Dignity and Enhancement

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Does human enhancement threaten our dignity, as some prominent commentators have asserted? Or could our dignity perhaps be technologically enhanced? After disentangling several different concepts of dignity, this essay focuses on the idea of dignity as a quality, a kind of excellence admitting of degrees and applicable to entities both within and without the human realm. I argue that dignity in this sense interacts with enhancement in complex ways which bring to light some fundamental issues in value theory, and that the effects of any given enhancement must be evaluated in its appropriate empirical context. Yet it is possible that through enhancement we could become better able to appreciate and secure many forms of dignity that are overlooked or missing under current conditions. I also suggest that, in a posthuman world, dignity as a quality could grow in importance as an organizing moral/aesthetic idea.

The Meanings of Dignity and Enhancement

The idea of dignity looms large in the postwar landscape of public ethics. Human dignity has received prominent billing in numerous national and international declarations and constitutions. Like some
successful politicians, the idea of dignity has hit upon a winning formula by combining into one package gravitas, a general feel-good quality, and a profound vagueness that enables all constituencies to declare their allegiance without thereby endorsing any particular course of action.

The idea of dignity, however, also has behind it a rich historical and philosophical tradition. For many of the ancients, dignity was a kind of personal excellence that only a few possessed to any significant degree. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC), a Roman following in the footsteps of the Athenian Stoics, attributed dignity to all men, describing it as both a characteristic (human rationality) and a requirement (to base one’s life on this capacity for rationality).\(^1\)

In Medieval Christianity, the dignity of man was based on the belief that God had created man in His image, allowing man to share some aspects of His divine reason and might.\(^2\) Theologians thought they saw man’s dignity reflected in his upright posture, his free will, his immortal soul, and his location at the center of the universe. This dignity was viewed as an essential characteristic of the human being, possessed by each one of us, independent of social rank and personal excellence.

In the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the intrinsic dignity of man was decoupled from theological assumptions about a divine heritage of the human species. According to Kant (here partly echoing the Stoics), all persons have dignity, a kind of absolute value that is incomparable to any price or instrumental utility.* Kant held that dignity is not a quantitative notion; we cannot have more or less of it. The ground of the dignity of persons is their capacity for reason and moral agency. In order to respect this dignity, we must always treat another person as an end and never solely as a means. In order to avoid affronting our own dignity, we must also refrain from treating ourselves merely as a tool (such as by groveling to others, or selling ourselves into slavery) and from acting in ways that would undermine our rational agency (such as by using intoxicants, or committing suicide).\(^\dagger\)

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* This grounding of dignity in personhood and rational moral agency leaves out small children and some humans with mental retardation. This might be viewed as a major problem (that Kant largely ignored).

\(^\dagger\) The Stoics claimed that we ought to commit suicide if we know that our rational
The term “human dignity” did not feature in any European declarations or constitutions in the 18th and 19th centuries. Dignity is to be found for the first time, albeit more or less in passing, in the German constitution drawn up in 1919 by the Weimar National Assembly, and its next appearance is in the corporate-fascist Portuguese constitution of 1933. Only in the aftermath of the Second World War does the concept’s heyday begin. It appears in about four constitutions in the period 1900–1945 and in more than thirty-seven from 1945 to 1997. Its next appearance is in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and in numerous later declarations, proclamations, and conventions.

Within applied ethics, the concept of dignity has been particularly salient in medical ethics and bioethics. It has been used to express the need for informed consent in medical research on human subjects. It has also been invoked (on both sides of the argument) in debates about end-of-life decisions and assisted euthanasia, and in discussions of organ sales and organ donations, assisted reproduction, human-animal chimeras, pornography, torture, patenting of human genes, and human cloning. Recently, the idea of dignity has also been prominent in discussions of the ethics of human enhancement, where it has mostly been invoked by bioconservative commentators to argue against enhancement.

If we examine the different uses that have been made of the idea of dignity in recent years, we can distinguish several different concepts. Before we can talk intelligibly about “dignity,” we must disambiguate the term. I propose the following taxonomy to regiment our dignity-talk:

**Dignity as a Quality:** A kind of excellence; being worthy, noble, honorable. Persons vary in the degree to which they have this property. A form of Dignity as a Quality can also be ascribed to non-persons. In humans, Dignity as a Quality may be thought of as a virtue or an ideal, which can be cultivated, fostered, respected, admired, promoted, etc. It need not, however, be identified with moral virtue or with excellence in general.

* For Aristotle, excellence and virtue went together; his term for this was *to kalon*, the noble. Earlier, however, in what we might call “Homeric ethics,” there was not
Human Dignity (Menschenwürde): The ground upon which—according to some philosophers—rests the full moral status of human beings. It is often assumed that at least all normal human persons have the same level of human dignity. There is some disagreement about what precisely human dignity consists in, and this is reflected in disagreements about which individuals have human dignity: Only persons (as Kant maintained)? Or all human individuals with a developed nervous system who are not brain-dead? Or fetuses in the womb as well? Might some nonhuman primates also have this kind of dignity?6

Two other related ideas are:

Human Rights: A set of inalienable rights possessed by all beings that have full moral status. One might hold that human dignity is the ground for full moral status. Human rights can be violated or respected. We might have a strict duty not to violate human rights, and an imperfect duty to promote respect for human rights.

(Dignity as) Social Status: A relational property of individuals, admitting of gradation. Multiple status systems may exist in a given society. Dignity as Social Status is a widely desired prudential good. Our reasons for seeking social status are not distinctly moral, but the standards and conditions that determine the allocation of social status are topics for ethical critique. Some social status is earned, but traditionally it was also thought that some individuals have a special intrinsic Dignity as Social Status, such as an aristocrat or a Brahmin.∗ Even though the Latin root word (dignitas) originally referred to a social status commanding respect, it might be best to refer to this property simply as Social Status to forestall confusion, reserving the word “dignity” for other uses.

Each of these concepts is relevant to ethics, but in different ways.†

such a close identification of virtue with honor or excellence. (I’m grateful to Guy Kahane for this point.)

∗ In respect of referring to a property partly acquired and partly inherent, the original concept of Dignity as Social Status might be thought of as intermediary between the concept of Dignity as a Quality and the concept of Human Dignity.

† See also Lennart Nordenfelt, “The Varieties of Dignity,” Health Care Analysis 12 (2004): 69-81, for discussion of different types of dignity. Three of his dignity-concepts can be roughly mapped onto Dignity as a Quality, Human Dignity, and Dignity as Social Status. In addition, Nordenfelt also discusses a notion of Dignity of Identity, “the dignity we attach to ourselves as integrated and autonomous per-
In this paper, I shall focus on Dignity as a Quality and the ways in which this concept interacts with that of human enhancement. Before discussing its relations to enhancement, we shall need a richer characterization of Dignity as a Quality. I will draw on the sensitive linguistic and phenomenological analysis provided by Aurel Kolnai.*

On the idea of Dignity as a Quality of that which is dignified, Kolnai notes:

Dignity means Worth or Worthiness in some “absolute,” autonomized and objectivized, as it were “featural” sense…. [Yet it] has descriptive content…. It is, in this respect, on a par with any of the basic moral virtues such as justice, truthfulness, benevolence, chastity, courage, etc., including even integrity or conscientiousness, none of which is synonymous with Moral Goodness or Virtue as such, and each of which, notwithstanding its possible built-in reference to Morality (and moral evaluation) as such, is susceptible to contentual description.8

On this understanding, Dignity as a Quality is a thick moral concept: it contains both descriptive and evaluative components, and may not be in any simple way reducible to more basic moral predicates. Dignity as a Quality also has certain aesthetic overtones. The
term might have its own unique contribution to make to our normative vocabulary, but it should not be identified with Morality. If possessing Dignity as a Quality is a virtue, it is one out of many. The concept is hardly a promising candidate for the central and pivotal role in an ethical system that the idea of Human Dignity plays in Kantian philosophy and in some international declarations.

We can proceed further by describing the appropriate responses to Dignity as a Quality. These seem to incorporate both aesthetic and moral elements. According to Kolnai, the term subtly connotes the idea of verticality, albeit tempered by also connoting a certain idea of reciprocity:

Can we attempt at all to assign, to adumbrate at least, a distinctive response to Dignity (or “the dignified”)? Whatever such a response might be, it must bear a close resemblance to our devoted and admiring appreciation of beauty (its “high” forms at any rate) on the one hand, to our reverent approval of moral goodness (and admiration, say, for heroic virtue) on the other. Dignity commands empathic respect, a reverential mode of response, an “upward-looking” type of the pro attitude: a “bowing” gesture if I may so call it.

Next, let us consider what features call for such responses. What characteristics are typically dignified? While not claiming to produce an exhaustive list, Kolnai suggests the following:

First—the qualities of composure, calmness, restraint, reserve, and emotions or passions subdued and securely controlled without being negated or dissolved. Secondly—the qualities of distinctness, delimitation, and distance; of something that conveys the idea of being intangible, invulnerable, inaccessible to destructive or corruptive or subversive interference. Thirdly, in consonance therewith, Dignity also tends to connote the features of self-contained serenity, of a certain inward and toned-down but yet translucent and perceptible power of self-assertion. With its firm stance and

* The related concept of to kalon, however, does have such a foundational role in Aristotle’s ethics.
solid immovability, the dignified quietly defies the world.\textsuperscript{10}

Finally, regarding the bearers of such dignity, Kolnai remarks:

\textit{[T]he predicates…are chiefly applicable to so-called “human beings,” i.e. persons, but again not exclusively so: much dignity in this sense seems to me proper to the Cat, and not a little, with however different connotation, to the Bull or the Elephant…. Is not the austere mountainous plateau of Old Castile a dignified landscape…? And, though man-made, cannot works of art (especially of the “classic,” though not exactly “classicist,” type) have a dignity of their own?\textsuperscript{11}}

The term “enhancement” also needs to be explicated. I shall use the following rough characterization:

\textit{Enhancement:} An intervention that improves the functioning of some subsystem of an organism beyond its reference state; or that creates an entirely new functioning or subsystem that the organism previously lacked.

The function of a subsystem can be construed either as \textit{natural} (and can be identified with the evolutionary role played by the subsystem, if it is an adaptation), or as \textit{intentional} (in which case the function is determined by the contribution that the subsystem makes to the attainment of relevant goals and intentions of the organism). The functioning of a subsystem is “improved” when the subsystem becomes more efficient at performing its function. The “reference state” may usually be taken to be the normal, healthy state of the subsystem, i.e., the level of functioning of the subsystem when it is not “diseased” or “broken” in any specific way. There is some indeterminacy in this definition of the reference state. It could refer to the state that is normal for some particular individual when she is not subject to any specific disease or injury. This could either be age-relative or indexed to the prime of life. Alternatively, the reference state could be defined as the “species-typical” level of functioning.

When we say “enhancement,” unless we further specify these and other indeterminacies, we do not express any very precise thought. In what follows, however, not much will hinge on exactly how one may choose to fill in this sketch of a definition of enhancement.
Greater Capacities

We can now begin our exploration of the relations between dignity and enhancement. If we recall the features that Kolnai suggests are associated with Dignity as a Quality—composure, distinctness, being inaccessible to destructive or corruptive or subversive interference, self-contained serenity, etc.—it would appear that these could be promoted by certain enhancements. Consider, for example, enhancements in executive function and self-control, in concentration, or in our ability to cope with stressful situations; further, consider enhancements of mental energy that would make us more capable of independent initiative and that would reduce our reliance on external stimuli such as television; consider perhaps also enhancement of our ability to withstand mild pains and discomforts, and to more effectively self-regulate our consumption of food, exercise, and sleep. All these enhancements could heighten our Dignity as a Quality in fairly direct and obvious ways.

Other enhancements might reduce our Dignity as a Quality. For instance, a greatly increased capacity for empathy and compassion might (given the state of this world) diminish our composure and our self-contained serenity, leading to a reduction of our Dignity as a Quality. Some enhancements that boost motivation, drive, or emotional responsiveness might likewise have the effect of destabilizing a dignified inner equilibrium. Enhancements that increase our ability rapidly to adapt to changing circumstances could make us more susceptible to “destructive or corruptive or subversive interference” and undermine our ability to stand firm and quietly defy the world.

Some enhancements, therefore, would increase our Dignity as a Quality, while others would threaten to reduce it. However, whether a particular enhancement—such as a strongly amplified sensitivity to others’ suffering—would in fact diminish our dignity depends on the context, and in particular on the character of the enhanced individual. A greatly elevated capacity for compassion is consistent with an outstanding degree of Dignity as a Quality, provided that the compassionate person has other mental attributes, such as a firm sense of purpose and robust self-esteem, that help contain the sympathetic perturbations of the mind and channel them into effective compassionate action. The life of Jesus, as described in the
Even if some enhancement reduced our Dignity as a Quality, it would not follow that the enhanced person would suffer a net loss of virtue. For while Dignity as a Quality might be a virtue, it is not the only virtue. Thus, some loss of Dignity as a Quality could be compensated for by a gain in other virtues. One could resist this conclusion if one believed that Dignity as a Quality is the only virtue rather than one among many. This is hardly a plausible view given the Kolnai-inspired understanding of Dignity as a Quality used in this paper.* Alternatively, one might hold that a certain threshold of Dignity as a Quality is necessary in order to be able to possess any other virtues. But even if that were so, it would not follow that any enhancement that reduced our Dignity as a Quality would result in a net loss of virtue, for the enhancement need not reduce our Dignity as a Quality below the alleged threshold.

The Act of Enhancement

Our Dignity as a Quality would in fact be greater if some of our capacities were greater than they are. Yet one might hold that the act of enhancing our capacities would in itself lower our Dignity as a Quality. One might also hold that capacities obtained by means of some artificial enhancement would fail to contribute, or would not contribute as much, to our Dignity as a Quality as the same capacities would have done had they been obtained by “natural” means.

For example, the ability to maintain composure under stressful conditions might contribute to our Dignity as a Quality if this capacity is the manifestation of our native temperament. The capacity might contribute even more to our Dignity as a Quality if it is the fruit of spiritual growth, as the result of a long but successful psychological journey that has enabled us to transcend the trivial stressors that plague everyday existence. But if our composure is brought about by our swallowing a Paxil, † would it still reflect as

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* By contrast, e.g., to the Aristotelian concept of *to kalon.*
† Paroxetine, a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) used to treat symptoms of depression and anxiety.
favorably on our Dignity as a Quality?*

It would appear that our maintaining composure under stress will fully count toward our Dignity as a Quality only if we are able to view it as an *authentic* response, a genuine reflection of our autonomous self. In the case of the person who maintains composure only because she has taken Paxil, it might be unclear whether the composure is really a manifestation of her personality or merely of an extraneous influence. The extent to which her Paxil-persona can be regarded as her true persona would depend on a variety of factors.12 The more permanently available the anxiolytic is to her, the more consistent she is in using it in the appropriate circumstances, the more the choice of taking it is her own, and the more this choice represents her deepest wishes and is accompanied by a constellation of attitudes, beliefs, and values on which availing herself of this drug is part of her self-image, the more we may incline to viewing the Paxil-persona as her true self, and her off-Paxil persona as an aberration.

If we compare some person who was born with a calm temperament to a one who has acquired the ability to remain calm as a result of psychological and spiritual growth, we might at first be tempted to think that the calmness is more fully a feature of the former. Perhaps the composure of a person born with a calm temperament is more stable, long-lasting, and robust than that of a person whose composure results from learning and experience. However, one could argue that the latter person’s Dignity as a Quality is, *ceteris paribus*, the greater (i.e., even setting aside that this person would likely have acquired many other attributes contributing to his Dignity as a Quality during the course of his psychological trek). The reasoning would be that a capacity or an attribute that has become ours because of our own choices, our own thinking, and our own experiences, is in some sense more authentically ours even than a capacity or attribute

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* For this example to work properly, we should assume that the psychological states resulting are the same in each case. Suppose one thinks that there is a special dignity in feeling stressed out yet managing to *act* cool through an exertion of self-control and strength of character. Then the thought experiment requires that we *either* assume that the feeling of stress would be absent in all three cases (native temperament, psychological growth, Paxil), *or else* assume that (again in each of the cases) the feeling of stress would be present and the subject would succeed in acting cool thanks to her self-control (which might again have come about in either of the three ways).
given to us prenatally.

This line of reasoning also suggests that a trait acquired through the deliberate employment of some enhancement technology could be more authentically ours than a trait that we possessed from birth or that developed in us independently of our own agency. Could it be that not only the person who has acquired a trait through personal growth and experience, but also one who has acquired it by choosing to make use of some enhancement technology, may possess that trait more authentically than the person who just happens to have the trait by default? Holding other things constant—such as the permanency of the trait, and its degree of integration and harmonization with other traits possessed by the person—this would indeed seem to be the case.

This claim is consistent with the belief that coming to possess a positive trait as a result of personal growth and experience would make an extra contribution to our Dignity as a Quality, perhaps the dignity of effort and of the overcoming of weaknesses and obstacles. The comparison here is between traits, capacities, or potentials that we are given from birth and ones that we could develop if we were given access to enhancement technologies.*

A precedent for the view that our self-shaping can contribute to our Dignity as a Quality can be found in Pico della Mirandola’s Oration on the Dignity of Man (1486):

We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgment and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions,

* The claim I make here is thus also consistent with the view put forward by Leon Kass that the “naturalness” of the means matters. Kass argues that in ordinary efforts at self-improvement we have a kind of direct experience or “understanding in human terms” of the relation between the means and their effects, one that is lacking in the case of technological enhancements; see Leon R. Kass, “Ageless Bodies, Happy Souls: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Perfection,” The New Atlantis 1 (Spring 2003): 9-28.
may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature…. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer.13

While Mirandola does not distinguish between different forms of dignity, it seems that he is suggesting both that our Human Dignity consists in our capacity for self-shaping and also that we gain in Dignity as a Quality through the exercise of this capacity.

It is thus possible to argue that the act of voluntary, deliberate enhancement adds to the dignity of the resulting trait, compared to possessing the same trait by mere default.

**The Enhancer’s Attitude**

At this point we must introduce a significant qualification. Other things being equal, defiance seems more dignified than compliance and adaptation. As Kolnai notes, “pliability, unresisting adaptability and unreserved self-adjustment are prototypical opposites of Dignity.” Elaborating, Kolnai writes:

It might be argued that the feature sometimes described as the “meretricious” embodies the culmination of Un-Dignity…. What characterizes the meretricious attitude is the intimate unity of abstract self-seeking and qualitative self-effacement. The meretricious type of person is, ideally speaking, at once boundlessly devoted to the thriving of his own life and indifferent to its contents. He wallows in his dependence on his environment—in sharp contrast to the dignity of a man’s setting bounds to the impact of its forces and undergoing their influence in a distant and filtered fashion—and places himself at the disposal of alien wants and interests without organically (which implies, selectively) espousing any of them…. [He] escapes the tensions of alienation by precipitate fusion and headlong surrender, and evades self-transcendence by
the flitting mobility of a weightless self.\textsuperscript{14}

So on the one hand, the “self-made” man or woman might gain in Dignity as a Quality from being the author (or co-author) of his or her own character and situation. Yet on the other hand, it is also possible that such a person instead gains in Un-Dignity from their self-remolding. The possibility of such Un-Dignity, or loss of Dignity as a Quality, is an important concern among some critics of human enhancement. Leon Kass puts it uncompromisingly:

\begin{quote}
[The] final technical conquest of his own nature would almost certainly leave mankind utterly enfeebled. This form of mastery would be identical with utter dehumanization. Read Huxley’s \textit{Brave New World}, read C. S. Lewis’s \textit{Abolition of Man}, read Nietzsche’s account of the last man, and then read the newspapers. Homogenization, mediocrity, pacification, drug-induced contentment, debasement of taste, souls without loves and longings—these are the inevitable results of making the essence of human nature the last project of technical mastery. In his moment of triumph, Promethean man will also become a contented cow.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

The worry underlying this passage is, I think, the fear of a total loss of Dignity as a Quality, and its replacement with positive Un-Dignity.

We should distinguish two different ways in which this could result. The more obvious one is if, in selecting our enhancements, we select ones that transform us into undignified people. The point here is that these people would be undignified no matter how they came about, whether as a result of enhancement or through any other process. I have already discussed this issue, concluding that some enhancements would increase our Dignity as a Quality, other enhancements would risk reducing it, and also that whether a particular enhancement would be a benefit, all things considered, cannot usually be decided by looking only at how it would affect our dignity.

A more subtle source of Un-Dignity is one that emanates from the very activity of enhancement. In this latter case, the end state is not necessarily in itself undignified, but the process of refashioning ourselves that brings us there reduces our Dignity as a Quality. I
argued above that a dignified trait resulting from deliberate enhancement can in favorable circumstances contribute more to our Dignity as a Quality than the same trait would if it had happened to be ours by default. Yet I think it should also be acknowledged that in unfavorable conditions, the act of self-transformation could be undignified and might indeed express the “meretricious” attitude described by Kolnai.

When is the activity of self-transformation dignity-increasing and when is it dignity-reducing? The Kolnai quote suggests an answer. When self-transformation is motivated by a combination of “abstract self-seeking and qualitative self-effacement,” when it is driven by alien wants and interests that have not been organically and selectively endorsed by the individual being enhanced, when it represents a surrender to mere convenience rather than the autonomous realization of a content-full personal ideal, then the act of enhancement is not dignified and may be positively undignified—in exactly the same way that other actions resulting from similar motivations may fail to express or contribute to our Dignity as a Quality.*

Let us use an example. Suppose that somebody takes a cognition-enhancing drug out of mere thoughtless conformity to fashion or under the influence of a slick advertising campaign. There is then nothing particularly dignified about this act of enhancement. There might even be something undignified about it inasmuch as a person who has Dignity as a Quality would be expected to exert more autonomous discretion about which substances she puts in her body, especially ones that are designed to affect her mental faculties. It might still be the case that the person after having taken the cognitive enhancer will gain in Dignity as a Quality. Perhaps the greater power and clarity of her thinking will enable her henceforth better to resist manipulative advertisements and to be more selective in her embrace of fads and fashions. Nonetheless, in itself, the enhancement act may be Un-Dignified and may take away something from her Dignity as

* The act of enhancement could also be undignified under some other conditions. For example, one might think that if an intervention involves immoral conduct, or if it involves the use of “tainted means” (such as medical procedures developed using information obtained in cruel experiments), this would tend to make the intervention undignified. Again, however, this problem is not specific to enhancement-related acts.
a Quality. The problem is that her motivation for undergoing the enhancement is inappropriate. Her attitude and the behavior that springs from it are Un-Dignified.

Here we would be remiss if we did not point out the symmetric possibility that refraining from making use of an opportunity for enhancement can be Un-Dignified in exactly the same way and for the same reasons as it can be Un-Dignified to make use of one. A person who rejects a major opportunity to improve her capacities out of thoughtless conformity to fashion, prejudice, or lazy indifference to the benefits to self and others that would result, would thereby reduce her Dignity as a Quality. Rejection and acceptance of enhancement are alike in this respect: both can reflect an attitude problem.

**Emotion Modification as a Special Hazard?**

“Enhancements” of drives, emotions, mood, and personality might pose special threats to dignity, tempting us to escape “the tensions of alienation by precipitate fusion and headlong surrender.” An individual could opt to refashion herself so as to be content with reality as she finds it rather than standing firm in proud opposition. Such a choice could itself express a meretricious attitude. Worse, the transformation could result in a personality that has lost a great portion of whatever Dignity as a Quality it may have possessed before.

One can conceive of modifications of our affective responses that would level our aspirations, stymie our capacity for emotional and spiritual growth, and surrender our ability to rebel against unworthy life conditions or the shortcomings of our own characters. Such interventions would pose an acute threat to our Dignity as a Quality. The fictional drug “soma” in *Brave New World* is depicted as having just such effects. The drug seems to dissolve the contours of human living and striving, reducing the characters in Huxley’s novel to contented, indeterminate citizen-blobs that are almost prototypical of Un-Dignity.

Another prototypical image of Un-Dignity, one from the realm of science, is that of the “wire-headed” rat that has had electrodes inserted into its brain’s reward areas. The model of a self-stimulating rat, that will relentlessly press its lever—foregoing opportunities for
mating, rest, or even food and drink—until it either collapses from fatigue or dies, is not exactly one that commands a “reverential mode of response” or an “upward-looking type of the pro attitude.” If we picture a human being in place of the rat, we would have to say that it is one Un-Dignified human, or at any rate a human engaged in a very Un-Dignified activity.*

Would life in such an Un-Dignified state (assuming for the sake of argument that the pleasure was indefinitely sustainable and ignoring any wider effects on society) be preferable to life as we know it? Clearly, that depends on the quality of the life that we know. Given a sufficiently bleak alternative, intracranial electrical stimulation certainly seems much preferable; for example, for patients who are slowly dying in unbearable cancer pain and for whom other methods of palliation are ineffective.† It is even possible that for such patients, wire-heading and similar interventions increase their Dignity as a Quality (not to mention other components of their well-being). Some estimable English doctors were once in the habit of administering to cancer patients in their last throes an elixir known as the Brompton cocktail, a mixture of cocaine, heroin and alcohol:

Drawing life to a close with a transcendentally orgasmic bang, and not a pathetic and god-forsaken whimper, can turn dying into the culmination of one’s existence rather than its present messy and protracted anti-climax…. One is conceived in pleasure. One may reasonably hope to die in it.18

Bowing out in such a manner would not only be a lot more fun, it seems, but also more dignified than the alternative.

But suppose the comparison case is not unbearable agony but a typical situation from an average person’s life. Then becoming like

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* The Stoics generalized this point, maintaining that “sensual pleasure is quite unworthy of the dignity of man and that we ought to despise it and cast it from us.” See Cicero, De officiis, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1913), book 1, chapter 30. The virtue and dignity of asceticism and the converse sinfulness and debasement of flesh-pleasing have also been recurring themes in some religious traditions.

a wire-headed rat, obsessively pressing a lever to the exclusion of all other activities and concerns, would surely entail a catastrophic loss of Dignity as a Quality. Whether or not such a life would nevertheless be preferable to an ordinary human life (again assuming it to be sustainable and ignoring the wider consequences)—depends on fundamental issues in value theory. According to hedonism such a life would be preferable. If the pleasure were great enough, it might also be preferable according to some other accounts of well-being. On many other value theories, of course, such a wire-headed life would be far inferior to the typical human life. These axiological questions are outside the scope of this essay.*

Let us refocus on Dignity as a Quality. A life like that of a wire-headed rat would be radically deprived of Dignity as a Quality compared to a typical human life. But the wire-heading scenario is not necessarily representative—even as a caricature—of what a life with some form of emotional enhancement would be like. Some hedonic enhancements would not transform us into passive, complacent, loveless, and longing-less blobs. On the contrary, they could increase our zest for life, infuse us with energy and initiative, and heighten our capacity for love, desire, and ambition. There are different forms of pleasurable states of mind—some that are passive, relaxed, and comfortable, and others that are active, excited, enthusiastic, and joyfully thrilling. The wire-headed rat is potentially a highly misleading model of what even a simply hedonically enhanced life could be like. And emotional enhancement could take many forms other than elevation of subjective well-being or pleasure.

If we imagine somebody whose zest for and enjoyment of life has been enhanced beyond the current average human level, by means of some pharmaceutical or other intervention, it is not obvious that we must think of this as being associated with any loss of Dignity as a Quality. A state of mania is not dignified, but a controlled passion for life and what it has to offer is compatible with a high degree of

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* To assume that Dignity as a Quality has any intrinsic value would already be to renounce strict hedonism. However, even if one denies that Dignity as a Quality has intrinsic value, one might still think that it has other kinds of significance—for example, it might have instrumental value, or it might have value insofar as somebody desires it, or the concept of Dignity as a Quality might express or summarize certain common concerns.
Dignity as a Quality. It seems to me that such a state of being could easily be decidedly more dignified than the ho-hum affective outlook of a typical day in the average person’s life.

Perhaps it would be slightly preferable, from the point of view of Dignity as a Quality, if the better mood resulted from a naturally smiling temperament or if it had been attained by means of some kind of psychological self-overcoming. But if some help had to be sought from a safe and efficacious pill, I do not see that it would make a vast difference in terms of how much Dignity as a Quality could be invested in the resulting state of mind.

One important factor in the Dignity as a Quality of our emotions is the extent to which they are appropriate responses to aspects of the world. Many emotions have an evaluative element, and one might think that for such an emotion to have Dignity as a Quality it must be a response to a situation or a phenomenon that we recognize as deserving the evaluation contained in the emotion. For example, anger might be dignified only on occasions where there is something to be angry about and where the anger is directed at that object in recognition of its offensiveness. This criterion could in principle be satisfied not only by emotions arising spontaneously from our native temperament but also by emotions encouraged by some affective enhancement. Some affective enhancements could expand our evaluative range and create background conditions that would enable us to respond to values with regard to which we might otherwise be blind or apathetic. Moreover, even if some situations objectively call for certain emotional responses, there might be some indeterminacy such that any response within a range could count as objectively appropriate. This is especially plausible when we consider baseline mood or subjective well-being. Some people are naturally downbeat and glum; others are brimming with cheer and good humor. Is it really the case that one of these sentiments is objectively appropriate to the world? If so, which one? Those who are sad may say the former; those who are happy, the latter. I doubt that there is a fact of the matter.

It appears to me that the main threat to Dignity as a Quality from emotional enhancement would come not from the use of mood-brighteners to improve positive affect in everyday life, but from two other directions. One of these is the socio-cultural dimension, which
I shall discuss in the next section. The other is the potential use of emotional “enhancements” by individuals to clip the wings of their own souls. This would be the result if we used emotional enhancers in ways that would cause us to become so “well-adjusted” and psychologically adaptable that we lost hold of our ideals, our loves and hates, or our capacity to respond spontaneously with the full register of human emotions to the exigencies of life.

Critics of enhancement are wont to dwell on how it could erode dignity. They often omit to point out how enhancement could help raise our dignity. But let us pause and ask ourselves just how much Dignity as a Quality a person has who spends four or five hours every day watching television? Whose passions are limited to a subset of eating, drinking, shopping, gratifying their sexual needs, watching sports, and sleeping? Who has never had an original idea, never willingly deviated from the path of least resistance, and never devoted himself seriously to any pursuit or occupation that was not handed him on the platter of cultural expectations? Perhaps, with regard to Dignity as a Quality, there is more distance to rise than to fall.

Socio-Culturally Mediated Effects

In addition to their direct effects on the treated individuals, enhancements might have indirect effects on culture and society. Such socio-cultural changes will in turn affect individuals, influencing in particular how much Dignity as a Quality they are likely to develop and display in their lives. Education, media, cultural norms, and the general social and physical matrix of our lives can either foster or stymie our potential to develop and live with Dignity as a Quality.

Western consumerist culture does not seem particularly hospitable to Dignity as a Quality. Various spiritual traditions, honor cultures, Romanticism, or even the Medieval chivalric code of ethics seem to have been more conducive to Dignity as a Quality, although some elements of contemporary culture—in particular, individualism—could in principle be important building blocks of a dignified personality. Perhaps there is a kind of elitism or aristocratic sensibility inherent in the cultivation of Dignity as a Quality that does not sit easily with the mass culture and egalitarian pretensions of modernity.
Perhaps, too, there is some tension between the current emphasis on instrumentalist thinking and scientific rationality, on the one hand, and the (dignified) reliance on stable personal standards and ideals on the other. The perfect Bayesian rationalist, who has no convictions but only a fluid network of revisable beliefs, whose probability she feels compelled to update according to a fixed kinematics whenever new evidence impinges on her senses, has arguably surrendered some of her autonomy to an algorithm.*

How would the widespread use and social acceptance of enhancement technologies affect the conditions for the development of individual Dignity as a Quality? The question cannot be answered a priori. Unfortunately, neither can it currently be answered a posteriori other than in the most speculative fashion. We lack both the theory and the data that would be required to make any firm predictions about such matters. Social and cultural changes are difficult to forecast, especially over long time spans during which the technological bases of human civilizations will undergo profound transformations. Any answer we give today is apt to reveal more about our own hopes, fears, and prejudices than about what is likely to happen in the future.

When Leon Kass asserts that homogenization, mediocrity, pacification, drug-induced contentment, debasement of taste, and souls without loves and longings are the inevitable results of making human nature a project of technical mastery, he is not, as far as I can glean from his writings, basing this conviction on any corroborated social science model, or indeed on any kind of theory, data set, or well-developed argument. A more agnostic stance would better match the available evidence. We can, I think, conceive of scenarios in which Kass’s forebodings come true, and of other scenarios in which the opposite happens. Until somebody develops better arguments, we shall be ignorant as to which it will be. Insofar as both scenarios are within reach, we might have most reason to work to realize one in which enhancement options do become available and are used in

* I say this as a fan of the Bayesian way. Another view would be that we do not have any coherent notion of autonomy that is distinct from responding to one’s reasons, in which case the perfect Bayesian rationalist might—at least in her epistemic performance—be the epitome of dignity. That view would be more congruent with many earlier writers on dignity, including Kant.
ways that increase our Dignity as a Quality along with other more important values.

The Dignity of Civilizations

Dignity as a Quality can be attributed to entities other than persons, including populations, societies, cultures, and civilizations. Some of the adverse consequences of enhancement that Kass predicts would pertain specifically to such collectives. “Homogeneity” is not a property of an individual; it is a characteristic of a group of individuals. It is not so clear, however, what Dignity as a Quality consists in when predicated to a collective. Being farther from the prototype application of the idea of dignity, such attributions of Dignity as a Quality to collectives may rely on value judgments to a greater extent than is the case when we apply it to individuals, where the descriptive components of the concept carry more of the weight.

For example, many moderns regard various forms of equality as important for a social order to have Dignity as a Quality. We may hold that there is something undignified about a social order which is marked by rigid status hierarchies and in which people are treated very unequally because of circumstances of birth and other factors outside their control. Many of us think that there is something decisively Un-Dignified about a society in which beggars sit on the sidewalk and watch limousines drive by, or in which the conspicuous consumption of the children of the rich contrasts too sharply with the squalor and deprivation of the children of the poor.

An observer from a different era might see things differently. For instance, an English aristocrat from the 17th century, placed in a time machine and brought forward into contemporary Western society, might be shocked at what he would see. While he would, perhaps, be favorably impressed by our modern comforts and conveniences, our enormous economic wealth, our medical techniques and so forth, he might also be appalled at the loss of Dignity as a Quality that has accompanied these improvements. He steps out of the time machine and beholds vulgarized society, swarming with indecency and moral decay. He looks around and shudders as he sees how the rich social architecture of his own time, in which everybody, from
the King down to the lowliest servant, knew their rank and status, and in which people were tied together in an intricate tapestry of duties, obligations, privileges, and patronage—how this magnificently ordered social cathedral has been flattened and replaced by an endless suburban sprawl, a homogenized society where the spires of nobility have been demolished, where the bonds of loyalty have been largely dissolved, the family pared down to its barest nucleus, the roles of lord and subject collapsed in those of consumer and purveyor, the Majesty of the Crown usurped by a multinational horde of Burger Kings.

Whether or not our imaginary observer would judge that on balance the changes had been for the better, he would most likely feel that they had been accompanied by a tragic loss, and that part of this loss would be a loss of Dignity as a Quality, for individuals but especially for society. Moreover, this loss of societal Dignity would reside in some of the same changes that many of us would regard as gains in societal Dignity as a Quality.

We strike up a conversation with our time-traveling visitor and attempt to convince him that his view about Dignity as a Quality is incorrect. He attempts to convince us that it is our view that is defective. The disagreement, it seems, would be about value judgments and, to some extent, about aesthetic judgments. It is uncertain whether either side would succeed in persuading the other.

We could imagine other such trans-temporal journeys, perhaps bringing a person from ancient Athens into the Middle Ages, or from the Middle Ages into the Enlightenment Era, or from the time when all humans were hunter-gatherers into any one of these later periods. Or we could imagine these journeys in the reverse, sending a person back in time. While each of these time travelers would likely recognize certain individuals in all the societies as having Dignity as a Quality, they might well find all the societies they were visiting seriously lacking in Dignity as a Quality. Even if we restrict ourselves to the present time, most of us probably find it easier to identify Un-Dignity in societies that are very different from our own, even though we have been taught that we ought not to be so prejudiced against the customs of foreign cultures.

The point I wish to make with these observations is that, if you or I were shown a crystal ball revealing human society as it will be a few
centuries from today, it is likely that the society we would see would appear to us as being in important respects Un-Dignified compared to our own. This would seem to be the default expectation even apart from any technological enhancements which might by then have entered into common use. And therein lies one of those fine ironies of history. One generation conceives a beautiful design and lays the ground stones of a better tomorrow. Then they die, and the next generation decides to erect a different structure on the foundation that was build, a structure that is more beautiful in their eyes but that would have been hideous to their predecessors. The original architects are no longer there to complain, but if the dead could see they would turn in their graves. *O tempora, o mores*, cry the old, and the bones of our ancestors rattle their emphatic assent!

It is possible to take a more optimistic view of the possibilities of secular change in the societal and cultural realms. One might believe that the history of humankind shows signs of moral progress, a slow and fluctuating trend toward more justice and less cruelty. Even if one does not detect such a trend in history, one might still hope that the future will bring more unambiguous amelioration of the human condition. But there are many variables other than Dignity as a Quality that influence our evaluation of possible cultures and societies (such as the extent to which Human Dignity is respected, to name but one). It may be that we have to content ourselves with hoping for improvements in these other variables, recognizing that Dignity as a Quality, when ascribed to forms of social organization rather than individuals, is too indeterminate a concept—and possibly too culture-relative—for even an optimist to feel confident that future society or future culture will appear highly dignified by current lights.

I will therefore not discuss by what means one might attempt to increase the Dignity as a Quality of present or future society, except to note that enhancement could possibly play a role. For example, if homogenization is antithetical to a society having Dignity as a Quality, then enhancements that strengthen the ability of individuals to resist group pressure and that encourage creativity and originality, and maybe even a degree of eccentricity, could help not only individuals to attain more Dignity as a Quality but also society, thanks to the cultural diversification that such individuals would create.
A Relational Component?

Let us return to the Dignity as a Quality of individuals. One might attribute Dignity as Quality to an individual not only because of her intrinsic characteristics but, arguably, also because of her relational properties. For example, one might think that the oldest tree has a Dignity as a Quality that it would not possess if there were another tree that was older, or that the last of the Mohicans had a special Dignity as a Quality denied to the penultimate Mohican.

We humans like to pride ourselves on being the smartest and most advanced species on the planet. Perhaps this position gives us a kind of Dignity as a Quality, one that could be shared by all humans, including mediocrities and even those who fall below some nonhuman animals in terms of cognitive ability. We would have this special Dignity as a Quality through our belonging to a species whose membership has included such luminaries as Michelangelo and Einstein. We might then worry that we would risk losing this special dignity if, through the application of radical enhancement technologies, we created another species (or intelligent machines) that surpassed human genius in all dimensions. Becoming a member of the second-most advanced species on the planet (supposing one were not among the radically enhanced) sounds like a demotion.

We need to be careful here not to conflate Dignity as a Quality with other concepts, such as social rank or status. With the birth of cognitively superior posthumans, the rank of humans would suffer (at least if rank were determined by cognitive capacity). It does not follow that our Dignity as a Quality would have been reduced; that is a separate question. Perhaps we should hold, rather, that our Dignity as a Quality would have been increased, on grounds of our membership in another collective—the Club of Tellurian Life. This club, while less exclusive than the old Club of Humanity, would boast some extremely illustrious members after the human species had been eclipsed by its posthuman descendants.

There might nevertheless be a loss of Dignity as a Quality for individual human beings. Those individuals who were previously at the top of their fields would no longer occupy such a distinguished position. If there is a special Dignity as a Quality (as opposed to merely social status) in having a distinguished position, then this
dignity would be transferred to the new occupants of the pinnacles of excellence.

We cannot here explore all the possible ways in which relational properties could be affected by human enhancement, so I will draw attention to just one other relational property, that of uniqueness. Reproductive cloning is not a prototypical enhancement, but we can use it to raise a question.* Does a person’s uniqueness contribute something to her Dignity as a Quality? If so, one might object to human cloning on grounds that it would result in progeny who—other things being equal—would have less Dignity as a Quality than a sexually conceived child. Of course, we should not commit the error of genetic essentialism or genetic determinism; but neither should we make the opposite error of thinking that genes don’t matter. People who have the same genes tend to be more similar to one another than people who are not genetically identical. In this context, “uniqueness” is a matter of degree, so a set of clones of an average person would tend to be “less unique” than most people.†

Naturally occurring identical twins would be as genetically similar as a pair of clones. (Natural identical twins also tend to share the same womb and rearing environment, which clones would not necessarily do.) Since we do not think that natural twins are victims of a significant misfortune, we can conclude that either the loss of one’s degree of uniqueness resulting from the existence of another individual who is genetically identical to oneself does not entail a significant loss of Dignity as a Quality, or losing some of one’s Dignity as a Quality is not a significant misfortune (or both).

One might still worry about more extreme cases. Consider the possibility of not just a few clones being created of an individual, but many millions. Or more radically, consider the possibility of the creation of millions of copies of an individual who would all be much more similar to one another than monozygotic twins are.‡ In

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* One could argue that reproductive cloning would be an enhancement of our reproductive capacities, giving us the ability to reproduce in a way that was previously impossible.
† Unless, perhaps, cloning were so rare that being a clone would itself mark one out as a highly unusual and “unique” kind of person.
‡ Human “uploading” is one possible future technology that might lead to such a scenario; see Hans Moravec, Mind Children: the Future of Robot and Human Intelligence (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988). Another
these imaginary cases, it seems more plausible that a significant loss of Dignity as a Quality would occur among the copied individuals. Perhaps this would be a pro tanto reason against the realization of such scenarios.

Dignity Outside the Human World: Quiet Values

Dignity as a Quality is not necessarily confined to human beings and collectives of human beings:

The redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always. No one has ever successfully painted or photographed a redwood tree. The feeling they produce is not transferable. From them comes silence and awe. It’s not only their unbelievable stature, nor the color which seems to shift and vary under your eyes, no, they are not like any trees we know, they are ambassadors from another time. They have the mystery of ferns that disappeared a million years ago into the coal of the carboniferous era…. The vainest, most slap-happy and irreverent of men, in the presence of redwoods, goes under a spell of wonder and respect…. One feels the need to bow to unquestioned sovereigns.19

It is easy to empathize with the response that John Steinbeck describes, and it fits quite well with Kolnai’s account of the characteristic response to dignity.

Another example:

[One] of my colleagues [recounts a story] about once taking his young son to a circus in town, and discovering a lone protestor outside the tent silently holding aloft a sign that read “REMEMBER THE DIGNITY OF THE ELEPHANTS.” It hit him like a lightning bolt, he said. The protestor’s point is surely an intelligible one, though we could debate whether it is genuinely reason enough to avoid all types of circuses.20

would be the creation of many copies of the same sentient artificial intelligence.
We need a name for the property that we feel we are responding to in examples like the above, and “Dignity as Quality” fits the bill. We might also apply this concept to certain actions, activities, and achievements, perhaps to certain human relationships, and to many other things, which I shall not explore here.

The Dignity as a Quality that we attribute to nonhumans (or more accurately, to non-persons) is of a different type from that which we attribute to human beings. One way to characterize the difference is by using a distinction introduced by Stephen Darwall. Darwall describes two different kinds of attitude, both of which are referred to by the term “respect.” The first kind he calls recognition respect. This attitude consists in giving appropriate consideration or recognition to some feature of its object in deliberating about what to do, and it can have any number of different sorts of things as its object. The other kind, which he calls appraisal respect, consists in an attitude of positive appraisal of a person either as a person or as engaged in some particular pursuit. The appropriate ground for appraisal respect is that a person has manifested positive characteristics or excellences that we attribute to his character, especially those that belong to him as a moral agent.

For example, when we say that Human Dignity must be respected, we presumably mean that it must be given recognition respect. We owe this respect to all people equally, independently of their moral character or any special excellences that they might have or lack. By contrast, when say that we should respect Gandhi for his magnanimity, we are probably referring to appraisal respect (although his magnanimity should also in certain contexts be given recognition respect). Similarly, if someone has a high degree of Dignity as a Quality (perhaps Gandhi again), this also calls for appraisal respect.

The kind of Dignity as a Quality that we attribute to non-agents does not call for appraisal respect, since only agents have moral character. Thus we can distinguish between Dignity as a Quality in the narrow sense, as a property possessed only by (some) agents and that calls for appraisal respect, and Dignity as a Quality in a wider sense, which could be possessed by any number of types of object, and which calls for recognition respect only. We do not have to literally admire or give credit to the redwoods for having grown so tall and having lived so long; but we can still recognize them as possessing certain
features that we should take into account in deliberating about what we do to them. In particular, if we are truly impressed by their Dignity as a Quality (in the wide sense), then we ought to show our recognition respect for their dignity—perhaps by not cutting them down for their timber, or by refraining from urinating on them.

Dignity as a Quality, in this wide sense, is ubiquitous. What is limited, I would suggest, is not the supply but our ability to appreciate it. Even inanimate objects can possess it. For a mundane example, consider the long, slow, sad decline of a snowman melting in the backyard. Would not an ideally sensitive observer recognize a certain Dignity as a Quality in the good Snowman, Esq.?

The ethical fades here into the aesthetic (and perhaps into the sentimental), and it is not clear that there exists any sharp line of demarcation. But however we draw our conceptual boundaries, our normative discourse would be impoverished if it could not lend expression to and genuinely take into account what is at stake in cases like these. Perhaps we could coin the category of quiet values to encompass not only Dignity as a Quality in this extended sense, but also other small, subtle, or non-domineering values. We may contrast these quiet values with a category of loud values, which would be more starkly prudential or moral, and which tend to dominate the quiet values in any direct comparison. The category of loud values might include things like alleviation of suffering, justice, equality, freedom, fairness, respect for Human Dignity, health and survival, and so forth.*

It is not necessarily a fault of applied ethics, insofar as it aims to influence regulation and public policy, that it tends to focus exclusively on loud values. If on one side of the scales we put celebrating the Dignity as a Quality of Mr. Snowman, and on the other we put providing a poverty-stricken child with a vaccination, the latter will always weigh more heavily.

* It is, of course, a substantive normative question in which of these categories to place a given value. For example, Nietzsche might have held Dignity as a Quality to be a loud value, and he might have thought that equality was of no value at all. One big question, even if one does not share Nietzsche's view, is how we ought to treat Dignity as a Quality from an impartial standpoint. Is it better to have a few supremely dignified persons surrounded by many with little dignity, or better to have a modicum of dignity widely spread?
Nevertheless, there may be a broader significance to the quiet values. While individually weak, in aggregate they are formidable. They are the dark matter of value theory (or, for all ye business consultants among my readers, the long tail of axiology). Fail to uphold a quiet value on one occasion, and nothing noticeable is lost. But extirpate or disregard all the quiet values all the time, and the world turns into a sterile, desolate, impoverished place. The quiet values add the luminescence, the rich texture of meaning, the wonder and awe, and much of the beauty and nobility of human action. In major part, this contribution is aesthetic, and the realization of this kind of value might depend crucially on our subjective conscious responses. Yet, at least in the idea of Dignity as a Quality, which is our focal concern here, the moral and the aesthetic blend into one another, and the possibility of responding to the realm of quiet values (or helping it into existence through acts of creative imagination and feeling) can have moral implications.

The Eschatology of Dignity

Kolnai describes a certain mode of utopian thinking as inimical to Dignity as a Quality:

Perhaps [certain people] believe that by the ensuring through a collective agency of everybody’s “Human Dignity” (including a sense of individual self-assertion and self-fulfillment) everyone will also acquire Dignity as a Quality or, what comes to the same thing, the concept of “Dignity as a Quality” will lose its point—a view prefigured by the first great apostle of Progress, Condorcet, who confidently foresaw a rationally and scientifically redrawn world in which there would be no opportunity for the exercise of heroic virtue nor any sense in revering it.

The core of Un-Dignity, as I would try to put it succinctly, is constituted by an attitude of refusal to recognize, experience, and bear with, the tension between Value and Reality; between what things ought to be, should be, had better be or are desired to be and what things are, can be
and are allowed to be.*

This raises the question of whether there would be any role left to play for Dignity as a Quality if the world, thanks to various political, medical, economical, and technological advances, reached a level of perfection far beyond its present troubled state. The question becomes perhaps especially acute if we suppose that the transhumanist aspiration to overcome some of our basic biological limitations were to be realized. Might the tension between Value and Reality then be relaxed in such a way that Dignity as a Quality would become meaningless or otiose?

Let us make a leap into an imaginary future posthuman world, in which technology has reached its logical limits. The superintelligent inhabitants of this world are *autopotent*, meaning that they have complete power over and operational understanding of themselves, so that they are able to remold themselves at will and assume any internal state they choose. An autopotent being could, for example, easily transform itself into the shape of a woman, a man, or a tree. Such a being could also easily enter any subjective state it wants to be in, such as a state of pleasure or indignation, or a state of experiencing the visual and tactile sensations of a dolphin swimming in the sea. We can also assume that these posthumans have thorough control over their environment, so that they can make molecularly exact copies of objects and implement any physical design for which they have conceived of a detailed blueprint. They could make a forest of redwood trees disappear, and then recreate an exactly similar forest somewhere else; and they could populate it with dinosaurs or dragons—they would have the same kind of control of physical reality as programmers and designers today have over virtual reality, but with the ability to imagine and create much more detailed (e.g. biologically realistic) structures. We might say that the autopotent superintelligences are living in a “plastic world” because they can easily remold their environment exactly as they see fit.

Now, it might be that in any technological utopia that we have any realistic chance of creating, all individuals will remain constrained

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* Kolnai, “Dignity,” p. 262. Kolnai adds that the “core of Un-Dignity” does not include “either submission to the existing order of things and the virtue of patience, or a sustained endeavor for reform, improvement and assuagement.”
in important ways. In addition to the challenges of the physical frontiers, which might at this stage be receding into deep space as the posthuman civilization expands beyond its native planet, there are the challenges created by the existence of other posthumans, that is, the challenges of the social realm. Resources even in Plastic World would soon become scarce if population growth is exponential, but aside from material constraints, individual agents would face the constraints imposed on them by the choices and actions of other agents. Insofar as our goals are irreducibly social—for example to be loved, respected, given special attention or admiration, or to be allowed to spend time or to form exclusive bonds with the people we choose, or to have a say in what other people do—we would still be limited in our ability to achieve our goals. Thus, a being in Plastic World may be very far from omnipotent. Nevertheless, we may suppose that a large portion of the constraints we currently face have been lifted and that both our internal states and the world around us have become much more malleable to our wishes and desires.

In Plastic World, many of the moral imperatives with which we are currently struggling are easily satisfiable. As the loud values fall silent, the quiet values become more audible.* With most externally imposed constraints eliminated by technological progress, the constraints that we choose to impose on ourselves become paramount.

In this setting, Dignity as a Quality could be an organizing idea. While inanimate objects cannot possess Human Dignity, they can be endowed with a kind of Dignity as a Quality. The autopotent inhabitants of Plastic World could choose to cultivate their sensibility for Dignity as a Quality and the other quiet values. By choosing to recognize these values and to treat the world accordingly, they would be accepting some constraints on their actions. It is by accepting such constraints that they could build, or rather cultivate, their Plastic World into something that has greater value than a daydream. It is also by accepting such constraints—perhaps only by doing so—that it would be possible for them to preserve their own Dignity as a Quality. This dignity would not consist in resisting or defying the

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* This is not to say that the quiet values would actually be heard or heeded if and when the loud values fall silent. Whether that would happen is difficult to predict. But an ideal moral agent would begin to pay more attention to the quiet values in such circumstances and would let them play a greater role in guiding her conduct.
world. Rather, theirs would be a dignity of the strong, consisting in self-restraint and the positive nurturance of both internal and external values.*

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Notes

2 Ibid., p. 242.
8 Kolnai, op. cit., pp. 251-252.
9 Ibid., p. 252.
10 Ibid., pp. 253-254.
11 Ibid., p. 254.
14 Kolnai, op. cit., pp. 265-266.
16 Aryeh Routtenberg and Jacob Lindy, “Effects of the availability of rewarding septal and hypothalamic stimulation on bar pressing for food under conditions of deprivation,” Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology 60 (1965): 158-161.
17 For a discussion of the relations between dignity and suffering, see Daryl Pullman, “Human dignity and the ethics and aesthetics of pain and suffering,” Theoretical Medicine 23 (2002): 75-94.
20 Craig Duncan, “Respect for Dignity: A Defense,” online manuscript, 10/06 draft, p. 5; see www.ithaca.edu/faculty/cduncan/respect.doc.
Commentary on Bostrom

Charles Rubin

In his essay for this volume, Nick Bostrom acknowledges that the consequences of emerging technologies for what he, following Aurel Kolnai, calls “Dignity as Quality” are hard to predict and even harder to judge. What Bostrom doesn’t seem to notice is that Kolnai himself would almost certainly have opposed the transhumanist agenda and that the very essay Bostrom draws upon provides ample grounds for doubting the wisdom of transhumanism’s ultimate goals. Rather than supporting his case, the attempt to enlist Kolnai in his cause reveals instead how Bostrom fails to appreciate that genuine human dignity, like all human excellence, requires that we acknowledge and accept certain natural necessities, even those we sometimes struggle against.

Kolnai (1900–73) would seem to be an odd source for the case for transhumanism. A Hungarian-born philosopher who converted to Catholicism after reading G. K. Chesterton, Kolnai spent much of his career as an expatriate. Trained in phenomenology by Husserl, Kolnai articulated a politics of “Christian imperfectionism” and a powerful anti-utopianism, a politics not at all well suited to a thoroughgoing project to remake human nature.1 In particular, the essay “Dignity,” to which Bostrom refers, provides no grounds for thinking that our dignity, in the sense Kolnai is most interested in, could be
enhanced by an increase in our power—indeed, quite the opposite.

Unlike most writers on dignity, Kolnai is at pains to distinguish
the dignity he cares about—“dignity as quality”—from the related
notions of human dignity and human rights. “Dignity as quality” is
primarily a characteristic that elicits from us reverence and awe, “a
‘bowing’ gesture if I may so call it” (252). Kolnai is at pains to avoid
reducing “dignity as quality” to a merely moral claim, such as “the
so-called rights of man” (257). He is skeptical of the natural basis of
such rights, and he thinks that the moral imperative implied in them
obscures our appreciation of “dignity as quality.” As for the notion
of human dignity, he finds it to be a hybrid concept halfway between
the prescriptive character of rights and the descriptive character of
“dignity as quality” (258).

“Dignity as quality” in this sense would seem to be tailor-made
for Bostrom’s purposes, since it transcends merely human dignity and
can be attributed to elephants, cats, bulls, and even landscapes (254).
As Bostrom might well ask, if a cat can have dignity, why not Cat
Man? If nonhuman beings can have it, why not transhuman beings?

Furthermore, we would be remiss if we failed to acknowledge
that Kolnai’s discussion of these matters is itself fraught with ambigu-
ity and uncertainty, some of which may have seemed to Bostrom to
point in his direction. In particular Kolnai’s skepticism about there
being a true natural basis of natural rights spills over into questions
he raises about the place of “dignity as quality” in human life. But
despite this skepticism, Kolnai seems genuinely to wonder whether
there is a moral order congruent with being human, for which human
beings are not simply responsible but which makes sense of human
dignity even if it does not resolve all ambiguities. “Dignity as qual-
ity” is an effort to give an account of dignity without starting from an
answer to this question. Kolnai proceeds instead by elucidating the
lived experience of the phenomenon of dignity. But Kolnai chooses
not to evade the issue of the ultimate ground of dignity altogether.

Bostrom, on the other hand, leaves all Kolnai’s nuance and un-
certainty aside. To be sure, Bostrom makes the anodyne observation
that any given potential enhancement to human life may or may not
turn out to enhance human dignity. Yet when he turns to the logical
culmination of his defense of enhancement, his concluding “leap into
an imaginary future posthuman world,” Bostrom fails to confront
many passages in Kolnai that warn against just such a world and that suggest that its fundamental assumptions could not help but make it undignified. For example, Kolnai finds Condorcet’s “rationally and scientifically redrawn world” to be a place where “there would be no opportunity for the exercise of heroic virtue nor any sense in revering it” (262). Why should we not think that Kolnai would see Bostrom’s Plastic World as just another “Utopian Delusion” like Condorcet’s?

Here again, Kolnai goes some way toward Bostrom’s point of view when he writes that “an elementary, not to say elemental, feature of dignity…[is] clarifying, developing, pursuing, and making valid personal tastes and choices” (261). Bostrom thinks, of course, that posthuman capacities can only widen the realm of such activity. And yet, for Kolnai, this aspect of dignity exists within a larger framework of “what is most important,” which is “not to ‘get what one likes’ but to be able to endure what one ‘gets’ without necessarily assenting to it or growing to ‘like’ it” (262). The dignified attitude thus has an element of resignation quite antithetical to the very plasticity of Plastic World. Why should autopotent human beings ever concern themselves with the constraints of “an existing order of things” or the “tension between Value and Reality” (262)? Yet refusal to “recognize, experience, and bear with” that tension is for Kolnai “the core of Un-dignity” (262).

Bostrom suggests that his posthumans will be “Bayesian rationalists” who have “no convictions but only a fluid network of revisable beliefs.” While such qualities may appear to allow a dignified-sounding “self-transcendence,” it is hard to distinguish such rationalism from what Kolnai calls a meretricious “flitting mobility of a weightless self” (266). While Bostrom might well be right that a posthuman being will have “spectacular success” at “creating around himself a world for his own use,” he fails to note that Kolnai thinks such self-creation is precisely what will lead to dignity as quality being “crowded out” (266).

We might also pose to Bostrom the question George Orwell asked in The Road to Wigan Pier about H. G. Wells’s portrayal of the physical traits of the man of the future. In a highly mechanized society, Orwell wondered, why should we expect to find human beings of the godlike physique and fitness Wells describes? It seems to Orwell far more likely that, as the necessity for physical fitness declines, one
would find “little fat men,” a point that early 21st-century Americans can hardly gainsay. Of course, we might reply to Orwell that we will choose to constrain ourselves: physical fitness is better for our health, a fun hobby besides! And yet somehow rigorous programs of diet and exercise are hardly the norm. Many more indulge the freedom of separating high caloric consumption from intense physical activity and are on the lookout for the magic pill that will free them from the consequences of such indulgence.

In Plastic World dignity will become a quality as rare as is physical excellence in a mechanized world. Perhaps the best we can expect is that, just as we today admire intensive physical cultivation in boutique settings, e.g., sports, there will be a super-intelligent audience in Plastic World for “dignity games.” After all, we see in contemporary America a taste for “Masterpiece Theatre” renditions of vanished worlds of honor and gentlemanliness. The inhabitants of Plastic World, we might imagine, will enjoy highly ritualized moral encounters, appreciated by some for the display of antiquated excellence and by most for the frisson of horrific insight they provide into a barbaric past.

According to Kolnai, true dignity (and its opposite) arises only in how we come to terms with things not of our own choice or making. But if that is the case, there can be no dignity in the world of autopotent posthumans, who know no restraint or constraint not of their own making. Unlike Kolnai, Bostrom is confident that posthuman inhabitants of plastic world will exhibit the “dignity of the strong.” Out of their autopotency they will choose to restrain themselves in accordance with “quiet values.” In human terms we know what that might mean: the mercy of the king or conqueror, the act of noblesse oblige. But in the world we have known hitherto, the dignity of such acts still depends on external constraints felt by the strong, such as the binding power of religious obligation, the existence of powerful social hierarchies, even the mere sense of prudence that restraint is good today because one never knows what tomorrow will bring. Will “quiet values” produce any like reasons to compel the strong in plastic world to show self-restraint? Bostrom never worries that the strong might not want to restrain themselves in Plastic World, or that there might be a real ugliness in the human will that will only be exposed once we are freed of natural constraints.
By Kolnai’s lights, then, it seems likely that Bostrom has fallen into a utopian trap, a classic expression of which can be found in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. The old courtier Gonzalo expatiates on the ideal commonwealth he would create if he were king, concluding paradoxically that there would be “No sovereignty.” The not merely cynical Antonio comments, “The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning” (*The Tempest* 2.1.160, 162-3.) Likewise, Bostrom begins by having us seek the power of gods, though in the “latter end” he paradoxically expects us to refrain from using our godlike powers to the maximum.

Notes

2 All references to Kolnai in the text are to Aurel Kolnai, “Dignity,” in *Philosophy* 51 (1976): 251-271.
Part III.
Dignity and Modern Culture
Dr. Adam Schulman’s thoughtful overview (in the introduction to this volume) of the problems posed by bioethics and human dignity begins with a succinct description of what might be called the state of the question. His words bear repeating:

Human dignity—is it a useful concept in bioethics, one that sheds important light on the whole range of bioethical issues, from embryo research and assisted reproduction, to biomedical enhancement, to care of the disabled and the dying? Or is it, on the contrary, a useless concept—at best a vague substitute for other, more precise notions, at worst a mere slogan that camouflages unconvincing arguments and unarticulated biases?

To begin the discussion by reference to what is “useful” or “useless” does not necessarily imply a thoroughgoing utilitarian calculus, but it does invite the question, Useful or useless to what end? The statement of the state of the question says that “useful” means that it sheds important light on various bioethical issues, while “useless” means that it is less useful than “more precise notions” or, worse, that it is
misleading and deceptive. Clearly, “light”—i.e., wisdom, knowledge, truth, guidance—is what we desire. Since the subject is bioethics, the kind of light we are looking for is ethical or moral light.

We need not enter into the debate over whether there is a qualitative difference between the ethical and moral. It is argued by some that the ethical deals with right and wrong while the moral deals with good and evil, with right and wrong being defined by us while good and evil are discovered in the way things really are. With respect to the actions addressed by bioethics, perhaps all can agree that the goal is to do the right thing, with most claiming that the right thing is the moral thing. In the history of Western civilization’s reflection on ethics and morality, the most elementary maxim is, “Do good and avoid evil.” For purposes pertinent to the questions addressed by bioethics, this can also be phrased as “Do right and avoid wrong.” The first principle of practical (moral) reason, in obedience to that maxim, is to direct one’s will in accord with the human good.

To be sure, it is argued by some that in some circumstances it is permissible to do evil—a “necessary evil,” as it is called—in order to do the right thing, meaning in order to achieve the right result. This touches on the divide between the utilitarian and deontological lamented by Dr. Schulman. From one viewpoint, it is at least doubtful that an act is evil if it is indeed necessary to achieving a good (i.e., doing the right thing). From another viewpoint, assuming that good and evil are antithetical, it is allowed that good may result from an act or course of action that will foreseeably result in a circumstance that it would be wrong to intend, but the good result is despite and never because of the doing of evil. The relevance of this brief excursus on the distinction between ethics and morality, including the distinction between right and wrong, on the one hand, and good and evil, on the other, will become evident in due course.

The stated subject is the usefulness of the concept “human dignity.” The better phrase is “the dignity of the human person.” “Human dignity” may suggest the collective and include efforts such as taking technological charge of the evolution of the human species. “The dignity of the human person” places the accent on the individual, albeit, to be sure, the individual situated in community. The dignity of the human person may entail an important, although limited, measure of autonomy. Dignity as autonomy features strongly in, for instance,
arguments for “death with dignity.” Morally, however, the dignity of the human person is affirmed most importantly not in the assertion of one’s autonomy but in the protection of others who are most subject to having their dignity violated. Therefore, in bioethics as in medicine more generally, the first rule is “Do no harm.” That first rule enjoins us to protect and maintain something that is recognized as good in its being.

That first rule is perceived by some to be a restriction on scientific and technological progress, and it is intended to be exactly that. More precisely, it is a frankly moral placing of limits on what some, driven by what is aptly described as the scientific or technological imperative, deem to be progress. Morality is not to be pitted against genuine progress, and we should be grateful for all the advances that have been made and no doubt will be made in “the relief of man’s estate” (Bacon). But it is precisely the business of ethical and moral reason to make normative judgments regarding present and proposed measures aimed at such relief. This is true with respect to the dignity of the human person and with respect to more ambitious proposals aimed not so much at relieving as at transforming “man’s estate.” In this connection, Dr. Schulman’s citing of C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man* is entirely to the point.

Understanding of the questions before us has not been well served by the ill-defined discipline of bioethics. Militating against the task of normative moral judgment is not only the scientific and technological imperative, with all the fame and glory attending “breakthrough” achievements, but also the weight of inestimable financial interests. Think, for instance, of what those who can pay will pay for a significant extension of their life span or for the “perfect baby.” It is only somewhat cynical to observe that institutions with the greatest vested interest in dubious advances have recruited the best bioethicists that money can buy.

One must acknowledge that bioethics as an intellectual institution is, in significant part, an industry for the production of rationalized—sometimes elegantly rationalized—permission slips in the service of the technological imperative joined to the pursuit of fame and wealth. Which is not to deny that such permission slips are also issued in the service of what some believe to be the relief of suffering and the enhancement of man’s estate. Even when bioethics is
conducted with intellectual and moral integrity, a question must be raised about the nature of the authority of those who are called bioethicists. This touches on politics and political legitimacy in addressing bioethical controversies.

Dr. Schulman notes the complaint that the idea of the dignity of the human person in international agreements and declarations in the aftermath of World War II “does not offer clear and unambiguous guidance in bioethical controversies.” He says, correctly, that in such statements “the meaning, content, and foundations of human dignity are never explicitly defined. Instead, the affirmation of human dignity in these documents reflects a political consensus among groups that may well have quite different beliefs about what human dignity means, where it comes from, and what it entails. In effect, ‘human dignity’ serves here as a placeholder for ‘whatever it is about human beings that entitles them to basic human rights and freedoms.’” He adds, “This practice makes a good deal of sense.”

It makes a great deal of sense indeed. In a world indelibly marked and marred by the Holocaust, the Gulag Archipelago, Mao’s Great Leap Forward, and myriad other crimes against humanity, a political consensus as a placeholder against great evils, no matter how intellectually rickety its structure, is not to be scorned. In *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon describes the ways in which the drafters of the declaration were keenly aware that their goal was a political consensus, not a philosophical or moral treatise on human nature and the rights and dignities attending human nature. Given the enormous cultural, religious, intellectual, and ideological diversity of those involved, a political consensus was a great achievement. While rights and freedoms are positively asserted, they are largely defined negatively against the background of evils to which the declaration says, in effect, “Never again!” Thus was the morally elementary rule “Do no harm” given new specificity.

Nor should it be thought that a political consensus is somehow inferior to a coherent treatise on the moral and philosophical foundations of human dignity. In a world that continues to be characterized by what Saint Augustine called *libido dominandi*—the unbridled lust for power and glory—politics is an instrument for the restraint of great evil. In ethics, and in bioethics specifically, “politics”
is frequently seen as an alien intrusion upon or a poor substitute for the search for “clear and unambiguous guidance.” But the search for guidance through the controversies besetting us is precisely a political task.

Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and his *Politics* are both discourses on morality. From them we can derive this definition of politics: *Politics is free persons deliberating the question, How ought we to order our life together?* The “ought” in that suggested definition clearly indicates that politics is—in its nature, if not always in its practice—a moral enterprise. Our political vocabulary—what is fair or unfair, what is just or unjust, what serves the common good—is inescapably a moral vocabulary. Contra David Hume and many others, an *ought* can be derived from an *is*, and typically is so derived in the ordinary experience of individuals and communities. Neither agreement nor consensus is required on all the details of “whatever it is about human beings that entitles them to basic human rights and freedoms.”

The political consensus of the *Universal Declaration*, although very important, undoubtedly rests upon a philosophically thin account of the dignity of the human person. That is in large part because the “international community” is not a community. It is not, in Aristotle’s sense of the term, a *polis* in which free persons deliberate the question, How ought we to order our life together? Of course, there are many and interesting debates about whether the United States or its several states qualify as a *polis*. Without going into the details of those debates, it is beyond dispute that our constitutional order presents itself as a political community deliberating its right ordering on the basis of the political sovereignty of “the people” exercised through the specified means of representative democracy. The foundational principle here is the statement of the Declaration of Independence that just government is derived from the consent of the governed.

The question of the dignity of the human person is rightly understood as a political question. It is inescapably a political question. The resolution (always provisional and open to revision) of the great majority of political disputes does not ordinarily require delving into the foundational truths explored by philosophy, ethics, and theology. Our political discourse is guided, and frequently misguided, by custom, habits, and tacit understandings. Proponents of “natural law
theory” rely heavily on moral reasoning attuned to “those things that we cannot not know.” And of course other theories are advanced, both because they are held to be true and because they are thought to be useful for purposes of political persuasion.

In general, however, our political life is not heavily burdened by theory, or at least not by the explication of theory. That is because knowing and judging the good things of human life is not so burdened. In the realm of bioethics, however, and specifically with respect to the dignity of the human person, such explication is sometimes required. An obvious example is abortion, and the many issues inseparably tied to abortion. The most consequential political event of the past half century in the United States was the Supreme Court’s Roe and Doe decisions of January 1973. Numerous political analysts have described how those decisions have dramatically reconfigured the nation’s cultural and political life. And of course those decisions are intimately tied to many other “hot button” issues in bioethics. As an act of “raw judicial power” (Justice Byron White in dissent), Roe v. Wade removed a preeminently political, which is to say moral, question from public deliberation. The abortion decisions were a profoundly anti-political act and are accurately described as instances of the judicial usurpation of politics. And, of course, by attempting to remove the question, the Court turned it into something very much like the vortex of American politics.

The moral question is not, as the court majority supposed, about when a human life begins. That is a biological and medical question on which there is no serious dispute. The moral question can be put this way: At what point in its existence ought we, and for what reasons ought we, to recognize that a human life should be protected in law?

On this issue, if no other, Peter Singer has it right. As the noted Princeton advocate of infanticide said in a letter to the New York Times rebuking Mario Cuomo for his confused thinking about abortion, “The crucial moral question is not when human life begins, but when human life reaches the point at which it merits protection . . . Unless we separate these two questions—when does life begin, and when does it merit protection?—we are unlikely to achieve any clarity about the moral status of embryos.”2

That moral question is also and unavoidably a political question.
One might make the case that it is the most fundamental of political questions. If politics is deliberating how we ought to order our life together, there can hardly be a more basic question than this: Who belongs to the “we”? Although ostensibly removing it from politics, the abortion decisions forced into the political arena an issue that was thought to have been settled in the centuries of civilizational tradition of which our polity is part. Namely, that it is morally wrong and rightly made unlawful deliberately to kill unborn children.

If a principle is established by which some indisputably human lives do not warrant the protections traditionally associated with the dignity of the human person—because of their size, dependency, level of development, or burdensomeness to others—it would seem that there are numerous candidates for the application of the principle, beginning with the radically handicapped, both physically and mentally, not to mention millions of the aged and severely debilitated in our nation’s nursing homes. It may be objected that of course we as a people are not about to embark upon such a program of extermination. To think we might do so is simply bizarre.

As a culturally and politically contingent fact, that is true. But under the regime of Roe, a regime extended to embryonic stem cell research and other bioethical controversies, we have no “clear and unambiguous” agreed-upon rule precluding such horrors. We do have in our constituting texts, notably in the Declaration of Independence, a commitment to natural rights; and we do have deeply entrenched in our culture and politics a concept of the dignity of the human person.

The question is: Who belongs to the community for which we as a community accept responsibility, including the responsibility to protect, along with other natural rights, their right to life? This is a preeminently political question. It is not a question to be decided by bioethicists. Bioethicists, by virtue of their disciplined attention to this and related questions, are in a position to help inform political deliberations and decisions about these matters, but they are rightly and of necessity to be decided politically. They are rightly so decided because our constitutional order vests political sovereignty in the people who exercise that sovereignty through prescribed means of representation. They are of necessity so decided because in this society the views of moral philosophers—whether trained as such in the
academy or acting as such on the bench—are not deemed to be deter-
nominate. Witness the democratic non-ratification of the Supreme
Court’s imposition of the unlimited abortion license.

To say that such decisions are rightly decided politically is not to
say that the resulting decisions will always be morally right. Those
who disagree with the decisions that are made must make their case
in the political arena. The product of bioethics may be prescriptive
in theory—resulting in “clear and unambiguous” guidelines—but,
in this constitutional order, it has to be persuasive in practice. In
fact, of course, disagreements among moral philosophers, including
bioethicists, are as strong as those found in the general public, and
probably stronger.

In the happy absence of philosopher kings, everybody enters the
process of debate, deliberation, and decision equipped only with
the powers of persuasion. Obviously, not everybody enters on equal
terms, since powers of persuasion, access to the means of persuasion,
and audiences inclined to be persuaded to one position or another
are far from equal. This is a highly unsatisfactory circumstance in
which the achievement of “clear and unambiguous” rules is rare and a
“political consensus” resting on a moral point of reference as a “place-
holder” may be deemed a great achievement.

The dignity of the human person—construed not, or not primar-
ily, as the assertion of the rights of the autonomous but as the obli-
gation to protect those whose autonomy is very limited—is such a
point of reference. It is complained that those who defend that point
of reference have an unfair advantage in that it is so widely shared in
our culture. They are engaged, it is said, not in moral or ethical argu-
ment but in politics. As suggested earlier, however, politics is moral
argument about how we ought to order our life together. After the
June 1953 uprising in East Germany, the secretary of the Writers
Union distributed leaflets declaring that the people had lost the con-
fidence of the government and it would take redoubled efforts to win
it back. To which the playwright Bertolt Brecht is supposed to have
responded, “Would it not be easier in that case for the government to
dissolve the people and elect another?” Our present day bioethicists,
moral philosophers, and judges sometimes appear to want to heed
Brecht’s advice and dissolve the people that they have and who have
proven so recalcitrant to their expertise.
The people who are the American *polis* are deeply attached to the concept of the dignity of the human person. For those who have a moral adherence to this constitutional order and the means it provides for addressing the *res publica*, that is a factor of considerable significance. Yet there are those who contend that such popular attachments are prejudices or unreflective biases that have no legitimate place in authentically *public* discourse. Well known is the proscription, commonly associated with John Rawls, of “comprehensive accounts” from authentically public discourse. The proscription is most rigorously asserted when such comprehensive accounts are perceived to be “religious” in nature.

The moral authority of those who would make the rules for what is to be admitted and what is to be excluded from public discourse is far from being clear to many students of these arguments and is totally baffling to the people who are the public. The perfectly understandable suspicion is that there is a self-serving dynamic in the efforts of some to appoint themselves the gatekeepers and border patrol of the public square, admitting some arguments and excluding others. The proscription of comprehensive accounts—especially when they are religious or associated with a religious tradition—gives a monopoly on the public square to accounts that are non-religious or anti-religious in character. Such accounts are, in fact, no less comprehensive, as has been persuasively argued by, among others, Alasdair MacIntyre in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*. Conflicts that are described as being between reason and tradition are typically conflicts between different traditions of reason, each invoking its own authorities.

In the comprehensive accounts that would proscribe other comprehensive accounts, especially if they are perceived as “religious” in nature, the operative assumption is typically atheism. This is not to say that all who support such proscriptions are atheists. It is to say that, in their moral reasoning, they are *methodological* atheists. Only those arguments are to be admitted to public deliberation that proceed *as if* God does not exist. This is a non-rational prejudice in which the great majority of Americans do not acquiesce. Whether by invoking Pascal’s Wager or some other argument, they believe it is a great deal more rational to proceed as if God does exist. In any event, they do so proceed. The politically sovereign people are free to acknowledge, and generally do acknowledge, a sovereignty higher than
their own, and to give public expression to that acknowledgment.

For most purposes in the ordering of our common life, it is neither necessary nor wise to invoke an account of moral reality beyond what is required for the resolution of the issue at hand. Explicitly moral arguments are not to be expanded or multiplied beyond necessity. On most issues, a sustainable measure of political equilibrium can be achieved by appeal to a widely shared and “thin” account of moral reality that is far less than comprehensive. This is frequently not the case, however, in questions related to bioethics.

People who are themselves devoutly religious may in the public square advance arguments that are not distinctively religious in character. This is notably the case with proponents of natural law theory. They proceed on the basis that human beings are naturally endowed with a rational capacity to discern the truth, including the moral truth, of things. In public argument, they generally prescind from religious or theological claims, contending that agreement on the ultimate sources and ends of human reason is not necessary to the exercise of human reason.

Contrary to the critics of natural law theory, the theory and its practice is not discredited by the observation that many, if not most, of its practitioners do in fact have definite ideas on sources and ends. Nor is it discredited by being widely perceived as a distinctively Catholic theory. Its proponents can readily respond that a distinctively Catholic contribution to our common life is to have preserved a universal understanding of reason that is, being universal, in no way peculiarly Catholic. It is an understanding that has strong roots in the Aristotelian view of politics and public discourse under discussion here.

Not all Americans are as abstemious as natural law theorists when it comes to unfurling in public argument their ultimate and comprehensive truth claims. For the great majority of Americans, religion and morality are inextricably intertwined. Public arguments involve different publics or different parts of the public. To those publics who are presumed to share their comprehensive account of reality in its fullness, proponents of this position or that will make the arguments that they think will be most effective in persuading. This is inevitable, and those who have a problem with it have a problem with democracy. (Obviously, many thoughtful people, from ancient
times to the present, have had and do have grave reservations about democracy.)

There is, of course, a necessary concern about unbridled populism, raw majoritarianism, and the dangers of demagoguery. The framers of our constitutional order were keenly aware of these problems. Thus our system of representation, checks and balances, staggered elections, vetoes, overrides, judicial review, and other mechanisms conducive to more sober deliberation of how we ought to order or life together. While this intentionally complex order slows the course of turning arguments into law and public policy, it in no way restricts the arguments that can be made.

Demagogic agitation for specific laws or policies is sometimes employed, for instance, by identifying one’s policy preferences with the will of God. Such appeals are usually limited to audiences where it is thought they might be persuasive. There is also the demagoguery of appeals to the more general public that—for instance in the controversy over embryonic stem cell research—cruelly exploit human suffering and exaggerated or unfounded hopes for cures. Demagoguery will be always with us. Our constitutional order is not a machine that runs of itself. It depends upon the cultivation of restraint, civility, and disciplined reason, which are always in short supply. And we do well to keep in mind that the wisest of our public philosophers, from Tocqueville onward, cautioned not only against the tyranny of the majority but also against the tyranny of the minority. Today that caution is pertinent to the minority that would impose a rule that authentically public discourse must be methodologically atheistic.

Restraint, civility, and disciplined reason are seriously undermined by the hostility to “comprehensive accounts” in our public discourse—especially if they are perceived to be religious in nature. In most intellectual enterprises, and not least in ethics, there is a propensity to emulate the methodologies and exactitude associated with the physical sciences. Philosopher Thomas Nagel writes:

This reductionist dream is nourished by the extraordinary success of the physical sciences in our time, not least in their recent application to the understanding of life through molecular biology. It is natural to try to take any successful intellectual method as far as it will go. Yet the impulse to find
an explanation of everything in physics has over the last fifty years gotten out of control. The concepts of physical science provide a very special, and partial, description of the world that experience reveals to us. It is the world with all subjective consciousness, sensory appearances, thought, value, purpose, and will left out. What remains is the mathematically describable order of things and events in space and time. We have more than one form of understanding. Different forms of understanding are needed for different kinds of subject matter. The great achievements of physical science do not make it capable of encompassing everything, from mathematics to ethics to the experiences of a living animal. 

The concept of the dignity of the human person was arrived at, and is today sustained, by such a different form of understanding. It is a form of understanding that is carefully reasoned, frankly moral and, for most people who affirm it, is in fact, if not by theoretical necessity, inseparable from a comprehensive account that is unapologetically acknowledged as religious. The hostility to admitting this account to public discourse is longstanding. Indeed, it has long been argued by some that moral referents should be eliminated altogether from law and public policy, that ours is a strictly procedural polity devoted only to means and prescinding from ends, and especially from overtly moral ends. Oliver Wendell Holmes famously wrote that it would be a great benefit “if every word of moral significance could be banished from the law altogether, and other words adopted which should convey legal ideas uncolored by anything outside the law.”

But, of course, it was by ideas and experiences outside the law that the concept of the dignity of the human person was enshrined in the law. The word “enshrined” is used advisedly, indicating the sacred sources of that dignity. In religious thought, and in Christian thought specifically, the dignity of the human person has become the touchstone of ethical reflection. Pope John Paul II wrote on several occasions that the entirety of Catholic social doctrine rests on the understanding of the dignity of the human person. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* devotes no less than 23 pages to explaining the concept and its implications. It is an explanation that in its essentials is
embraced also by non-Catholic Christians, as is evident, for instance, in the recent statement of Evangelicals and Catholics Together, “That They May Have Life.”7 It is a concept firmly grounded in the Jewish tradition and—although not without troubling ambiguities—in that of Islam.8

That concept, on which almost all Americans rely, with varying degrees of reflectiveness and consistency, in deliberating how we ought to order our life together can be briefly summarized: A human being is a person possessed of a dignity we are obliged to respect at every point of development, debilitation, or decline by virtue of being created in the image and likeness of God. Endowed with the spiritual principle of the soul, with reason, and with free will, the destiny of the person who acts in accord with moral conscience in obedience to the truth is nothing less than eternal union with God. This is the dignity of the human person that is to be respected, defended, and indeed revered.

That is beyond doubt a very comprehensive account of the dignity of the human person. I have referred to the political sovereignty of “the people” in our constitutional order. The location of sovereignty—the authority to which the polis holds itself finally accountable—has in the post-World War II been, one might say, personalized. Ours is a period that Karl Barth, the most influential Protestant theologian of the past century, described as one of “disillusioned sovereignty.”9 The great disillusionment is with the sovereignty of the state.

If one asked almost all Enlightenment thinkers what is sovereign, they would not have answered “reason” or “the individual” or “science.” The unhesitating answer would be “the state.” The darkest and most relentless depiction of the modern political project was offered by Thomas Hobbes. He taught that the incarnate and resurrected God-man who lives and governs is to be replaced in the temporal world by a mortal god (deus mortalis)—a machine-like man, mythologically known as the Leviathan. Engraved on the title page of the 1651 edition of his book by that title is Job 41:24: Non est potestas super terram quae comparatur ei—“There is upon the earth no power like his.”10 After Auschwitz and the Gulag Archipelago, none can read those words without a moral shudder.

There is on earth Leviathan’s like and, indeed, his sovereign: the human person. The concept of the dignity of the human person may
be a “placeholder” in international covenants, but in the American political experiment, when public discourse is not arbitrarily constrained by methodological atheism, it is, with respect to bioethics and other matters of great moral moment, a concept richly and rationally elaborated and claiming overwhelming public support. It is, in sum, a concept that is indispensable to the political task of deliberating and deciding how we ought to order our life together.

Notes

8 For a discussion of different religious understandings, see David Novak’s Natural Law in Judaism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and C. S. Lewis’s discussion of the Tao in The Abolition of Man (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1943).
10 Cited by Hittinger, ibid., p. 280, n. 16. I am indebted to Professor Hittinger for directing me to unfamiliar literature on the historical development of the idea of the dignity of the human person.