

Biomedical Technologies and Human Dignity

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Biomedical Technologies



Human Dignity: Everybody Supports It...

Euthanasia and suicide are contrary to the intrinsic dignity of human persons.

We want our deaths to be free from pain, mess, embarrassment. We want to be able to make deliberate choices at the end of life, so that we can die with dignity.

The use of technology to modify human nature is dehumanizing and threatens human dignity.

The use or creation of human embryos in research and their manipulation undermine human dignity.

Human dignity will be enhanced, rather than diminished, by the great project of addressing the suffering that attends illness.

Emerging technologies allow us to improve human nature and thus enhance human dignity.

Research that could create entities that may blur the lines between human and nonhuman primates should not be conducted because it could threaten to undermine human dignity.

It seems logically possible to engage in human-to nonhuman primate neural grafting without adversely affecting the dignity of humans.

Human dignity is inviolable. **It must be respected and protected.**



...and therefore

a useless
concept

a squishy,
subjective
notion

a conversation
stopper

the concept is
a mess

and idea that
cannot be
thought

Problems with Dignity

- **What exactly is it?**
- **Who has it?**
- **What is it good for?**

What Is It?

Personal, Social, Aspirational

- Can be lost, undermined, violated
- Some people may lack for a variety of reasons
- Admits of degrees

Intrinsic, Inviolable

What Is It?

Personal, Social, Aspirational

- **Aristotelian dignity.** A special worthiness or moral excellence.
- **Dignity as flourishing.** Refers to people's capacities to lead fulfilling lives, to develop and nurture their talents, their capabilities.
- **Aristocratic dignity.** A quality of a human being who acts in accordance with her superior rank and position.
- **Comportment dignity.** The displayed quality of a human being who acts in accordance with expectations of proper behavior.

What Is It?

- **Apparent inconsistencies can result from:**
 - **Conceptualizing dignity as either aspirational or inviolable**
 - E.g., Euthanasia
 - **Upholding different values or characteristics to be of relevance when determining whether dignity is undermined or protected.**
 - E.g., Human enhancement



What Is It?

Personal, Social, Aspirational

Intrinsic, Inviolable

- Cannot be lost or undermined
- It's inalienable
- Does not admit of degrees
- It demands that possessors of dignity never be treated merely as means but always at the same time as an end

Who Has It?

Personal, Social, Aspirational

- Only those human beings who have the relevant quality(s),
 - e.g., moral excellence, a particular kind of demeanor, certain behavior

Intrinsic, Inviolable

- All, and only, the human species
- Entities who have a particular intrinsic property
 - e.g., moral self-legislation, rationality, complex emotions...

Who Has It?

- **More than one entity involved when dealing with biotechnologies**
 - **E.g., Human-Nonhuman chimera research; embryo research;**

What Is It Good for?

- **Not good as public policy criterion**
 - E.g., Council of Europe Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine
- **Good in other important ways:**
 - Help us think about ontological questions that might assist us in understanding something about the nature of human beings
 - Expand the narrow concerns for individual autonomy often consuming bioethicists.
 - Frame discussions of biotechnology in a way that attends to the social relations among human beings rather than simply focusing on issues of individuals.
 - Broaden the conversation to include issues related to our obligations to other beings (enhanced humans, chimeras, human embryos) rather than simply on our individual rights.



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Thank you



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