

TWO VERY DIFFERENT CONCEPTS OF HUMAN DIGNITY

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Last February (23 February, 2012) the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, published online an article entitled: 'After Birth Abortion: Why Should the Baby Live'. Written by Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva, it presents the argument that if abortion is permitted, it is reasonable also to permit infanticide. Coupled with the morally disputable premise that abortion is *acceptable*, the argument is based on the correct understanding that there is no morally relevant difference between the foetus and the newborn baby. The argument is not novel. Peter Singer and Helga Kuhse argued likewise in their book *Should the Baby live?* published by Oxford University Press in 1985.

The first comment the argument above warrants is that, if the faultless premise that there is no morally relevant difference between the foetus and the newborn baby is coupled with the assertion that abortion is *unacceptable*, we arrive at a very different conclusion to that arrived at by Giubilini and Minerva and by Singer and Kuhse. For on this last line of reasoning we arrive at the conclusion that feticide is no more acceptable than abortion. So if Giubilini and Minerva choose to use the expression 'after birth abortion', we may choose to speak of 'prenatal infanticide'! [1]

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In this paper I shall argue that much hangs on how you understand the concept of human dignity. Those who advocate infanticide and killing on grounds of disability and those who call for euthanasia on grounds of dementia have a different concept of human dignity from those of us who insist on the sanctity of human life. Theirs is a secular concept. Dignity in the sense that is linked to sanctity of human life is a concept that you cannot accept unless you believe in God.

Why? If you believe in God, the Christian God, you believe not only that your life is a gift and that the ultimate destiny God wants for you is union with him in the Kingdom of Heaven but you also believe that each one of us human beings possesses a special likeness to God--even if this likeness can be diminished by inhuman and ungodly behaviour. Even though you believe that violence and lack of love of God and neighbour spoil our likeness to God, your concepts of human dignity and of the sanctity of human life derive from your understanding of life as a gift and of us humans as created in the image of God and for a special relationship with God. On a Christian understanding, the human individual possesses dignity in virtue of his or her likeness to God and relationship with God, who through the Incarnation, who in Jesus, united Himself with mankind and called us to follow the Gospel call for love of God and neighbour. Precisely, therefore, on a Christian understanding, every innocent human life is inviolable. In other words, on a Christian understanding, the taking of innocent human life is perceived as always wrong. Both infanticide and euthanasia are ruled out as violations of human dignity and of the principle of the sanctity of life.

But if you do not believe in God, this view of human dignity and of the value and taking of human life will make little sense. Instead, human life will be valued or judged on the basis of personal achievements and mental or physical abilities. So viewed some lives will seem worthy of less protection than others. So viewed some lives will be seen as dispensable. Human dignity will seem to be relative. It will seem to be a question of more or less, depending on your abilities or quality of life. Judged with reference to abilities or quality of life, people who suffer from dementia will be said to have lost their dignity. Judged by these criteria the disabled infant can be killed. Indeed, even the healthy infant can be killed, because it is not yet in possession of sufficient intellectual abilities.

‘When we kill a newborn infant there is no person whose life has begun’, wrote Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer in their jointly written book of 1985. ‘The State should not impose a severely impaired child on an unwilling family’, they said. On this line of reasoning, to kill an infant is no offence to its human dignity—especially not if it is affected by an adverse physical or mental condition. More precisely, as argued by Singer and Kuhse, the infant possesses no human dignity and so no right to life because it is not a person. And it is not a person because it is not yet in possession of the intellectual abilities typical of a mature and healthy human adult. Singer’s and Kuhse’s concept of personhood is attached to that of certain intellectual abilities. On Singer’s and Kuhse’s understanding the concept of personhood is not a relational concept. You are not thought to be a person—and you are not thought to be in possession of human dignity—merely in virtue of being born of human parents and so related to other humans. Your personhood is linked solely to certain intellectual attributes; and your dignity is linked to your personhood or lack of it. Thus your human dignity is diminished in proportion to your lack of intellectual abilities and it is further diminished if your quality of life is poor.

There is no room for the concept of the sanctity of human life within this secular and elitist conceptual framework. The concept of human dignity anchored in the understanding of ourselves as created in the image of God is out of place within this secular context. So too is any understanding of ourselves as individuals related to God in a special way. Giubilini’s, Minerva’s, Singer’s and Kuhse’s concepts of human dignity and right to life are very different from the Christian ones. While their concepts of human dignity and right to life are based on and proportional to possession of intellectual abilities and/or quality of life, the Christian concepts of human dignity and sanctity of human life are based faith in a transcendent reality and our relationship to the same. We are talking about two very different concepts of human dignity and two very different understandings of right to life.

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That said, it is noteworthy that our likeness to God as a species is linked to some of those very features that many members of the secular community single out as *the* criteria of human dignity. Indeed, our likeness to God as a species is linked to abilities and characteristics that are typified by flourishing human adults. And it is true that some of us possess more or less of these characteristics.

The human species is distinguished from other animals primarily because it possesses superior intellectual or mental abilities. We share with other animals our materiality. As bodily

beings we share their need of nourishment and their instincts for self-preservation and their sexual drives. Precisely because we, as a species, possess intellectual or mental abilities that make us—if you allow the expression—more God-like, we are singled out in the Scriptures as God’s stewards or caretakers and, indeed, as His co-workers. It is true to say, that when as Christians we say that humanity, *as a species*, possesses a special dignity over and above animals, we do mean that humans are created in the image and likeness of God in a way that no other creatures are. It is also true that on this understanding we humans—both as a species and individually—are singled out for a special relationship with God. This is not least because humans are the only creatures that are capable of knowingly and wilfully turning towards or away from God.

Those who speak of loss of human dignity when people are physically dependent on others or have lost their mental faculties use the concept of human dignity as it is used to distinguish humans from other species. Human dignity in terms of intellectual or mental abilities is properly used when talking about the human species but this concept of human dignity could not be more different from that used when saying that individually we possess human dignity merely in virtue of being human and thus created in the likeness to God (although some of us may spoil—or partly spoil—this likeness by turning our backs on God and neighbour).

Ascribing intrinsic dignity to an individual merely in virtue of being human comes easy if you believe that each and every member of the human family is created in the image of God and ultimately for union with God. If you do not believe in God, that other concept of human dignity, the one that is most properly used when distinguishing us from animals, may come more naturally to you. So not surprisingly, advocates of legalized euthanasia and assisted suicide tend to use the last-mentioned concept of human dignity, that is, the concept related to possession of intellectual abilities that makes us superior to other animals and so, not surprisingly, they ascribe little value to, for example, the life of the baby who is born with Down syndrome or to a person who no longer is full possession of his or her mental faculties. Precisely because of their elitist criteria of dignity, advocates of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide may likewise ascribe little value to a life of few achievements. Using what you might call the species concept of human dignity in terms of those qualities that make us humans as a species superior to animals—as distinct from the Christian concept of human dignity which is applicable to us individually—advocates of infanticide and euthanasia cannot accept the concept of the sanctity of human life and so fail to recognize the inviolability of innocent human life.

Unlike the elitist concept of human dignity inherent in the arguments presented by philosophers such as Singer and Kuhse, the Christian concept of human dignity is a ‘relational concept’. It is based both on an understanding of the human individual’s likeness to and relationship with our triune and relational God and on the individual human’s likeness to and relationship with one other humans. The Christian concept of human dignity acknowledges human inter-relatedness. It identifies us as (individual) members of a human family and a human society. The newborn child is a son or a daughter. The old lady in the wheelchair is somebody’s daughter or mother or wife or aunt. In other words, on the Christian understanding human dignity in the sense of individual personal dignity is intrinsically linked to being in

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relationship both with God and fellow humans. Indeed, this is the essence of the Biblical understanding of Adam and Eve as created in the image and likeness of God and of the son of Adam as created in his father's image and likeness (Gen 5:1-3).

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I have borrowed the expression 'prenatal infanticide' from Dr Trevor Stammers, who used it in an interview with the media.

REFERENCE

KUHSE, Helga and Peter SINGER. *Should the Baby Live? : The Problem of Handicapped Infants* . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, ISBN:0192860623
