## MODULE 2: WHAT IS HUMAN DIGNITY?

In this module, we will be working towards the achievement of learning outcome 2: work collaboratively to explain the concept of the dignity of the human person and analyse examples of a commitment to human dignity in action.

We will also be working towards the attainment of graduate attributes:

1: demonstrate respect for the dignity of each individual and for human diversity (which you will do through the **content** of the module);

4: think critically and reflectively (which you will do through the **skills processes** involved in completing the activities);

7: work both autonomously and collaboratively (which you will do through the **skills processes** involved in completing the activities, especially in class); and

8. locate, organise, analyse, synthesise and evaluate information (which you will do through the **skills processes** involved in completing the activities).
Graduate Attributes in this Module

Note that we will be working with a new graduate attribute in the classroom activities associated with this module: GA7—work both autonomously and collaboratively. Go to the Graduate Attribute 7 Resource to gain an overview of what is expected in collaborative work at third-year level and beyond, especially in the workforce.

Complete the self-assessment tool in order to prepare for and reflect on the collaborative activities you undertake in this unit. Print your completed forms and bring them to class.

We will also be working with graduate attribute 8. GA8 is very closely linked with GA4 (think critically and reflectively)—it contains a series of skills (deepening in a spiral), and thinking critically and reflectively actually lies behind many of these skills. Let’s examine how your work on GA8 will unfold in this module:

The module begins by helping you to identify various approaches to human dignity.

Then we see if you understand and interpret those positions by locating evidence for them in various texts and categorising them.

The next step involves deepening that understanding; you will analyse more complex materials to synthesise and articulate each position.

Then we raise questions about each position in relation to the others. You need to start bringing in your evaluative skills here—what are the problems inherent in each position?

Finally, we give you further where the authors use different frameworks to think about human dignity. You need to apply your enriched understanding in new contexts.

Go to the Graduate Attribute 8 Resource to learn about this process.
2.1 WHAT IS HUMAN DIGNITY?

2.1.1 The bases of human dignity

In module 1, “dignity” was defined as “worth” or “value.” It seems a simple matter, then, to say that “human dignity” means “human worth” or “human value” and that this is an important consideration in all that we do.¹

Nonetheless, when various people use the expression “human dignity,” they may be referring to different things.² This is because they are thinking about the basis of human dignity differently.

What is human dignity? When we ask this question, we are often bringing a different question to bear on our answer: what is it that gives a human being dignity?

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¹ Typically, when referring to human beings, dignity is more closely associated with the notion of “worth” so as to distinguish it from “value” in terms of money or utility. In other words, human worth or dignity should not be measured in terms of monetary value or usefulness.

² A scholarly note for those interested in philosophy and the possible distinction between human beings and human persons. This unit makes no distinction between the terms human dignity and dignity of the human person. One should note, however, that a distinction is obviously possible, particularly due to the fact that the latter explicitly mentions the ‘person’. So, for example, one could make a distinction between ‘human dignity’ as referring to the dignity of all human life forms, and ‘the dignity of the human person’ as referring only to those human life forms that demonstrate personhood (however that may be defined). In this unit, no such distinction will be made, since, whichever term one uses, it must refer to an anthropology, i.e., to an idea of what constitutes a human being/person as a bearer of dignity. Thus, the debate should focus more on what constitutes the human individual to which both the terms ‘human dignity’ and ‘dignity of the human person’ can refer.

For example, usage in the German debate seems to make little distinction between Menschenwürde (human dignity) and Würde der Person (dignity of the person). Instead, the focus is on what constitutes the human individual as a bearer of dignity, i.e., can and should one make a distinction between Mensch (human being) and Person (human person) with respect to dignity? In a contribution aimed at addressing the role of the concept of the person in solving bioethical problems, the German philosopher and biomedical ethicist Dieter Birnbacher points out that in biomedical ethics there are two ‘schools’ of thought in this regard. The first he calls the Äquivalez-doktrin (Equivalence Doctrine), which holds that all human beings (menschlichen Wesen) are persons (i.e. bearers of dignity) from conception to death, e.g. philosopher Robert Spaemann. The Nichtäquivalez-doktrin (Non-Equivalence Doctrine) argues that a human being is only a person if they display certain capacities, e.g. philosopher Peter Singer. Interestingly, in both cases, Birnbacher states that it is Menschenwürde that is ascribed to the relevant notion of person, i.e. the being that bears this dignity and is therefore worthy of respect. Hence, this unit too makes no distinction between the ‘dignity of the human person’ and ‘human dignity’. Birnbacher, Dieter. “Hilft der Personen Begriff bei der Lösung bioethischer Fragestellungen?” In Menschenleben – Menschenwürde, edited by Walter Schweidler, Herbert A. Neumann, and Eugen Brysch, (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2003), 31–32. See also, among others, Spaemann, Robert. “Sind Alle Menschen Personen? Über neue philosophische Rechtfertigungen der Lebensvernichtung.” In Tüchtig oder tot? Die Entsorgung des Leidens, edited by Jürgen-Peter Stössel, (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), 133–147.; Singer, Practical Ethics, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 83-109; Mieth, “Das Proprium Christianum und das Menschenwürdeargument in der Bioethik,” Theologische Quartalsschrift 180 (2000): 252–271.
2.1.2 Two main categories for thinking about human dignity

ACU Brisbane lecturer, David Kirchhoffer, classifies the various approaches to human dignity into two main categories.

**Category 1** Some understandings of human dignity are based in the belief that it is something all humans already *have*—

- either simply because they are human, OR
- because humans possess certain capacities that other creatures do not possess.

**Category 2** Other understandings of human dignity are based in the belief that human dignity is something that people can *acquire (or lose)*—

- either through their own feelings of self-worth (or lack of self-worth), OR
- through certain dignity-bestowing (or dignity-removing) behaviours.

Watch and listen to David Kirchhoffer explain the various approaches to human dignity.

**Accessibility:** Turn on YouTube captions to view subtitles/transcript.

**ACTIVITY 2.1.2**

1. Print the worksheet for activity 2.1.2. As you listen to the video, complete the table below. For each column, first complete the sentence, then list all the words you hear to describe each of the categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category 1: Dignity humans</th>
<th>Category 2: Dignity humans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

2. Write a paragraph summarising the differences between each of the 2 categories for thinking about human dignity.
2.1.3 Each category contains two approaches to grounding human dignity

Within category 1 approaches, we can identify two subsets of understandings: let’s call them 1a and 1b. Similarly, within category 2 approaches, we can identify what we can call 2a and 2b. These are summarised in the following diagram:

![Diagram of human dignity categories](image)

**Click each quadrant** for more information and videos.

**Accessibility:** Turn on YouTube captions to view subtitles/transcript.

FOR PRINTING, the four quadrants are below:

**1A Dignity that humans always already have by being a member of the human species:**
*Humans have inherent worth simply because they are human.*

- Many religious arguments fall into this category, particularly those claiming that humans have been created by God in God’s own image.
- Non-religious proponents of this view might say that it is natural to favour the survival of one’s own species over others, and hence that one’s own species has a special worth over against any instrumental or even intrinsic value that other species may have.

Watch and listen to David Kirchhoffer talk about the dignity that humans always already have by being a member of the human species.

**1B Dignity that humans always already have based on possession of one or more human capacities:**
*Humans have inherent worth because they are distinctive and special.*

- Human reason (the capacity to think rationally, rationality) is the special capacity to which we are most frequently referred in terms of distinctiveness. Other capacities might include autonomy, freedom, morality, conscience, or even the capacity to love.
- Some people argue against this position because they claim that particular species of animals have similar capacities, so that humans are not unique.
Watch and listen to David Kirchhoffer talk about the dignity that humans always already have based on possession of one or more human capacities.

2A Dignity that humans can acquire (or lose) through a sense of self-worth: I have dignity when I believe in my own worth.

- People arguing from this position understand human dignity as something akin to a sense of pride in oneself or a conscious sense of one’s own worth as a human being living a meaningful life, worthy of the respect of others.
- For some people arguing from this position, being in a compromised or humiliating position is a threat to their dignity (although others might continue to assert their dignity in spite of being in such a position).

Watch and listen to David Kirchhoffer talk about the dignity that humans acquire (or lose) through a sense of self-worth.

2B Dignity that humans can acquire (or lose) through moral (or immoral) behaviour: Humans acquire dignity when they behave well in society, but can also lose it when they behave badly.

- This argument focuses not so much on one’s own sense of self-worth, but on the way in which one is judged to have human dignity through one’s behaviour.
- Particular people may be seen as examples of human dignity here because of the selfless lives they have lived in pursuit of high ideals and exemplary conduct, for example: Aung San Suu Kyi, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., or Mother Teresa.
- Other people (for example, violent criminals) might be judged to have lost their human dignity and so deemed not worthy of participation in society.

Watch and listen to David Kirchhoffer talk about the dignity that humans acquire (or lose) through moral/immoral behaviour.

ACTIVITY 2.1.3

Before you begin, print the PDF file: Four Approaches to Grounding Human Dignity.

Then, click on each quadrant of the diagram above for an explanation of each position using text and video. As you work through the resources provided for each category, complete the relevant sections of your handout by naming and describing the approach.

Bring your completed worksheet to class in week 3.
Note: You will need to have memorised and be able to explain all four approaches to grounding human dignity for your in-class test in week 3.

You will also need to keep the page somewhere prominent for the whole semester as you study UNCC300.
2.1.4 Some examples of the different approaches to grounding human dignity

**ACTIVITY 2.1.4**

Print the PDF file: *Examples of Different Approaches to Grounding Human Dignity.*

Examine each of the following resources and see if you can identify the understanding of the basis of human dignity to which it MOST relates (you may find that some resources call on more than one basis for human dignity). Use the sheet to complete the identification exercise, giving reasons for your response in each instance.


A brief view of a Catholic understanding of human dignity is outlined in this press release. The full speech offers greater depth.

Keep this handout for the activities to follow – you will be asked to add to it. Then, bring your responses to class so that you can see how you went.

**RESOURCES TO DEEPEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING**

Let’s look again at our diagram. This time, when you click on each quadrant you will be given a number of examples where this approach could be used to ground an argument on the basis of human dignity. Using the same handout from the previous activity (“Examples of Different Approaches to Grounding Human Dignity”), work through each of the quadrants, adding to the handout as you go. We have also provided some questions to help deepen your understanding.

Don’t forget to bring your completed handout to class so that you can see how you went.

Click each quadrant for more information and required readings. Accessibility: Turn on YouTube captions to view subtitles/transcript.
FOR PRINTING, the four quadrants are below:

1A Dignity that humans always already have simply because they are human:

1. Hershey H. Friedman, “Human Dignity and the Jewish Tradition” (paper, Jewish Law, 2008), (at the beginning of the article, Friedman sets out the foundations for a Jewish thinking of human dignity; he then goes on to apply it in a religious setting);
2. “Human Dignity” (Educating for Justice), (this gives the sources for thinking about human dignity in Catholic tradition);

ACTIVITY 2.1.4 (1A)
In light of these examples, write a paragraph summarising the first understanding of human dignity.

1B Dignity that humans always already have because they have distinctive qualities that bestow a special dignity:

1. In this lecture, Michael Sandel, from Harvard University, discusses the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Watch the first 5 minutes, where he outlines the basis of Kant’s teachings on human dignity. (Note: This piece of film has full captioning. Choose ‘English’ not ‘English: automatic captions’.)
2. In this TED Talk, Antonio Demasio discusses the scientific Quest to Understand Consciousness. Note the way in which he describes the role of consciousness as distinctively human, and the role that consciousness plays in moving humanity beyond our biological possibilities.
3. In this article, Helene Guldberg claims that Only Humans Have Morality, Not Animals. She says that it is our collective cognition that makes humans “special and unique among the animal kingdom.”

ACTIVITY 2.1.4 (1B)
In light of these examples, write a paragraph summarising the second understanding of human dignity.

2A: Dignity that humans can acquire (or lose) through a sense of self-worth:

The belief that human dignity relates to a sense of self-worth is expressed in the examples below, where each of the protagonists is in a situation of extreme humiliation and degradation. However, note how different the responses are in each case: for the first subject, dignity is experienced as remaining in spite of the situation; for the second subject, dignity is experienced as lost in the situation.

1. Consider first the case of Brian Keenan, an Irishman kidnapped in 1986 in Lebanon along with an English colleague, John McCarthy. They were held for ransom as political hostages in appalling conditions for over four years. Keenan describes how he keeps his own sense of worth in spite of the degradation to which he was subject. Read about the experience and listen to an interview with Keenan on how he retained his sanity and dignity during this ordeal. In 2004 a movie, Blind Flight, was made on the experiences of these two men. Watch this very powerful trailer for the film. This brief animation of a chapter of the book Keenan wrote, An Evil Cradling, gives a taste of what he endured. Read this one brief incident from Keenan’s book on his refusal to have a haircut as a means of retaining his sense of dignity.
2. Let’s look at a quite different example. Human dignity as a sense of self-worth is the cornerstone of this study carried out in England and published in the International Journal of Nursing Studies. The research presented a case study on patient dignity in an acute hospital setting. This study will be of great interest to all Health Sciences students.

**ACTIVITY 2.1.4 (2A)**

1. In the first example, what do you notice about the way in which the term dignity is understood by Keenan? What impact did his actions and choices have on his sense of dignity? Why was it important to him to be able to retain his sense of dignity, as he defined it?

2. According to Baillie’s study (example 2) what are the factors that promote dignity and what are the factors that threaten dignity in an acute hospital setting? What conclusions can you draw from this in relation to the care of vulnerable patients? What does this study add to the discussion on human dignity in relation to care of the sick and dying?

3. In light of these examples, write a paragraph summarising the third understanding of human dignity.

**ACTIVITY 2.1.4 (2B)**

1. Gandhi famously said “My life is my message”. How did Gandhi’s life and work promote human dignity?

2. At his cremation, the crowd chanted “Gandhi is immortal”. What was it about Gandhi, his life, his actions and his teachings that led him to be remembered by others as “dignified”?

3. Note the contrast between Gandhi’s understanding of dignity and that of George W Bush. How do they compare? What do you note about the way in which the former President justifies torture?

4. In light of these examples, write a paragraph summarising the fourth understanding of human dignity.
2.2 PROBLEMS WITH THE APPEAL TO HUMAN DIGNITY

Throughout this module, you have been using the skills inherent in GA8. Up to this point, you have been locating, interpreting, analysing, and synthesising. Now you are asked to use a skill of an even higher order—evaluation.

2.2.1 Human dignity can be used to support opposing arguments

One of the reasons that “dignity talk” is often problematic is that people invoke human dignity to support completely opposing arguments.

Watch and listen to David Kirchhoffer introduce the problem of talking about human dignity.

Accessibility: Turn on YouTube captions to view subtitles/transcript.

We saw in 2.1.4 (understanding 2B) that the use of torture was justified because terrorists had forfeited their human dignity while the ‘worth’ and ‘value’ of innocent people needed to be protected. However, there are those who argue against torture because it is a violation of human dignity.

Here are some further examples of how the appeal to human dignity can result in difficulties:

**Example 1**

Proponents of approach 1A might say that dignity is intrinsic to human being—therefore, it is usually wrong to kill. However, proponents of 1B might say that human dignity comes about because of a special quality that humans possess—in this instance, let’s suppose this quality is rationality. If someone does not display observably rational qualities (say, a person with dementia, or a foetus), the 1B argument might lead to the possibility that it is acceptable to kill that human being.

**Example 2**

Proponents of approach 1B might say that because human dignity comes about as a result of a special quality that humans possess (and we will assume again for the sake of the example that this is rationality), it is wrong to assist in the suicide of someone who still maintains their rational functions. However, proponents of 2A might argue that because human dignity relies on one’s own felt sense of worth and pride in oneself, it is acceptable to assist in the suicide of someone who feels they no longer maintain that sense of worth and pride because of other impairments.
Example 3

Author James Gilligan describes a real case where a man was sent to prison for violent behaviour. While in prison, the man again displayed violent behaviour, this time stabbing another inmate whom he felt had ridiculed him. However, the man justified his actions with an appeal to his own dignity (in the sense of 2A): “Pride. Dignity. Self-steem. And I’ll kill every *** in that cell block if I have to in order to get it! My life ain’t worth nothin’ if I take somebody disrespecting me and callin’ me punk *** *** and goin’ ‘Ha! Ha!’ at me. Life ain’t worth livin’ if there ain’t nothin’ worth dyin’ for. If you ain’t got pride, you got nothin’. That’s all you got! I’ve already got my pride.”

While the interviewee in this video clip from Louis Theroux: Miami Mega-Jail [transcript] uses the word “respect,” instead of dignity, we can see that he is appealing to the same sense of dignity to which Gilligan’s violent man refers.

We can see in this example that an appeal to one’s own sense of dignity (2A) could contradict an understanding of dignity in each of the other senses (1A, 1B, 2B).

2.2.2 The appeal to human dignity has not stopped atrocities

In module 1, we observed that the idea of “human dignity” rose to a new prominence after World War II, in the wake of the holocaust. It is contained in many documents developed in the post-war period, and can be seen to have inspired civil rights movements around the world. Moreover, it has a significant place in Australian professional and legislative codes. However, the disturbing fact is that the violence and genocide of the first half of last century that prompted the renewed interest in human dignity has not abated with the rise of such instruments as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

These two facts—the fact that human dignity can be used to promote opposing arguments, and the fact that the appeal to human dignity has not yet been successful in changing behavior—suggest that we need to think about human dignity differently.

ACTIVITIES 2.2.2 – TO PURSUE IF YOU HAVE AN INTEREST

The videos below give examples of how the world has been apparently incapable of promoting and protecting human dignity even after lessons learned from the Holocaust.

This documentary on Pol Pot’s destructive regime in Cambodia: Inside Evil.

The movie, Hotel Rwanda, tells the story of the terrible violence perpetrated against the Tutsi minority by the Hutus in Rwanda. In this instance (and others, such as the massacre at Srebrenica), the United Nations was unable to prevent the decimation of whole populations. You could hire this movie at your local video store.

Can you think of any other recent cases where an affront to human dignity has occurred?

2.2.3 RESOURCES TO DEEPEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING

The following articles will allow you further explore much of what has been presented in this module but you should note that they sometimes blend different quadrants of our framework or use different terms to name or speak of the various quadrants.

1. This article by Mary Ann Glendon, “The Bearable Lightness of Dignity” (First Things, May 2011, 41-45), explores some of the difficulties surrounding the use of the concept of human dignity when it is ‘co-opted’ by various interest groups and highlights some attacks on the concept in recent years. Ultimately she argues that a culture which respects human dignity is a culture worth building.

Glendon calls for a “transformation of culture” to one that protects the freedom and dignity of humankind through the habits and opinions of ordinary citizens, political leaders and the world’s religions. She implores each of us to “ fulfill the call to perfect (our) own dignity and in so doing, to respect the inherent dignity of fellow members of the human family” (p.45).

To what extent do you agree or disagree with Glendon? What are the practical implications of her call?

2. This brief article by Margaret Somerville, “Defining Human Dignity” (Catholic Education Resource Center, [first published in Montreal Gazette, November 22, 2009]), echoes much of what you have read of the Kirchhoffer model proposed in this module, although she uses
different language to describe the different understandings. Here she explores how both the proponents and opponents of euthanasia employ the concept of human dignity to support their opposite positions. It is interesting to note the way in which Somerville places an appeal to human dignity against the background of the common good.

3. Here, the author outlines the philosophical origins of the term human dignity, and explores how various understandings of the term have been undermined by advances in science and technology. Kurt Bayertz, “Human Dignity: Philosophical Origin and Scientific Erosion of an Idea” (Sanctity of Life and Human Dignity, ed. Kurt Bayertz [Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1996], 73-90).

4. Rieke Van Der Graaf and Johannes J. M. Van Delden, “Clarifying Appeals to Dignity in Medical Ethics from an Historical Perspective” (Bioethics 23, no.3 [2009]: 151–160). An alternative framework for understanding dignity is proposed in this article, which has strong resonance with the Kirchhoffer model but uses different terminology to speak of the different understandings. This article offers a particularly useful historical overview and relates specifically to medical ethics.

What definition of human dignity is provided by Van Der Graff and Van Delden? What do you notice about the model they propose for understanding human dignity? How might this model provide a basis for discussions on issues where human dignity is at risk, particularly in areas related to medical ethics?
2.3 QUESTIONS FOR REVISION

Use these questions to ensure that you have a thorough understanding of the material in this module. You need this in order to prepare for the weekly tests on this and other material, as well as to inform the preparation of assessment task 2.

1. What are the two main categories for understanding human dignity? How do these understandings differ?
2. What are the two subcategories for each understanding? How do these differ?
3. Explain, in detail, each of the four approaches. What is the basis of each approach?
4. Can you think of some scenarios/examples where each of these understandings might be applied?
5. Which approach to human dignity is closest to the understanding you identified as your own, in module 1? Explain your answer.
6. Which approach/s is/are favoured by various religious traditions? What impact do you think the understanding of human dignity has on a tradition’s beliefs, teachings and practices?
7. What are some of the problems associated with the various approaches and understandings of human dignity? How do you think these problems could be resolved?
8. Do you think it is important to have a common understanding and a common definition of human dignity? Why? Why not? In the case of some of the examples provided in this module, what difference do you think a shared understanding of human dignity might make to discussions on various issues?
9. In 2.2.2, we saw that an appeal to human dignity, following the atrocities of WWII, did not in fact stop atrocities from occurring today. To what extent do you think a shared understanding of human dignity would influence the halting of such atrocities?
10. In UNCC100, we studied the nature of the common good. What role do you think the common good plays in discussions of human dignity? How might an understanding of the common good be brought to bear on issues of human dignity?
11. The header of this module is “What is human dignity?” Revisit the definition of human dignity that you composed in the tutorial in weeks 2 and 6. Is there anything you wish to refine or add in light of your learning in this module? Re-write your definition to reflect this deeper understanding.