyone and all members of the human race, including the pious and the sinner, are endowed with dignity...."²⁰ As Christians, Muslims believe that dignity cannot be merited. However, it should be noted that "image" in the case of Islam should be given special attention. *Imago Dei* does not form any ground for establishing a

¹⁷ Howard, Thomas Albert, ed. *Imago Dei*. Washington, US: Catholic University of America Press, 2013. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 8 November 2016.

¹⁸Kamali, Mohammad Hashim. "Human Dignity in Islam." *International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies*. IAIS Malaysia, 1 Nov. 2007. Web. 14 Dec. 2016.

¹⁹ Crawford, S. Cromwell. *World Religions and Global Ethics*. New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1989.

²⁰ Kamali, Mohammad Hashim. "Human Dignity in Islam." *International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies*. IAIS Malaysia, 1 Nov. 2007. Web. 14 Dec. 2016.

similarity of form between God and humanity. Though “God created Adam in his form”, Quran is explicit that claiming an assimilation with God is prohibited: “Nothing is as His likeness”. “Form”, “image”, and “similarity” do not seem very appropriate terms to approach the relationship between God and people, but the terms “signs” and “covenant” are more appropriate. Another important aspect to note is that Adam’s form is the way that God shows beauty, and everything divine is beautiful.²¹

According to Michot, “Every Muslim is ... invited to follow him in his humble and loving worship of the Lord God, Islam is being essentially an *imitatio Muhammadi* (peace be upon him)...”. Islam sees all men equal, and God reminds about that as written in the Quran: “We have created you all from one pair - all from dust - Higher among you is he who is higher in righteousness... and knowledge”.²² Men’s capacity to implement and decipher God’s will is connected to Reason, and therefore, to human dignity. In addition, Islam teaches that humans are Godlike because they are endowed with a soul “of the breath of God”.²³ The idea of status is also present in Islam. Humans are ranked above angels, and in the verse 7:11 of the Quran angels were asked to bow down to Adam. The text recounts God responding to Iblis: “what prevents thee from prostrating thyself to one whom I created with My Own Hand?” (Q, 38:75-76)²⁴ Fatwa, the Islamic legal interpretation, talks about how respecting human dignity extends into human actions, and is used to determine ethics of practices including medical ones. Therefore, in

²¹ Michot, Yahya. “The Image of God in Humanity from a Muslim Perspective”. Norman, Richard Harries, and T. J. Winter (ed.): *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation*. [1st ed.]. London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006.

²² Michot, Yahya. “The Image of God in Humanity from a Muslim Perspective”. Norman, Richard Harries, and T. J. Winter (ed.): *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation*. [1st ed.]. London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006.

²³ Crawford, S. Cromwell. *World Religions and Global Ethics*. New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1989.

²⁴ Kamali, Mohammad Hashim. "Human Dignity in Islam." *International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies*. IAIS Malaysia, 1 Nov. 2007. Web. 14 Dec. 2016

Islam human dignity is connected to the idea of humans having a special status in creation but all being inherently equal, the special relation of humans to God, and the possession of transcendental qualities such as Reason and Soul. Human creation is a manifestation of beauty, but this exceptionalism of the person also carries with it responsibilities and legal duties in regards to worshipping God, interacting with other people, as well as other aspects of life.

Alternative Definitions of Human Dignity

As seen from the analysis of the concept of human dignity in Abrahamic faiths, it is evident that *imago Dei* is a central and important doctrine. Though Judaism, Christianity and Islam have a difference in understanding how God manifested his image in humans and how that affects their obligations, similar beliefs across the religions in regards to human dignity exist. Using these shared values and believes could provide a theoretical basis for providing a general inter-religious definition of human dignity. If the concepts of *imago Dei* and *imitatio Dei* are regarded as pillars of the definition, one can assume that human dignity is an inescapably religious concept if it cannot be separated from the two notions. The emphasis on the duty of individuals to follow the Golden rule, egalitarianism of all people, and human exceptionalism due to the ability to reason, on the other hand, have the potential to be seen as universally applied concepts that do not require a religious premise. The special status of humans could be regarded as a secular concept as well, however, it is derived from the knowledge of an hierarchical system of creation which could be understood only within a religious framework. Seemingly secular aspects of the religious definition still require at the very least a belief in a transcendental nature of humanity. A possible way to find an alternative definition of human dignity without the

transcendental aspect and other religious presuppositions would be to explore philosophical traditions of thought that discuss human worth or any other attempts to define human dignity on a non-religious basis. Is it possible that philosophy can challenge religion “for ownership of the keys to the values shop?”²⁵

Alternative Definitions of Human Dignity: Kantianism

Kantianism has a special role in philosophical heritage concerning the discussion of human dignity. Kant’s categorical imperative commands: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means”. Human worth is seen as “beyond price”. For Kant, respect is not using other human beings without their consent. The reason behind why humans possess dignity is because of their capability of acting morally. His philosophy draws not on metaphysical abstractions, but on everyday efforts of individuals to lead a morally decent life.²⁶ Kant also mentions status of humans as a primary derivative of their worth: dignity is understood as elevation or sublimity, and therefore is relational. Everyone who pursues morality should be respected unconditionally, and thus, valued. Kant believes that human worth is innate and inalienable, because of this prerogative of pursuing morality given to all humanity by nature. Humans should make use of the freedom granted exceptionally to them because of their elevated status over nature. Therefore, Kant connects human dignity to freedom and unconditional pursuit of morality. The ultimate duty that the possession of human dignity infers on an individual is to respect others.²⁷

²⁵ Davis, 1 in Davis, D. S., & Zoloth, L. (1999). *Notes from a narrow ridge: Religion and bioethics*. Hagerstown, Md.: University Pub. Group.

²⁶ Shell, Susan M. "PCBE: Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics (Chapter 13: Kant's Concept of Human Dignity as a Resource for Bioethics). March 2008. Web. 08 Nov. 2016.

²⁷ Part II: Sensen, Oliver. *Kantstudien-Ergänzungshefte : Kant on Human Dignity*. Berlin/Boston, DE: De Gruyter, 2011. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 8 November 2016.

Thus, the Kantian view of human dignity is focused on the idea of choice to pursue morality, respecting others by treating humans as an end in themselves, and recognizing unconditional value in humanity.

Kantianism has been seen by many as a tradition of thought that could provide a definition of human dignity that would not be religious. Humans are seen as exceptional without a divine recognition of the exceptionalism. However, trying to use the Kantian definition of human dignity as a universal one in public discourse can be problematic. The idea of the individual's freedom in the Kantian paradigm can sometimes be deduced to "choice worship" by proponents of liberalism, who see the individual's right to choose as the primary principle of human dignity. Kantianism does not assert that all choices of an individual are morally acceptable. Respect for the humanity of others does not deduce from respecting the humanity of oneself: therefore, a prohibition of suicide is a logical continuation of duties that this respect would entail. A conflict arises between dignity and choice because duties can place constraints on the content of the will.²⁸ Another difficulty that may arise when attempting to use the Kantian thought to define human dignity or to use it in public discourse is idea of transcendentalism. The abovementioned human ability to follow moral law presupposes a transcendental transformation of the human animal nature.²⁹ Though the theistic basis an individual might choose not to ascribe a theistic idea to the Kantian notion of dignity, the choice to pursue morality could be difficult to explain without some spiritual premise. Kantian theoretical paradigm does illuminate a way in which one can view human dignity on a non-religious basis, but might contain some theistic premise because of the beliefs in the elevation of humans over nature. In addition, using

²⁸ Meir Dan-Cohen, A Concept of Dignity, 44 *Isr. L. Rev.* 9 (2011). Berkeley Law Scholarship Repository.

²⁹ Enslin, John Victor. "Kant on Human Dignity: A Conversation among Scholars." *Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation*. Boston College University Libraries, 2014. Web. 15 Dec. 2016.

Kantianism to propagate “choice worship” can harm the public discourse by excerpting the concept of will from the vast context of Kant’s philosophical heritage that outlines its implications. Nonetheless, Kantian notion of dignity, with its universally understood idea of the “categorical imperative” and developed theoretical framework, is a valuable alternative to religious definitions of the term.

Alternative Definitions of Dignity: Secular Humanism

Secular humanism makes the explicit claim of rejecting religious premises in moral decision-making. Secular humanists often use the concept of dignity while simultaneously rejecting theistic beliefs. Humanism originated in the 14th century with attempts to secularize morality and to spread the idea that pleasures were to be propagated. Humanist thinkers Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola emphasized human dignity and freedom in their philosophical heritage.³⁰ The underlying basis of secular humanist philosophy is the assumption that a person can be moral and virtuous without necessarily believing in the divine: the American Humanist Association calls for “Good without a God”. Transcendentalism is rejected by modern secular humanists. Moreover, secular humanist ethics focuses on emancipating individuals from controls of political regimes, organized religions, and conventional morality while advocating for creative self-realization.³¹ The definition of human dignity in secular humanism is based on the assumption that humanity is intrinsically valuable but not because of a theistic dogma.³² Humanist Manifesto III proclaims the following: “We are committed to treating each person as

³⁰ Page 692: Flynn, Tom, and Richard Dawkins. *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007. Print.

³¹ Flynn, Tom. "Secular Humanism Defined." *Council for Secular Humanism*. Center for Inquiry, 2016. Web. 16 Dec. 2016.

³² Pages 35-36: Murray, Abdu. *Grand Central Question: Answering the Critical Concerns of the Major Worldviews*. InterVarsity, 2014. Print.

having inherent worth and dignity”.³³ An understanding of what constitutes the term dignity for a secular humanist could be derived from looking at main tenants of humanist philosophy. The pillar of a secular humanist understanding of the world is reason, differences of opinion should be settled by appealing to evidence, moral choices are subject to revision due to limitations of human knowledge, ideals should be used as guidelines for living context, and a belief in a soul or spiritual aspect is to be rejected. Humanists assert that a common ground could be found among humans because “we most often share the same needs, interests, and desires and because we share the same planetary environment”.³⁴ Humanism, as do religious beliefs and Kantianism, also implies some certain behavioural outcomes that are logical consequences of adhering to the secular humanist thought. Positions on social policy include the development of autonomy, construction of effective social organization, promotion of democracy, and international cooperation on global causes.³⁵ A humanist philosophy simultaneously focuses on the upholding of human dignity and the pursuit of human desires and aspirations, and lays out a moral framework and suggested policy implications for the belief system it asserts.

The position of secular humanism seems like an attractive definition of human dignity for public discourse. It is absent of the idea of *imago Dei* that is a premise of religious definitions, rejects strongly any transcendental notion which could be implied for Kantianism, and promotes values that could be seen as applicable for all humans. Thus, it could be assumed that this philosophical tradition provides even a more secular definition of dignity than Kantianism and

³³ American Humanist. "Humanism and Its Aspirations - American Humanist Association." *American Humanist Association*. American Humanist Association, Web. 15 Dec. 2016.

³⁴ Edwards, Fred. "The Humanist Philosophy in Perspective - American Humanist Association." *American Humanist Association*. American Humanist Association, Web. 15 Dec. 2016.

³⁵ Edwards, Fred. "Current Positions on Social Policy: The Humanist Philosophy in Perspective - American Humanist Association." *American Humanist Association*. American Humanist Association, Web. 15 Dec. 2016.

rejects the idea that dignity is an inescapably religious concept. However, the secular humanist definition of human dignity is also not immune to criticism. Referring back to Calhoun's framework, the humanist philosophy rejects both *imago Dei* and the idea of human exceptionalism. If reason or pursuit of morality were seen by philosophical thought as conveying human exceptionalism, secular humanists argue that the spiritual aspect of humanity does not pass the scientific test and should be disregarded. Though humanists may argue that human dignity is inherent and an explanation of its origin is not necessary, their definition would infer complications when attempted to be applied in the public discourse. The contention arises between human life possessing inherent worth and the right to pursue individual happiness: When an individual's aspiration for desires based on the basic necessity to survive come in conflict with the rights of another person, which of the two values would be considered more important in the humanist moral calculus? McDowell (as cited in Obioha) argues: "The Marxist, for example argues that the individual only has worth as a member of society. It is permissible, indeed necessary, to expend the individual for the society... How can the humanist infringe on the Marxist's individual preciousness and dignity by telling him his view of mankind is wrong?"

³⁶ For questions of medical ethics that require moral judgement extending beyond the commonly held values of individuals sharing planetary environment, a secular humanist framework would probably uphold the individual's choice. The emphasis on autonomy has the potential of also falling in the pitfall of "choice worship" as the interpretation of Kantianism, which would also be subject to the critique that not all choices are morally acceptable. The absence of an explanation of the origin of human dignity and an outline of the limitations of human dignity in regards to

³⁶Obioha, Precious Uwaezuoke. "A Critique of Atheistic Humanism in the Quest for Human Dignity." *Open Journal of Philosophy* 03.01 (2013): 131-39. *Scientific Research*. Sci Res, Feb. 2013. Web. 15 Dec. 2016.

other humanist values poses complications in regards to making moral judgements. Despite of that critique, the secular humanist definition of human dignity does provide an alternative that encompass nontheistic views and attempts to explain human worth without a religious premise.

Alternative Definitions of Dignity: International Institutions

International governance organization often use the term human dignity. Institutions like the United Nations have openly embraced the term: it is mentioned in numerous legal documents. The most famous of them is the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which contains the use of the term dignity in relation to the idea of human rights in the first sentence of its preamble.³⁷ Glendon (as cited in Jackson) relates the UNDHR to the documents of the “large family of dignity-based rights” which were adopted in the post-World War II period.³⁸ It is agreed upon the fact that international organizations do not provide a clear definition of the term despite of its frequent appearance in documentation. The general idea behind the use of the concept by international governance organizations is that each individual has intrinsic worth which consequently would require conduct that respects that individual. International institutions such as the United Nations were able to bring humanity to a consensus that dignity infers individual rights without defining the term in a particular way. However, questions remain on the explanation of why humans have worth and what type of behavior towards the individual is acceptable or unacceptable in relation to it. It is argued that trying to define the term could have been counter-productive towards the goal of adopting international laws about human rights

³⁷ Available from the United Nations official website: <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights>

³⁸ Jackson, Vicki C. "Constitutional Dialogue and Human Dignity: States and Transnational Constitutional Discourse." *Montana Law Review* 65 (2004): 15-40. *Georgetown Law Faculty Publications*. Web. 15 Dec. 2016.

protection.³⁹ The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights is often cited by individuals that intent to provide a secular definition of human dignity. In this case, lack of clarity may seem as a virtue: international institutions use the term to assert positive rights and values while leaving the individual with the responsibility to interpret the term within the context for themselves, whether they view the origin of dignity as theistic or nontheistic. It may seem that international governance institutions give an opportunity for citizens to skip the tenuous debates about the moral and religious premises of the term and simply start applying it to public discourse.

The IGO connotation of the term could be seen as applicable to more people than the religious definition of *imago Dei* and those explanation based on theistic human exceptionalism. The definition nonetheless is vague unless seen in the context of the values that it is trying to convey, just as the religious and philosophical definitions require a contextual premise. The upholding of human dignity as the core value behind promotion of human rights is an agreement among political groups with differing opinions that dignity is something about humans, whatever it might be, that entitles them to certain rights.⁴⁰ The emotional appeal of the term would vary between individuals who are left with a right to decide for themselves the origin of human dignity. That claim still leaves many questions including whether an individual can lose or compromise their dignity in certain circumstances. In addition, an assertion of human exceptionalism without any reference for it produces a conflict of individual rights with other beings: Would an individual's right for economic development be more valuable than the preservation of animal biodiversity? And lastly, viewing the definition of human dignity as a

³⁹ McCrudden, Christopher. "Human Dignity and Judicial Interpretation of Human Rights." *European Journal of International Law* 19.4 (2008): 655-724. *Oxford Journals*. Web. 16 Dec. 2016.

⁴⁰ Page 75: Harees, Lukman. *Mirage of Dignity on the Highways of Human "Progress": The Bystanders' Perspective*. The United States of America: Authorhouse, 2012. Print.

central reason for human rights could serve as a pathway for international governance to impose a certain agenda of the international rights that are in the “spotlight” of their activity. They might be prone to use the term to advance a certain moral framework, just as the religious and nonreligious strains of thought would, in their self interest. The debates about certain biases of international governance show that despite of their attempt to encompass all nations and cultures, the sheer diversity of world’s population will lead to further disagreements on abovementioned questions about human dignity.

Analysis of Secular Definitions

Kantianism and Secular Humanism provide strong evidence that human dignity is not an inescapably religious concept. Their philosophical heritage shows alternative ways of defining the term, a basis of universal values which it is embedded within, and a set of actions that this definition would imply. Moreover, international institutions make the case that the issue behind providing a clear definition of human dignity could be left unaddressed, while the term itself could be used in documents for the overall betterment of humanity. Many more philosophers attempted to provide a definition of human dignity without the use of the doctrine of *imago Dei*. Though these definitions might have differences, just as the religious definitions they possess some common themes and values such as freedom of choice and respect. However, the nontheistic explanations of human dignity imply certain actions from individuals that can conflict and differ. Traditions of thought that use human exceptionalism as a part of the definition are able to preserve the strong emotional appeal from the religious understanding of the term that is often desired to be invoked. When delving into the origin of such exceptionalism, Kantianism appeals to spirituality. This could be seen as more encompassing than a strictly

religious definition, but still could imply a theistic underpinning and exclude the individuals that do not possess a belief in transcendentalism. Asserting human exceptionalism and then inferring a reaction to it without a coherent moral framework as international institutions often attempt to do could be seen as an anthropocentrically biased approach. The broadness of the secular humanist theoretical framework does not allow for evaluating the duties that dignity infers on individuals, especially when it comes to the conflict between pursuing happiness and infringing upon the rights of other individuals. Without emphasizing human exceptionalism and relying on scientific evidence only in questions of morality, secular humanism lacks capacity to answer medical ethical questions like human cloning. Though secular traditions provide alternative non-religious definitions, questions remain about the theoretical foundations of these beliefs: a criticism of these traditions of thought is a lack of metaphysical grounds for the emergence of human worth and human rights.⁴¹ Nonetheless, these alternative definitions have a significant role in promoting inclusiveness of alternative nontheistic understandings of human worth within the public discourse in relations to the question of human dignity.

The criticism of concealing religious bias behind the term of human dignity could partially extend to non-religious traditions as well. As seen from the example of “choice worship”, groups intentionally reduce the theoretical complexity or whitewash the ambiguity of secular philosophical definitions in order to promote certain beliefs. A danger of attempting to provide a secular definition of dignity is that interests could still be channelled through the invocation of the seemingly “neutral”, secular term. This is evident from the example of dignity as a basis of human rights discourse of IGOs. Féron argues: “natural rights doctrines ... are ...

⁴¹ Page 28: Copan, Paul “Grounding Human Rights: Naturalism’s Failure and Biblical Theism’s Success”. Menuge, Angus J.L., ed. *Applied Legal Philosophy : Legitimizing Human Rights : Secular and Religious Perspectives*. Abingdon, Oxon, GB: Routledge, 2013. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 16 December 2016.

dependent on faith in axioms that justify the existence and authority of these rights, and are thus no different from a religion in epistemological terms ...The truth of the matter is that it is by seeking the Absolute in human rights that we inevitably turn them into a religion".⁴² Is there a way to achieve a definition of human dignity which could prevent all sides of public debates from attaching meaning to it that is not present? McCrudden argues that at least in the realm of international law, religious and philosophical traditions cannot reach an agreement on the matter: none of the traditions of thought are able to provide a legal definition of dignity which could be used by lawyers for judgement. Giving preference to one tradition of thought's definition over the others would diminish its attractiveness as a common ground to generate agreement between those who might not ascribe to that tradition. Defining dignity in a clear way is possible when it is tied to a framework of interpretation.⁴³ Therefore it is important to note that any party which invokes the term dignity does so with a set of values it prescribes to the term, which stem from their understanding of human worth and could be based either on a religious or secular framework.

Applying the Concept of Human Dignity to Public Discourse

In order to address this larger theme of the vagueness behind the definition of the concept, "dignity" should not be viewed as a singular independent term, but must be considered within a theoretical framework. All traditions of thought that claim to have a definition and a moral framework attached to the term must be transparent about the beliefs concerning human worth that they are trying to convey. All sides must have a right to point out attempts to attach

⁴² Féron, Henri. "Human rights and faith: a 'world-wide secular religion'?" *Ethics & Global Politics* [Online], 7.4 (2014). Web. 16 Dec. 2016

⁴³ McCrudden, Christopher. "Human Dignity and Judicial Interpretation of Human Rights." *European Journal of International Law* 19.4 (2008): 655-724. *Oxford Journals*. Web. 16 Dec. 2016.

superficial meaning to the term. For the Abrahamic religious traditions, utilizing the commonality of *imago Dei* and *imitatio Dei* provides a common ground for conceptualizing an interfaith definition of human dignity and engaging in fruitful interreligious dialogue on the ethical questions. The use of “dignity” as based on religious doctrines in pure form is not acceptable for public policy decisions. However, religious traditions of thought could appeal to broader moral themes such as non-humiliation and join the human exceptionalism-based philosophical traditions when advocating for certain ethical decisions. As for the nontheistic and philosophical traditions that might or might not require a belief in the spiritual, they should be open about the moral framework that they are utilizing, what actions it entails, and why do they believe in such approach. Secular definitions should not be seen as a panacea for addressing issues in public discourse because they might still carry certain biases. A starting point for productive discussion centered around the concept of dignity would be appreciating the richness of traditions of thought that attempted to explain human worth and embracing this diversity of knowledge. By using the general idea of human worth as a starting point, various traditions of thought should continue to hold discussion and debates about what could they agree on in regards to the overarching definition of the concept. Though it may seem like an idealistic idea, such transparency can produce a more productive environment for bringing more clarity to the concept in lieu of parties misusing the term and claiming ideological superiority because of its invocation.

Conclusion

This research paper aimed to answer the question of whether dignity is an inescapably religious concept by examining Abrahamic faith-based definitions and nontheistic definitions of

the term. By examining nontheistic definitions of the term one can assert that there have been attempts to construct frameworks around a definition of human dignity without the belief in the doctrine of *imago Dei*, which is essential to the Abrahamic faith-based traditions. As for the question of whether the term loses its appeal when defined in strictly secular terms, it would depend on how the secular framework explains human worth. Besides the basis of human worth the term human dignity does not have a clear definition that could serve as a universally acceptable reference. In order to apply the term human dignity in argumentation and understand the message that it carries one needs to possess the knowledge of the tradition of thought it is being inferred from. Therefore, the conclusion that “human dignity” is not an inescapably religious concept and can be defined as more inclusive towards a broad humanity of believers and nonbelievers is important, but does not necessarily prevent the definition from being altered to propagate a certain belief system. It is also evident that much of the weight ascribed to the term comes from the idea of human exceptionalism, which may seem as a starting point for dialogue but still possess limitations. Though theistic and nontheistic traditions have common themes that they associate with “dignity”, their explanations have serious differences which cannot be fully reconciled.

Referencing the framework for “dignity” when using the term in public debates, such as identifying if it is being used within the Kantian tradition of thought, could potentially reduce the ambiguity behind the definition. This approach would also allow to promote transparency of intentions behind the use of “dignity” in argumentation. One tradition of thought should not claim superiority over the other: all philosophical traditions should be celebrated and presented in a way to promote consensus and unity. This could be done through appealing to broader moral

values. A future area of research could be identifying values which would be able to serve as a starting point for achieving some consensus between various traditions of thought. The limitations of this research paper is that it does not examine how non-Abrahamic faiths define “dignity”. Other religions like Confucianism bring a different and valuable perspective on the definition of the concept that does not involve the doctrine of *imago Dei*. Another limitation of this research paper is that it does not consider socio-cultural definitions of “dignity”, such as the Chinese concept of “face”, which could also serve as alternatives to theistic and nontheistic explanations. An assertion of values like autonomy could be seen as a pro-Western cultural view of the world which neglects different cultural perceptions of “dignity”. Though many questions in the area of defining human dignity still remain, this paper positively contributes to the discussion about using “human dignity” in the public discourse.

Endnotes

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