

The Primacy of Human Dignity as a Central Concern for Education in the Future

AUTHOR

Thomas De KONINCK

Thomas De Koninck (born 1934 in Leuven, Belgium) is a philosopher from Québec, Canada. After studying at Oxford (M.A.), Université Laval (Ph.D.), and Freie Universität Berlin, he became professor at University of Notre Dame (1960–1964) in the United States and at Université Laval (1964–) in Québec.

Corresponding author:

Thomas.DeKoninck@fp.ulaval.ca

Please cite this article as:

Koninck, Thomas De, „The Primacy of Human Dignity as a Central Concern for Education in the Future”, in Popa Tache, Cristina Elena, Hubert Landier, Leonardo da S.G. Martins da Costa & Mariana Thieriot Loisel (eds.), *For an International Transdisciplinary Chair: About the Dialogue Between Culture and Technoscience*, ADJURIS – International Academic Publisher, Bucharest, Paris, Calgary, 2024, p. 236-252, <https://doi.org/10.62768/ADJURIS/2024/2/11>

Abstract: This article explores the primacy of human dignity as a central concern for the future of education, particularly within the context of health ethics and end-of-life care. It critiques the prevalent ambiguities and manipulations of the term "human dignity" by examining the Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel's Report on End-of-Life Decision Making, which dismisses the concept of dignity as insufficient for normative ethical questions. The article argues that such dismissals are strategically used to promote the moral right to assisted suicide by overemphasizing individual autonomy. It draws parallels to ideological manipulations of language as described by George Orwell and underscores the importance of maintaining clear and precise definitions to avoid fallacies. The discussion highlights three universal meanings of human dignity—ontological dignity, dignity-decency, and dignity-liberty—and their implications for ethical decision-making in end-of-life care. The conclusion emphasizes the necessity of preserving the authentic understanding of human dignity in educational discourse to ensure ethical integrity in future societal practices.

Keywords: human dignity, education, individual autonomy, ethical decision-making, ontological dignity, dig-

nity-decency, dignity-liberty.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62768/ADJURIS/2024/2/11>

Preamble

A period of political, economic and ecological uncertainty, such as the one we are living through, is also a period of uncertainty with regard to the benchmarks that used to guide us, or by which we let ourselves be guided. The result is all sorts of assertions, resolutions, petitions of principle and declarations, all of which have in common the fact that they are not based on anything that has been properly thought through and argued. This would be no more serious than a passing fad if it did not sometimes result in public decisions that are binding on everyone and of the utmost gravity insofar as they call into question the human subject and the dignity of the human subject.

Professor Thomas De Koninck provides us with an illustration of this with the current debates on 'end-of-life decision-making'. The attitude of doctors towards their patients should be dictated, not by their personal adherence to the Hippocratic Oath, but by a piece of legislation, a text with a virtuous purpose but with insecure foundations limited to the ideas of the moment. What is clearly at stake, beyond the case in point, is the dignity of the individual. The dignity of the individual is being compromised by the atrocities we are witnessing around the world, whether in Ukraine, Gaza or elsewhere, but also by a multitude of low-intensity legal measures that have the effect of reducing the individual to any one of a multitude. In both cases, it is the dignity of the person that is denied, if not violated.

If CIRET has a *raison d'être*, it is to affirm 'the humanity of humanity' as the guiding principle that should drive us through the changes that lie ahead. This *raison d'être* invites us to stand at a level of reality that is a little beyond certain current debates and the contradictions they reveal. Thank you to Professor De Koninck for taking us there by reminding us that Antigone will always be right, whatever the cost to her, to want to bury her brother, even if he is a traitor to the laws of the City; because if there is one thing that cannot be transgressed without man ceasing to be human, it is his dignity.

This dignity is not to be found in a discourse that claims to be solely rational, or in the pages of a legal text specific to the City of Thebes as it is to our society. His reason finds its foundation in the depths of the vast forest, the forest of origins that can only be told through the myths at the heart of which what we are finding its true foundation. This call of the forest most often remains alien to the village and to those who sit by the smoking fireplace. Yet it is this call that can lead us to the 'secret of the dawn', a secret that eludes common understanding and demands to be discovered in the uncertainty of being.

Dr. Hubert Landier

1. Introduction

Of fallacies, ‘The most prolific and usual is the argument that turns upon names’, observed Aristotle at the outset of his *Sophistical Refutations*. Hence it is, he added, that ‘those who are not well acquainted with the force of names misreason both in their own discussions and when they listen to others’¹. Needless to say, the way to deal with the frequent ambiguity of words is hardly to exploit or aggravate it as Sophists do, no less today than yesterday, but rather to correct it by means of precise descriptions and definitions. This is particularly the case for a term as crucial to health ethics as the word *dignity*. And what underscores especially nowadays the extent to which the recognition of authentic human dignity has become a central challenge in health ethics is its place in end-of-life care.

An eloquent example of fallacies exploiting the many-meanings of keywords or expressions, such as ‘human dignity’ and ‘individual autonomy’, was recently provided by the Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel in its Report entitled *End-of-Life Decision Making*, published in November 2011. That Report claimed that ‘while the language of *human dignity* is seemingly universal, there is currently no consensus on the moral basis or on the precise meaning of human dignity’, concluding that ‘the concept of human dignity is an unsuitable tool for settling normative questions pertaining to end-of-life decision making’². This stratagem enabled them to hold that there must be a moral right to assist suicide, in view of what they deem ‘the paramount status of the value of individual autonomy’³. As we shall see, the Report is gravely mistaken on both counts, beginning with human dignity.

There is more still. There is what, on another parallel topic, the Quebec poet Paul Chamberland has incisively summed up in the following terms: ‘The total alteration of the meaning of words will allow the fabrication of an official version of what shall pass for reality itself’⁴. One could not better state the fact that, because it is unable to transform reality, ideology alters the meaning of words signifying that reality. Henceforth, as George Orwell put it: ‘black is white’, ‘war is peace’, and so forth. The principle is indeed admirably formulated by Orwell in *1984*: one must aim to ‘dislocate the sense of reality’. ‘In Oldspeak it is called, quite frankly, “reality control”. In Newspeak it is called *doublethink*’. You will recall that ‘the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of

¹ Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations*, 1, 165 a 5 and a 15–17, translation by W. A. Pickard-Cambridge, in *the Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, Princeton University Press, 1984, vol. 1, p. 278.

² Report of the Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel, *End-of-Life Decision Making*, November 2011, pp. 51–52.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 41 sq.

⁴ Paul Chamberland, *Le Devoir*, 8 mai 2013, p. A 8.

thought'. Accordingly, 'Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them'⁵. This was aptly illustrated by the Quebec *Special Commission on the Question of Dying with Dignity*, which transformed the fine expression of *medical aid in dying* into an oxymoron no longer meaning genuine medical aid such as palliative care, but its exact opposite, euthanasia⁶. What made this possible was the confusion that Commission was able to maintain in the use of the word *dignity*, notably within the formula *Dying with Dignity*, which even served to name both the Commission and its Report.

And yet it is easy to notice that the word *dignity* carries at least one superficial sense, which Gabriel Marcel rightly qualified as 'a decorative conception of dignity', consisting in 'impressing oneself outwardly', to quote André Gide⁷. No matter, that is the sole meaning the Commission made its own, even though it has no ethical connotation, and is more a mockery of properly understood human dignity than anything else.

Whereas in fact *human dignity* has three strong universal meanings whose relevance to end-of-life care is soon evident: **1/ontological dignity, 2/dignity-decency, 3/dignity-liberty**⁸. The rest of my exposé today will center on those three meanings and their practical consequences, before a brief conclusion. Discussion of 'individual autonomy' will find its natural place when we reach the third meaning, 'dignity-liberty'.

2. Ontological Dignity

The Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 opens with the following words: 'Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world'. This is what may be called ontological dignity, since it speaks of the inherent and equal dignity of every single human being, belonging, in other words, to his or her very *being*.

The fifth 'Whereas' having reaffirmed the faith of the people of the United Nations 'in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women', Article 1 states that 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood'. Article 3 affirms that 'everyone has the right to life, liberty and

⁵ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1949; Penguin Books, 1954, pp. 44–45; 169–171.

⁶ Cf. *Mourir dans la dignité. Rapport de la Commission spéciale*, Assemblée nationale, Québec, mars 2012, p. 78 and *passim*. No official English translation seems available so far.

⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *La dignité humaine*, Paris, Aubier, 1964, p. 168; André Gide, *Ainsi soit-il ou Les jeux sont faits*, Paris, Gallimard, 1952; édition revue et augmentée, 2001, p. 115.

⁸ The best treatment I know of this threefold distinction is in an essay by Jacques Ricot entitled 'La dignité du mourant', in *Le mourant*, Editions M-editer, 2006, pp. 43-81.

security of person’; Article 5 adds: ‘No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment’; Article 7: ‘All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law’⁹. And so on up to Article 30. That list of the rights and liberties ensuing from the simple “recognition of the inherent dignity of all members of the human family” is truly impressive.

The emphasis in Article 3 on the right to life as the most fundamental of all – given that both the right to liberty and to security of person presuppose life itself – has to be seen as particularly significant. It anticipates, in its very terms, and in their order, Article 7 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which reads: “*Everyone has a right to life, liberty and security of person*”. In a word, right to life is the *sine qua non* of all other fundamental rights, freedom itself to begin with, for the evident reason that to suppress someone’s life is to suppress his or her freedom, whilst the reverse is not the case.

As Hans Jonas noted with good reason, “how strange that we should nowadays speak of a right to *die*, when throughout the ages all talk about rights has been predicated on the most fundamental of all rights – the right to *live*”. Indeed, every other right ever argued, claimed, granted, or denied, can be viewed as an extension of this primary right, since every particular right concerns the exercise of some faculty of life, the access to some necessity of life, the satisfaction of some aspiration of life’ [...] Every further right, equal or not, in natural or positive law, derives from this cardinal one and from the mutual recognition of it by its claimants’¹⁰. This having been said, the novelty of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights – which makes it an acquisition of the twentieth century whose import could in no way be exaggerated – is the **affirmation that the right to life and all the other fundamental rights that follow are necessary consequences of the equal dignity of all humans without exception.**

In a word, then, it was universally agreed among nations that the origin and principle of all those fundamental human rights is no less than *human dignity* itself. It is most evidently a dignity tied to the very humanity of each and every one of us, to the fact that we *are* humans. Hence, I repeat, the word ‘ontological’, which, as dictionaries attest, refers to being as such.

How does one explain, however, such an outstanding and unanimous agreement among nations over the absolutely prior character of the recognition of human dignity? It should be obvious that one primary reason must have been the universal indignation provoked by the Nazi horrors: the Second World War ended in 1945; the Nuremberg trial took place between November 30, 1945 and October 1, 1946; we are in 1948. Ethics are not born in academic debates. The feeling of revolt before an injustice is indeed the moral principle *par excellence*. Albert Camus rightly sensed this essential aspect when he spoke of *anguished*

⁹ Cf. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Brussels, Amnesty International, 1988.

¹⁰ Hans Jonas, *The Right to Die*, The Hastings Center Report, Wiley Online Library, 2012. p. 31. The words *die* and *life* are underlined by the author.

wonder and predicted: *Indignation will be for all times. We now know it.*¹¹ The feeling of indignation precedes the concept of dignity and signals the birth of moral conscience¹².

In point of fact, human dignity is first recognized through the experience of being indignant. Whatever destroys what is worthy, in Greek *axios*, is *felt* to be unworthy, *anaxios*. As Aristotle remarked, ‘the servile, the worthless and the unambitious are not given to indignation’¹³. In Éric Fiat’s excellent terms, ‘*a man who behaves badly is unworthy of his dignity, that is all [...] But as a matter of fact, if we judge his conduct to be unworthy, it is with reference to that ontological dignity we confer on him*’¹⁴. The keenness of the feeling of indignation before an injustice perpetrated against human dignity further quickens the formation of conscience. ‘*One only finds these reasons because it shocks*’, Pascal justly pointed out. The feeling ‘*acts in an instant and is always ready to act*’, he added, rediscovering anew Plato’s intuition on the flash of the instantaneous, *to exaiphnes*, the instant in which everything is turned round and renewed, to which I’ll return at the end of this talk¹⁵.

That such a detailed and limpid affirmation of what the absolute priority of human dignity entails should have gained such unanimous approval among nations and cultures so diverse in so many regards is therefore far from surprising. Yet one should none the less rejoice over the fact that the universal recognition of the equal dignity of all human beings *qua* human, without exception, **has at last imposed itself as the ultimate foundation of all rights** and the indispensable rampart, at the level of principles, against barbarism under its multiple guises. ‘*What does barbarism consist in*, asked Goethe, *unless it is precisely that it is unaware of what excels?*’ The barbarian is above all perverse to the point of not being aware of his own humanity any more than that of others, for we all share the same humanity¹⁶.

Now two further capital traits bring out even more the full import of ontological dignity:

A. We owe to modern thought a very helpful ‘philosophical formulation’ of human dignity. When applied to humans, the word ‘dignity’ must be understood in an unsentimental, rigorous sense. It means nothing less than this: their

¹¹ Albert Camus, *Préface à « l’Espagne libre », Actuelles I, Essais*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1965, respectively, p. 1605 et 1607.

¹² See Jean-François Mattéi, *De l’indignation*, Paris, Éditions de la Table Ronde, 2005.

¹³ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II, 9, 1387 b’s 13–15, translation by George A. Kennedy.

¹⁴ Éric Fiat, *Grandeurs et misères des hommes. Petit traité de la dignité*, Paris, Larousse, 2010, p. 23. The italics are the author’s.

¹⁵ Pascal, *Pensées*, respectively Brunschvicg 276; Lafuma 983; Le Guern 759, and Brunschvicg 683; Lafuma 565; Le Guern 671; Plato, *Parmenides*, 156 D.E.

¹⁶ *Goethes Gespräche mit Eckermann*, 22 März 1831, Wiesbaden, Insel-Verlag, 1955, p. 455; cf. my book, *De la dignité humaine*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1995 (reprinted, 2002), p. 4-6, 223-224.

dignity puts humans, in Kant's words, 'infinitely beyond any price'. As if echoing Pascal's celebrated phrase 'learn that man infinitely transcends man', Emmanuel Kant does provide an excellent description, in his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, of this basic distinction between dignity and price: 'In the realm of ends everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. Whatever has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; on the other hand, whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity'. Adding, further on, that what 'constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself does not have mere relative worth, i.e. a price, but an intrinsic worth, i.e. *dignity*'¹⁷.

Kant also remarks, accordingly, that man 'exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will. In all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, he must always be regarded at the same time as an end. [...] Rational beings are designated *persons*, because their nature indicates that they are ends in themselves, i.e. things which may not be used merely as means. Such a being is thus an object of respect, and, so far, restricts all [arbitrary] choice. Such beings are not merely subjective ends whose existence as a result of our action has a worth for us, but are *objective ends*, i.e. beings whose existence itself is an end. Such an end is one for which no other end can be substituted [...]'¹⁸.

All this from Kant has consistently been considered to be especially useful, with good reason. For it means, in practice, that to recognize a human being's dignity is to acknowledge that he or she must never be reduced to means to an end. Every single human being has the dignity of an end. This is particularly enlightening with regard to care, especially palliative care, for we may already discern from it that, if humans have a right to full care even when in a state of extreme dereliction, it is because human dignity requires it. He or she always remains one for whose sake we must act.

B. The other capital trait is what Paul Ricœur aptly described as 'a requirement that is older than any philosophical formulation', namely that 'something is due to human beings simply because they are human'¹⁹. In all the cultures we know from every era, a fragment of tragedy, an epigram, a legislative text, a proverb, an inscription on a tomb, a tale, a song, a work of art, a work of wisdom, have testified to it.

Moreover, recognition of this requirement becomes more explicit as civilizations assert themselves, the most remarkable being the recognition that is

¹⁷ Pascal, *Pensées*, Brunschwig 434; Lafuma 131; Emmanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, Zweiter Abschnitt (AK IV, 434–435). I quote from Lewis White Beck's translation, The Library of Arts, 1959, p. 53. In this quotation from Kant, as in those which follow, the words underlined are underlined in the text.

¹⁸ Kant, *ibid.* (AK IV, 428); Lewis White Beck's translation, pp. 46–47.

¹⁹ Paul Ricœur, « Pour l'être humain du seul fait qu'il est humain », in *Les enjeux des droits de l'homme*, dir. Jean-François de Raymond, Paris, Larousse, 1988, p. 235–236.

spontaneously given to the weakest and poorest, the importance of leniency and respect toward those who are in a state of dependency and weakness. In India, the *Laws of Manu*, of ancient origin, declare in plain language: ‘Children, the old, the poor and the sick should be considered as lords of the atmosphere’²⁰. Chinese wisdom ranks the ‘ability to comfort others’ as most important. *Ren* (or *jen*) insists that one does not ‘become human except in one’s relationship with others’ and that ‘the moral tie is most important in that it is the basis of, and constitutes the nature of, all human beings’²¹. Respect for the poor and the suffering, in every sense of those terms, is at the core of the Jewish and Christian traditions. The Koran states duties to orphans, the poor, travellers without lodging, the needy, and those who have been put into slavery²². Compassion is one of the two main ideals of Buddhism²³. Among the Greeks, Sophocles helps us see something similar in the person of old Oedipus, blind and in tatters, practically abandoned, asking ‘So, when I am nothing – then am I a man?’²⁴.

Everywhere we thus seem to discover a sense that a state of destitution reveals the quality of being human most clearly, commanding awareness of one’s own particular nobility – the nobility, again, of being, not of something that is possessed. Such recognition of every human being unique dignity, about which civilizations at their best are so remarkable in agreement, is of the utmost importance, because it too proves that the universal recognition of human dignity is not derived from some abstract definition of man; that it is not based on some particular so-called ‘philosophical system’, or arbitrary point of view.

Respect even for the dead has been universal, as funeral rites devoted to honouring the dead have borne out everywhere, from the dawn of time. Why should one, to this day, be moved to assent before the action of the young girl Antigone in Sophocles’s great play when she refuses to let the body of her brother, even though he was denounced as a traitor, to be left to rot in the sun and be eaten by vultures, at the cost of breaking the law and sacrificing her own life? Her ethical commitment, and the universal echo it provokes, implies that even the dead body of a condemned person deserves sacred rites. These will restore it

²⁰ Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, New York, Macmillan, 1947, p. 104, 107 and 115.

²¹ Anne Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, Paris, Seuil, 1997, p. 68 sq. According to Marcel Granet, all Confucian doctrine of ‘the supreme virtue’, *ren* (or *jen*) is defined as [translation] ‘an active feeling of human dignity’, based on respect for oneself and respect for others, from which the golden rule is derived; cf. his book *La pensée chinoise*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1968, p. 395–398. Cf. also *The Analects of Confucius* XII, 22; VI, 23; IV, 15.

²² Cf. *I Kings* 21; *Isaiah*, 58, 6–10; *Deuteronomy* 15, 1–15; 24, 10–15; 26, 12; *Proverbs* 14, 21; 17, 5; 22, 22–23; 23, 10–11; *Matthew* 5, 3–12; *Luke* 6, 20–26; 10, 29–37; *Mark* 12, 41–44; *Luke* 16, 19–25; *Matthew* 25, 31–46; and Azim Nanji, *Islamic Ethics*, in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1991, p. 108 sq.

²³ On wisdom and compassion in Buddhism, see R. E. Florida, in *Buddhist Approaches to Abortion*, in *Asian Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1991, pp. 39–50.

²⁴ *Oedipus at Colonus*, 430, translated by Robert Fagles, in Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, New York, The Viking Press, 1982, p. 286.

to the humanity to which it belongs by right²⁵. If this be true with regard to the dead, if even the remains of a condemned man deserve such respect, what should one think of a living human body, destitute or defenceless as it may be?²⁶

Her judgment is an ethical one and not simply a judgment of the fact which locates a singular under a category. It is the form of an engagement: I say that the cadaver of my brother merits all the honours due to a human being and it is my duty to act accordingly, even to the cost of my life. So, it can be asked, prior to any other form of argumentation, if, in medical ethics, the example of Antigone, or other similar ones, should be considered to be outmoded. Ordinary experience does not suggest this. A demented old man, for example, is for the most part recognized as a person by his children; even if there is effectively no communication, there is a relation to the others simply because they recognize him. More difficult, certainly, is the recognition of those whom sickness or cruelties have rendered unrecognizable, as in *Isaiah*, 52, 14: ‘His aspect was so disfigured that he no longer had a human appearance’. But, as Ronald Dworkin pointed out, this does not prevent the ‘intrinsic, sacred value’ of human life from being recognized by most of us most of the time²⁷.

The death that Antigone defended is a limit case. Her example puts magnificently into light, *a fortiori*, the greatness and necessity of care given to patients up to the last instant of their lives, considering that even beyond death their remains have a right to so much respect. And her example has yet another major dimension: she appeals to unwritten laws, inscribed in the human heart, foreshadowing what Claude Bruaire sums up very well for medicine: ‘*Positive legislation is not all and supposes unwritten laws. It regulates a craft but it cannot prescribe all its ethical norms. A doctor does not only follow an official deontological code, even if he must do so with intelligence and rigour, for he is in contact with questions that do not come solely under written law*’²⁸.

3. Dignity – Decency

The word ‘dignity’ is derived from the latin *dignus*, which refers to *decet*, ‘it is suitable’, to which are attached two substantives: *decus*, *decor*. *Decus* signifies ‘decorum, decency, dignity’; hence ‘honour’ and ‘beauty’, physical beauty together with moral beauty, though that last meaning belongs more to *decor*. Isidore of Séville specifies that ‘*decus* refers to the soul [or spirit], *decor* to the

²⁵ Cf. Sophocle, *Antigone*, v. 26–30 (cf. 203–206); v. 453–457; v. 71–74; cf. v. 909–914; and v. 924 (cf. v. 942–943); as well as *Ajax* (cf. 1129 sq. et 1343 sq.), *Oedipus the King* (863 sq.), *Electra* (1090 sq.).

²⁶ For further detailed references, cf. T. De Koninck, *De la dignité humaine*, Paris, PUF, 1995 (2^e édition, ‘Quadrige’, 2002), p. 7–11.

²⁷ Cf. Ronald Dworkin, *Life’s Dominion. An Argument about Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, pp. 11–13 and *passim*; on dignity: p. 233–241.

²⁸ Claude Bruaire, *Une éthique pour la médecine*, Paris, Fayard, 1978, p. 50–51.

form of the body'²⁹. One might therefore be tempted to reduce the meaning of the word dignity to '*the sort of elegance which spares others the spectacle of our own distresses*', in Jacques Ricot's fine phrase³⁰. This is what a certain rhetoric succeeds at, as the above-mentioned Commission *Dying with Dignity* appears to have done. But authentic decency and beauty are more truly found in the beauty of human relations at their best, namely in friendship, which ancient Greeks such as Aristotle rightly judged to be *what is most necessary* for a human life³¹. Care properly understood offers a splendid illustration of such friendship.

Emmanuel Levinas has successfully emphasized for our day what he termed 'responsibility for the other', by stressing that human vulnerability as such obliges us. This is evident above all in the human face. The face is given to the other's vision. I shall never see my own face save in reflections of it. The human body is turned toward the other. In concrete, ordinary life, such a 'face to face' demonstrates, furthermore, that the other person is one I cannot invent. Her otherness fully resists any reduction to the same as me. Properly speaking, to look at a human face is not to look at the forehead, the nose, the mouth, the chin, etc., so much as to grasp the whole of it, and its 'essential poverty'.

The human face is indeed naked, exposed and even threatened – a dependence which we sometimes attempt to mask through poses or by seeking a countenance. Be that as it may, the face is meaningful in itself. In the other's defenceless eyes can be read the commandment; 'Do not kill', a ban which surely does not render murder impossible – it is merely an ethical requirement – but which explains why the murderer is unable to look the victim in the eyes. Should you mock this, you might well reveal that, not unlike the murderer, you too avoid truly looking at human faces³². So soon as the other looks at me in the sense I have just described following Levinas, I am responsible for him or her; even more so, 'responsibility is initially *for the other*'³³. The relation between us is even asymmetrical: 'from the outset, no matter who the other person may be with regard to me, it is she of whom I am above all responsible'³⁴. It is initially in the face, in my responsibility for the other person, that justice manifests itself – or better still, equity – revealing at a still deeper level 'the wisdom of love'. To be responsible, as the word indicates, is to answer *for*, but it is, just as much, to answer. *Noblesse oblige*, as the saying is: I must answer to the call of the other person's face, to its authority, to its command, especially through suffering. Only a barbarian would refrain from it.

²⁹ Cf. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots*, by A. Ernout et A. Meillet, 4^e édition, Paris, Klincksieck, 1959, s. v. *decet*.

³⁰ Jacques Ricot, *Dignité et euthanasie*, Nantes, Éditions Pleins Feux, 2003, p. 13.

³¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII, 1, 1155 a 4–5.

³² Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Éthique et Infini. Entretiens avec Philippe Nemo*, Paris, Fayard, 1982, p. 89–132; *Totalité et infini*, La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971; *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Paris, Fata Morgana, 1972.

³³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Éthique et Infini*, p. 102.

³⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous. Essai sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Paris, Grasset, 1991, p. 123.

It is worthwhile recalling here that the French verb ‘soigner’, meaning ‘taking care of’, possesses the additional connotation found in the expression ‘un travail très soigné’, where the emphasis is put on the idea of ‘up to the smallest details’. Care of the sick could draw inspiration from that other meaning as well, which would translate itself into respect for the sick even unto the smallest details, its motive being the dignity of the sick person and the requirements it entails with regard to her body, her spirit, her culture, and to **the interpersonal relationships so essential to a genuine quality of life**. Health professionals thus have a good chance to be called upon to become experts in humanity. The *essential poverty* of human beings is seldom more evident than in the sick and the dying. It is as if the truth but also the enigma of our condition were even more patent then. These are indeed the *limit situations* (Karl Jaspers) which prove universal, in their essentials, for every human life: suffering, dread or anxiety, aging and death.

In suffering we experience an ‘impossibility to free ourselves from the instant of existence’, the ‘absence of any refuge’, ‘an incapacity to escape or to draw back’; there is, furthermore, ‘the proximity of death’; pain adds Levinas, involves ‘a sort of paroxysm’. One experiences an extreme passivity, a kind of pure subjection. Vladimir Jankélévitch likewise observed that ‘pain itself is only tragic because of the mortal possibility it contains; and it is again death which is implicitly confronted in every peril, and which is the dangerous in every danger’³⁵. All of which may help to generate a clearer conscience of the duty one has – a duty to humanity – to bring to the sick and to the dying the necessary aid³⁶. **We may there catch a glimpse of how much medical care remains the central pivot to insure, in a concrete way and in the last analysis, the effective recognition of the dignity of the person, which is the dignity of an end, or purpose, mentioned earlier.**

Please allow me a last remark on this score. Recognition by the other person is the most powerful of all rewards. Respect, recognition and love are in fact all intimately related. The basic theme here is that of the good in its most evident form, the lovable; where resentment and hate desire destruction, love and friendship say, on the contrary, ‘it is good that you exist’. ‘*There lies the root of the joy of love, when it exists: to feel ourselves justified to exist*’, wrote Sartre in one of his best pages³⁷. Each and every patient, whoever he or she may be, is thus recognized in concrete fashion, through medical care, for what he or she is in truth: unique in the world. Every authentic act of care is accordingly measured by the person of the patient in its integrity and its dignity, invariably present whatever the appearances may be, putting to the test both the competence and

³⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, PUF, 2006, p. 55 sq.; Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Les vertus et l'amour I*, Paris, Flammarion, coll. Champs, 1986, p. 134.

³⁶ Cf. Jean-Louis Baudoin et Danielle Blondeau, *Éthique de la mort et droit à la mort*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1993.

³⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, Paris, Gallimard, 1943, p.439.

the humanity of health professionals: an immense challenge, to be sure, but the ultimate *raison d'être* of all medical care as such, and of its greatness.

4. Dignity-Liberty

Furthermore, human dignity has at all times, though in diverse ways, been associated to our rational nature and to the ensuing freedom of the will. It was so not only by Kant and the whole Enlightenment, but already by the Ancients, and most explicitly in the Middle Ages. Thus, St. Bernard wrote: 'I call human dignity the free will, thanks to which man is not only placed above the other living creatures, but has the right also to command. I call science the power he has to discern that eminent dignity, a power that cannot have its origin within him'³⁸. For Thomas Aquinas, the nobility of human beings stems from the fact that they are intelligent and are the source of their actions, that is to say that they are free, in which regard they are in the image of God³⁹. According to Dante, 'The greatest gift which God in His bounty bestowed in creating, and the most conformed to His own greatness and that which He most prizes, was the freedom of the will, with which the creatures that have intelligence, they all and they alone, were and are endowed'⁴⁰. Liberty, in brief, for all of them, expresses the core of the human condition, its two essential components being intelligence and will, both of them immense; witness the experience we enjoy of thinking and willing. They are both also implicit in the formula which, as Paul Ladrière writes, 'dominates the whole history of the notion of person', the one we owe to Boethius: 'an individual substance of a rational nature'⁴¹.

The simplest and most accessible way to see how freedom and the concept of person are linked is the notion of causality, as reflected in ordinary language. The Greek word *aitia*, cause, means at first 'responsibility', as in 'accountability' in the sense of a 'charge'; the Latin word *causa* evolved in a similar fashion, also meaning a legal cause or action or trial, to begin with. The words 'accuse', 'excuse', 'recuse' still bear the mark of such an origin.

If I take you to court, it is because I believe you are responsible (having to answer for, or respond) for something; I recognize you *ipso facto* as a person. You cannot put on trial someone who is unable to answer for his or her actions. 'To treat an individual as a person is to consider him responsible for his actions before the tribunals, in the literal or figurative sense, of law or morality – or even, for some, before the tribunals of divine judgement' (Alan Montefiore). John

³⁸ St Bernard, *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, chapter II, in *Oeuvres mystiques*, translation by Albert Béguin, Paris, Seuil, p. 31-32.

³⁹ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae, Ia-IIae*, Prologus ; see also *Ia Pars*, q. 93.

⁴⁰ Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso*, Canto V, 19–24, translated, with a Commentary, by Charles S. Singleton, Princeton University Press, 1975.

⁴¹ *Naturae rationalis individua substantia (Contra Eutychen et Nestorium*, c. III, PL 64, 1343). Cf. Paul Ladrière, *La notion de personne, héritière d'une longue tradition*, in *Biomédecine et devenir de la personne*, dir. Simone Novaes, Paris, Seuil, 1991, p. 49 ; cf. 47-51.

Locke was not mistaken, in that regard, when he saw in the term ‘person’ a ‘tribunal term’ (*forensic*)⁴².

Notice how far we are here from the ‘individual autonomy’ proclaimed by the Report of the Royal Society of Canada mentioned earlier. For what its author’s advocate is a recycling of the voluntarism of two late mediaeval theologians, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. Scotus defined the will as ‘the sole total cause of volition’; Ockham went a step further by advancing that the good is ‘identical to what is desired or willed by the will’: *bonum est idem quod volitum sive volibile*⁴³. To put it succinctly, whatever your ‘autonomy’ decides would be *ipso facto* good. Try telling that to a jury in a real murder trial! Both left out reason and responsibility in the quest for the good, as if unaware of the fact that, to quote Schelling, ‘the most profound difficulty of the whole doctrine of liberty’ is that it is ‘a power for good or evil’⁴⁴. The same applies to the Report in question.

Thus, we see autonomy and liberty, in the deeper sense of those terms, as opposed to the reductions of the said Report, amount to the same. The word ‘autonomy’ refers to *autos*, the self, and to *nomos*, the law. But a law I give to myself in that manner must perforce prove capable of universalization, must be founded in reason aiming at the good, and therefore be the opposite of submission to a selfish impulse. Now this is true even till the instant of death. That instant is none the less indeterminate beforehand, as was admirably underscored by Vladimir Jankélévitch, who, not without reason, saw here no less than the ‘foundation of medical deontology’. He wrote: ‘Yet if the prolongation of life cannot be indefinite, the date of death, we saw, does remain indeterminate, and that indetermination, authorizing all hopes, is the foundation of medical deontology. Late though death may come, it always arrives too soon [...]. In other words, to put to death a dying person more than three quarters dead, to put to death a dying person who is scarcely alive, and nevertheless living and even irretrievable [...], an infinite distance still needs to be covered’⁴⁵.

In order to see more clearly into all this, one must bring to the fore the ultimate experience of liberty in our heart of hearts. No one can force me to love or not love anyone in my heart of hearts, even under torture or in whatever con-

⁴² Alan Montefiore, *Identité Morale. L’identité morale et la personne*, in *Dictionnaire d’éthique et de philosophie morale*, ed. by Monique Canto-Sperber, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1996, p. 691 a, referring to Amelia Rorty, *The Identities of Persons*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1976; John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II, XXVII, 26.

⁴³ Cf. André de Muralt, *L’unité de la philosophie politique. De Scot, Occam et Suarez au libéralisme contemporain*, Paris, 2002, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, p. 29-31; p. 32-34.

⁴⁴ F.W.J. Schelling, *Recherches philosophiques sur l’essence de la liberté humaine et les sujets qui s’y rattachent* (1809), trad. Jean-François Courtine et Emmanuel Martineau, dans *Œuvres métaphysiques (1805-1821)*, Paris, Gallimard, 1980, p. 139 (*S. W.* VII, p. 352).

⁴⁵ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La mort*, Paris, Flammarion, 1977, p. 282-283.

straining circumstance. Moreover, internal experience of thinking and loving reveals that an instant flash suffices to turn everything around in another direction. I may in an instant change completely in my heart of hearts. We shall experience death, you and I, only when our time comes, like everyone. But as some great contemporary philosophers, such as Gadamer, have pointed out, we all enjoy the living trace of it in our experience of the instantaneous – all of a sudden we understand, all of a sudden we decide, in an instant⁴⁶.

5. Conclusion

It follows that human dignity can never be lost. It is obvious in the case of ontological dignity, since it has to do with every man's very being. No less so in the case of dignity-decency, since the latter imposes respect to the last, in the perspective of care, without ever making an attempt at anyone's life. And dignity-liberty forbids both euthanasia and assisted suicide, which destroys it by imposing the 'absolute constraint' of death, while pretending to respect freedom⁴⁷. Moreover, it brings out the true sense of individual autonomy, namely the inalienable liberty of the heart of hearts, which must be honoured to the last by the best care possible in order to facilitate its exercise in the most crucial moments of a human life.

When faced with two evils, one must choose the lesser of the two: it is better to live, even when suffering, than to die, death being without remission, as Hamlet reminds us. To kill a person is to remove each and every one of her possibilities, to suppress brutally her very identity, above all her precious liberty. The advocates of euthanasia and assisted self-slaughter, to use Shakespeare's term, entertain an abstract view of the end of each unique, priceless and ineffable human life; there are no exceptions to this uniqueness whatever they may think in scorn of it. They artificially separate that end from the whole it belongs to, which is the complete life of the victim, as if the death of a human being was comparable to the death of an insect deprived of memory, or to disposing of an obsolete computer. They commit the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*, brilliantly denounced by the great Anglo-American philosopher, A. N. Whitehead, by substituting the abstract, an isolated moment, to the concrete, which is the culminating moment of a full human life. The end of the race will no longer be allowed, the finale of the symphony is censured, and the quest for meaning is trampled underfoot and reduced to nothing, as it was by Macbeth's nihilism. Life would then indeed seem to be 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ Cf. Walter Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*, London & New York, Continuum, 2008, pp. 72–76.

⁴⁷ Cf. Fabrice Hadjadj, *Réussir sa mort*, Paris, Presses de la Renaissance, Points/Essais, 2005, p. 153.

⁴⁸ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V, 5, 26–28.

Acknowledgment and Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. Any errors or omissions are his own.

References

1. Aristotel, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII, 1, 1155 a 4–5.
2. Aristotel, *Sophistical Refutations*, 1, 165 a 5 and a 15–17, translation by W. A. Pickard-Cambridge, in *the Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, Princeton University Press, 1984, vol. 1, p. 278.
3. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II, 9, 1387 b's 13–15, translation by George A. Kennedy.
4. Baudoin, Jean-Louis et Danielle Blondeau, *Éthique de la mort et droit à la mort*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1993.
5. Bruaire, Claude, *Une éthique pour la médecine*, Paris, Fayard, 1978, p. 50-51.
6. Camus, Albert, *Préface à « l'Espagne libre », Actuelles I, Essais*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1965, respectively, p. 1605 et 1607.
7. Cheng, Anne, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, Paris, Seuil, 1997, p. 68 sq.
8. Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso*, Canto V, 19–24, translated, with a Commentary, by Charles S. Singleton, Princeton University Press, 1975.
9. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots*, by A. Ernout et A. Meillet, 4^e édition, Paris, Klincksieck, 1959, s. v. *decet*.
10. Dworkin, Ronald, *Life's Dominion. An Argument about Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, pp. 11–13 and *passim*; on dignity: pp. 233–241.
11. Fiat, Éric, *Grandeurs et misères des hommes. Petit traité de la dignité*, Paris, Larousse, 2010, p. 23.
12. Florida, R. E., *Buddhist Approaches to Abortion*, in *Asian Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1991, pp. 39–50.
13. Gide, André, *Ainsi soit-il ou Les jeux sont faits*, Paris, Gallimard, 1952, édition revue et augmentée, 2001, p. 115.
14. *Goethes Gespräche mit Eckermann*, 22 März 1831, Wiesbaden, Insel-Verlag, 1955, p. 455.
15. Hadjadj, Fabrice, *Réussir sa mort*, Paris, Presses de la Renaissance, Points/Essais, 2005, p. 153.
16. Jankélévitch, Vladimir, *La mort*, Paris, Flammarion, 1977, p. 282-283.
17. Jankélévitch, Vladimir, *Les vertus et l'amour I*, Paris, Flammarion, coll. Champs, 1986, p. 134.
18. Jonas, Hans, *The Right to Die*, The Hastings Center Report, Wiley Online Library, 2012. p. 31.
19. Kant, Emmanuel, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, Zweiter Abschnitt (AK IV, 434–435), Lewis White Beck's translation, The Library of Arts, 1959, p. 53.
20. Koninck, T. De, *De la dignité humaine*, Paris, PUF, 1995 (2^e édition, « Quadrige », 2002), p. 7-11.
21. Lammi, Walter, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*, London & New York,

- Continuum, 2008, p. 72-76.
22. Levinas, Emmanuel, *Entre nous. Essai sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Paris, Grasset, 1991, p. 123.
 23. Levinas, Emmanuel, *Éthique et Infini. Entretiens avec Philippe Nemo*, Paris, Fayard, 1982, p. 89-132.
 24. Levinas, Emmanuel, *Le temps et l'autre*, PUF, 2006, p. 55 sq.
 25. Lewis, C. S., *The Abolition of Man*, New York, Macmillan, 1947, p. 104, 107 and 115.
 26. Locke, John, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, XXVII, 26.
 27. Marcel, Gabriel, *La dignité humaine*, Paris, Aubier, 1964, p. 168.
 28. Mattéi, Jean-François, *De l'indignation*, Paris, Éditions de la Table Ronde, 2005.
 29. Montefiore, Alan, *Identité Morale. L'identité morale et la personne*, in *Dictionnaire d'éthique et de philosophie morale*, ed. by Monique Canto-Sperber, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1996, p. 691.
 30. *Mourir dans la dignité. Rapport de la Commission spéciale*, Assemblée nationale, Québec, mars 2012, p. 78 and *passim*.
 31. Muralt, André de, *L'unité de la philosophie politique. De Scot, Occam et Suarez au libéralisme contemporain*, Paris, 2002, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, p. 29-31; p. 32-34.
 32. Nanji, Azim, *Islamic Ethics*, in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1991, p. 108 sq.
 33. *Naturae rationalis individua substantia (Contra Eutychen et Nestorium, c. III, PL 64, 1343)*. Cf. Paul Ladrière, *La notion de personne, héritière d'une longue tradition*, in *Biomédecine et devenir de la personne*, dir. Simone Novaes, Paris, Seuil, 1991, p. 49; cf. 47-51.
 34. *Oedipus at Colonus*, 430, translated by Robert Fagles, in Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, New York, The Viking Press, 1982, p. 286.
 35. Orwell, George, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1949; Penguin Books, 1954, pp. 44-45; 169-171.
 36. Pascal, *Pensées*, Brunschwig 434; Lafuma 131;
 37. Report of the Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel, *End-of-Life Decision Making*, November 2011, pp. 51-52.
 38. Ricœur, Paul, 'Pour l'être humain du seul fait qu'il est humain', in *Les enjeux des droits de l'homme*, dir. Jean-François de Raymond, Paris, Larousse, 1988, p. 235-236.
 39. Ricot, Jacques, *Dignité et euthanasie*, Nantes, Éditions Pleins Feux, 2003, p. 13.
 40. Ricot, Jacques, *Le mourant*, Editions M-editer, 2006, pp. 43-81.
 41. Rorty, Amelia, *The Identities of Persons*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1976.
 42. Sartre, Jean-Paul, *L'être et le néant*, Paris, Gallimard, 1943, p.439.
 43. Schelling, F.W.J., *Recherches philosophiques sur l'essence de la liberté humaine et les sujets qui s'y rattachent* (1809), trad. Jean-François Courtine et Emmanuel Martineau, dans *Œuvres métaphysiques (1805-1821)*, Paris, Gallimard, 1980, p. 139 (S. W. VII, p. 352).
 44. St. Bernard, *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, chapter II, in *Oeuvres mystiques*, translation by Albert Béguin, Paris, Seuil, pp. 31-32.

45. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae, Ia-IIae*, Prologus; see also *Ia Pars*, q. 93.
46. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Brussels, Amnesty International, 1988.