

Summary:

Human beings have a special type of *dignity* which is the basis not to kill one another, to take each other's well-being into account and to follow the golden rule.

Rather, human dignity is based on their ability to reason and make free choices (their essential feature), which distinguishes them from animals.

The capacity for enjoyment or suffering (sentience) is not a valid criteria for a being to have dignity.

This criteria for human dignity (stated above) applies to all humans even in marginal cases.

Why do humans have inherent dignity?

“Human beings are rational creatures by virtue of possessing natural capacities for conceptual thought, deliberation, and free choice, that is, the natural capacity to shape their own lives. These basic capacities to reason and make free choices are possessed by every human being, even those who cannot immediately exercise them” (p. 174).

Humans have dignity not based on their accidental features (like race, gender, stage of development, ability/disability), but rather on the kind of being that they are (their essential features, described above).

Inherent dignity is present, even in these cases:

(1) Compromised dignity: Losing one's independence and/or privacy compromises one's dignity but his/her dignity is not fully lost.

For example, elderly people who can't perform basic bodily functions without assistance have the same amount of dignity, only it is compromised by their physical limitations.

(2) Low personal sense of dignity: Something can harm one's *sense of* dignity without damaging or compromising one's real dignity.

For example, people who become dependent on others often feel a certain loss of dignity. Yet, their personal dignity is not harmed.

(3) Injustice: Someone can be treated in a way that is at odds with his or her personal dignity.

For example, humans have been enslaved, raped, or falsely imprisoned. Such things are considered crimes because their treatment is at odds with their true personal dignity.

Why the capacity for enjoyment or suffering (sentience) is not a valid criterion:

Singer's argument is: All and only beings that have interests have moral status; but all and only beings that can (now) experience suffering or enjoyment have interests; therefore, all and only beings that can (now) experience suffering or enjoyment have moral status.

The problem with this argument is that the ability to feel enjoyment or pain is an accidental attribute (one which some humans possess and others do not). Further, different beings have these capacities in different degrees.

Implications:

A human newborn infant who will die shortly or a severely cognitively impaired human would be due *less* consideration than a more mature horse or pig on the ground that a mature horse or pig will have richer and more developed interests.

Humans with a greater capacity for enjoyment or suffering would have more moral rights than those with a lesser capacity. Those with no capacity for enjoyment or suffering, such as those with congenital insensitivity to pain (CIPA) or human embryos, would not be considered to have any dignity.

Additional problem:

Another problem with having sentience as the criteria for inherent dignity is that it is oftentimes based on the hedonist principle, which states that something is automatically good if it satisfies emotional or physical desires.

“[W]hat makes a thing good cannot consist in its being enjoyed, or in its satisfying desires or preferences. Rather, desires and preferences are good only if they are in line with what is genuinely good, that is, genuinely fulfilling.”

Essential v. Accidental Attributes:

“[O]ur position is that a rights-bearing subject has rights in virtue of the kind of substantial entity he or she is, not in virtue of accidental attributes such as race, sex, ethnicity, age, size, stage of development, or condition of dependency” (p. 181).

Essential qualities are the capacity to reason and make free choices.

Accidental qualities are ones that vary from person to person (as shown above).

Marginal cases:

“On this position every human being, of whatever age, size, or stage of development, has inherent and equal fundamental dignity and basic rights. If one holds, on the contrary, that full moral worth or dignity is based on some accidental attribute, then, since the attributes that could be considered to ground basic moral worth (developed consciousness, etc.) vary in one degree, one will be led to the conclusion that moral worth also varies in degrees” (p. 190).

“[T]he criteria for full moral worth is having a nature that entails the capacity (whether existing in root form or developed to the point at which it is immediately exercisable) for conceptual thought and free choice—not *the development* of that basic natural capacity to some degree or other” (p. 190).

They conclude that embryo-destructive research, abortion, and euthanasia all involve the killing of an innocent human being in violation of their moral right to life and to the protection of the laws.