INDETERMINISM AND THE DEATH OF FINAL ENDS: A THREAT TO THE INTEGRAL HUMAN PERSON

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I. Introduction

The human person has always sought to understand life's ultimate purpose. Ancient philosophers like Aristotle spoke of telos - a natural goal or end toward which everything strives. (Aristotle 1984, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.7) Christianity gave this idea a deeper meaning, teaching that since humans are made in the *imago Dei* (Gen1:27), they are created for communion with God and with others. (Aquinas 1947, *ST* I, q.93, a.4) But in today's world, this belief is often questioned by indeterminism - the belief that existence, especially human life, lacks a fixed cause or ultimate end.

Indeterminism is not merely an abstract theory. It is integrated into contemporary education, politics, ethics, and even how people see themselves. It may look like it gives more freedom, but it can actually harm human dignity by taking away the solid truths that guide freedom in the right way. (Titus 1972, 56)

II. Objectives and Methodology

This paper aims to address the philosophical and ethical implications of indeterminism, particularly its impact on the concept of human dignity. This paper is guided by three research questions:

1. What is the nature of indeterminism, and how has it shaped contemporary understandings of human existence and purpose?

2. In what ways does indeterminism undermine the integral dignity of the human person?

3. How can Aristotelian - Thomistic teleology and Christian anthropology offer a coherent alternative that safeguards human dignity?

In addressing these questions, this study draws upon classical sources such as Aristotle's *Nicomachean* Ethics and St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, alongside modern philosophical works including Burton F. Porter's *The Good Life: Alternatives in Ethics*, Dario Composta's *Moral Philosophy and Social Ethics*, Harold H. Titus' *The Range of Ethics*, and Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics*.

1. The Idea of Indeterminism

1.1 Historical Background of Indeterminism

The roots of indeterminism go back to ancient scepticism, where thinkers like the Sophists doubted the existence of objective truth or moral order. But it was during the Enlightenment that these ideas began to strongly shape the modern worldview. The growth of empirical science, though valuable in many ways, moved attention away from purpose (teleology) and toward mechanism. Nature started to be seen more as a closed chain of cause-and-effect, with no reference to any final goal or purpose (Hume 1748,65).

In the 19th and 20th centuries, existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre pushed this further, declaring that "existence precedes essence" - that human beings have no predefined nature or purpose, and must create themselves entirely through their own choices (Sartre 1943,28). This view of existential indeterminism fits well with a culture that prized personal freedom and autonomy above everything else (Nietzsche 1974, 125).

Today, indeterminism is strengthened in many areas:

- **Scientific Indeterminism** in quantum mechanics, where uncertainty is seen as a fundamental feature of reality.

- **Moral Indeterminism** in the form of ethical relativism, where no moral claim is objectively binding.
- **Cultural Indeterminism** in postmodernism, which rejects grand narratives and embraces fragmented perspectives.

1.2 Why Indeterminism Appeals to the Modern Mind

At first, indeterminism appears freeing. It offers self-definition, creative freedom, and escape from oppressive systems. As Burton F. Porter notes in *The Good Life*, many modern people fear that belief in a fixed purpose may limit their individuality or force them into outdated moral frameworks (Porter 1995, 112)

However, for me, freedom without orientation is like a ship without a compass. It may sail, but it has no way of knowing whether it is moving toward a safe harbour or toward destruction. Henry Sidgwick, in *The Methods of Ethics*, argues that without a clear ultimate goal, moral reasoning becomes uncertain, and ethical life turns into a series of disconnected choices (Sidgwick 1962,10). Indeterminism may seem appealing because it promises immediate freedom, but as we will see, its long-term impact can be damaging to both individuals and society.

2. Philosophical Consequences of Denying Final Ends

2.1 Morality Without a Compass

Classical moral philosophy from Aristotle to Kant assumes that moral norms are grounded in something objective, whether it be the fulfilment of human nature, the authority of reason, or the will of God. Remove the idea of a final end, and moral norms lose their foundation. Without a telos, the "why" of morality collapses into the "what" of arbitrary rules.

For Aristotle, virtues are habits that perfect human nature in pursuit of eudemonia Aristotle 1984, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 1106a). Without a shared goal, "virtue" becomes nothing more than personal preference or cultural custom. For Aquinas, moral law reflects the eternal law (Aquinas 1947, *ST* I-II, q.94, a.2). Deny the purpose of eternal law, and moral law becomes just a tool of social control.

Henry Sidgwick, in The Methods of Ethics, explains that even utilitarianism assumes a clear ultimate goal - "greatest happiness." Without understanding what true happiness is, ethical reasoning loses its direction (Sidgwick 1962, 35). The result is moral relativism: What is good becomes whatever I or my culture decide it is. In practice, this relativism leaves societies with no rational basis for resolving deep moral disagreements (Titus 1972, 87). Moral discourse becomes a contest of wills rather than an appeal to truth.

2.2 Identity in a World Without Ends

Human identity has traditionally been shaped by one's relation to a larger order: the polis for Aristotle, the created cosmos for Aquinas, the moral law for Kant. Without an objective order, identity becomes something each person must construct entirely on theirs own. At first, this may seem freeing. But as Titus notes in The Range of Ethics, lacking a guiding framework often leads to alienation (Titus 1972, 95). Without a shared sense of meaning, people are left constantly reinventing themselves, which can cause anxiety rather than true freedom. The self becomes a shifting project rather than a stable being. As Composta warns, when identity is disconnected from an objective good, dignity becomes conditional - granted by others based on usefulness, attractiveness, or conformity, rather than being intrinsic (Composta 1988, 122).

2.3 Freedom Without Orientation

Indeterminism often claims to liberate us by removing predetermined ends. But as Sidgwick notes, freedom without a goal is indistinguishable from aimlessness (Sidgwick 1962, 89). In moral life, unbounded choice can be a burden.

Without orientation, freedom risks becoming:

- Caprice — acting on impulse rather than reason.
- Escapism — avoiding difficult moral commitments.
- Nihilism — concluding that nothing really matters.

This is why even secular philosophers warn that modern freedom must be "oriented toward the good" if it is to avoid self-destruction.

2.4 Dignity Under Threat

Human dignity, in both classical and Christian traditions, is based on the idea that people are valuable in themselves, not mere means. But if there is no ultimate purpose to human life, then dignity itself risks becoming a legal fiction - upheld only as long as society chooses to value it.

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As Composta notes, without a final goal, there is no logical reason to claim that all people regardless of ability, situation, or contribution have equal worth (Composta 1988, 135). The natural result is that we start judging people mainly by their usefulness.

Note:

Indeterminism diminishes the pillars that have historically upheld morality, identity, and dignity. The loss of final ends leads not to liberation but to moral confusion, personal alienation, and social fragmentation. This sets the stage for our next question: If rejecting teleology produces such harms, what alternative can restore a coherent vision of human dignity?

3. From Consequences to the Question of Dignity and Purpose

Looking at how indeterminism can weaken our sense of moral order, personal identity, and social unity, we face an important question: **What can give human dignity real meaning if we deny that life has a final purpose?**

This is not just a theoretical problem. It affects real issues in society today - like bioethics, political rights, technology, and care for the environment. If dignity is only a cultural idea, it can be changed, limited, or taken away whenever society wants. **The consequences are serious.**

3.1 The Limits of Procedural Morality

One-way people try to protect dignity is by relying on rules, rights, and contracts—without claiming any ultimate purpose for human life. Many liberal democratic theories take this approach: as long as we agree on fair procedures, we can disagree about what is truly good.

But, as Henry Sidgwick warns, rules alone cannot explain why people matter—they only show how people should be treated under agreed rules. If the belief in everyone's equal worth fades, the rules themselves can be changed or ignored (Sidgwick 1962, 379). History shows that procedural protections often fail when political or cultural pressures arise, unless there is a deeper moral foundation.

3.2 The Persistence of the Question "Why?"

Even in societies that reject teleology, the question "Why should I respect this person?" refuses to go away. As Burton F. Porter notes, "The human spirit rebels against purely

functional definitions of value" (Porter 1995, 45). People naturally look for reasons beyond convenience or social rules to recognize human dignity. This suggests that dignity cannot simply be eliminated or replaced without creating a serious moral gap. If that is the case, then dignity itself points beyond indeterminism toward some kind of ultimate meaning.

3.3 The Rational Pull Toward Teleology

If dignity is real and universal, it means that all human beings share a common nature and a common purpose. This is exactly what the idea of a final purpose, or teleology, provides:

- A shared nature explains why everyone has the same moral worth.
- A shared purpose shows why that worth does not depend on what someone achieves, how useful they are, or whether others recognize it.

Aristotle's concept of telos (Aristotle 1984, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I,1097b22-1098a20), Aquinas' idea of participating in the eternal law (Aquinas 1947, *ST* I-II, q.91, a.2), and Kant's "kingdom of ends" - though different in detail—all agree that true moral dignity requires some ultimate goal. Without this goal, claims of moral equality are simply statements, not reasoned conclusions.

3.4 Dignity as a Signpost of Purpose

When properly understood, dignity is not just a feeling; it is a sign pointing toward purpose. Saying that every person has intrinsic worth is another way of saying that each life is meant for something beyond mere survival or personal preference. Even secular moral philosophers often use language that hints at a purpose:

- We talk about "human flourishing" (Aristotle's eudemonia).
- We talk about "fulfilling one's potential."
- We talk about "realizing our humanity."

All of these ideas suggest that there is something humans are meant to become—and the idea of "ought" only makes sense if there is some ultimate goal or end.

3.5 The Philosophical Threshold

At this point, the philosophical question comes to a crossroads. We have two options:

1. Accept that dignity is just a useful idea and live with the uncertainty and instability that brings; or
2. Recognize that if dignity is truly universal, it needs a deeper, metaphysical foundation—something that indeterminism alone cannot provide.

Choosing the second option does not force us to follow any specific religion. It simply opens the door to the idea that a final purpose, or teleology, is necessary to make sense of moral life.

Note:

We have seen that rejecting ultimate purposes leads to moral confusion, yet the idea of human dignity cannot simply be erased. This tension pushes us to ask a deeper question:

What is the true purpose of human life, and can we understand it through reason alone, or do we need a theological perspective?

4. The Case for a Teleological Grounding of Dignity

If dignity is more than a legal fiction or social contract, it must be anchored in something objective, stable, and universal. This is the claim of teleological ethics: that human beings have an intrinsic end (τέλος) toward which their nature is ordered, and that this end is the source of their worth.

4.1 Human Nature as a Rational Starting Point

We begin with a fact so obvious that it is easy to overlook: humans are not amorphous, interchangeable beings with no fixed identity. We are a distinct kind of creature, marked by rationality, self-awareness, moral agency, and the capacity for love. Aristotle calls this the "rational animal", Aquinas calls it the imago Dei in theological terms, and Kant refers to it as autonomy - the capacity to legislate the moral law to oneself. This nature is not an incidental feature of our biology; it defines what it means to be human. And if nature defines us, it also orients us toward the fulfilment proper to that nature — our telos.

4.2 The Logical Link: Nature → End → Dignity

The philosophical chain is as follows:

1. Nature: Every being has certain abilities or capacities that define what it is.
2. End: These abilities point toward a particular purpose or fulfilment.
3. Dignity: A being's worth comes from the fact that it is oriented toward that fulfilment.

For example, a knife's nature as a cutting tool defines its purpose (to cut well), and its "goodness" as a knife is judged by how well it fulfils that purpose. Human dignity works the same way, though on a far deeper level: our worth comes from the fact that our human nature is directed toward a unique fulfilment.

4.3 Teleology and Moral Obligation

If humans have a final end, then moral obligations are not arbitrary - they are the pathways by which we move toward that end. This transforms morality from a set of imposed rules into the logic of human flourishing.

- For Aristotle, virtue is the alignment of the soul with its natural end.
- For Aquinas, moral law reflects the eternal order in which humans participate.
- For Kant (despite his rejection of theological teleology), the dignity of the person demands that we act always in a way that respects their rational nature as an end in itself.

In each case, the moral law is not a constraint on freedom but the form of true freedom - the way by which we achieve our fulfilment.

4.5 The Universality of the Human End

One of the most powerful features of teleology is its universality. If human nature is shared, then the end toward which it is ordered is also shared. This means dignity is not a matter of cultural consensus, legal recognition, or personal preference. It is objective, inherent, and equal for all. As Dario Composta stresses without teleology there is no logical foundation for equal human worth (Composta 1988, 122).

This universality grounds moral equality on something deeper than political agreement. It also explains why human rights have such a powerful moral claim even in contexts where they are not recognized by law.

4.6 The Inescapable Direction of Human Life

Even when people reject the idea of a divinely given end, they still orient their lives toward some perceived "highest good" - be it pleasure, power, personal achievement, or altruism. This reveals a paradox: humans cannot live without some teleology, even if they try to replace the ultimate end with a provisional one.

The question is not whether we have a telos, but whether we will recognize the true telos - the one that is adequate to the full scope of human nature. At this stage, philosophical reason can affirm that:

- Humans have a nature.
- That nature is ordered toward an end.
- Dignity derives from that end.
- Yet, reason alone may struggle to specify precisely what that final end is.

This is where philosophy reaches its natural limit and theology can offer an expanded horizon.

Note:

If the argument for teleology is correct, then human dignity is not just a social convention- it is a real feature of the world. The next question is whether human nature and our ultimate purpose point beyond the material world- whether they suggest a higher, transcendent source and fulfilment that reason can grasp but cannot fully explain.

5. Theological and Ethical Implications

Indeterminism is more than a philosophical problem - it challenges the very heart of Christian understanding of humanity and moral life. If human life has no fixed cause or ultimate purpose, then the claim that humans are made *imago Dei* - in the image of God loses its basis. The Christian view of humanity rests on the belief that God has given each person an eternal purpose: communion with Him and participation in His divine life. (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965, no. 22; *Catechism* 1997, §1700 -1706).

In Catholic thought, human dignity is inseparable from this orientation toward God. Teleology (the idea of a final purpose) is not just abstract philosophy; it is the foundation of Christian ethics. When indeterminism removes this sense of purpose,

ethics can collapse into subjectivism - what Henry Sedgwick called "preference without principle," (Sidgwick 1962, 120) where moral decisions have no ultimate standard of right and wrong.

From a theological perspective, freedom is not just the ability to choose between options; it is the ability to choose what is truly good, leading toward the beatific vision. As Dario Composta argues in Moral Philosophy and Social Ethics, authentic freedom requires an objective moral law-one written into human nature and accessible to reason (Composta 1988, 88-89). Without this law, choice becomes arbitrary, and human dignity risks being reduced to mere social agreement or personal preference.

5.1 The Moral Vacuum Left by Indeterminism

Indeterminism creates a situation where moral rules are seen as temporary and open to negotiation. Harold H. Titus, in The Range of Ethics, points out that societies that lose confidence in objective moral truths end up with ethical pluralism - many conflicting moral codes all claiming authority (Titus 1972, 25). While having different opinions can be positive, ethical relativism leaves people without a clear guide, turning moral life into trial-and-error rather than the pursuit of what is truly good.

In this situation, theological ethics emphasizes the intrinsic value of each person, independent of usefulness or social approval (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965, no. 12). If we reject ultimate purposes, life's worth must be artificially created-through achievements, popularity, or personal satisfaction-rather than seen as inherent. This shift helps explain much of the "existential fatigue" in modern culture: when nothing is ultimately binding, everything becomes negotiable, and eventually, nothing feels meaningful.

5.2 Indeterminism and the Crisis of Human Identity

The loss of a clear purpose for human life affects our sense of who we are. If there is no God-given goal for humanity, then "human nature" becomes uncertain. At first, this may feel freeing, but as Porter notes in The Good Life, it can also lead to confusion and loneliness (Porter 1995, 67). Without a steady sense of why we exist, figuring out who we are becomes difficult and stressful.

Christian teaching offers an answer by showing that our identity comes from God, not just from ourselves. The Bible says that God calls us by name even before we define ourselves (Isaiah 43:1). This call gives our lives meaning and direction, beyond just surviving or expressing ourselves. Ignoring this guidance is, as Aquinas says, like being a ship without a rudder, easily tossed by the waves of our desires and circumstances (Aquinas 1947, *ST* I-II, q.91, a.2)

5.3 Ethical Consequences for Society

At the societal level, indeterminism weakens the moral foundation that holds communities together. Social ethics relies on a shared understanding of the good-what Sidgwick calls "the point of ultimate reconciliation" between personal and collective goals (Sidgwick 1962, 373). Without a common purpose, laws and policies risk becoming mere tools for managing conflict rather than guiding people toward virtue.

This has tangible effects:

- In education, the focus shifts from forming virtuous individuals to producing adaptable workers.
- In politics, policies are judged by short-term efficiency rather than their ability to promote the common good.
- In culture, art and media may prioritize novelty and shock value over truth and beauty.

Theological ethics offers a corrective by emphasizing that the worth of every social institution lies in how well it supports the full development of human beings-not only materially, but morally and spiritually as well (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965, no. 25).

6. Philosophical-Theological Synthesis and Way Forward

Indeterminism challenges how we understand human life and morality. By denying any inherent purpose for humanity, it leaves individuals without a stable sense of meaning. While this idea has philosophical roots, its influence has created a fragmented moral landscape. Moving forward requires not just critiquing indeterminism, but affirming a purpose-driven vision of the human person-one that speaks to both reason and faith.

6.1 Harmonizing Reason and Faith

The Catholic tradition holds that philosophy and theology complement each other. Reason helps us understand human nature and universal moral principles, while theology reveals our supernatural destiny: union with God. Sidgwick noted that purely utilitarian reasoning cannot satisfy humanity's search for ultimate meaning (Sidgwick 1962, 486). Composta adds that social ethics collapse without a transcendent orientation. Together, philosophy and theology show that moral obligation is participation in a divinely ordered good, not merely a personal choice.

6.2 Reclaiming the Teleological Vision

Titus reminds us that the human search for the good responds to a reality that exists beyond ourselves. (Titus 1972, 33) Teleology grounds morality in what humans are meant to become. Aquinas's natural law teaches that our inclinations toward truth, community, and virtue come from the Creator. (Aquinas 1947, *ST* I-II, q.94, a.2). By reclaiming this vision, education, politics, and ethics regain direction and meaning.

6.3 Theological Corrective to Moral Fragmentation

Indeterminism ignores God as the source and end of human life. Scripture declares, "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Christ, as the "way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), reveals humanity's purpose perfectly. Following Him aligns human action with divine intention, making moral law a path to freedom rather than a restriction *Catechism* 1997, §1741).

6.4 Practical Steps for Reorientation

1. **Educational Renewal** – Include philosophy and theology in curricula to help students understand human purpose.
2. **Public Discourse on the Common Good** – Shape policies and civic engagement around human flourishing, not just economic growth.

3. **Ecclesial Witness** – The Church should model communities that live moral purpose, offering a counterexample to relativism. (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965, no.43)
4. **Philosophical Engagement** – Christian thinkers must dialogue with secular ideas, addressing indeterminism with reasoned arguments.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, Indeterminism fragments morality; teleology unites it. By combining philosophical clarity with theological insight, we can articulate a vision of the human person that is intellectually persuasive, morally coherent, and spiritually fulfilling. This synthesis is essential for a civilization that can endure, flourish, and ultimately find its home in God. (Phil 3:14).

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