

Examining the criteria of human dignity

Seyed Abdosaleh Jafari¹, Behin Araminia², Hanieh Tavasoli^{3*}, Nafiseh Tavasoli⁴, Soheil Abedi⁵, Ahmad Fayaz Bakhshe⁶

1. Researcher, University of Religions and Denominations, Research Center for Religions and Denominations; Researcher, Medical Ethics and History of Medicine Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
2. Researcher, Mental Health Research Center, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
3. Resident of Neurology, Faculty of Medicine, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran.
4. Researcher, Endocrine and Metabolism Research Institute, Endocrine and Metabolism Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
5. PhD Candidate in Medical ethics, Medical Ethics and History of Medicine Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
6. Researcher, Sina Trauma & Surgery Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

Abstract

One of the critical aspects in discussing human dignity is the establishment of its criterion, a standard unique to humans. This criterion should effectively create a fundamental and structural distinction from other creatures. Initially, our focus was on the endeavors of biologists to differentiate the human species from others, emphasizing the physical aspects. However, physical and genetic differences lack the necessary characteristics to serve as a criterion for dignity. Subsequently, we explored the notion of this criterion in human behavior. Yet, given that behavior stems from human thought, it proves unsuitable as a criterion for dignity. Thus, our quest led us to explore human wisdom. However, since wisdom, like other abilities, serves as a tool for improved living and is present to some extent in other animals, it proves inadequate as a criterion. We have determined that the distinguishing characteristic lies in the power of choice or free will, setting humans apart from other living beings whose behavior is solely instinctual or driven by needs. Consequently, free choice forms the foundation of dignity, assigning value to the chooser based on the choices made.

Keywords: Human dignity; Criterion of dignity; Freedom of choice; Free selection of virtues; Voluntary compliance with belief.

***Corresponding Author**
Hanieh Tavasoli

Address: Department of Neurology, Ghaem Hospital, Ahmadabad Blvd., Mashhad, Razavi Khorasan Province. Iran.

Postal Code: 9176999311

Tel: (+98) 51 38 01 25 22

Email: haniehtavasoli74@gmail.com

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Introduction

One of the fundamental principles and cornerstones of bioethics is human rights (1). Human rights and human dignity are interconnected concepts, with their meaning dependent on each other. The significance of human rights and the imperative to uphold the rights of all individuals are justified by the notion of human dignity (2). In this context, human dignity stands as one of the foundational concepts that underpin both human rights and the structuring of human behavior. Perhaps the most fundamental question in this context is why and for what purpose human dignity exists, and what are its criteria and dimensions. What factors have contributed to the establishment of human dignity? Why is this dignity attributed to humans? In all schools of thought, whether material or spiritual, there must be a criterion for this dignity; otherwise, even if dignity is acknowledged, and behavior is aligned with it, it would be unjustified and inappropriate. How can the dignity of individuals engaging in harmful actions, such as "corruption and shedding blood," be justified? Given the significant importance of human dignity, various schools of thought have delved into the concept and criteria for its existence in individuals.

Different approaches may highlight various facets of human dignity, such as inherent dignity, attributed dignity, or inflorescent dignity. These aspects may mirror distinct sources of human dignity, including human nature, social recognition, or moral excellence. Depending on the prioritized aspect, certain human rights may be viewed as more fundamental or contingent than others. Various approaches suggest distinct criteria for determining who possesses human dignity and who is entitled to human rights. For instance, some approaches may ground human dignity in specific capacities humans exhibit, such as rationality, autonomy, or morality. This perspective might lead to the exclusion of certain individuals lacking or losing these capacities, such as fetuses, infants, or people with severe disabilities. Other approaches may anchor human dignity in the simple fact of being human, irrespective of specific capacities or characteristics. This inclusive perspective encompasses all humans but also prompts inquiries about the limits of the human species and the potential existence of non-human dignified beings (3). As previously mentioned, diverse schools of thought offer distinct criteria for human dignity. In

the ontological view, this criterion is dependent on nature and is inherent (4).

Another perspective on human dignity is through a transcendental and philosophical lens. Kant has played a significant role in shaping this viewpoint, asserting that the foundation of human dignity lies in moral autonomy (5). The third approach to human dignity is theological and anthropological. From this standpoint, human dignity is contingent on the belief that the creation and salvation of humans can be facilitated by God. Another lens through which to examine human dignity is the anthropological view. In anthropological approaches, the criterion for human dignity lies in acknowledging and appreciating the diversity and complexity of human cultures and worldviews, and promoting dialogue and cooperation among them (6).

This article does not delve into the criterion of humanity; rather, its focus is on the criterion of dignity in humans. It does not explore what makes humans human or what feature, if present in a creature, qualifies it as human. The central inquiry is directed at what, existing in a being acknowledged as human, bestows dignity upon it. What human characteristics contribute to the emergence of human dignity? Many human traits are shared with other creatures, making these

shared characteristics inadequate as the face and criterion of human dignity.

While these characteristics can serve as criteria for a broader dignity no longer exclusive to humans, shared by all animals and anyone who has that characteristic, the dignity bestowed upon humans for their existence becomes a shared quality among all beings. Likewise, the dignity granted to humans for their growth and maturity is a quality from which all living beings can benefit. The dignity bestowed upon humans because they are animals is a dignity shared by all animals. However, the unique dignity conferred upon humans due to their humanity is distinct and exclusive to them. In this article, we have explored various perspectives, extracting what is deemed the criterion of dignity in different approaches to human dignity. Through rigorous logical and philosophical arguments, we endeavored to identify a standard that is reasonable and acceptable from both secular and religious standpoints, capable of distinguishing humans from other creatures.

Discussion

Possible criteria for human dignity

Upon initial inspection, what distinguishes humans from non-humans lies in five domains:

physical body, behavior, emotions, wisdom, and belief. While this categorization lacks strict boundaries, it doesn't appear to imply any other inference. This is particularly crucial as the factor separating human dignity cannot be a trivial difference overlooked at times. Consequently, the root of human dignity must reside within one of these five categories, which are more prominent. In certain religions, the dignity of followers is attributed to religiosity and adherence to that specific faith. Some religious leaders assert that departing from the religion results in a loss of dignity. However, in this article, we do not scrutinize religion as a distinct factor. It appears

that religion is a collection and combination of the other three components: emotions, intellect, and behavior (7). Similar to other human distinctions, it is interconnected with these three axes and does not run parallel to them.

Hence, humans are deemed dignified either due to their unique body, distinct behavior, special perceptions, or their intelligence. In the subsequent sections, we will delve into an examination of these factors. A conceptual map and a summary of this article, along with the topics we are set to discuss, can be found in Figure 1.

<i>Physical, anatomical, and biological features</i>
Physical differences between species lack significance, and creatures cannot be definitively categorized solely based on their appearance. The spectrum created by their physical variations renders it an unsuitable criterion for human dignity. Moreover, these physical distinctions fail to create a meaningful difference deserving of a value-based quality such as dignity.
<i>Behavior</i>
The origin of human behavior can be ascribed to three general causes: biology and nature, emotions, and wisdom. Biological differences were discussed in the previous section, and the two other cases will be addressed in their respective sections.
<i>Emotions</i>
It appears that other advanced animals also possess the ability to understand emotions, making this feature insufficient to distinguish humans from other creatures and serve as the basis for their dignity. It is essential to note that emotions primarily represent the receptivity of humans, rather than constituting a dignifying feature that can be the cause of human rights. Additionally, some emotions seem to originate from human wisdom, a topic we will explore further in the wisdom section.
<i>Wisdom</i>
*Instrumental wisdom, being merely a tool for facilitating life, cannot be the source of human dignity. There are numerous instances of highly intelligent criminals, yet their intellectual prowess does not lead to them being deemed more worthy of dignity. *Spiritual wisdom, while more valuable than instrumental wisdom, cannot be the sole cause of dignity as it is acquired from knowledge and information. The accumulation of information alone is not sufficient to create a value worthy of human dignity.
<i>Belief</i>
*Possessing a belief, defined as a definite knowledge or certainty about knowledge, lacks a separate essence from other forms of knowledge and is even present in animals. Therefore, it cannot serve as the sole cause of dignity. *Freedom in compliance with or rebellion against beliefs: Despite the evident distinction between humans and other creatures, where no animal acts contrary to their beliefs, this difference cannot be a factor of dignity. Disobedience to one's beliefs links a person to anti-values and cannot serve as a foundation for dignity, which is based on values and contributes to making humans valuable. *Voluntary compliance with beliefs: This voluntary commitment has the potential to become a subject of value and serve as the foundation for dignity

Figure 1. Summary of possible criteria for human dignity

A: Dignity achieved through anatomical and physical characteristics

Given that the most overt and straightforward manifestation of humanity is anatomy and physical characteristics, as well as the state of being alive, many have emphasized it and regarded it as the origin of dignity. In the Torah, the anatomy of people is deemed divine and, consequently, sacred¹. Built upon this foundation, racial differences have gained prominence and have been exploited in racist religions and philosophies. Aristotle, for instance, deemed Greek citizens superior to other enslaved races (8). Arthur de Gobineau wrote an essay on the inequality of human races, asserting the superiority of Iranians (9). Houston Stewart Chamberlain laid the groundwork for Nazism by championing the superiority of Aryanism (10).

However, the mere fact of being alive and anatomical and physical differences alone cannot justify human dignity beyond the dignity of other animals. The biological and physical distinctions between humans and other animals, especially closely related biological species, are minimal and insignificant. At times, an equivalent number of

differences with a continuous gradient exists between other species of living beings, yet they have not been deemed a criterion for their dignity. Therefore, we must seek a distinct and unmistakable difference—not a questionable part of a continuum or a continuous process, but a difference that unequivocally sets humans apart from all other biological species and can serve as the foundation for their specific dignity.

B: Dignity achieved through behavior

Experientialism, positivism, behaviorism, and pragmatism collectively emphasize the significance of human behavior, to the extent that Karl Marx defined people by their praxis and behavior (11).

Human behaviors can be categorized into two groups: those with a biological and instinctual aspect and those derived from emotions and wisdom. Actions stemming from creation belong to the category of biology and existence, lacking a value higher than other creatures for human beings. Conversely, behaviors derived from emotions or wisdom are subsets of these two domains. Hence, the criterion for human dignity must exist within

¹ *The Torah, Book of Genesis, Chapter 1, Verse 27*

these two domains: emotions or wisdom, which we will explore further.

C: Dignity achieved through emotions

Epicure placed fundamental importance on types of feelings such as happiness and beauty (12). However, romanticism, particularly through the works of Rousseau and the "religious experience" of Schleiermacher, underscored the authenticity of feelings, and sensationalism expanded on this notion (13, 14). Laughter and joy, crying and sorrow, anger and aggression, love and kindness, wonder and anticipation are all characteristics that exist in no other creature but humans, and they do not manifest in any other form. However, three considerations must be taken into account:

First, the presence of these characteristics in advanced animals challenges their exclusivity to humans.

Second, the source of all these characteristics is pleasure, suffering, wonder and anticipation which are also partially derived from wisdom.

Third, these are only receptivity or susceptibility that extend beyond other creatures and do not constitute empowering abilities. Even evaluative intuitions such as good and bad, if accepted as valid, only enhance our knowledge and are akin to wisdom in this regard. This is why ancient philosophers regarded the reception of good and

bad as part of wisdom. However, as it appeared not entirely in harmony with modes of thought, they referred to it as practical wisdom or behavioral wisdom (15). Therefore, we will delve into this discussion in the wisdom section. However, there remains space to critique the fallacy of the framework and nature of emotion and wisdom, or the intersection of psychology and philosophy within this category.

In light of this, emotions, being the pinnacle of influenceability, cannot inherently be considered dignifying. However, it should be noted that within a comprehensive ideological system, emotions can be a demander of respect and dignity, rather than a cause for deserving it. Such a pervasive system, as a first step, should avoid harming sensitive individuals and strive for the well-being of all its masses. Nevertheless, this obligation is also an outcome of thought, a topic we will explore. Thought may not necessarily be inherently tied to values and dignity; it can be opportunistic, self-centered, comfort-seeking, and profit-oriented.

Love and fascination, while generating a vast array of tasteful and mystical literature, exhibit the passive characteristics of emotion and are unsuitable as a criterion for dignity. On the other hand, since they give rise to persistent effort, they become actions that, when unconscious, resemble

behavior, and when conscious, become integral parts of belief and choice.

D: Dignity achieved through wisdom

Aristotle refers to humans as talking animals, although this attribution may arise from commentators, translators, and philosophers like Alexander of Aphrodisias, Isaac Hanin, or Abu Yusuf Kandi (16). Wisdom and thought serve two purposes: one in better understanding and planning in life, and the other in comprehending and planning transcendent concepts that lead to spiritual and religious knowledge and beliefs (17).

Instrumental wisdom

The terrestrial use of wisdom and thought, referred to as instrumental wisdom, serves to facilitate and organize life, acting as a tool for practical living. Consequently, it cannot be inherently linked to transcendent concepts and values. Just as an animal with sharper eyesight doesn't possess more dignity than an animal without it, and an animal that runs faster isn't more dignified than an animal that walks slowly, this worldly wisdom only contributes to a better life. However, a more comfortable life is not necessarily more dignified. Intellectual tools provide knowledge but do not inherently bring dignity. For instance, a computer may be more valuable than a table, but it is not more dignified.

Observably, great sinners and high-ranking criminals, despite their intellectual capabilities, are not respected or deemed dignified by society. Similarly, exploiters, deceivers, and liars, even if intelligent, do not garner esteem and dignity. The thoughts and knowledge pertinent to worldly matters and beneficial in practical life serve merely as tools that enhance capability. While valuable, they do not inherently bestow dignity.

It can be asserted that ignorant and unintelligent individuals are often less respected. However, we also observe that a thinker who employs their intellectual capacity for wrongdoing is deemed worse than the ignorant. Therefore, intellectual tools alone cannot serve as the criterion for the dignity of individuals or the absence of dignity in others.

Spiritual wisdom

Contemplating values, God, and spiritual and religious knowledge, as emphasized by philosophers like Ghazali Tosi and Shahabuddin Sohrawardi, holds a higher position than instrumental wisdom (18-20). However, this characteristic alone cannot be inherently dignifying, as this wisdom represents another form of knowledge, and knowledge is inherently of the nature of received data—it cannot inherently create value. Religious scholars across various religions

do not deem mere knowledge as dignifying until it evolves into a belief. Therefore, it is evident that dignity is not attained solely through wisdom and knowledge, even though these forms of knowledge may serve as prerequisites for belief. Consequently, a "knowing animal" cannot be respected solely because it is a "talking animal.

E: Dignity achieved through belief

"Belief is a mental attitude of acceptance or assent toward a proposition without the full intellectual knowledge required to guarantee its truth. Beliefs can be either true or false, and they can influence our actions and emotions" (21). Throughout history, the predominant approach of most religious scholars has been to associate religious dignity with the dignity derived from belief in the contents of religions (22). Theologian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard also discusses the prominence of the leap of faith and belief, emphasizing a tendency toward acceptance (23).

Having a belief

Belief and faith, even when disregarding their subject matter, are essentially a definite knowledge or certainty about knowledge and do not possess a separate essence from other forms of knowledge. Much like animals, which also hold beliefs and act accordingly. As per the earlier definition, animals do have beliefs, although proving them may be

more challenging than with humans (24). Animals can employ their beliefs to guide their actions in various situations, such as finding food, avoiding predators, or interacting with other animals. For instance, they go to the pond to drink water and flee from perceived threats. An example is the crow, which believes that the hard shell of its buried walnut will soon rot.

In religious traditions, there are also believers like "Shaytan" (Satan) who rebel against their beliefs and are not respected for rebelling against such beliefs (25). Therefore, belief alone is not a definitive reason or indicator of dignity.

Selection: freedom in compliance with belief or rebellion against beliefs

Here, an evident distinction between humans and other animals arises. No animal, except humans, rebels against their beliefs. All animals are compelled and forced to comply with their beliefs. It is only humans who can voluntarily choose to comply or rebel against their beliefs. The voluntary compliance of humans with their beliefs establishes a bond beyond and distinct from the bond that other animals have with their beliefs. This bond ties humans to what they have chosen to comply with and separates them from what they have chosen to rebel against. Their commitment to the non-coercive requirements of their beliefs, accepting

these obligations despite lacking external determinism, becomes the differentiating factor unique to humans and absent in other animals.

John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and Western existentialists, each in their unique way, stand as great thinkers of human freedom and emphasize the self-foundation of human dignity (26-28).

However, this freedom in compliance and rebellion against belief cannot be the sole basis of human dignity. The ability to rebel or comply is, in itself, a natural ability inherent in every creature due to its unique creation, making it a subject of existential judgment rather than a value judgment.

Those who consider this freedom in choice as the criterion for human dignity often highlight the lack of a clear criterion rather than providing a definitive basis for it. At times, individuals themselves perceive this freedom as both a value and an anti-value or as the "negative and positive selection of human and animal." (29). The criterion for human dignity should be rooted in value rather than nature or anti-value. Human dignity is what

makes people deserving of respect and certain rights; therefore, the criterion should be grounded in an internal value.

Voluntary compliance with beliefs

We believe that the criterion of human dignity lies not merely in the freedom to accept belief but in the voluntary acceptance and conscientious pursuit of belief. This voluntary bond, given its capacity to exist or not, has the potential to become a subject of value and serve as the creator and foundation of dignity.² Although not everyone attains this position, it is achievable for all humans. The wise philosopher Avicenna said, "Whoever believes without reason has stripped themselves of their humanity" because he comprehends that the essence of humanity lies in this voluntary and conscious acceptance and commitment (30). Abandoning these two characteristics would signify a departure from humanity, particularly when one persists in relinquishing these traits, leading to a departure from the criterion of humanity that permeates all aspects of life. In this perspective, "human nature" is synonymous with

² Islam considers this acceptance as the basis of piety and religiousness. (The Holy Quran, Surah Baqarah, verse 132: Abraham enjoined this [creed] upon his children, and [so did] Jacob, [saying], 'My children! Allah has indeed chosen this religion for you; so, do not die except as those who have surrendered themselves [to Allah].)

This is the kind of Islam that can be used as a measure of dignity. (The Holy Quran, Al Imran, verse 67: Abraham was neither a Jew

nor a Christian. Rather, he was a Hanif, a Muslim, and he was not one of the polytheists.)

Adherence and acceptance of belief is what is considered as the Hanif's nature in Islam. (The Holy Quran, Surah Ar-Room, verse 30: So, set your heart as a person of pure faith on this religion, the original nature endowed by Allah according to which He originated mankind (There is no altering Allah's creation; that is the upright religion, but most people do not know.)

the acceptance of beliefs, the affirmation of correctness, and the commitment to it.

The measure and degrees of compliance with beliefs

In this regard, people can be divided into three categories:

- Those who act on what they truly believe.
- Those who do not care about what they believe. True beliefs are ineffective in their lives. They live like creatures that have never come to such beliefs, and since those creatures do not have such beliefs that they can act on or not, then they are even more lost than them; Because they are oblivious and indifferent to their position of recognition.
- Those who rebel against their belief and fight with it. These people lack "acceptance," and instead, demonstrate "disobedience" to their beliefs. They have no connection with what constitutes the criterion of dignity; on the contrary, they are deemed "vile." This is a unique degradation that no other creature except humans can reach. Humans are the only creatures capable of rebelling against their beliefs. They can hold complete belief in something and, instead of

accepting and following that belief, engage in conflict with it. These individuals are detached from the source of dignity, a position marked by their special lowliness. Wisdom cannot establish a reasonable dignity for them, as they have not only severed their connection with the source of dignity but have risen up to fight against it.³

Therefore, human dignity exhibits different degrees and grades based on the degree of connection established with its criterion. Individuals, starting with any level of dignity at birth, can either enhance their levels of dignity or diminish them by rebelling against what they believe in

Doubt in dignity

It should be noted that many foundations of positive social rights can be derived from the minimum amount of inherent dignity found in "voluntary acceptance," while exploring its "acquisitive maximum" involves more aspects of anthropology, ethics, mysticism, and theology. Legal discussions often concentrate on the minimum dignity, while theological discussions delve into the maximum level. Neglecting these two areas is one of the fundamental factors

³ *The Holy Quran, Surah Haj, verse 18: And many have come to deserve the punishment. Whomever Allah humiliates will find no*

one who may bring him honor. Indeed, Allah does whatever He wishes.

contributing to the mutual misunderstanding between legal systems and religions.

Conclusion

Understanding and analyzing the concept of human dignity necessitates a criterion that is, firstly, specific to humans; otherwise, this dignity would be applicable to non-human beings as well. Secondly, that characteristic should be capable of serving as a criterion for dignity, which is a valuable concept. Thirdly, that feature should not be dependent and variable on another factor. Characteristics such as biological or social connections cannot be the basis for dignity, as they lack meaningful differences or values compared to other species.

Religion and even human behavior, although they both possess these characteristics, are ultimately derived from a person's emotions and thoughts. Emotions also originate from non-valued actions or wisdom. However, instrumental wisdom is not inherently a value, and spiritual wisdom can become the subject of value in the position of belief, provided there is a will to follow and not be disobedient to that belief. Therefore, dignity transitions from the realm of thought and wisdom

to the realm of will and inclination. It is evident that following, accepting, and obeying the belief of wisdom will hold value, while rebellion against it will go against value. Human dignity is derived from and exemplified by this chain. Based on this foundation, a human being who adheres to their belief has a criterion for human dignity, and those who do not adhere to their belief and do not value it will be devoid of the criterion of dignity. It should be noted that one cannot rely on adherence to a specific belief here. The belief, correctly conceived in the depths of someone's soul and mind, becomes the criterion for their actions. In other words, what matters is that each person is as valuable as they have respected their own belief, and, in this criterion, each person judges themselves.⁴ Although from an ontological perspective, this dignity is realized when it is continuously in line with true values, and imaginary values lack this characteristic, it should be noted that dignity is something whose realization is dependent on other factors, and there is no action that is inherently dignifying. This means that the criterion for measuring each person's actions is how much they have acted on the belief they have sincerely reached with their ability to understand, and honest

⁴ *The Holy Quran, Surah Qayamat, verses 14 and 15: Indeed, man is a witness to himself, even though he were to put up his excuses.*

errors in recognizing the truth are acceptable. In fact, acting on what a person sincerely believes in can be a measure of their dignity, even if their belief is deemed wrong by others. In this way, the validity of dignity is acceptable for someone who has acted according to their reason, even if they have a slip in their thoughts. A person with such a lapse in their thoughts may not have a valid reason for their dignity, but, from our perspective, the reason for their dignity remains intact on its own. This viewpoint embraces the diversity of human dignity, considering "the free selection of virtues and goodness" as the criterion. In our opinion, human dignity is not equal in all individuals, and the degree to which a person acts in alignment with their beliefs of what is right and good determines the level of their dignity. It should be noted that this grading of human dignity leads to the emergence of the minimum and maximum amounts of dignity. The minimum amount of human dignity, subject to

"human rights," is shared by all humans, while the maximum amount is discussed in mysticism and theology and is achieved by only a few people. In conclusion, addressing how the achievement or non-achievement of this criterion in society impacts the flow of rights and regulations is a crucial issue that will influence all the evidential results of this discussion. This aspect will be investigated in another research endeavor.

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