# SENIOR THESIS

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Outline of Major Concepts

- **The problem of defining human dignity**
  - Many foundations of the modern concept: antiquity, religion, Kant, modern government
  - Some definitions integrate these foundations: Leon Kass and Joseph Seifert

- **Dignity as a placeholder for what is characteristically human**
  - Dignity as a middle term: personhood-dignity and dignity-decision making are the popular connections in bioethics today
  - As a placeholder dignity could be replaced by what it stands for- to be characteristically human

- **The problem of many different definitions of personhood**
  - Every field tries to give a definition of personhood using the vocabulary and told available to them
    - Science defines the person using evolution and molecular biology
    - Philosophy defines the person in terms of rationality and social connections
    - Theology defines the person in terms of body and soul

- **The universal definition of personhood based on human experience**
  - All persons must be living *Homo sapiens*.
  - All persons must be simultaneously material and immaterial.
  - All persons must die.

- **Who is a Person?**
  - The personhood of fetuses and embryos, infants and children, adults in comas, and adults with dementia or other mental handicaps is often challenged, but analysis shows all human beings are persons.
    - There is no such thing as potential persons.
    - Display of attributes is not needed to affirm membership in a species when genealogical connection is known
    - *Homo sapiens* at all levels of development show material and organizing principles.

- **Implications of personhood**
  - The only right afforded to persons is a right to maintain fully their personhood.

- **A methodology for bioethical decision-making and practical examples**
  - Three step methodology in which dignity is not considered
    - Review what it means to be a person
    - Analyze the situation for affronts to personhood.
    - Ensure that personhood is maintained in the resolution
The world of medicine is constantly progressing. Everyday scientists look for ways to prevent physical, mental, and emotional suffering. The search for new types of surgery, innovative medicines, and groundbreaking procedures will surely help people live longer, happier lives. Yet the realm of bioethics refuses to accept new technologies as good, solely on the fact that they will support life and decrease pain. Bioethicists search for the deeper implications of technologies like stem cell research, mind altering or enhancing drugs, and reconstructive surgery. They search for the effects that these technologies may have on our societies, relationships, and futures. In short, they reduce every question they encounter into one: What does it mean to be a human being?

Many people today answer this question with a seemingly simple phrase. They say to be human means to have dignity. Yet this phrase does not seem to answer the question satisfactorily. Instead it sparks another series of questions: What is dignity? How do humans get it? Do all *Homo sapiens* have it? Does it give humans any rights? These questions do not have simple answers, yet bioethicists like Gilbert Meilaender and Leon Kass still hold that it is an important concept in bioethics. Not all philosophers are as supportive of this concept though. Stephen Pinker, a psychologist at Harvard, states, “The problem with dignity is that it is a squishy subjective notion hardly up to the heavy weight moral demands assigned to it.”¹ Ruth Macklin, another leading bioethicist, claims it is a useless concept and argues that bioethics has functioned very well in the past using the simpler, more concrete idea of autonomy to make decisions.²

Dignity as a concept has many different meanings and consequently is difficult to use to make bioethical decisions. One definition of dignity states that it is a placeholder for what is characteristically human. As a placeholder, dignity should be replaced by what it stands for,
personhood. This concept can be defined by concrete human experiences and can be more effectively used as the basis for bioethical decision-making.

THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING HUMAN DIGNITY

Critics of dignity cite numerous examples in which the term has sparked controversy. For instance, proponents on both sides of the physician-assisted suicide debate use the concept of dignity to support their beliefs. Those in favor of physician-assisted suicide crusade for death with dignity, a death on one’s own terms without the humiliating circumstances that often accompany the drawn-out process of dying in today’s healthcare system. Those who are against physician-assisted suicide cite dignity as a concept that upholds the value of every person as a unique and important part of society regardless of health or mental status. Not only is use of the word by opposing sides of the same argument sometimes ambiguous and confusing, members of the same religious tradition seem not to be able to agree on a definition of dignity. In the *Summa Theologica* Thomas Aquinas writes, “a man who sins deviates from the rational order and so loses his human dignity.”³ Pope John Paul II writes in his encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae*, “Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity.”⁴ What is it about human dignity that gives it this uncertain or squishy nature? Why is it so difficult to come to a simple definition of human dignity?

Some of the problem can be attributed to the varying sources from which dignity’s meaning is derived. In classical Greek and Roman antiquity, the notion of dignity is something rare and exceptional, something that is worthy of honor. It is from this foundation that dignity can be viewed as a concept that raises humans above other animals. But what is it about humans that raises them to such a level? Is it individual virtues, skills, and qualities or is it an overarching character or demeanor? Some proponents of technologies that augment the human body and
mind argue that according to this definition these technologies enhance human dignity. The Stoics, a group of ancient Greek philosophers, however, did not use the idea of dignity as honor to separate individuals based on their qualities and virtues. These thinkers recognized only one characteristic as important: reason. All people possessing reason were believed to have equal dignity.\(^5\)

The Christian and Jewish religious traditions add significantly to the meaning of dignity as well. These traditions derive the meaning of dignity from the biblical idea that human beings are made in the image of God. This teaching states that because human beings are God-like they possess inherent and inalienable dignity. All individuals, healthy and infirm, are made in God’s image and therefore share in His God-given dignity. Proponents use this definition of dignity not only to argue for the practice of using medicine only for healing, but also to argue against technologies that manipulate nature in a way that only God should be able to.\(^6\) Supporters of this use of dignity believe that technologies such as in vitro fertilization, cloning, and genetic engineering should not be pursued. This basis for dignity is problematic because many non-religious bioethicists believe that the use of the word dignity serves only as camouflage for the religious belief that the order of nature is divinely sanctioned. They discard any meaning dignity might have because they believe it has no foundation other than divine revelation.

Immanuel Kant’s definition of human dignity is much easier to apply to the decision making process than many other definitions. He states that dignity prohibits the use of another person merely as a means to one’s own end. For Kant, dignity refers to value of the human person which is greater than the value of any other being or thing. The intrinsic value of a human person shows that all value is not homogenous.\(^7\) Human value is not determined the same way all other value or worth is determined. The price of a loaf of bread is determined by how much
people in a certain area at a certain time will pay for it. A person’s value is not determined by others; it simply exists. Because this definition insists that persons cannot be used as a means, it is very practical for bioethical decisions about research and voluntary informed consent. Kant’s definition of dignity celebrates autonomy. Although autonomy may in theory seem to be a fairly straightforward concept, from a practical perspective it is difficult to use as a basis for many bioethical decisions. Infants and dementia patients cannot act autonomously. Do these people not possess human dignity?

The final source to which the meaning of dignity can be traced is much more contemporary than any of the other sources. Many 20th-century constitutions and international declarations use the word dignity with the intention of protecting the rights of all people equally. Dignity is mentioned in the preamble to the Charter of the United Nations, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in the Constitution of the State of Virginia, and in the Basic Law of Germany. These governmental and modern sources of dignity make sure to use the word dignity, but do very little to explain its meaning. The use of the word dignity without defining any certain meaning is exactly what Steven Pinker is referring to when he refers to dignity’s subjective sense. Using a word that does not have certain meaning does nothing besides create more confusion and ambiguity.

Leon Kass and Joseph Seifert both propose that each definition of dignity does not have to be mutually exclusive. Each has a valuable lesson to offer, and, when they are integrated, result in philosophies of dignity that have varying levels. Kass proposes two levels of dignity. He calls them the basic dignity of human being and the full dignity of being human. The basic dignity of human being is afforded to all humans equally by their very nature as human beings. Kass is sure to clarify, however, that dignity is not simply a list of rights one deserves. It is not a
belonging; it is the active assertion of those natural rights humans deserve against individuals who threaten these rights. However, the full dignity of being human is not equally distributed to all people. In fact, Kass believes, as did the ancient Greeks and Romans, that this type of dignity “is not something to be found in every living thing like a nose or a navel.”¹³ It is found in a flourishing of human life. There is an inherent dignity in showing exemplary virtue, but also in daily human activities. To flourish does not mean that one must be the hero in every situation. To flourish means to go about with human activity and relations. The full dignity of being human can be found in simple acts such as cooking a meal or dancing a dance.¹⁴ Kass’ division of dignity recognizes that all humans have dignity, but certain humans display their dignity more fully in their flourishing. The dignity of being human is not something that one can earn for life by flourishing at one point or another. Rather it is a dignity that can fluctuate within a particular individual. When slaves revolt, the dignity of being human is affirmed,¹⁵ and when people are objectified and degraded the dignity of being human is lost.

Joseph Seifert starts with an idea similar to Kass’ basic dignity of human being. Seifert calls this dignity ontological dignity. It is based on the substantial being of a human and its potencies.¹⁶ The key to ontological dignity is its recognition of potency. An infant or an adult in a coma both have the potential to reason and participate fully in human activity; therefore, they possess dignity. Some human beings, however, have the ability to change their human potencies into actualities, yet not all humans can change their potencies to actualities in the same degree. The degree to which a human being is able to actualize his or her potencies can be evaluated with two principles: maturity and consciousness. People are then afforded rights based on the level to which these characteristics are developed. For instance, legal autonomy is not granted to children until they reach the age of 18 and an individual who is in coma is not permitted to vote. These
rights are a consequence of what Seifert calls the dignity of the awakened person.\textsuperscript{17} The next level of dignity is based on moral premises. People who live morally good lives have moral dignity and those who do not recognize morality cannot obtain this type of dignity. Moral dignity requires a continued effort. It is more of a mission than a possession\textsuperscript{18}. The final form of dignity for Seifert does not rely on one’s self. It is dependent on the gifts given by others and God. This type of dignity is similar to the Roman and Greek notion of dignity as honor. It is based on the talents one is endowed with by God, the position of respect given by a community, or the special care given by one’s lover.\textsuperscript{19} In this model of dignity, there are varying levels of dignity and even varying degrees of dignity within each level, but each is not independent of the other. Each type of dignity builds on the dignity of the previous level, and because of this even the person who has no ability to actualize his or her potencies does have some dignity.\textsuperscript{20}

From just these few examples it is clear that there are many different ways in which dignity can be explored and defined. Some of them are very similar while others are drastically different. Some ideas about dignity even use the same set of premises, but come to different conclusions based on different perspectives and underlying motivators. Gilbert Meilaender recognizes the difficulty in reducing dignity to a single definition that has certain implications for bioethics. He proposes that even though there are many different definitions they all seek to “represent what is characteristically human and to be honored and upheld because it is human.”\textsuperscript{21} He calls dignity a place holder for these larger and more complex ideas. If all uses of the word dignity do in fact seek to represent what is characteristically human, the greater difficulty for bioethics is not to determine what dignity is, but rather to recognize universally what the human being is or what a person is.
It seems that many authors in bioethics focus on one of two important connections. Many focus on using dignity to make bioethical decisions. Articles focus on the rights which humans deserve because of their dignity. Articles entitled “Human Dignity and Public Bioethics,”22 “Human Dignity and Political Entitlements,”23 and “The Right to Life and the Fourfold Root of Human Dignity”24 demonstrate this focus well. The other focus of modern bioethics is to search for a definition of dignity based on the development of a universal understanding of the person. Modern bioethicist Gilbert Meilaender recently wrote a book entitled Neither Beast nor God: The Dignity of the Human Person which explores what is required for personhood and how it relates to dignity. Others have explored similar ideas in articles such as “Human Uniqueness and Human Dignity: Persons in Nature and the Nature of Persons”25 and “Human Dignity and the Mystery of the Human Soul.”26

Although both the dignity-decision making and the dignity-person connections are important, often, the important connection of person-decision making is passed over. It seems that dignity serves as a middle term that is used to relate the two ideas. Why are the ideas of personhood or the human usually not directly related to bioethical decisions? If, as Meilaender believes, dignity truly is a placeholder, why must it be used? As a placeholder, it could very easily be replaced by what it stands for, human characteristics and their implications. In fact, the elimination of the word dignity has the potential to greatly reduce the pluralism in bioethics. Charles Malik, the draftsman of the of the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights, said that when it came to human rights a single question presented itself: “What is man?”27 Pope John Paul II made a similar statement to the General Assembly of the United Nations. He said that “it
is one thing to uphold a legitimate pluralism of forms and freedom, but it is quite another to deny that the nature of man or that the human experience have any universality or intelligibility.”

Popular culture champions dignity as a value that must be upheld. Culture argues that without dignity each person will lose his or her worth according to the dignity-person connection. However, Robert Spaemann disagrees. In the introduction to his book *Persons: The Difference Between ‘Someone’ or ‘Something,’* he states that “Suddenly the term ‘person’ has come to play a key role in demolishing the idea that human beings, *qua* human beings, have some kind of rights before other human beings.” The popular argument states that human beings do have rights as persons, but is quick to qualify that not all human beings are persons. Ideas like this lead to massive genocides, in which one group does not see another as deserving of rights and therefore eliminates them. A universal definition of the human person, however, would not support this assertion. Dignity in the popular sense does the same thing. It recognizes that dignity affords rights, but then qualifies that all human beings do not have dignity. Because dignity has such a loose definition however, no statement can be made to refute this relativistic claim.

Gabriel Marcel insists that a reality check is necessary if any of these terms are going to be useful. He states, “I think the philosopher who first discovers certain truths and then sets out to expound them in their dialectical or systematic interconnections always runs the risks of profoundly altering the nature of the truths he has discovered.” Part of the problem with dignity is that it is a mental construct that can neither be seen nor touched. Although it can be experienced, it is difficult to verbalize these experiences and oftentimes those theorizing about it have not had the experience themselves. Personhood is much more real. Persons can be observed, researched, and touched. There may be some parts of the person that cannot be
explored empirically, but everyone has experienced what it means to be a person. There is a guarantee that theorists have experienced the notion for themselves. According to Marcel this experience of a theoretical concept is the only way to ensure the theory is correct.

**THE PROBLEM OF MANY DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS OF PERSONHOOD**

Although the human experience lends itself to a universal definition, many different fields try to define the human person using only the ideas and vocabulary found in that field. Before sound bioethical decisions can be made, however, a universal definition that recognizes each of these traditions must be synthesized. Once a definition of the human person has been developed, its implications can be explored and a methodology for using the definition for bioethical decision making can be created.

Science, theology, philosophy, and even art all have something to say about the human person. Members of these traditions work tirelessly to use the tools they have available, in order to describe their human experiences. Science tries to describe the human experience in terms of matter. Experiments are performed to analyze the effects of drugs, chemicals, and our genetic information. Many scientists believe in the process of evolution. For them all human characteristics can be explained in terms of a biological advantage that over time has been integrated into the genetic information of all *Homo sapiens*. Evolution claims that the brains of social animals such as *Homo sapiens* are wired to feel pleasure when they participate in social practices such as cooperation and to feel pain when they are shunned, excluded, or hurt. Positive reinforcement for social practices makes sense because they allow for a wide range of benefits such as more efficient food acquisition and the ability to fight off large predators. Evolution views man as a cog in the machine of the world. He is naturally inclined to act in ways which ensure his future and the future of the world.
At first glance, this philosophy may seem to portray the human being as nothing unique. However, closer examination does show that science recognizes man as unique and places him above all other animals. Although *Homo sapiens* are wired to portray social behavior, science also recognizes that self preservation should be hard wired in the brain of every species. Self preservation and communal cooperation often result in tendencies toward the same behaviors. However, sometimes they do not. Humans recognize that stealing from a person or maybe even killing a person in order to take all of his or her belongings would definitely be a benefit to them. Society, however, has instituted a cultural structure to discourage these things from happening. Society instills values of kindness and sharing in its children. It praises self-sacrificing heroes and honors them with rituals and ceremonies. The fact that society, a human institution, works to prevent the selfish elimination of its members shows that human life does deserve protection. Societies do not institute similar practices and laws to protect mice, birds, or deer. There is an obvious difference between the life of a deer and that of a human. Furthermore, in the claim that human beings naturally work to ensure their future and the future of the world, scientists recognize that humans are worthy of care in the world. They have a responsibility to care for the world, something which is required of no other animal or plant, and it is important for humans to take care of the world so that their survival is ensured, not the survival of other specific species or individuals. Despite evolution and science’s effort to focus on the material of the *Homo sapiens*, the statements that are made naturally separate man from other species and point to the thing that causes this separation, the immaterial.

According to Robert Spaemann philosophy has tried to identify two main attributes of humans that separate them from the rest of the world’s organisms and provide the basis for the name person. Philosophy first looks at what is means to be rational and then at the social
character of humans. Boethius’ definition of the person recognizes the individual as a substance of a rational nature.  

Descartes’ famous statement *cogito ergo sum* (“I think therefore I am”) defines the existence of the person entirely on an ability to think. Hume and Locke have tried to define personal identity and the person in terms of memory. They believe that perceptions and impressions exist independently and are only connected by resemblance, contiguity, and causation. However, to simply define a philosophy of the person based on a subjective inwardness is problematic. It does not provide for the separation of humanity from the rest of the world. All animals are presumed to have some kind of subjective inwardness, a consciousness or an ability to do more than react. Robins collect hundreds of pieces of string and grass in order to create a single end product, a nest, and beavers do the same thing when they cut down and collect thousands of twigs to build their dams.

When a sense of subjective inwardness is combined with the communal nature of humans, a stronger distinction can be made between humans and the rest of animals. Many different species of animals act in a communal nature, but a community of persons is different. To be a person is to stand in relation to all other persons *a priori*. Each member of a human community occupies a unique place that cannot be occupied by any other person. The uniqueness of the human person is not defined qualitatively. It is defined by a place and a time within the universe that an individual alone occupies. When the amnesia patient gains consciousness or realizes what has happened, the first questions asked are: Who am I? and Where am I? Both questions show that in order to regain his or her place in the community as a person, the patient tries to establish his or her unique place. The patient tries to establish a context in which he or she exists. The only way to define a particular person is in relation to everything else, to all other persons and all that can never be a person.
person is important in this context. It is drastically different from the notion of humanity, which is a biological concept. Humanity implies a genealogical connection between individuals that is similar to the connection between twigs on a common tree. The word person implies a connection that should be viewed like abstract locations in space, always present and always in relation to each other.\textsuperscript{43} It is also important to note that humanity refers to each individual in the same way, but person refers to each individual differently. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, person is not a generic term, but a generalizable proper noun.\textsuperscript{44} In this sense it is similar to the way a proper family name, such as Smith or Johnson, means something different for each member of the family. The use of the family name implies different roles with different sets of responsibilities for each member of the family; to be Mrs. Smith means something different than to be Mr. Smith, just as to be a certain person means something different than to be a different person.

Another important contribution of philosophy to the definition of the human person is the recognition of the importance of a body and a rationality. This importance is often found in theology as well. The only difference is that theology replaces the term rationality with the idea of a soul. Before we begin our discussion of this relation, it is important to note the problem of dualism. Although both the body and soul are important to the understanding of the human, they cannot be viewed separately. A person is both body and soul, material and rationality, or subject and object. When we recognize that a person is both body and soul we see the uniqueness of the human condition. Gilbert Meilaender calls this uniqueness the in-between status of humans.\textsuperscript{45} They are neither God, total soul or rationality, nor beast, total material or body. Philosophy recognizes that persons are not simply subjects or objects in the subject-object relationship. They are subject and object at the same time. Some philosophers argue that humans cannot be persons
when they sleep or are under anesthesia. But because persons are not only object or subject personality still exists even if the subjective nature of the person is not active. Continuity of the person does not solely depend on continuity of consciousness, but rather depends only on the continuity of the organism in the world. However, the connection between the objective and subjective nature of humans does dictate that persons do have to be living beings.

This brief analysis of the human experience from several different thought traditions gives a basis on which a universal definition of the human person can be built, yet at the same time they present a difficulty. All of these traditions have drastically different views of the person, which makes it difficult to create a single absolute definition of the human person. Science even denies that such a definition can be made. Evolution states that the human is constantly changing and therefore cannot be defined absolutely.\textsuperscript{46} A philosophical analysis of the human person can address this problem. Karl Rahner states that “variability is part of the invariability of human nature”\textsuperscript{47} and Gilbert Meilaender affirms this sentiment by stating, “Living things can only maintain their existence by not remaining what they are.”\textsuperscript{48} These statements respect the scientific notion of needed change, but simultaneously assert that a universal definition of the person can be put forth. The following questions must be answered by the universal definition of the human person in order for it to be useful in the bioethical decision making process. The most obvious question that needs to be answered is: What is a person? Yet this question is not particularly helpful unless two other questions are addressed simultaneously. This first is: Who deserves this title of person? And the second is: What does it mean to be given this title?
THE UNIVERSE DEFINITION OF PERSONHOOD

As stated earlier, if the universal definition of personhood is not developed from the human experience, but from theoretical extrapolations and discussions, there will be no way to ensure its usefulness. Each part of the universal definition must arise from the experiences that every human has. The first part of the universal definition of personhood does indeed come from a universal experience. It simply requires that a person is a living member of the species Homo sapiens, something everyone has experienced. At its most basic level this assertion begins to make personhood an exclusive term. It limits personhood to at least having a material existence and begins to raise humans above all other organisms on the planet. The man in a dream is not a person, because he is never a living Homo sapiens. This notion of a person’s necessary membership in a particular species comes directly from science. Our DNA and biochemistry do play a role in personhood. It is what dictates biological humanness which is a necessary condition of personality. It is important to realize, however, that the universal definition of personhood cannot simply stop at this purely material premise. Although biological humanity is necessary for personhood, it is not sufficient.

Recognition of the immaterial aspect of a person is important as well. There must be some greater organizing principle that makes the material of Homo sapiens recognizable as individual persons. Science has tried to convince the world that the person is no more than a compilation of genetic parts. When a certain number of parts are compiled, a human being is created. The genetic information then influences and controls a person’s dispositions, tendencies, and behaviors for the entirety of his or her life. For science, all that matters are the genetic sentences that dictate human life. Gilbert Meilander in his article “Bioethics and the Character of Human Life” presents an interesting anecdote to demonstrate that these claims of science do not
hold up to scrutiny. He begins by presenting the following excerpt from *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway:

> He looked down into the water and watched the lines that went straight down into the dark of the water. He kept them straighter than anyone did, so that at each level in the darkness of the stream there would be a bait waiting exactly where he wished it to be for any fish that swam there … I have no understanding of it and I am not sure that I believe in it. Perhaps it was a sin to kill the fish … He urinated outside the shack and then went up the road to wake the boy. He was shivering with the morning cold … Then he was sorry for the great fish that had nothing to eat and his determination to kill him never relaxed in his sorrow for him. How many people will he feed, he thought. But are they worthy to eat him? … That was the saddest thing I ever saw with them, the old man thought. The boy was sad too and we begged her pardon and butchered her promptly … The boy did not go down. He had been there before and one of the fishermen was looking after the skiff for him.

Following this passage he asserts that Hemingway’s prose is generally regarded as clear and straightforward, but asks the reader if this passage made any sense. Did it? Of course it did not; that is because Meilander took the passage from pages 29, 104-105, 22, 74, 48, and 123, in that order.\(^49\) Meilaender tries to demonstrate that without an organizing principle material subunits cannot become an intelligible whole. If books are simply viewed as collections of sentences, then the same meaning should be obtained no matter what order the sentences are in. This, however, does not hold true.

The organizing principle must have something to organize. The human experience limits the ways of knowing things. An author cannot be considered an author if he does not write a book. Similarly, without material to organize, a person would not exist in a way that could be viewed by other organisms. However, the human body is more than a ball of clay which is molded by the spirit. It is an integral part of the person because the spirit is not accessible to others apart from the body.\(^50\) If humans were only body, they could still be viewed by others as members of the same species, as humans, but they would not be recognized as persons. Recognition of a stranger as a member of one’s own species does afford some responsibility to the other, yet focus is on a material value. As soon as a species member becomes weak or is a
burden to the group, it can be sacrificed and replaced by a stronger, more effective member of
the species. When recognition is of the embodied spirit, the simultaneous subject-object
existence of persons, one recognizes both their own unique position and that of the other
person. There is a realization that the other occupies an important position in the universe and
could never be replaced. This realization is something that is experienced on a regular basis.
Most people do not want to be thought of as replaceable; rather they wish to be viewed as
invaluable and irreplaceable by everyone they meet. Pope Benedict XVI states that “what is
biological in man is not only biological, but an expression and fulfillment of our humanity.”
The importance of the material and immaterial aspects is of utmost importance to the human
experience; without it humans would not have the capacities they currently are known to have.

The immaterial soul, spirit, or subjective nature of persons does not only allow for mutual
recognition of persons and the resulting respect; it allows for motivations, feelings, and
emotions. The material body or objective nature does not only provide a house for the spirit but
is an outlet for the expression of the immaterial. There are simply some places where the
genomic map cannot take us. It can instill survival techniques, instincts, and a drive to live, but
it cannot explain self-sacrifice, purposeful bodily or mental suffering, or allowing oneself to
become completely vulnerable. Human beings are constantly influenced by these biological
tendencies, but everyone has overcome these tendencies at one time or another. Overcoming an
ingrained and habituated biological drive can only be explained by a closer look at the
immaterial part of the person.

The human rationality or soul is what gives everything human a context. For instance,
DNA probably does control the desire to mate, but human love is more than that. Most
individuals do not mate with whomever they please whenever their DNA tells them to; rather
they enter into a self-sacrificing relationship. Both participants in the act, man and woman, desire each other, but in doing so sacrifice themselves to one another and their children for the rest of their lives. This is different from the rest of the material world. A plant’s DNA drives it to reproduce, but a plant has no responsibility to its offspring. Plants are different from animals, because animals have the abilities of perception, emotion, and movement. As a result of these abilities many animals, after succumbing to their primal desire to mate, make an effort to raise their young for a short period of time. However, if food is scarce or conditions poor, many species will eat their young to preserve themselves rather than sacrifice for their offspring. Other species simply abandon their young when conditions become harsh. Persons have all the qualities of animals, but also have an added ability of reflection. This ability allows for a realization that offspring are persons. They occupy a unique place in the universe, and parents have a responsibility to support them.

Not only does reflection influence our relationships, it also makes a person the center of his or her environment. This does not mean that the immateriality of humanity makes every human selfish; it simply means that it is immateriality, the ability for reflection, which creates meaning. A car cannot give itself a context. The usefulness of a car is determined by the user. If a car no longer fulfills its purpose, it no longer is viewed as a car. Instead it is viewed as a pile of scrap which no longer needs to be filled with gas or have its oil changed. A person however creates his or her own context. If a person is no longer viewed as a person, but instead as a useless mass of molecules it does not change the fact that the person will get hungry or thirsty. A human being’s status as an intact person cannot be determined by the thoughts of others; this status can only be determined by oneself as a result of reflection.
Before the next component of the universal definition of the human person can be explored, the idea of unity in the human person must be reiterated. It does not take much effort to recognize that there are two parts of the person: the body and the soul or the material and immaterial. This distinction is not the most important characteristic of the person. The fact of the simultaneous existence of both material and immaterial is most important. There are not two components of a person which can be separated and handled separately. If both are not present, a whole person cannot exist.

The final part of the universal definition of the human experience is death. It is the last human act, the last opportunity to display one’s personality. If one does not die, he or she is not a person in the sense of the human experience. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus is presented with an opportunity many people might think is an amazing one. He is trapped on the Island of Calypso, an immortal nymph of unrivaled beauty. She offers Odysseus immortality if he will remain with her forever as her husband. Surprisingly, Odysseus refuses the offer. He replies, “All that you say is true…look at my wise Penelope. She falls short of you… She is mortal after all…Nevertheless I long-I pine, all my days to travel home.” This short excerpt shows that Odysseus truly is tempted by Calypso’s offer, but in the end he wants to be a person, neither beast nor God. He does not want immortality, nor does he succumb to his animalistic desire. He wants to go home and die with his wife. He wants to be a person.

Anecdotes like this may tempt one to accept death as inevitable and therefore good. Persons must guard against this complacent acceptance of death because it denies a person his or her personhood. Each person who dies is uniquely a person who occupies a particular place in the universe. Death puts an end to the person so far as other individuals can know it. The destruction or denial of personhood can never be good. Reflection on death forces each person
to realize that he or she is not simply a member of a species, but rather an individual who must be honored and respected as unique.\textsuperscript{60}

It was stated previously that the first requirement of the human experience was to be a living member of the species \textit{Homo sapiens}. In fact, it is true that a person has his or her life. But it is important to realize that in having life one has one’s being.\textsuperscript{61} There is no difference between the two. Life is not a belonging a person has in the same sense that he or she may have a pair of shoes that can be thrown out. Life is being. It is had in the sense that one holds on to it in order to ensure existence. As a result, there can be no such thing as dying too soon.\textsuperscript{62} Life is not a term that refers to one’s accomplishments or age. It is simply one’s being and there is no time that is better than another for that being to end. Actually, all times are bad times. However, death is important for two reasons. The first is that one’s ability to remain interested and engaged in life depends upon the knowledge that it will end. It is impossible to be entirely satiated with life. There are things which are always sought for their own sake. Persons seek friendship, faith, work, and play.\textsuperscript{63} These things are sought for themselves and with no greater goals in mind. The acknowledgment that death can come anytime keeps persons interested in achieving these goals at every moment in their lives.

The second reason is that when the time for death approaches, it is essential to maintain one’s personhood. Because life is something that is had, it can also be surrendered.\textsuperscript{64} Aristotle’s theory of motion states that the end of motion is not part of the motion itself. This does not mean, however, that a person has no role in the ending of his or her motion. The end of motion may not be part of motion, but the ending of motion by the mover is a very active process.\textsuperscript{65} In a death that maintains personhood until the very end, activity and passivity are not opposed. The surrendering of one’s life, one’s very being, through passivity and suffering is an active
process. One must consciously surrender him or herself which will bring an end to his or her motion. Surrender is oftentimes considered to be the only true proof of having. If one does not have the ability to give something away, one has not had it to begin with. This being the case, dying must be the supremely human act because it is in surrendering one’s life that one confirms the ownership of his or her being.

The universal human experience reveals three things to the world about what is necessary in defining a person. The first is simply that one must be a living member of the human species. The second premise recognizes the role of both the material and immaterial portions of the person. These portions, however, cannot be viewed as portions or pieces. They must be viewed together as the entirety of the human person. The final requirement of personhood is participation in the supremely human act of death; an active death in which persons prove their having of themselves. Although creating a universal definition of the human person is of utmost importance, it is useless unless it can be clearly demonstrated which members of the human species are to be called persons.

**WHO IS A PERSON?**

This subject is much debated in today’s bioethical environment. Most bioethicists and philosophers agree that people who can function within society and have normal reasoning capacities are to be considered persons. However, it seems that there are four groups of humans who often are not considered to be persons. These are embryos and fetuses, infants and children, adults in comas, and adults handicapped by dementia or other mental illnesses. There are certain characteristics that qualify humans to be put in each of these categories, but are these qualities enough to exclude them from personhood?
What could be enough to exclude someone from personhood? Robert Spaemann says nothing. He states that “when we recognize someone’s claim to a place in the community of persons it is not an act of cooptation. The criteria for it are not set by those who are already members.” Personhood is not something that can be awarded or bestowed. It is something that is simply recognized in all human beings.

In the eyes of many, children are often viewed as potential persons. The problem is that there can be no such thing as potential persons. Previously we have affirmed that persons must be situated in a particular place and time. Persons are always situated in a condition and the condition always presupposes personhood. There is no denying that persons develop over time. An infant or a child is not the same as a fully functioning adult; however, a person must exist before the development begins. Nothing that is not a person can become a person over time. There are only non-persons and persons. If personhood is recognized as something that changes in children over time as they develop, this change can only take place if the children are initially treated as persons. Society does not try to teach dogs and cats or even chimpanzees the meaning of personhood. Instead these animals are locked in cages and used purely for entertainment. It is only because children are treated as someone and not something from the start that most of them develop the properties that justify the way they have been treated.

Next consider mentally ill adults and the handicapped. Does an old woman cease to be a human the moment she cannot remember her family or think for herself? If this were the case no one would ever go visit nursing homes, and the moment people were diagnosed with dementia they could be thrown away because their personhood would have been abolished. This, of course, is not the case, but why? The severely handicapped are never viewed as a separate species from the rest of humanity. Science does not classify them as something other than
human; instead science states that they are sick persons. Science then works very hard to help restore them to their proper place in the world. Science works to allow them to function in that unique place of the community that is still and will always be theirs. Some mentally ill individuals have not lost all of their human capacities. They may still be able to function moderately in society. A type of practical rationality is maintained in these patients, and right and wrong can still be differentiated. Although these individuals may not be considered autonomous individuals by government institutions, they are at least responsible to God or some other entity greater than we.

According to many philosophers adults who are in a constant vegetative state or coma are not considered to be persons. Peter Singer takes this view to an even greater extreme when he claims humans are not persons when they sleep. For Singer, humans are persons only when they are conscious and able to use their rationality. From a purely scientific sense, a species may originally be identified by creating a list of attributes which members of that species must have; however, after the species is established it is not necessary to demonstrate the required attributes for each individual of the species. All the individual offspring are not observed to ensure that the appropriate attributes are demonstrated. Their membership in the species is recognized by a genealogical connection, not a display of qualities or attributes. The same holds true for the human species and even for the species of persons. Once a person is known to be part of that species, he or she no longer has to demonstrate the attributes. Coma patients obviously do not show rationality, but are known to be the offspring of members of the human and personal species. A similar argument can be developed using philosophical principles. Inanimate objects are classified as instances of a kind on the basis of likeness. There is no need for direct relation to each other; only indirect connections must be made. However, there is a direct genealogical
connection between persons that ensures that they are grouped together. Again, physical and mental attributes do not have to be demonstrated.

The resolution to the problem of classifying the embryo and fetus as persons is similar to the resolution that is presented for children. The most important premise is that nothing that is non-person can ever become a person. There is no instantaneous or gradual process by which a non-person becomes a person. It does not make sense to say that a fetus becomes a person on the first day of the third trimester, after a heart beat develops, or even at the moment of birth. From the moment of conception a fetus must be a person. The recognition of personhood in the embryo and fetus is not a new idea. Ancient Roman law recognized the unborn conceived child as a human being legally. The word person is never used in the statutes, but nevertheless the embryo and fetus were recognized as needing protection and support from the moment of conception.75 The fetus is programmed to develop into a functioning human being who will most probably be classified as a person. Some may argue that the immaterial and material aspects are not present in a blastocyst, or even during the first and second trimesters. As discussed earlier, the idea of the immaterial and material center around an organizing principle. When the blastocyst and the varying stages of embryonic and fetal development are explored, there is clearly organization to the material. Some may argue this is organization is imposed by the material itself, but for persons there is no way to separate the material and the immaterial. It is the whole, both components, that work to organize and develop into the fullness of personhood.

It is clear now that if the previously developed universal definition of personhood is accepted, all members of the species must be classified as persons. From the moment that development begins until the very last moment of life, *Homo sapiens* live a unique life destined to occupy a place in the universe that cannot be filled by any other person or thing. Now that it is
clearer what a person is, and who is to be considered a person, why does it matter? What privileges or rights are afforded to individuals on the basis of their personhood?

THE IMPLICATIONS OF PERSONHOOD

There are very few specific rights that are afforded to human beings because of their personhood. In fact, most of the rights do not arise from personhood itself, but work instead to allow man to develop and use personhood to the fullest.\textsuperscript{76} There are two rights which come from this broad foundation. The first is to have the ability to exercise one’s power within his dominion and the second is to prevent disturbance of the peaceful enjoyment of the space in which one’s legitimate power is exercised.\textsuperscript{77}

Rights are a very secular idea. Individuals and special interest groups pour millions of hours and dollars every year into efforts to pass secular laws that uphold one particular right or another. Political philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke make the importance of man’s natural rights the foundations of their political philosophies. Governmental or secular law is primarily concerned with the order of society. What does this type of law have to do with defining the person? If the laws created and accepted by a society are going to be good laws, the human person must be considered. Morality, not governmental law, is concerned with the order of the person. A closer look reveals that society is made up of persons. If a society is going to function well, it must take into account the ontological structure of persons every time it begins the law making process.\textsuperscript{78} Why must the ontological structure of persons be noted by government officials? If it is not, totalitarian laws will be passed and all human rights would soon be abandoned. According to Hume, a political philosopher, a totalitarian regime is not good; in fact he states it is against common sense, a most basic instinct of persons, to support such a regime, because by its very nature it does not afford any rights to the people.
In the end the only true right held by someone because of their personhood, is their personhood itself. As stated earlier, personhood is something that is had and as such humans have a right to defend it. It is their belonging which no one should be able to take away or infringe upon. Although in many situations personhood is not respected, there are only a few ways it can be completely taken away: suicide, torture, or murder.

It is clear why murder takes away someone’s personhood. As we have stated earlier a requirement of personhood is life. However, it is important to note that all murder does not end personhood in a way that takes it from a human being. For instance, when martyrs are murdered they choose their death over changing their beliefs. In this case, murder becomes a process by which someone chooses actively to surrender his or her personhood instead of abandoning an ideology. In this case, the murderer does not take the individual’s personhood because the murdered individual gives his or her life. Suicide is similar to murder. Although every human has his or her life and every person has the ability to surrender that life, suicide does not fit the supremely human way of dying that was discussed earlier. When a person commits suicide, he or she takes his or her own life in the same way a murderer would. It is not an act of surrendering or giving, but an act of taking at a particular time and place. By taking one’s own life instead of surrendering it, people fail to fulfill the supreme right, the right to maintain one’s personhood.

Torture is a unique case because it does not end in the taking of an individual’s life and therefore his or her personhood. Instead it takes personhood in another way. It eliminates freedom completely. When this happens there is no choice; human instinct and need for survival take over. Exposing someone to extreme pain, whether physical, emotional, or mental, for extended periods of time eliminates one’s ability to choose. When the threat of death is presented (as in the case of martyrs), an individual can choose to give up his or her beliefs or
personhood. Torture does not allow for this choice. Instead it forces someone to choose to give up his or her beliefs because death is not an option; the only option is more pain.

A METHODOLOGY FOR BIOETHICAL DECISION MAKING AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

What is a person? Who is a person? What does it mean to be a person? Each of these questions is part of a very important universal definition of the person. The implications and answers to each of these questions can be very helpful as bioethical decisions are made. In fact, if every bioethical decision is analyzed in light of these three questions, a conclusion will always be found. When presented with a bioethical dilemma, the first step must always be reviewing what it means to be a human. It may seem like a waste of time, effort, or resources, but without a solid foundation no truly helpful decision can be made. With the idea of what makes a person in the forefront of one’s mind, the dilemma then must be analyzed for any affront to personhood within the situation. Questions like “What part of the person is not being recognized?” or “Who is not being qualified as a person?” must be asked. As a conclusion or resolution is reached one must reflect on the situation and be sure that one’s right to maintain their personhood has not been disrespected in any way, or worse, taken away altogether.

In the report Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President’s Council on Bioethics, three uses of the word dignity are recognized. Each approaches a particular aspect of human life and is used to support both sides of many arguments. The first use of the word is “dignified and humane.” This refers to a right not to be humiliated or degraded in any way. In other words, this statement refers to a right to be respected as a person. “Equal dignity and respect owed to all human life” is the second use of dignity. This phrase implies that no matter what age, state of wellness, social status, or race one belongs to, he or she must be treated
the same as anyone else. Dignity as a respect for decision making or autonomy is the last use of the word that is recognized in the Council’s report. If these uses of dignity are analyzed using the definition of the person developed above, perhaps more uniform conclusions can be drawn about the bioethical issues they are often used to support or dismantle.

What does it mean to be treated in a dignified and humane way? Because dignity can be viewed as a placeholder for the greater implications of being human, this phrase is really asking what it means to be treated as a person. Some people also argue that this use of dignity ensures that one has the right not to be embarrassed, humiliated, or degraded. Using the word dignity in this way has many different applications. It can be used to argue that healthcare providers do not respect their patients by not treating them with dignity. Others argue for death with dignity. This often is referred to physician-assisted suicide and fights to ensure terminally ill or elderly patients are not humiliated by the process of dying. Rather they are given a means, usually as a prescription for pain killers, to end their lives on their own terms at a time they choose. Still others may use this meaning of dignity to argue that it is not humane to allow the agonizing experiences some persons have to be remembered for the rest of their lives. Instead they should be medicated so that they forget their horrifying experiences. Do all of these arguments really seek to uphold human dignity or are they arguments put forth by people who simply want to make life easier?

Those who argue that healthcare providers do not treat their patients with dignity cite examples in which physicians put patients in dehumanizing situations. Some say it is an affront to dignity that patients are made to undress and are then inspected from head to toe by physicians who search for the most minor imperfections. Others cite hospital gowns that are open in the
back and sometimes expose people’s behinds when it is not intended. And still others complain of drab hospital rooms and methodical treatment by doctors and nurses.

Are these things really affronts against human dignity, and, on a deeper level, against personhood? They can be, but in many cases they are not. They are simply necessary to ensure health. If analysis begins as it should with a reflection on personhood, several different points may surface. The first is that personhood requires human life and the purpose of the healthcare system is to preserve life. How can it be an affront to dignity? Deeper reflection is required. The human person is to be viewed as subject and object simultaneously. Body and rationality cannot be separated. Oftentimes the cold procedures of the healthcare system do just that. They view the person as a series of molecules and larger parts that must be kept in working order, just like when a car is taken into the repair shop and the repairman opens the hood and looks under the car. He checks the fluids and ensures each part moves as it should. Often physicians make sure they get through their 69-point inspection in ten minutes or less and move on to the next patient. This is when problems can arise. By their very nature, healthcare professionals are required to look at the objectiveness of the human person. However, they must never forget that a human person is much more than material. They must recognize that unique place in society that each person holds and respect every person accordingly. There is no way to avoid undressing for examination, or the use of gowns that are easy to remove in the case of an emergency, but the mannerisms with which these tasks are performed can make a difference. Healthcare professionals must realize the danger and be ever conscious that they do not disrespect the unity of subject and object within the person. Bioethics cannot simply warn physicians against a behavior that is almost a natural part of their profession. In order to be useful, bioethics must suggest a way to recognize the simultaneous existence of the material and immaterial aspects of
a person. Perhaps physicians can explain what they are doing to patients as the procedures are completed or the reasons these humiliating procedures need to be performed. Any kind of appeal to a person’s rationality or explanation of why a materially unpleasant procedure is needed to ensure the continued existence of the person would respect a person’s unity as a person.

The idea of taking one’s life in order to ensure a humane death can be difficult to analyze. Previously it was made clear that suicide and murder deprive a person of the most human of all acts, dying. This premise clearly prohibits direct physician-assisted suicide. Actions such as writing large prescriptions of painkillers for patients to take when the end of life becomes too much to bear, and directly injecting patients with overdoses of morphine in order to end suffering, do take away the patient’s personhood. However, every example is not as clear. For instance, consider the elderly patient who is showing the first signs of dementia. Is it justifiable for that patient to stop taking his or her heart medication in order to accelerate death and avoid the humiliating and slow process of mental degradation? What if the patient is in a continuously vegetative state? Should he or she be maintained on a respirator and feeding tube indefinitely or is that dehumanizing? These are complicated situations, but if they are considered in light of what is means to be a person, perhaps some answers can be found.

When the definition of the human person is considered in light of this situation, the first idea that surfaces is the uniqueness of every person and the evil of eliminating a person. Even the old man who is afraid of losing much or all of his rational ability still has a role in society. Even though death is unavoidable, it is never something that should be accelerated or induced just because it is more comfortable or easy. In the case of the old man with dementia, his family and physicians must remind him that he is not only his rationality. He is a person who is material and immaterial all at once, and even if his rational skills do not remain he will still be dad, uncle, or
brother, perhaps even war veteran, philanthropist, or jokester. He must be careful that he does not equate his entire being with his immaterial or rational ability. Continued reflection, however, might lead to the belief that this man is surrendering his life, which is the supremely human act. He is not purposefully taking his being from himself; he just wishes to speed up a natural process. When the man’s role as a person in the universal community is clearly recognized and affirmed, it becomes clear that by stopping his heart medications he is depriving himself of his role in the universal community. He does take his life when the medication is stopped; he resigns himself to the inevitable and does not affirm his one right afforded by his personhood, the preservation of the personhood itself. Further reflection, might even recognize that fear of losing his mental capacity may be torturous for him. He might argue that by accelerating his death he avoids having his freedom destroyed. When this argument is analyzed, it is noticed that the torture is not imposed upon him by an outside agent. Pain and death are not the only two choices. He could come to realize his value and continue to fight for his personality.

The coma patient presents another unique case in which the entirety of what it means to be a human person must be analyzed. It has been established previously that coma patients do indeed maintain their personhood. They are not required to maintain all the attributes of the species of person in order to remain a member of this species. However, even if this statement is accepted, bioethical problems regarding the coma patient will still present themselves. For instance, imagine a person who has been kept alive in a coma for 60 years. The patient is now eighty and his heart is weakening, his immune system is slowing down, and soon it is thought his respirations will slow down so far that a respirator is needed. Is it humane to keep this 80-year-old patient alive? Does is support or destroy his personhood to keep him alive? This situation is particularly difficult. It is understood that all attributes do not need to be present in order to
qualify an individual as a member of a species, but as this patient’s health degrades fewer and fewer attributes will be identifiable. Do there need to be any identifiable characteristics or is genealogical connection enough to establish membership in the species of person? In this unique case, the most important part of the definition of personhood is death. Although it may not be known to those around him, the patient may be ready to surrender his life in the supremely human act of death. Although medical professionals, family members, and loved ones do have a responsibility to keep the patient alive and to try to restore him to his health, there comes a point when medical care must be removed in order to allow the patient to remain human.

The final example in which dignity is used in a way that refers to treating one humanely or most like a person is using drugs to erase a patient’s unpleasant memories. This argument is very similar to the argument surrounding the dementia patient. Both are tortured by their thoughts and their freedom dwindles. In this case, it is important to remember that the patient is not simply material. Materially the patients may revert to animal instinct wishing for the easiest and quickest way to remove the pain, but a person cannot simply be viewed as chemicals to be manipulated. Every person is a unique fusing of chemicals and spirit. If patients tortured by their thoughts are simply put on drugs, their full humanity is not recognized. In order to maintain personhood in these patients, therapists and physicians must work to treat the entire person. Drugs can be part of the therapy, but they cannot be viewed as the easy cure or the only way to correct the negative emotions and feelings.

The second meaning of dignity in the Council’s report focuses on the equal respect owed to all human life. The implications of this use of dignity are very similar to implications of using personhood to make bioethical decisions. The conclusion usually is the preservation of life. Bioethicists must be careful not to take the principle of sustaining life to the extreme. Healthcare
providers must realize that sometimes the situation is beyond their control, and the use of extreme measures in these cases can actually degrade one’s personhood. For instance, consider a 95-year-old man who comes into the emergency room after falling down the stairs. As the doctors examine him it becomes clear that he has many broken bones, his lungs have been punctured by his broken ribs, and he has a significant amount of internal bleeding. If the only criterion on which this man’s health plan was based revolves around an equal dignity and an equal opportunity for life, this man would be rushed to surgery. However, if the healthcare providers carefully examine this situation in light of what it means to be a human person, another conclusion might be reached. As this situation is examined two things must be kept in mind. The first is the unique place that every member of the community holds, and the second is that dying is never to be accepted as good. If this man dies it will not be a good thing. Yet when the healthcare providers consider this man as a whole person, material and immaterial, they may decide materially he cannot survive. He has suffered too much internal bleeding, and surgery is not healthy for a patient this old. This realization respects the man’s ability to surrender his life and remain human. If the surgeons rush in without considering the entire situation, they will probably take his personhood from him. If surgery is not performed, the patient must not just be left alone to suffer and die. Our previous discussion on torture shows us why this cannot be allowed to happen. If the man is forced to bear too much pain his freedom will be destroyed and he will no longer be able to surrender his life. Instead he must be made as comfortable as possible so that he can die while maintaining his personality.

Another place this definition of dignity may be used is in the neonatal care unit. In this unit, patients are born every day with known brain damage. The physicians of this unit are faced with a decision, to continue aggressive medical treatment to keep premature babies alive or to
maintain a moderate course of action which probably will not. Some argue that these babies’
mental function will be so diminished as they grow that it is not worth keeping them alive. In this
case, both the idea of equal dignity and personhood would argue to keep the child alive. As has
been stated in every other example, the child is more than his or her mental capacities; he or she
must be viewed as a whole, that is, a person by his or her genealogical connection to the human
race.

The final use of the term dignity in the Council’s report refers to the autonomy of a
person. Autonomy refers only to the decision-making ability of individuals. Previous examples
have shown the importance of death and the simultaneous subject-object nature of persons. It is
clear that this definition of dignity, like others, often does not uphold the universal definition of
the human person developed above. It views the person as a non-material decision-making
entity. This definition does not recognize the simultaneous material and immaterial nature of
person, and therefore it should not be used to make bioethical decisions.

This use of dignity is often used to prove that embryos and embryonic stem cells are not
truly persons. Neither embryos nor stem cells have a rational ability. They cannot make decisions
for themselves and according to this definition of dignity are not persons. Because they are not
persons, parents are able to view embryos and embryonic stem cells as objects. Parents often
view their embryos as possessions. They use their autonomy to make decisions for embryos and
can make a decision to destroy them. When one views embryos in light of the definition of the
human person, a totally different conclusion is drawn. Because nothing that is not a person can
ever become one, this is a nonsensical use of the word dignity. It does not agree with its
foundation in the characteristics of the human person.
Viewing autonomy as the only necessary condition for dignity is also often used to support genocidal or eugenic political agendas. Some proponents of this use of the word dignity openly advocate murder of individuals with mental handicaps or the elderly. Some extremists may even propose killing the elderly in order to salvage the healthcare system. Analysis of these proposals using the methodology outlined above makes it clear that these premises cannot be upheld. A person’s value is not determined by their mental capacities, but rather according to Kant, it exists in and of itself. This use of dignity also clearly does not recognize the unity of rationality and material. This viewpoint separates material and immaterial; it bases material value off of immaterial ability.

Each of these case studies clearly demonstrates how the universal definition of personhood can be used in the bioethical decision-making process. It provides a framework of criteria on which situations can be analyzed and solutions can be proposed. The ultimate criteria in all types of decision-making should be protection of personhood.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The human person, the implications of being a human person, bioethics, and decision making are all intimately connected. Each term supports the others and without the thought tradition behind each of these terms, all of the others become meaningless. The concept of the human person gives rise to a certain set of principles and implications. These implications become the principles of bioethics, and bioethics should be the foundation for all scientific and health related decisions. Dignity has purposefully been left out of this equation. Dignity is a confusing term with many different meanings. It can be manipulated by the user to support almost any opinion. In this equation, dignity has been replaced by the implications surrounding
the concept of the human person. Gilbert Meilaender refers to dignity as a placeholder and in this equation it has been replaced.

The definition of the human person is based on the universal experience of humanity. Reflection on one’s life experiences reveals three premises on which personhood is based. The first is that every human person has to be a living member of the biological species *Homo sapiens*. Persons are not entirely determined by their materiality though. They are simultaneously material and immaterial, subject and object. A person’s body and mental capacities cannot be separated from one another. The body needs the immaterial to organize and animate it, and the immaterial needs the body to express it. The unique simultaneous existence of material and immaterial in persons places them in a unique place as neither animals nor gods. The unique status of persons allows for mutual recognition. To recognize a person means to recognize that each individual occupies a unique place in the universal community. Because persons are more than animals they are not simply viewed as another instance of the species. They are viewed as individuals, who cannot be replaced. Their role in society is uniquely theirs. As a result of the unique role that every individual plays in society, death can never be a considered a good thing; it removes someone from that unique role in society that can only be his or hers. Although death is never a good thing, it is an important part of the personal experience. In fact, it can be called the supremely human act. Life is the being of person. Death keeps individuals interested in living their lives fully. Also, death requires that persons surrender their life. Through this surrender persons affirm that they, in fact, held their being in the first place!

This definition of the human person does not require that a list of rights be instituted. In fact it only affords the person two rights. The first is to be able to exercise authority in one’s own space. The second is to ensure that the peaceful condition in one’s private space is maintained.
However, these rights do not arise from personhood directly; instead, they create conditions which ensure that personhood can be expressed to its fullest extent.

This foundation of the expression of personhood then becomes the founding principle of bioethics. Before any decision is made, one must consider what personhood means. Then any part of a situation which might challenge personhood should be analyzed. When it is time for a final decision to be made, the most important question is, “Has personhood been challenged or taken away?” If it has, the situation must be resolved to restore personhood in order for bioethics to have completed its job. Bioethics is the keeper of the human person. It should not be a center for linguistic debate over the definition of dignity. It should be a community which works tirelessly to uphold the human person, the concept many claim dignity it based on. If this is the case the human person needs to be directly linked to the decision-making process and human dignity replaced. The human person, not human dignity, should be the sole foundation of bioethics and bioethical decisions.


ENDNOTES

4. G. Meilaender, 33
6. A. Schulman, 8.
7. S. Shell, “Kant’s concept of Human Dignity.” In Human Dignity and Bioethics, 335.
8. A. Schulman, 11.
13. L. Kass, 309.
17. J. Seifert, 206.
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