Dissecting Bioethics

“Dissecting Bioethics,” edited by Tuija Takala and Matti Häyry, welcomes contributions on the conceptual and theoretical dimensions of bioethics.

The section is dedicated to the idea that words defined by bioethicists and others should not be allowed to imprison people’s actual concerns, emotions, and thoughts. Papers that expose the many meanings of a concept, describe the different readings of a moral doctrine, or provide an alternative angle to seemingly self-evident issues are therefore particularly appreciated.

The themes covered in the section so far include dignity, naturalness, public interest, community, disability, autonomy, parity of reasoning, symbolic appeals, and toleration.

All submitted papers are peer reviewed. To submit a paper or to discuss a suitable topic, contact Tuija Takala at tuija.takala@helsinki.fi.

Dignity: Two Riddles and Four Concepts

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Two Dignity Riddles

I M A G I N E a dignified death . . . your own. Where are you? Who is with you? Do you fall asleep without waking up? If you live in a Western, industrialized society, your thoughts may quickly turn to a particular type of death. For instance, the vision of yourself lying in bed with a debilitating illness, unable to eat by yourself, unable to wash yourself or go to the bathroom, incontinent or connected to urinary tubes, tended by strangers in a hospital, potentially demented, puzzled, lonely, unable to comprehend where you are and in serious pain.

Observations of lonely, painful, institutionalized dying and the fear thereof have sparked Death with Dignity movements around the world, organizations created to show “courage and compassion in an area of deep concern to us all—the making of wise and deliberate choices at the end of life,” in other words, the choice to die from one’s own or a physician’s hand. For many, death with dignity means dying without excruciating pain, without relatives having to witness the achingly disintegration of their loved ones, and without the embarrassment of needing help for the most basic human functions. To achieve their aims of legalizing physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia, Death with Dignity organizations appeal almost exclusively to the concept of dignity, as the names of organizations throughout the world testify. But, surprisingly, so do their opponents, as the following three quotes show:

[T]o kill an innocent human life, whether one’s own or another’s, even
for the sake of avoiding terrible su-
ferring, is intrinsically immoral. Eu-
thanasia and suicide are contrary to the
intrinsic dignity of human persons.4

This sense of the ... dignity of all
human life has been influential in
maintaining traditional western pro-
hibitions against abortion, suicide, eu-
thanasia, and hazardous medical
experimentation on human subjects.5

We want our deaths to be free from
pain, mess, embarrassment. But there
is a long Christian tradition of “holy
death,” that is, of allowing even a
hard death to be a witness to God’s
grace. We’re nowhere invited to ring
down the curtain early to preserve
our pride. How dignified did Jesus
look on the way to the cross? Spat-
tered with blood and spit, despised
and rejected, he carried his own in-
strument of torture up a hill. Was this
a death with dignity? Ironically, it was.6

Dignity forbids suicide or euthana-
sia according to the above three au-
thors, whereas it demands suicide or
euthanasia according to Death with
Dignity organizations. This is our first
dignity riddle. Two opposing groups7
discussing the same topic both using
the concept of dignity to support their
positions! How can this be possible?

Imagine a dignified person.... Whom do you see? Perhaps
Nelson Mandela, who kept his poise
and self-respect during 26 years of
imprisonment? Or Nobel Peace Laure-
ate Aung San Suu Kyi, who spent 11
of the past 18 years in some form of
detention in Burma without losing her
serenity? Or Antigone, daughter of
Oedipus, who combined heroic cour-
age with gentle care for her father and
brother? Whatever you see, it is un-
likely to be a mass murderer, a tor-
turer, a rapist, or a pedophile. In
general, one associates dignity with
certain character dispositions that pre-
vent evil behavior. For instance, ration-
al self-control, composure, calmness,
but also the power of self-assertion
and belief in one’s own worth. Dig-
nity is a quality that generates respect
and even awe among those who ob-
serve it.8 Yet, if dignity is restricted to
persons who generate awe in observ-
ers, how can one explain its appear-
ance in numerous national constitutions
and many ethical guidelines? “Human
dignity is inviolable” starts the Ger-
man constitution, and the Universal
Declaration of Human Rights bases
freedom, justice, and peace on “the
recognition of the inherent dignity . . .
of all members of the human family.”

If all human beings have inherent dig-
nity, the same would apply to tor-
turers and rapists, and there is no
difference—in this respect—between
Mother Theresa and Adolf Hitler. So
why, when asked to imagine persons
with dignity, do we name specific peo-
ple for whom we feel awe? Why do we
only think of some people when asked
about dignity? Doesn’t this imply that
one can either lose or never possess it?
This is our second dignity riddle.

Is Dignity a Useless Concept?
Ruth Macklin contended that “dignity
is a useless concept.”9 Franz Josef Wetz
agreed and expressed more flourish-
ingly that “dignity is an entry from
the old-European grand vocabulary,
which not unlike drugs tricks the ad-
dict into believing in fantastic fake
solutions for deep conflicts.”10 Helga
Kuhse argued that “the notion of
human dignity plays a very dubious
role in contemporary bioethical dis-
course.... [It] has a tendency to stifle
argument and debate and encourages
the drawing of moral boundaries in
the wrong places.”11 Macklin’s, Wetz’s,
and Kuhse’s modern voices echo older
warnings by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), for whom dignity was going to develop into the shibboleth of all thoughtless philosophers, a word for an idea that cannot be thought, such as the highest number or the largest space. The above authors suggest that dignity is to be purged from ethical discourse. And, indeed, if the concept is so vague that it can be used to defend opposing positions, so it should. However, all four address their concerns to the Kantian concept only, without distinguishing it from others. By introducing four different concepts and by shedding light on the two posed dignity riddles, I intend to show that there is hope for dignity yet. As Matti Häyry put it, if nobody monopolizes the term, the recognition that dignity is multifaceted can lead to constructive dialogue between people and cultures.

Four Concepts of Dignity

Kantian Dignity
The most prominent Western understanding of dignity goes back to Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who believed he could prove the existence of a supreme law of morality and its link to human dignity. Due to the complexity of his thought, Kant is one of the most difficult philosophers to abridge. Still, in order to understand Kantian dignity, the main elements of his ethical theory need to be outlined very briefly. Kant started his explorations into ethics from moral common sense, which he saw captured in the following sentence:

It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will.

Based on this observation, Kant infers that morality is intimately linked with duty. How does he make this inference? For Kant, God is the only being who can only act morally. Animals, on the other hand, cannot act morally at all. Human beings belong to neither category as they can act morally and immorally. Based on his premise that only a good will is intrinsically good, Kant states that the concept of “duty” is included in the concept of the “good will.” The good will needs to be directed at something and this can only be the moral good. It would not be a good will if it were directed at anything else. Hence, to distinguish oneself from animals one has to strive for the moral good, that is, one has a duty to be moral.

The ability to separate good and bad depends on the human faculty of reason. Only because human beings are rational is it possible for them to decide between morally right and wrong. And now comes Kant’s move to human dignity! Every individual rational being is an end in itself, somebody with life plans. Such a being should not be bought by others like commercial goods and used for their own purposes. Human beings have intrinsic worth, not a price for which they can be acquired. They have absolute inner worth (absoluten innern Wert). Or as Kant scholars often put it, human beings have dignity because of their “rational nature in its capacity to be morally self-legislative.”

The term that has been coined for this type of dignity is gift or dowry dignity, dignity one has intrinsically, without ever being able to lose it. Kant alludes to this point when he says, “I cannot deny all respect even to a vicious man.” What does it mean if somebody has dignity in the Kantian sense? According to Kant, a person with dignity has rights, “an absolute inner worth by which he extorts (abnütigen) respect for himself from all other rational be-
ings in the world.” Thus right holders must not be instrumentalized by other human beings without their reasonable consent or, in Kant’s own words, act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.24

This statement of Kant’s is also known as the Formula of Humanity.25 Based on the above, Kantian dignity could be defined as follows: “Dignity is a property of all rational beings,”26 which gives the possessor the right never to be treated simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” However, international laws and national constitutions have stressed the inviolability of human dignity and expanded its scope to include all human beings. The modern Kantian-inspired definition of dignity would therefore be

Dignity is an inviolable property of all human beings, which gives the possessor the right never to be treated simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.

**Aristocratic Dignity**

The Latin term dignitas links directly to ornament, distinction, or glory.27 When one talked about dignity in pre-modern times, one referred to stratified societies where some people were valued higher than others. The German word Würdenträger [carrier of dignity] is a clear indication of such traditions. Carriers of dignity were invested with secular or religious positions of high rank, and they behaved in a dignified way when they acted in accordance with this position. Often it was assumed that God invested carriers of dignity with their rank or that it was handed down through noble families. Kings, popes, or other nobles would be regarded as dignified if their conduct befitted those of higher rank.28 Thus, dignity was restricted to an infinitesimally small number of human beings and strongly associated with a position. A suitable term for this type of dignity would be aristocratic dignity.29 And one could define it as follows:

Dignity is the outwardly displayed quality of a human being who acts in accordance with her superior rank and position.

**Comportment Dignity**

Aristocratic dignity links dignity to outward displays of actions. If somebody wears a heavy silk gown, carries a sceptre, and walks in front of a large number of state officials with an upright posture at slow pace, we can assume that he has a position of superior rank. Yet, by describing a king who walks in front of his members of court, I just combined two elements of dignity, which can be separated: the dignity when acting in accordance with superior rank and position and the dignity of appropriate and seemly comportment. Let us look at two literature quotes to illustrate the point.

Her gloves were not merely well-worn but battered, Rasmichin noticed, and yet this evident poverty gave the ladies an air of dignity, which can be found in people who know how to wear shabby clothes. Razumihin looked reverently at Dunetschka . . . . “The queen who mended her stockings in prison,” he thought quietly, “must have looked like a queen and even more royal than at sumptuous banquets and receptions!” (Fjodor Dostojewski, Crime and Punishment,30 emphasis added)

The two ladies Dostojewski describes cannot claim superior rank or
position; otherwise they would not be so poor. Dostojewski wrote *Crime and Punishment* five decades before the rule of the Tsars ended. Under this regime, those of noble birth or in superior state positions would not have worn battered gloves. Yet, Dostojewski compares one of the ladies with a queen in prison, somebody who has queenly comportment despite being forced by circumstances beyond her control to mend her own stockings. This example gives us the outward display of aristocratic dignity, namely noble comportment, but in two ladies who contemporaries in Russia would have called of inferior social rank.

Certain outward signs of dignified behavior are expected in most societies from most human beings. Let us look at a second literature quote.

He had not slept a wink.... His lips curled in an involuntary sneer as he looked around the train carriage and saw how many of the passengers were already... either dozing, or napping, or nodding off, or snoozing, or snatching forty winks, their mouths hanging stupidly open, their heads lolling, their eyelids drooping heavily. Did these people have no sense of dignity, no self-respect? (Jonathan Coe: *The House of Sleep*, emphasis added)

Societies have myriad rules about dignified comportment, and the protagonist in Coe’s novel strongly believes that sleeping in public with one’s mouth open and head lolling violates one of them. In the same way as Coe’s protagonist believes it is undignified to snooze on a train, it could appear undignified to tell a rude joke at an official dinner with one’s mouth full, to giggle at an obituary, to kiss one’s partner in a Catholic church (unless he is the groom), to spit onto the street, to undress or relieve oneself in public, and so forth. This type of dignity, which we could name comportment dignity, can be defined as follows:

Dignity is the outwardly displayed quality of a human being who acts in accordance with society’s expectations of well-mannered demeanor and bearing.

**Meritorious Dignity**

Aristotle did not mention dignity in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. Yet two attributions to Aristotle are often quoted.

- Dignity does not consist in possessing honors, but in deserving them.
- The ideal man bears the accidents of life with dignity... making the best of circumstances.

In the first quote, Aristotle contrasts two perceptions of possible dignity. First, one is dignified if one possesses honors. Second, one is dignified if one deserves to possess those honors. The quote indicates that one can appear to have dignity (if one possesses honors) without deserving it. The mere appearance of dignity through the possessions of honors is reminiscent of the aristocratic view on dignity. As noted previously, the Latin term *dignitas* links directly to ornament, distinction, or glory. Ornament in particular refers to something that can be displayed without the equivalent merit or desert. This is not dignity for Aristotle. Dignity consists in deserving not displaying honors, in other words, being honorable. Honorable is, of course, another word for being morally praiseworthy, principled, respectable, upright, admirable as my thesaurus assures me. Hence, dignity is linked to the cardinal virtues for Aristotle. To be morally praiseworthy, principled, and admirable means to have a reliable character disposition toward courage, justice, wis-
dom, and temperance, given Aristotle’s belief in the unity of the virtues.

Does the second quote point us in a similar direction? “The ideal man bears the accidents of life with dignity . . . making the best of circumstances.” What the ideal man (or woman) is bearing are not happy accidents of life, but those involving pain and suffering; otherwise they would not have to be borne. This quote therefore points toward a quality that human beings need when their life is difficult, when circumstances cause anguish, distress, and hurt rather than joy and warmth and peacefulness. Which qualities would you wish your friends had when they suddenly encountered a serious misfortune? Would these not be the cardinal virtues as well as a sense of self-worth? It most definitely cannot be outer ornaments and honors; neither can it be intrinsic worth that everybody possesses, because Aristotle spoke of the “ideal” man and not of “every” man. To cope with life’s accidents, one needs inner strength, not outer recognition. For instance, a friend of my parents just died in a hospital very suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of 60. In Germany, with a female life expectancy of 82, this is regarded as too young to die, and it is therefore considered a serious misfortune. What would I wish the grieving husband? I would wish that he can bear this misfortune with courage, the courage necessary to get through serious pain and suffering. I would wish that he has temperance and patience and does not make it his life’s purpose to try to find desperately somebody whom he could blame. I would also wish that he has the wisdom to see that all life ends and that this end is beyond our control. I would wish him a sense of self-worth, so that he does not think his life ends with his wife’s. And I would wish him a sense of justice in his dealings with children and grandchildren. They deserve his support. All the cardinal virtues as well as a sense of self-worth are required to bear the accidents of life, and Aristotle uses one word to cover them, namely dignity. One could arguably contend that dignity is a virtue (a reliable character disposition). In fact, it is not an individual virtue, but a keynote to the cardinal virtues. Those who possess temperance, courage, and justice and are guided by wisdom will display dignity in its most perfect instantiation.

Based on these considerations, meritorious dignity could be defined as follows:

Dignity is a virtue, which subsumes the four cardinal virtues and one’s sense of self-worth.

Dignity Riddles Tackled

Let us return to the first dignity riddle (defending opposing views on physician-assisted suicide with the same concept). Death with Dignity organizations advocate the option of an accelerated death for competent adults who are “suffering unbearably from incurable illness.” Acceleration of death aims at mercifully releasing a person from having to go through the final stages of a terminal illness. A death with dignity is equated with a death in peace and without suffering. If one sees peace as a state of harmony, the following three scenarios seem to militate most strongly against a peaceful death in the healthcare setting. In 2002, Diane Pretty died in the United Kingdom from motor neuron disease. She had unsuccessfully campaigned for her right to assisted suicide, as she feared the choking and asphyxia in the final stage of her disease. According to her husband, “Diane had to go through the one thing she had foreseen.
and was most afraid of—and there
was nothing I could do to help.” 40
In 1995, a prison inmate in Washington,
D.C., was left in soiled bedding for
10 days, unable to walk to the lavi-
tory, incontinent, and dying from AIDS.
Because of the stench in his cell, no
medical staff would treat him. He fi-
nally died tied to a wheelchair with a
urine-stained sheet. 41 Peter Allmark re-
calls a terminal lung cancer patient
who was frequently in such severe
pain that he screamed in his U.K. hos-
pital where pain control was badly
managed and morphine only given in
inadequate amounts and at low fre-
quencies. 42 According to these three
examples, extreme anxiety, deep em-
arrassment, and unbearable pain mil-
itate against a peaceful death in the
medical setting. And it is those scenar-
ios that lead to fears about loss of
dignity. 43

A group of eminent philosophers
(Dworkin, Nagel, Nozick, Rawls, Scan-
lon, and Jarvis Thomson) joined Death
with Dignity organizations in their ad-
vocacy work and published the follow-
ing plea in the New York Times Book
Review: “Most of us see death . . . as
the final act of life’s drama, and we
want that last act to reflect our own
convictions, those we have tried to
live by, not the convictions of others
forced on us in our most vulnerable
moment.” 44

Equipped with our four definitions
of dignity, we can say about the first
riddle that unbearable pain, embarrass-
ment, and anxiety have no relevance for
Kantian-inspired, inviolable dignity.
Such intrinsic dignity cannot be lost and
is not available in degrees. Those under
extreme pain, embarrassment, and anx-
xiety have no less or no more dignity than
the more fortunate. This is why the
Christian authors cited above use the
concept of dignity to oppose physician-
assisted suicide. The purposeful accel-
eration of death of an intrinsically
valuable being is contrary to this being’s
intrinsic dignity and must therefore be
prevented. By contrast, Death with Dign-
ity organizations and the above philoso-
phers seem to align dignity with
effort and values that one has lived by
in the past. They, therefore, appeal to
the meritorious and the comportment
concept of dignity. What one might have
tried all one’s life, to fit into society’s
standards of decent behavior, one might
not be able to achieve in death. And to
have this witnessed by others on whom
one is dependent leads to one’s percep-
tion of lost comportment dignity. At the
same time, unbearable pain and ex-
treme anxiety may undermine the car-
dinal virtue of wisdom and thereby the
associated cardinal virtues of courage,
justice, and temperance. Even though
the most virtuous may achieve dignity
in death despite substantial torments
(one of the Christian authors above cites
Jesus’ death as an example), Death with
Dignity organizations implicitly main-
tain that nobody should have to. If one
does not want to die from foreseeable
asphyxia in the final stages of a termi-
nal disease, one’s meritorious dignity
should not be thus tested. Those groups
who contributed to our first riddle there-
fore use highly different concepts when
they appeal to dignity and speciﬁca-
tion of concepts is important in resolv-
ing the riddle.

Of course, advocates of physician-
assisted suicide such as the above cited
philosophers focus mostly on the re-
spect of autonomy in dying patients.
However, if dignity and respect for
autonomy were equated, Ruth Mack-
lin would be right. Dignity would be
superfluous and could be eliminated
from bioethical discourse. However, I
hope to have shown in the above short
discussion that dignity is more than
respect for autonomy and that an analy-
sis of dignity concepts has the poten-
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tial to illuminate debates as long as one does not expect dignity to have only one, clearly delineated meaning.

In the same way as light can be shed on the first dignity riddle by taking the different meanings of dignity into account, so can the second dignity riddle be moved toward resolution. People like Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi show dignified defiance in their fight for human rights. Dignified defiance is mostly fueled by dignity as a virtue, a strong sense of self-worth, courage, wisdom, temperance, and justice. Yet, it also has an element of comportment dignity, as shown in defiant posture and poise. When asked who shows great dignity, human beings tend to look for dignity as a virtue with the required comportment and not as an intrinsic quality of human beings, which can never be lost (the view expressed by most legislative instruments).

I would not maintain that dignity has necessarily been delineated exhaustively in my four different definitions. Neither would I argue that deep-seated moral dilemmas can easily be resolved by an appeal to any particular notion of dignity. However, as Derek Beyleveld and Roger Brownsword have rightly noted, dignity is a slippery idea, but it is also a very powerful one and the demand to purge it from ethical discourse amounts to whistling in the wind. It is better to try and eliminate some of its slipperiness than to ignore its supremacy in everyday morality and national and international law.

Notes
1. For an umbrella organization, see the World Federation of Right to Die Societies at: http://www.worldrtd.net/ (accessed Jul 14, 2007).
7. A third position will not be outlined here due to lack of space. According to Christopher Coope, “death with dignity” is an unsatisfactory and unclear phrase, which should simply be given up. Coope CM. Death with dignity. Hastings Center Report 1997;27(5):37–8.
12. Schiboleth nowadays stands for a code word for recognition. It is derived from Hebrew and goes back to the Old Testament, Book of Judges, Chapter 12, Verse 5ff, where it says: “And when refugees from Ephraim (came and) said: I would like to cross!, the men from Gilead asked: ‘Are you an ephraimite?’ And when one said no, they asked him: Please say ‘shibboleth’ and if he said ‘sibboleth,’ because he could not pronounce it, they took him and killed him near the river Jordan” (my translation).
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19. For a slightly longer exposition of this claim, see note 33, Schroeder D.


26. According to Kant, dignity is based on rationality and hence restricted to those with rational capacities. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the implications of this view for those whose rational capacities are diminished or nonexistent.


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