

## RESPECT FOR LIFE AND HUMAN DIGNITY

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### Abstract

*This paper attempts to focus on the concept on human dignity .It intends to re-search into the proper definition of human dignity in relation to elderly people. The paper also aims at showing that though Quality of life (QOL) of an elderly people can be deteriorated with social changes, but no one can snatch away one's own dignity. Taking example from Kant's ethics, I would like to show here that we should take care of elderly people not from emotional or sentimental point of view but our ethical principle asks us to do so. To do this, first of all I tried to show multifarious use of the concept 'human dignity' and then I made a distinction between human dignity and human rights. Sometimes it is mistakenly thought that these two concepts represent the same idea. After that, I have tried to show how elderly people lack human dignity though apparently.*

**Key words:** Human dignity, Quality of Life (QOL), Human rights, Pain and Pleasure principle, Categorical Imperative.



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## I

The term 'Dignity' has multifarious definitions from various angles depending on contextual use. According to law, human dignity is the most important right from which all other fundamental human rights derived. Human dignity is inherent in all human being .It is inalienable and inseparable from an individual. It is also independent of state. According to religion, especially as per the Biblical revelation, God not only created human nature but also endowed it with qualities in His image and after His likeness. It is the only ground which makes it possible to assert that human nature has an inherent dignity. The moral norms inherent in humanity just as moral norm set forth in the divine revelation reveal God's design for human beings and their calling. These norms are guidelines for a good life worthy of

God-created humanity. According to the orthodox tradition, a human being preserves his God-given dignity and grows in it only if he lives in accordance with moral norms because these norms express the primordial and therefore authentic human nature not darkened by sin. Thus there is a link between human dignity and morality. Moreover, the acknowledgement of personal dignity implies the assertion of personal responsibility. All human beings, says the Church, in as much as they are created in the image of God, have the dignity of a person. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that the right to the exercise of freedom belongs to everyone because it is inseparable from his or her dignity as a human person. The Catholic Church's view of human dignity is like Kant's in so far as it springs from human agency and free will, with the further understanding that free will in turn springs from human creation in the image of God.

The concept of human dignity is meant to distinguish human beings from other creatures, notably animals. It underlines the uniqueness of human beings among all creatures, above all their free will, Individual autonomy and capability of independent decision-making based on reason and free moral choice.

## II

The concept 'human dignity' is often mistaken with that of 'human right' and faced with certain challenges to the uniqueness of humanity. The concept of human dignity and human rights are found in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. According to Plato, the concept of 'justice' is an all encompassing political virtue, So that the good society and just society are one and the same. Aristotle on the other side believes in *egalitarian* ideals of justice, where equality is the main concern. Later on Hobbes and Mill have utilized natural equality and propagated the theory that "all men are equal by nature." The theory is mainly based on the principle of equal treatment to all. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century A.D, in the writing of Locke, he admits that no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty and possessions. Actually in the natural condition men would seek place by handling it over to common authority. In the latter phase, John Rawls and B.Williams have interpreted the theory of justice and equality in terms of logical reasoning. So, from this above discussion it is evident that people are conscious about the human dignity and rights to designate their standard of living as well as to maintain equal treatment in the society.

So human dignity is an essential concept in the society as well as in the morality, because through it the quality and honour of the people can be determined and from the sense

of dignity the concept of human rights can also be measured. The quality of human life is a very complex phenomena; it touches various spheres of mankind i.e. health, food, education, liberty, equality, franchise of the citizens and so on. And that's why the question: How people are enabled to live in the society in dignified manner even when they grow older?

On the other hand, human rights are rights which persons hold by virtue of human condition. It constitutes the common language of humanity .Actually human rights are only for human beings and not for state. The beneficiaries of human rights are individuals. Political Philosophy is more likely to focus a care for human rights upon a commitment to fundamental rules, such as, freedom, autonomy, equality together with other considerations relating to the essentials of human well being.

The principle of human dignity is one of the care principles of the doctrines of ethics. It is the fundamental concept from which all the human rights derive, and the basis for social order. In brief, the phrase 'human dignity' refers both to self-respect and to the respect for other human beings. According to some thinkers, dignity is very close to the concept of virtue or righteousness. R.Harcum indicates that the etymological root of 'dignity' is 'worthiness', or intrinsic value. The word dignity from the Latin dignus, means to have intrinsic worth, or excellence, or to be esteemed by others." ( Harcum, 1994 p.101.)

### III

German Philosopher Immanuel Kant considered human dignity as 'an intrinsic worth' which makes human being supreme creature of nature. According to his principle of Categorical Imperative, he admits that human can never be treated as means to an end; rather end itself. According to Categorical Imperative as stated in the *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals*:

*Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*

In that book he said that the ultimate moral principle may be understood like this:

*Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end never as a means only.*

Kant holds that human beings have desires and goals but other animals do not have these properties; other things have value for human beings. They act actually as means to the ends. He characterized human beings as 'rational agents', i.e. free agents capable of making their own decisions, setting their own goals and guiding their conduct by reason. This means

that one have a strict duty of beneficence toward other persons. We should be aware of other people's welfare; we must respect their rights and "endeavor, so far as we can, to further the ends of others." So, according to Kant treating human beings as end means respecting their rationality. Thus we may never manipulate people or use them to achieve our purposes.

Existentialist Philosopher Jean Paul Sartre in his book *Existentialism and Humanism* endorses the dignity of human beings. The book also stresses the centrality of human choice to the creation of all values. Bentham, the Utilitarian Philosopher begins with the statement that nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, 'pain and pleasure'. By nature, man is conditioned upon pleasure and pain. This comes down to the claim that we are pleasure-pain organisms. Reactions to these two stimuli so by the following rule: all human beings desire pleasure and the absence of pain.

There are two senses in which dignity is typically attributed to human beings. First, usually through some action, human beings can be said to express dignity. In this sense persons are said to speak 'with dignity' or carry themselves 'with dignity'. In this respect dignity is a distinctive normative concept. Secondly, human beings can be said to have dignity even though they are not, in the first sense, always dignified in their behaviour. Having dignity under this interpretation, is not a way of presenting oneself to others but is rather an attribution of a characteristic value to human beings. It is the second sense of having or possessing dignity that is philosophically and ethically more fundamental.

#### IV

Of the various problems that commonly afflict older people, perhaps more than any other – injuries is the lack of dignity due to marginalization. The most painful dimension of this marginalization is lack of human relations. An older person suffers not only by being deprived of human contact but also from abandonment, loneliness and isolation. As their interpersonal and social contacts are diminished, so their lives are correspondingly impoverished; they are deprived of the intellectual and cultural stimulus and environment they need. Older people experiences a sense of impotence at being unable to change their own situation due to their inability to participate in the decision-making processes that concern them both as persons and as citizens. The net result is that they lose any sense of belonging to the community of which they are members. This affects much on their dignity feelings. People today live longer and enjoy better health than in the past. Scientific advances and the consequent progress of medicine have made a decisive contribution in recent decades

to prolonging the average duration of human life. The prolongation of average life expectancy, and sometimes the dramatic decrease in the birth rate, has given rise to an unprecedented demographic transition: the age pyramid that existed less than half a century ago has literally been upside down. The number of older people is constantly increasing, while that of the young is constantly decreasing. To grasp in full the sense and value of old age we need to honour senior citizens and we need to bridge the gap between society and them.

It is true that with age the social place of an elderly person shifts from centre to margin. But it is also true that this obvious change is solely from relational point of view, i.e. from the view point of family members, neighbours and from society. It is rather outer change, not change from within. A section of people, be it children group, adult group, or senior citizen group, when separated or alienated from society at large, or feel like alienation from society, it is because of changing relation of that group with the society, and this alienation or separation or rather degradation in QOL is absolutely not from his or her own self. Human dignity or the Quality of life of a human being is not adopted with the course of living, it is innate. We have born with it. So it cannot be robbed or snatched from an individual. What is actually happening is that with the changing activity of an individual in society, mutual relation also changes. And according to the changing social status of an individual, society also reacts differently.

In this connection, we should re-think about the environment of old age homes where senior citizens of our country spends the last phase of their life. Parents who are abandoned by their family, senior citizens who have no family or assets, elderly people with chronic diseases, economically incapable old people and people who went through Elder Abuse- all of them comes to old age home to find shelter or, to say, a second home. As recommended by the Government, old age homes should cater not only physical needs of elderly person, but also the moral, psychological and economical needs. But in our country the actual scenario is completely different. Most of the old age homes are not up to the mark, so to say, it is not maintained properly. The service to the boarders is very poor. This scenario should be changed and elders should get complete care and an interactive environment so that QOL of elderly people gets upgraded.

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