

Human dignity: a contract or an abstract?

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Abstract

Although human dignity has been the focus of many researchers, fundamental debates about its existence have often been ignored. Different views on human dignity and its existence can lead to divergent interpretations of human rights. In this study, we attempted to find an answer to the question of the nature of human dignity by examining and collecting the opinions of experts and analyzing and criticizing them. Our analysis showed that since dignity is linked to human existence and understanding, it has a subjective nature. Subjective existences have different types, including contractual and abstract. Contractual existence finds its way to objective entities through human thought, and it is changeable. An abstract existence, on the other hand, is created by perception of an objective entity in a constant way among human beings. Human dignity is consistent with the contractual type, because simply seeing a human does not bring to mind the existence of dignity and human rights. Once we accept the contractual nature of dignity, we must determine who bestowed this dignity on man. Through investigations, we came to the conclusion that God is the only one that can grant such privilege, and the existence of dignity for humans is a proof of God's existence.

Keywords: Human; Human dignity; Human rights; Personhood; Bioethics.

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Introduction

Human dignity is a fundamental concept that affirms the worth and value of every human being regardless of their individual characteristics or circumstances (1). It is the basis for human rights and serves as the foundation for a just and equitable society (2). Much has been said and written about the nature of dignity and the privileges it brings to humans, and many schools of thought have suggested different criteria for human dignity in the course of history (3). The existence or non-existence of human dignity, nevertheless, has been less explored. In most studies, especially modern ones, dignity is assumed to be an inherent characteristic of all human beings, assuming that its existence or non-existence has rarely been examined (4). Discussing the nature of human dignity is crucial for clarifying its normative foundations, addressing ethical implications, navigating cultural differences, engaging in philosophical debates, and informing law- and policy-related decisions. Multiple conceptions of dignity can lead to varying interpretations of human rights and obligations, which emphasizes the need for a robust ethical framework that can address contemporary challenges. Understanding the nature of human dignity is essential for

developing inclusive approaches that respect diverse understandings while seeking common ground in international human rights discussions. By engaging with these philosophical questions, we can gain deeper insights into the meaning of human existence and how we derive moral obligations from our shared humanity. In this discourse, the attempt is to shift the focus from the essence and nature of dignity and instead look at its existence, disregarding the conflicts in the definition or identity of human dignity.

At times, the question concerning the existence or non-existence of human dignity refers to whether dignity is a genuine reality or merely an imaginary construct. Many researchers believe that the mere supposition of dignity implies its non-existence (5). Although this is a common belief, more detailed examination seems necessary, and therefore we intend to take a closer look at it here.

Almost every human feels that their species is superior to other living beings. This inner perception of superiority is probably induced by an old and rooted idea that has found its place in human thought, and the remnants and taboos associated with it are present in people's lives today. Even if one does not accept this level of dignity for oneself, it is safe to assume that a great

many others have agreed upon it or recognized it within themselves. Therefore, one should be satisfied with the belief that dignity exists, even if one believes that it is an unjust attribution that others have established subjectively. After all, any image, even if it does not exist in the outside world, has a subjective existence in the mind of the imaginer (6). Therefore, no reasonable person can claim that human dignity does not exist, and if we accept that it does, two basic and important questions must be answered: “Does human dignity only exist in peoples’ minds, or does it have some bearing in reality?” and “What category of existence does human dignity belong to?” In this study, we aimed to answer these two questions, and in order to do so, we examined different philosophical sources and found various forms of existence and their definitions. We also explored suitability of attributing those kinds of existence to human dignity through philosophical discussions and rational reasoning, examining the opinions of experts in the field of philosophy.

Method

In this philosophical article, the methodology is focused on observation, description and analysis. While philosophical articles often assume the methodology, this work explicitly outlines the

approach to ensure clarity and rigor. We will begin with observations drawn from various philosophical sources, including texts, essays and scholarly articles. These observations will serve as the foundation for the descriptive aspect of the methodology. The descriptive phase will involve a thorough examination of the different forms of existence as defined by philosophers and experts in the field. This step is crucial in establishing the framework for the subsequent analysis. The analytical phase will be the core of the article, where suitability of attributing specific forms of existence to human dignity will be explored through philosophical discussions and rational reasoning. Finally, the opinions of experts in philosophy will be carefully examined and incorporated into the analysis.

Results

The analysis reveals that the existence of human dignity is fundamentally subjective rather than objective. The notion of external dignity, aside from human perception, has not been substantiated. Instead, human dignity is intrinsically linked to human consciousness and experience, and therefore a subjective phenomenon. This subjectivity can be categorized into three types: contractual dignity, abstract dignity, and imaginary

dignity. Upon exploration, it becomes evident that human dignity aligns most closely with contractual dignity.

Contractual Dignity

Contractual dignity represents a type of subjective existence that lacks a true connection with objective realities. The thoughts and agreements among individuals establish this form of dignity. As societal agreements evolve, so does the definition of human dignity. This variability highlights the contractual nature of dignity, as different societies and cultures may redefine it over time, sometimes creating significant changes in its interpretation.

Abstract Dignity

While some scholars argue that human dignity can be viewed as an abstract existence - stable and unchangeable, derived from an external reality - this perspective still maintains a subjective foundation. Abstract dignity is perceived consistently across different minds, yet it is rooted in the characteristics of human beings as a species. Thus, while it may appear stable, it is still contingent upon human thought and experience.

Imaginary Dignity

In contrast, imaginary dignity is characterized by a lack of genuine connection to external realities. This form of dignity is ineffective and

unproductive, as it exists solely within the realm of illusion or delusion. Therefore, it is not considered a valid form of dignity in philosophical discourse.

In conclusion, the analysis supports the view that human dignity is a subjective construct, primarily understood as contractual dignity, shaped by societal agreements and human thought. This understanding emphasizes the dynamic and evolving nature of dignity, reinforcing its dependence on human consciousness, bringing it closer to an objective reality.

Discussion

The first philosophical question that we must answer after accepting the existence of dignity for humans is whether it is subjective or objective. In the following sections, we will examine the various aspects of this question.

The Objective or Subjective Existence of Dignity

Some entities exist outside of human thought and mind; they have their own independent existence and are detached from the thoughts of external beings. The existence or non-existence of humans and their thoughts has no impact on the existence of these external entities, which can be material or non-material. A material entity is like a pen in our hand or the sun above our head, while an instance of a non-material entity is the life of living beings.

These entities exist independently, regardless of whether people contemplate them or not; they exist outside and beyond human beings.

Claiming external existence for human dignity requires acknowledging its existence as a material or non-material entity, separate from the human mind. So far, human dignity has not been perceived in this manner and no one has claimed that each person, in addition to their own existence, has material or non-material dignity that can accompany them always or occasionally (7). Even if this were the case, another form of validation or contract would be needed to confirm the connection between a person and their dignity. The link between such external dignity and each person would still be contingent on thoughts, and thinking and is a subjective existence. As the essence of human dignity is a concept continuously associated with humans, and not something detached and disconnected from them, considering dignity to be separate from humans is in contradiction with assigning dignity to them. For this reason, all researchers agree that human dignity is not separate from humans and does not have a subjective existence, and it is through human thought that it finds existence.

Subjective existence can be divided into three categories: contractual dignity, imaginary dignity

and abstract dignity (8). We will go on to explore the definition of these types of existence below and determine which type of existence is congruous with the characteristics of human dignity.

Types of Subjective Existence

1. Contractual Dignity

This type of existence is not directly connected to objective existences, but is the thought that links the two. Therefore, the scholar can transform contractual existence through his thoughts (9). The entire existence of a contract depends on the thoughts of a scholar or on the contract between scholars (10). It is similar to the price of a commodity, which increases in scarcity and decreases when abundant, or like the color red, which, based solely on a social agreement, is considered a stop sign in traffic signals, but may be seen as a signal to drive in a different agreement.

Some consider human dignity to be of a contractual nature (11 - 14). From this perspective, it will be dependent on the superior qualities that the society has agreed upon for each individual, or the qualities that people assign to themselves. Now, every time people make new agreements, human dignity will be redefined. As we have observed over time and in various societies, scholars have often changed their definitions of human dignity, and sometimes even the societal norms of dignity. As a result, the

most wicked individuals have come to be considered either equal or sometimes even superior to the most virtuous ones (15). This instability in people's agreements over the criteria, extent and distribution of human dignity may point to the contractual nature of this notion and its lack of objective existence.

2. Imaginary Dignity

Due to its lack of true and stable connection with the external world, imaginary or illusory existence falls into the category of contractual existences that are unattached or incongruent with reality and other entities. Therefore, it is ineffective and unproductive, and is different from contractual existences that are of a conscious nature. It is even possible to identify yet another category within this classification, one that differentiates illusions (which have no connection with the external world) from delusions (which have an incongruent connection with reality). However, these categorizations are more psychological than philosophical (16), and it is evident that no one considers dignity to be associated with either illusions or delusions.

3. Abstract Dignity

Abstract existences belong in the realm of the human mind and are therefore subjective, but unlike contractual existences, they do not change in

different people's minds and with new agreements (17). The reason for this stability and non-change is that they are derived from an external existence. For example, objects are evaluated using concepts such as big or small and top or bottom, or based on whether they are integrated or in several pieces. Everyone can distinguish between these things, even though these features do not exist externally and are formed in our minds. However, such characteristics are stable and do not change with the transformation of our mind. These concepts are truly in an unbreakable connection with external and objective entities and are derived from them, so they are not merely ideas. For this reason, everyone, everywhere and at any time, perceives these characteristics in the same way. But is unity something that exists outside the single and unified object? The answer is a definitely no, since it is an attribute that is created in our mind with regard to an object, but our mind cannot associate unity with an object that is not integrated. Therefore, even though unity is created by our mind, it is derived from an external reality and an objective entity that is also a creation of our mind. Such concepts are called abstract: their existence is subjective, but they have an unbreakable link with objective entities and are unchangeable. Scholars who believe human dignity is a stable, inherent and

unchangeable presupposition usually consider it an abstract and subjective existence, but also think the origin of its abstraction to be the human species

since it brings such dignity to mind (18). A summary of the various types of existence in relation to human dignity is presented in Figure 1.

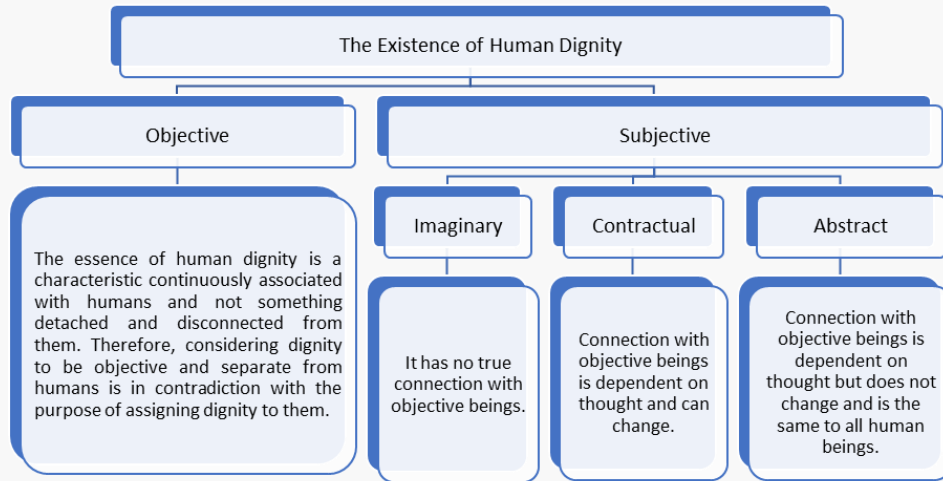


Figure 1. Summary of different types of existence in relation to human dignity

Thus far we have confirmed that human dignity does exist and is of a subjective nature. With regard to its specific type of subjective existence, some scholars believe that it is an abstract concept and some think that it is contractual. In the following section we will explore the question of which it is.

Is Human Dignity a Contract or an Abstract?

To provide a nuanced answer to this question, we need to delve into deep analyses. Both these categories of existence are purely subjective. The difference is that in the contractual type, there is no true and unbreakable link between humans and dignity, while in the abstract type, a true, unchangeable and unbreakable link connects

humans to dignity. Therefore, in order to consider dignity as an abstract, the existence of this connection must be proven, and to prove the existence of anything, its possibility must first be investigated.

The Possibility of Abstract Dignity

The question that needs to be answered here is whether dignity belongs in the field of existence or non-existence, or in the field of obligations and prohibitions? The fundamental debate regarding the dignity of any being is what actions should be performed in relation to that being, and what actions are prohibited and must not be performed.

Can these obligations and prohibitions be derived from existence or non-existence?

Generally speaking, obligations and prohibitions can be categorized into two groups: philosophical or evolutionary, and value-based or legislative.

1) Philosophical Obligations and Prohibitions

There is a principle in Islamic philosophy that states: "Something that is not due does not exist" (19). This means that nothing can exist until its existence is obligatory. Therefore, all entities that are needed in this world are called obligatory or required and definitely exist, and those entities that do not exist are prohibited or impossible. Those who have accepted this principle believe that there is no obligation or prohibition beyond existence and non-existence and they are the exact same thing as a result of mental abstraction.

Causal Obligations and Prohibitions

A sub-division of philosophical obligations and prohibitions, the causal type is derived from existence and non-existence. Causal obligations and prohibitions are the result of a chain of occurrences that require an extra step, that is, inference, and the abstractions and reasonings happen in the same way in the minds of all wise people (20).

Imagine that objects "A" and "B" are shown to a person at first, and then objects "B" and "C". That

person evaluates the three objects through their senses and compares the size of "A" to "B" and "B" to "C." Using the sense of sight, a person is able to abstract that object A is bigger than B, and object B is bigger than C. However, the comparison of the size of "A" to "C" is not based on perception or abstraction, but is deduced from previously established concepts. This process of thought is universal and genuine.

Therefore, even if causal obligations and prohibitions are not directly abstracted from existence or non-existence, they arise from a special abstraction that everyone finds to be correct based on their ability to reason. Realizing the cause after seeing the effect is the result of a rational reasoning after abstraction. Abstraction and reasoning are considered intellectual processes because it is intellect that creates abstract concepts from human external perceptions and produces inferential and rational results. It is for this reason that the abstractions and conclusions of all people are similar, and arguments are based on them.

David Hume believes that no obligation or prohibition, even causality, can be derived from existence and non-existence. This belief leads Hume to consider existence as devoid of any causal relationship (21, 22).

Even though obligations and prohibitions are not directly abstracted from existence and non-existence, they are born from what is abstracted as a result of reasoning in the human mind and carry the whole structure of wisdom. Hume believed that the abstraction of causal obligations and prohibitions from existence and non-existence is not accepted. Contrary to what Hume says, however, it is correct and valid to derive causal obligations and prohibitions from existence and non-existence. On the other hand, since the structure of the thought is the same in everyone, it is possible to refer to this set of conclusions in reasoning in an obvious way.

2) Value-Based Obligations and Prohibitions

Value-based "obligations" and "prohibitions" are not self-evident or structural inferences and conclusions. Clearly, these values, even in their essence, vary in intensity among individuals, times

and places, and cannot be universally relied upon in arguments. Although sometimes these values become the subject of arguments in a theoretical (non-self-evident) manner, they may also fall under the realm of aesthetics and are therefore not arguable.

The Chain of Obligations and Prohibitions

The chain of reaching obligations and prohibitions from existence and non-existence is depicted in Figure 2. In causal values, this chain is completed, and in philosophical obligations and prohibitions, it develops without inference or reasoning. In aesthetic valuation, the three components of abstraction, inference and reasoning are lost and replaced by intuitive perception. For this reason, the result is outside the realm of the self-evident and theoretical, and cannot be used for reasoning, even though it can be described in general terms.

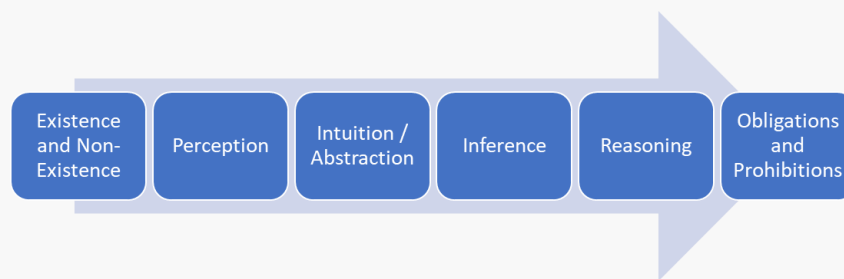


Figure 2. The chain of reaching obligations and prohibitions from existence and non-existence

Human dignity is a subject that has been viewed in various and sometimes contradictory ways throughout history and in different societies, and its

obligations and prohibitions are not amenable to philosophical deductions from human existence; therefore, we can automatically assume that it is not

an abstract concept. No instructions, obligations and prohibitions regarding human beings can be abstracted and deduced from their sheer existence, and people, simply by being human and existing, do not infer those human beings should be respected and have dignity and rights beyond other creatures. Intellect and wisdom can direct us to see that humans exist and help us understand the nature of a human being. But dignity, like other value-based concepts that speak about our moral obligations, prohibitions and behaviors, cannot be abstracted and deduced from the existence of humans. In short, it is not possible to determine a value for humans solely based on their existence or the nature of a human being, as value-based concepts are not developed from notions related to existence (23).

Being a value-based concept, dignity can only be placed in the category of aesthetic values, and its existence is not abstracted but rather a matter of contract. Being contract-based means that dignity is not a tangible entity in things, and the differences in its evaluation are precisely why there are various perspectives on dignity in different schools of thought. Dignity emerges from an external and mental context that is attributed to its possessor. Here, some fundamental questions are also raised,

one of which is: If human dignity is a contract, who is the granter of this contract?

The Granter of Human Dignity

If we accept human dignity to be contract-based, we may wonder who it has been granted by. Is it a pact established among humans or is it derived from something outside of humanity? It is evident that humans have always evaluated human dignity. However, evaluation and valuation are different from granting and endowing value, and we need to determine who the giver and who the recipient of dignity is.

1. Self-Granting Dignity

No one can grant value to themselves. Any certificate of contract is only valid when someone else, who has at least that amount of credit, signs and verifies it. No one can bestow value upon themselves. When humans claim superiority over all other beings, asserting ownership and dominion over them, it raises not only obvious conflicts of interest, but also shows arrogance and self-aggrandizement. If this is the case, then every country and society will define their own value system, considering their dignity superior to others, and base their actions upon it. On the other hand, in any historical era, it may be plausible for people to define their desired and varied forms of dignity. Every individual or family can have their own

special perspective, which, despite potential conflicts of interest, should be considered valid and not be criticized. In such a scenario, discussions about human dignity would become mere delusions.

2. Natural Dignity

Nature itself does not possess tangible thoughts and concepts to act as a granter or evaluator of human dignity. Moreover, nature would have to be more dignified than humans in order to qualify as the granter of dignity.

3. Divine Dignity

Contract-based dignity can only be granted upon humans and other beings by an intellect that transcends both. Dignity sometimes begins with an awareness beyond all dignitaries, which religions refer to as God. Human dignity itself is a clear sign of God's existence.

Materialism and Dignity

Hume's argument, although initially aimed to disarm the philosophical claims of religions, ultimately amounted to declaring the inadequacy and failure of materialistic ideologies in presenting any valid set of values (24 - 26). If there is no God, then all concepts of value and all obligations and prohibitions are merely invalid contracts lacking an accepted granter. Even if we set aside the question of legitimacy of people granting these contracts,

the contracts are still time-bound, space-bound and unstable.

No materialistic school can dictate an order for human life based solely on their worldview because obligations and prohibitions cannot be derived from existence and non-existence. Similarly, human dignity is a value-based concept that cannot be derived from materialistic philosophies. Therefore, in materialistic schools, claiming dignity for anything is an obvious violation and contradiction of their ideologies.

Intuition or Perception of Dignity

As mentioned earlier, dignity is something we find within ourselves. Suhrawardy believes dignity to be more of an internal perception, but Avicenna sees it as the result of logical proof and reasoning (27). Now does this intuitive perception serve as evidence for the abstraction and universality of dignity? The answer is that intuition is a form of perception; it is based on sensation and perception, contrary to abstraction, which is based on reason. Common people see intuition as the sixth sense, an indication that they classify intuition in the category of senses. For this reason, intuition can be attributed to all three categories of existence. The root of the intuitive perception of such contracts is their link to the granter (ontological presence). For this reason, we cannot understand others' contracts

as they do not have a connection with us through intuition or perception.

Dignity in Actuality and Potentiality

"Potentiality and actuality" is a subject of epistemology. From our perspective, actualities are facts, and potentialities are contracts. If dignity were an abstract concept, then each "actuality" that possesses dignity would only have the capability to receive dignity in its potentiality state, not the actual dignity itself. However, if we consider dignity to be contract-based, then it can also be attributed, to some extent, to entities in the potentiality state, and it is possible for the criterion of dignity in an "actuality" to be the criterion of dignity in the "potentiality" state. Therefore, proving dignity at the actuality stage, which is not yet attained and is a potential in humans (such as the dignity of a human fetus) indicates the contract-based nature of dignity; otherwise, what is derived from potentiality will not be derived from actuality.

The Permanence of Contract-Based Dignity

Although human dignity is considered contract-based, from this perspective, its permanence and immutability become clear. Contracts and the process of their being granted are inherently stable, and they will always remain stable. Therefore, although human dignity may be contract-based, it is permanent and remains unaffected by change.

This is why dignity is assessed to be innate and inherent, even though its intuitive and perceptual nature allows room for differences in its perception.

Wisdom and Dignity

If human dignity is a matter of contract and can only be valid in the presence of God and within religions, what would be the benefit and significance of rational discourse, since such inquiries are based on religious texts? The answer is that acceptance of the principles of faith is also based on wisdom, and creatures that lack wisdom cannot adhere to religious regulations. Hence, arguments derived from wisdom cannot be ignored in religion, and if religious statements are not rational, they are not acceptable. Religions rely on the authority of wisdom in theological discussions and cannot contradict it. Wisdom urges people to accept the foundations of religions, and accepting religions without wisdom is unreasonable. Therefore, although we emphasize the need for a divine source for granting the contract of human dignity, we will not close our eyes to examining and evaluating it.

Conclusion

In this study, we investigated the existence or non-existence of dignity in humans. Our findings

showed that even if an individual does not acknowledge superiority or dignity for themselves or humanity as a whole, others' belief in human dignity necessitates its acceptance as a subjective existence in their minds. The discussion clarified that dignity is a subjective existence and explored its various forms, including abstract, contractual and imaginary existence. Given that the essence and purpose of dignity is to provide guidelines for human behavior, an examination of how obligations and prohibitions relate to the existence or non-existence of beings was conducted. It was determined that human existence, through abstraction, inference and reasoning alone, does not yield behavioral instructions or a framework of obligations and prohibitions; thus, human dignity is classified as a contractual rather than an abstract concept. This raises the question of who establishes

this contract and confers dignity upon humanity. Various possibilities were considered, including individuals themselves, nature and God, ultimately concluding that God is the source of this dignity. The contractual nature of dignity, granted by God, ensures its constancy and stability across time and space for all human beings.

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Conflict of Interests

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