



# Reports

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*Thomas K. Johnson*

## Is Human Dignity Earned or Is Human Dignity a Gift?

Metaphysics and Justifying  
Human Rights

2026 / 6

International Institute  
for Religious Freedom



International Institute  
for Religious Freedom

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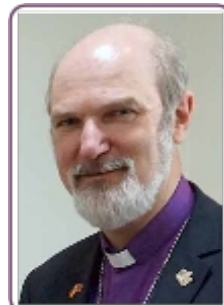
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This is a revision of a lecture Dr. Johnson delivered in May 1996, entitled “Why Is Human Life Valuable?” at a symposium of Russian- and English-speaking sociologists and philosophers at the Livadia Palace in Yalta, Crimea—the palace where Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt met at the end of World War II.

*Thomas K. Johnson*

## **Is Human Dignity Earned or Is Human Dignity a Gift?**

Metaphysics and Justifying Human Rights

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Prof. Sir Thomas K. Johnson**, Fulbright Fellow Tübingen, Ph.D. Iowa, is a philosopher of culture and religion who taught for two academic institutions started by anti-communist dissidents, The European Humanities University, Европейский гуманитарный университет in Russian, (Belarus) and The Institute of Fundamental Learning, Institut základů vzdělanosti in Czech (Charles University). He has taught at Protestant theological schools in eight countries and pastored three churches, two in the US and one in the former USSR. In 2003 he joined Martin Bucer Seminary and later became Vice President for Research. Johnson has received three knighthoods in recognition of his human rights efforts. His books include *Natural Law Ethics; God’s General Revelation; Human Rights; Christian Ethics in Secular Cultures* (2 volumes); *Evangelical Christianity, Humanitarian Islam, and the Clash of Civilizations*. He has edited 30 books including *God Needs No Defense*, with C. Holland Taylor. He serves the World Evangelical Alliance, which represents 650 million Christians in 160 countries, as Special Envoy to the Holy See and as Emissary for Humanitarian Islam.

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The last century began with tremendous hope. In the minds of the intelligentsia in the West, the combination of new technology and new rationality would certainly lead to a new epoch of continuing progress toward peace and prosperity. That hope was slashed by World War I (1914–1918) in which the number of dead vastly exceeded that of all previous wars combined; but there was still an echo of hope in the description of the war as “the war to end all wars.” Only twenty years later World War II erupted; once again the number of dead vastly exceeded that of all previous wars combined, this time including WWI. And partly concealed by the fog of war, the Holocaust was even more insidious: the attempt to eliminate an entire race and religion.

In response, without undue optimism, representatives of the great civilizations published the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. The best of humanity screamed “Stop!” to the previous decades of global insanity. The authors knew there are real ethical principles of right and wrong that can be articulated in terms of the rights of our neighbors. Oh, that the world had listened! Fifty years after the Holocaust I listened to philosophers and historians from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine as they recounted the hundred million who died as the result of European communism, many after the UDHR, to which must be added the tens of millions who died because of Asian totalitarianism, many after the UDHR was published. The twentieth century was an insane sea of blood from which the UDHR arose in the middle as the main island of moral rationality.

Our still youthful century inherited from our grandparents the largest of questions: “What is a human being, so violent, yet with a dignity that allows us to condemn our own violence?” This question arises across the disciplines: law, medicine, psychology, economics, sociology, art, and philosophy, to which AI is increasing the volume. We need to understand our peculiar dignity, as we also need to understand our peculiar inhumanity.

In this essay I can explore one small part of the question of humanity, “Why is human life valuable?”—a question more pointed when phrased as, “Is human dignity earned or is human dignity a gift?” Differing views in this area lie right below other important questions such as: Is there a universal reason to protect human rights, meaning a reason that is not too dependent on one culture or country? Is there a universal reason to practice humanitarian aid and medical aid? Should we all be concerned about public safety? This is not only a question of metaethics; it is also basic philosophy. Any philosophy without a satisfactory explanation of our consciousness (including our awareness of what people should rationally expect from each other) needs serious revision.

In modern thought there are two primary types of answers to why human life is valuable; some claim that the dignity of the person is earned by some function or ability, while others claim that human dignity is a gift given in a relationship or by nature. The first approach I call “functionalism,” the second “personalism.” Functionalist views of human dignity usually arise within naturalistic worldviews. Personalist views of human dignity are part of a personalist view of the universe. Functionalist views of human dignity have sometimes led to viewing *homo sapiens* who lack certain crucial functions as being subhuman and discardable.

A personalist view of human dignity may lead to significant sacrifices for our neighbors. This distinction requires explanation, first by illustrating functionalism, then personalism.

## Functionalism

An interesting variety of functionalism comes from Michael Tooley, who asked “what properties a thing must possess in order to have a right to life.”<sup>1</sup> Obviously a right to live is foundational for any other rights one might have. His answer goes like this. He quotes Joel Feinberg: “The sorts of beings who can have rights are precisely those who have (or can have) interests.” This means that “an entity cannot have any rights at all, and *a fortiori*, cannot have a right to life, unless it is capable of having interests.”<sup>2</sup> In order to have interests, it “must necessarily be a subject of conscious states, including experiences and desires.”<sup>3</sup> In order to have a desire for a continuing life, it must have a concept of a continuing self.

This all sounds eminently reasonable until one sees how Tooley uses his principles. Obviously, he can defend abortion. He also defends infanticide, because infants do not yet have a concept of a continuing self. But many higher animals probably do have a right to live, presumably a right equal to that of human beings, because they seem to have an interest in and a concept of a continuing self. He uses the term “murder” to describe the killing of some higher animals. And one is forced to wonder if a person in a coma still has full human rights within Tooley’s system of ethics. What started as a theory of human rights leads to the conclusion that killing babies is morally acceptable, whereas eating meat or wearing leather shoes could be described as murder. This is a good indicator of the problem of starting with a human function, in this case having an interest, as the basis for the dignity of a person.

A similar variety of functionalism is found in the philosophy of Mary Anne Warren. She asks, “What sort of entity, exactly, has the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?”<sup>4</sup> Though she is obviously quoting the American Declaration of Independence (of 1776), her overall point of view seems quite different from that of the Declaration. She suggests that we must make a distinction between genetic humanity and personhood, and that only persons, not genetic human beings, have moral rights. She says,

“Imagine a space traveler who lands on an unknown planet and encounters a race of beings utterly unlike any he has ever seen or heard of. If he wants to be sure of behaving morally toward these beings, he has to somehow

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Tooley, “In Defense of Abortion and Infanticide,” in *Applying Ethics*, 4th edition, ed. Jeffrey Olen and Vincent Barry (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1992), p. 176.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Anne Warren, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion,” in *Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Manuel Velasquez and Cynthia Rostankowski (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985), p. 249.

decide whether they are people, and hence have full moral rights, or whether they are the sort of thing which he need not feel guilty about treating as, for example, a source of food.”<sup>5</sup>

To answer this question, Warren suggests that the traits of personhood are roughly the following:

1. consciousness, especially the capacity to feel pain,
2. reasoning,
3. self-motivated activity,
4. the capacity to communicate,
5. the presence of self-concepts and self-awareness.

Warren does not think an entity needs to meet all five criteria to be a person. The first two may be sufficient. However, the absence of all five would surely indicate, she claims, that an entity is not a person and therefore has no moral rights.

Warren’s list of traits of personhood has much value. These are, of course, traits we normally find in people, but the crucial question is whether one must earn the dignity or status of personhood by means of having these normal functions and abilities, or if the status of personhood is received as a gift. Clearly her approach is a functionalist approach, and her answers will lead to the same problems as do Tooley’s. She very candidly says that humans at the beginning and end of life may not have personhood, and if some humans do not have personhood, they do not have moral rights.

A third example of functionalism comes from process philosopher John B. Cobb, Jr. He claims that “although the right of a human being to life is quite fundamental, it is not absolute. It is derived from, and therefore subordinate to, the right of people to carry out their own projects.”<sup>6</sup> Having projects to carry out is what gives distinctive dignity to human life and what confers rights on a person. Human projects lead to human rights.

Cobb clarifies his view by way of two sharp contrasts. He contrasts the life of a person with the life of an infant and with the life of an animal. An infant on the way to personhood goes through two major transformations. The first is that while an infant lives fully in the present, a “child comes to have his or her own projects that demand respect.”<sup>7</sup> The second transition is that in infancy, all experience is unified in serving the body, whereas a child uses the body to implement projects. And, Cobb believes, animals do not generally make the transition to using their bodies to fulfill projects beyond preservation of their bodies.

The problem with such a theory is that humans who do not yet have or no longer have projects do not have the moral status of personhood; therefore, their lives have no particular dignity or moral value. On the other hand, some animals

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>6</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., *Matters of Life and Death* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 74, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

might cross the line to become persons. It is a clear example of functionalism, albeit with a distinctive perspective on what function is needed to earn human dignity.

These three examples are enough to illustrate that functionalism of one variety or another is widespread. It is used to defend abortion, infanticide, active euthanasia, and animal rights. In every case, a human must demonstrate certain abilities or functions to earn the status of personhood in the eyes of other people or of society at large. If one fails to earn the status of personhood, then one's life is not to be particularly protected morally or legally.

Obviously, the three philosophies mentioned represent Western individualism. But a functional approach to the value of a person can easily be given a different ideological orientation. With a bit of imagination, one can change which functions or abilities are needed to earn "personhood." The functions selected can be economic, racial, religious, or related to one's value to the state. Then the definition of what makes human life valuable can be used to legitimate all sorts of atrocities, usually against some group of people not liked by the powerful. An analysis of the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century, those leading to the greatest crimes against humanity, yields a tragic set of variations on the same theme: personhood, human dignity, is something not all can earn. Functionalist ideologies have contributed to genocide and concentration camps. The philosophies of functionalism usually come with the high moral tone of explaining why human life is valuable, but they tend to end by explaining why the lives at the margins of society are not to be valued. This calls into question the whole method and approach of functionalism.

## Personalism

The main alternate to functionalism is personalism. The belief that unites personalists, in the midst of different conceptions, is that the value of human life is a gift, and this gift is simply a "given" that is present even if particular human abilities or functions are missing. Personalism arises in several traditions; its theorists are explaining ancient perceptions of humans as carrying sparks of divinity, the light of nature, the logos, fitrah, the image of God, or Atman that shares in Brahman.

A prominent example of personalism is the American Declaration of Independence. Warren failed to mention that all people are "endowed by their Creator" with unalienable rights. In eighteenth-century Anglo-American political discussion, some people said human rights were alienable, that they could be lost. This was one of the supposed moral defenses of slavery, and it bears a resemblance to functionalist views of humanity. In direct contrast to this, Thomas Jefferson and his colleagues claimed that human rights were unalienable, that they cannot be removed by a government, because they were a gift from God.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Even the rights of a convicted criminal are not lost; those rights are restricted. Several of the people who signed the American Declaration of Independence continued to own slaves even after they publicly affirmed ethical principles that condemned slavery. This is a tragic

In this way of thinking, the value of a person is not earned by any function or ability, and therefore the value of the person cannot be lost. The dignity of a person is simply a gift.

A different kind of personalism is found in the writings of Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), the nineteenth-century Danish “father of existentialism.” In *Sickness unto Death* he writes,

“The gradations in the consciousness of the self with which we have hitherto been employed are within the definition of the human self, or the self whose measure is man. But this self acquires a new quality or qualifications in the fact that it is the self directly in the sight of God. This self is no longer the merely human self but is what I would call, hoping not to be misunderstood, the theological self, the self directly in the sight of God. And what an infinite reality this self acquires by being before God! A herdsman who (if this were possible) is a self only in the sight of cows is a very low self, and so also is a ruler who is a self in the sight of slaves—for in both cases the scale or measure is lacking. The child who hitherto has had only the parents to measure itself by, becomes a self when he is a man by getting the state as a measure. But what an infinite accent falls upon the self by getting God as a measure.”<sup>9</sup>

Kierkegaard claims that the value of the person is relational, that value is given to the person by the relations in which one stands. Then, if all people stand in some relation to God, whether conscious or unconscious, positive or negative, that relation gives infinite value to the person. This value is a gift independent of functions. Philosophically and theologically, Kierkegaard’s existentialism and Jefferson’s deism are very different from each other, yet both see human dignity as a divine gift.

A different personalism comes from a German, Helmut Thielicke (1908–1986), who wrote his treatises in reaction to the Holocaust and other abuses of the Nazi era. He claimed that human dignity is always an *alien* dignity that comes from outside the self and not from any ontological qualities within the person, whether freedom, personality, responsibility, conscience, or any other capacity. His reason for thinking this was his claim that humans are relational entities, created by and for communication with God and humanity. The image of God in man, he claims, does not have to do with attributes or properties of mankind. “It has reference rather to the alien dignity which man possesses by way of his divine prototype [*Urbild*], that original which is present in Christ alone.”<sup>10</sup> When he uses the term “alien” to describe human dignity, he is following Martin Luther’s terminology. Luther said we cannot be acceptable to God based on

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example of the difference or even conflict between the professed beliefs and the practiced beliefs of a person or group of people.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Helmut Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 487.

<sup>10</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, vol. 1, *Foundations*, trans. and ed. Wm. H. Lazareth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) pp. 151, 152.

any inherent, internal goodness, or based on anything we do, but only based on an alien, external righteousness credited to us as a gift. Thielicke claims that our dignity, like our righteousness, has to do with “God’s remembrance of us,”<sup>11</sup> not with something internal within humans. Because God remembers humans, He speaks in creation and in Christ so that “The divine address constitutes the person.”<sup>12</sup>

Even if some people are atheists, according to Thielicke, the fact that God has spoken to humanity constitutes the dignity of every person so that the value of each person cannot be lost. Even if many normal human functions are lost, the dignity of the person is not lost, because it depends on God’s remembrance of the person and God’s speech to humanity. If human dignity is the result of God’s speech to us, that dignity bestows an important task, actualizing this discussion on the human side.<sup>13</sup>

A personalist view of human dignity leads to different conclusions about many dimensions of contemporary life than does a functionalist view. Medical care, human rights, humanitarian aid, and personal safety are some areas that look different if seen through personalist eyes. It should also be clear that functionalism is usually part of a materialist or naturalist worldview, while personalism is usually part of a theist, deist, or panentheistic worldview. Though there may be atheistic personalists and theistic functionalists, those combinations of beliefs would provoke cognitive dissonance.

It is said that among Western intellectuals, belief in God died in the nineteenth century, and belief in humanity died in the twentieth century. Contrary to the hopes of some, the death of belief in God did not lead us to become superior beings; it contributed to seeing the weak as less than fully human. The personalist alternative is not a narrow matter of religion or faith. For centuries people have known that mathematics is the language of the universe, and for generations we have known that DNA is the language of life. My dog is what he is because these two languages, and maybe more, make him what he is. But we humans are radically different from a dog; we know that we are what we are because of the language of the universe, because of the language of life, and because of the messages in one or more human languages that have shaped our consciousness. It is not a big leap of faith to think that all of this, including my dog, us, and our many human languages, is the result of another Voice that is far deeper than the language of the universe, that is the source of the language of the universe. If this Voice creates human dignity by speaking to humanity, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights deserves far more attention than we have given it so far.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 158. My mother-in-law was slowly dying of Alzheimer’s while I was studying functionalism. Such writers might not have seen her as human during her final years. Yet she seemed to always respond to the smell of coffee when a relative brought a cup. She was sometimes agitated in her final months; an Elder from her church reported that her agitation was replaced by peace when he read from the Psalms of David. Though some of her normal human functions were gone, she seemed to still respond to the quiet Voice of Creation.

## Imprint

### Addresses

International Institute for Religious  
Freedom  
P. O. Box 780068  
Orlando, Florida 32878  
United States of America

Friedrichstr. 38  
2nd Floor  
53111 Bonn  
Germany

International Director: Dr. Dennis P. Petri (V.i.S.d.P.)  
Research Director: Prof. Dr. Christof Sauer  
Executive Editor of the IJRF: Prof. Dr. Janet Epp Buckingham  
President: Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher

Website: <https://iirf.global>  
Contact: [info@iirf.global](mailto:info@iirf.global)

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