

UNCC300 MODULE 2:

WHAT IS HUMAN DIGNITY?

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MODULE 2: WHAT IS HUMAN DIGNITY?

Activities and materials in this module will help you meet:

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.

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

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

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

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

WARNING

Topics considered in UNCC LEO materials and in class discussions may be disturbing for some students.

If you are affected, please contact your Campus Leader and or the [University Counselling Service](#).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are advised that this site may include voices or images of people who have passed away. It may also contain links to sites that may use images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people now deceased.

2.0 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:



Critical thinking entails the development of a number of related skills including the ability to locate information, interpret that information, analyse, synthesise and evaluate that information and apply it in different situations.

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 material 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. You will have the opportunity to practice this process as you complete each of the activities in the modules and prepare for your assessment.

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?*

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 *Äquivalenz-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 *Nichtäquivalenz-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’. Dieter Birnbacher, “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, Robert Spaemann, “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; Dietmar 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](#) (or read the [transcript](#)).

ACTIVITY 2.1.2

1. **Print the work sheet for activity 2.1.2** (available in [PDF](#) and [Word](#) format). As you listen to the video, complete the table. For each section, first complete the sentence, then list all the words you hear to describe each of the categories.
2. Write a paragraph summarising the differences between each of the two 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:

Select each quadrant below for more information and videos.

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](#).

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](#).

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](#).

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 Four Approaches to Grounding Human Dignity worksheet (available in [PDF](#) and [Word](#) format)

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.

Make sure you have your completed worksheet with you when required.

Note: You need to memorise and be able to explain all four approaches to grounding human dignity.

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 2.1.4.1

Print the **Examples of Different Approaches to Grounding Human Dignity worksheet** (available in [PDF](#) and [Word](#) format)

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.

Kennett, Patricia. ' [Human Dignity in Confucianism.](#)' In *A Handbook of Comparative Social Policy*, 136-139. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2004.

Bhikkhu Bodhi. '[Giving Dignity to Life.](#)' Access to Insight, "A Theravada Library."

Mozaffari, Mohammed Hossein. "[The Concept of Human Dignity in the Islamic Thought.](#)" *Hekmat Quarterly* 4 (Dec 2011): 11-25. You need only read the Abstract, Introduction, Section III and Conclusion.

A brief view of a [Catholic understanding](#) of human dignity is outlined in this press release from Cardinal Peter Turkson President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

Add to this handout in the activities to follow, and make sure you have your completed handout with you when required.

SOMETHING TO PURSUE IF YOU HAVE AN INTEREST

The [full speech](#) by Cardinal Turkson offers greater depth.

ACTIVITY 2.1.4.2 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(2.1.4.1) ("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.

Select each quadrant below for more information.

1A DIGNITY THAT HUMANS ALWAYS ALREADY HAVE SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY ARE HUMAN:

1. Rabbi Frederick Morgan, " [The Notion of Human Dignity in Jewish Tradition](#)" Core Curriculum Study Notes, ACU, 2014.
2. " [Human Dignity](#)" (Educating for Justice), (You need only look at the first two pages of this resource; this gives the sources for thinking about human dignity in Catholic tradition);

In light of these examples, write a paragraph summarising a 1A 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 [this article](#) about how Keenan retained his sanity and dignity during this ordeal. 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](#). (You need only read pages 23-26 and 32-35.) This study will be of great interest to all Health Sciences students.

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?

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?

In light of these examples, write a paragraph summarising a 2A understanding of human dignity.

1B DIGNITY THAT HUMANS ALWAYS ALREADY HAVE BECAUSE THEY HAVE DISTINCTIVE QUALITIES THAT BESTOW A SPECIAL DIGNITY:

1. One philosopher whose work hinges on the capacities of human beings as autonomous creatures is Immanuel Kant. Here are listed three very brief resources to assist you in understanding Immanuel Kant's work:
 - a. In this lecture, Michael Sandel, from Harvard University, discusses the [philosophy of Immanuel Kant](#). Watch only 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'.)
 - b. [The work of Immanuel Kant](#), Core Curriculum Study Notes, ACU, 2014.
 - c. Palmer, Donald. *Does the Center Hold?: An Introduction to Western Philosophy*. 2nd ed. California, US: Mayfield, 1996. Pages [265-8](#); [272-3](#).
2. A further article, by Helene Guldberg claims that it is our collective cognition that makes humans "special and unique among the animal kingdom." Read her article: [Only Humans Have Morality, Not Animals](#).

In light of these examples, write a paragraph summarising a 1B understanding of human dignity.

2B DIGNITY THAT HUMANS CAN ACQUIRE (OR LOSE) THROUGH MORAL/ IMMORAL BEHAVIOUR:

The belief that dignity is afforded by society to those who behave well is illustrated for us in the case of extremes.

1. As a first example, we employ the life of Mahatma Gandhi, who is often afforded great dignity because of the selfless life he lived. This [short biography](#) will give some information on the man. In 1982 a movie was made of Gandhi and his inspirational life and work. Either watch the [trailer](#) of this film or listen to ['The Gandhi Rap'](#) by MC Yogi. If you are inspired by Gandhi, at some future stage you may like to watch the whole 1982 movie, simply called 'Gandhi'.
2. As a contrasting example, that is, an example that shows how society judges some people to have no inherent dignity because of their behaviour, the use of torture. Some, like President George W. Bush, would argue that terrorists (or suspected terrorists) have lost their dignity because of the heinous crime they committed against innocent people, and therefore, they do not deserve the rights afforded to them by human dignity. Watch this video, from the [Today Show](#) (Or read the [transcript](#)) and note carefully his argument of the use of torture.

Gandhi famously said "My life is my message". How did Gandhi's life and work promote human dignity?

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"?

Can you think of any other examples where people who could be judged by society to have lost their human dignity due to their behaviour?

In light of these examples, write a paragraph summarising a 2B 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 Kirchoffer introduce [the problem of talking about human dignity](#).

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-esteem. 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.”³

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).

³James Gilligan, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 106.

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.

SOMETHING 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.

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 to 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.

2.2.4 ACTIVITY

Complete and print this handout: [Applying the different approaches to human dignity \(Word format\)](#). Screen reader users please note, a simplified, more accessible version of this handout is also available in [PDF](#) or [Word](#) format.

This will assist you to consolidate your learning and begin to critique the quadrants in preparation for your assessment, and it will form the basis of an activity.

2.3 QUESTIONS TO CONSOLIDATE YOUR LEARNING

These questions will help you to ensure that you have a thorough understanding of the material in this module.

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?