Human Dignity and 'the Displaced Other': A Philosophical-Theological Inquiry into Personhood

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Introduction

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances." These enduring lines from Shakespeare reveal a profound insight into the transient nature of human existence. Yet, in every human entrance and exit on this vast stage of life, there arises a deeper question: how do we, the actors in this unfolding drama, make sense of our play, of ourselves and of others? What does it mean to be human in an information age, and how do we sustain human dignity in the face of challenging situations marked by displacement, inequity, and ill-treatment of others?

Human dignity is often perceived through a political, economic or legalistic basis that defends rights of individuals. Across these fields, dignity functions as a foundational principle that affirms the intrinsic worth of every person, regardless of condition, circumstance, or capacity. In human rights frameworks, dignity is the normative anchor from which all other rights flow. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins by recognising the "inherent dignity" of all members of the human family, highlighting its role as a shared moral baseline for global coexistence. Contemporary legal theory reinforces this: dignity is understood not merely as an abstract ideal but as a practical commitment to ensuring that every person is treated as an end in themselves, capable of agency, participation, and flourishing (Luis, 2012). Research on social cognition, trauma, and relational development shows that the human self is profoundly shaped by networks of recognition, belonging, and care. Dignity, therefore, is not only a metaphysical claim about human worth but a relational reality: humans depend on attentive, respectful, and just relationships to experience themselves as dignified. Theologically, dignity continues to be interpreted as the sacred value of each human person, created in the image of God and sustained by divine relationality (*Dignitas Infinita, 2024)*. Contemporary theology increasingly engages migration, ecological fragility, and social fragmentation as contexts in which dignity must be reclaimed and defended.

This article will consider dignity discourse within the language paradigm, the most fundamental manner through which humanity expresses meaningfully about itself and its place in the world. Being in the information era, it will critically evaluate the scientific claims that dominate modern cultural discourse. Therefore, it builds upon a two-fold enquiry: firstly, the question concerning how a philosophically coherent language may be established to meaningfully articulate the human condition. Secondly, to ask what theological insights may serve to uphold the dignity of the 'displaced other' amidst conditions of adversity. This study

proposes that human dignity is best understood as a relational reality, experienced and expressed through "our capacity to live in the life of another." It concludes that human dignity is not merely a normative principle but an experiential awakening to our shared humanity, particularly visible in moments of adversity.

Uncovering the language origins of humans as "machines"

Philosophers and scientists alike have long asked the question, 'What is life'? While this inquiry predates modernity, it gained fresh momentum in the twentieth century when physicist Erwin Schrödinger, in his 1944 lectures at Trinity College, Dublin proposed that life could be understood as a "code-script," a prediction later confirmed by the discovery of DNA by Watson and Crick in 1953 (Erwin, 1944). Schrödinger's insight inaugurated a new scientific vocabulary for describing living beings as informational systems.

Building on this, Nobel laureate Paul Nurse, in his recent work *What Is Life*? (Paul, 2021), identifies five defining principles of life, including the notion of life as information. The biological sciences, in this sense, perceive life as a process of coding as the central dogma of information translation. While these insights have illuminated the mechanisms of living systems, they have also encouraged a view of human beings as information machines, complex arrangements of chemical instructions with little intrinsic moral or metaphysical depth.

The danger of this view becomes evident when influential voices in science reduce human life to triviality. The physicist Stephen Hawking once remarked in an interview that "human beings are chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet orbiting a very average star." Similarly, Richard Dawkins, in *The Selfish Gene*, described human beings as "machines created by our genes" to propagate genetic information (Richard, 1976, p.2). Such statements, while rhetorically provocative, epitomize the mechanistic worldview that dominates contemporary thought: the assumption that to explain something scientifically is to exhaust its meaning.

As such, modern attempts to describe human life is frequently adulterated by technological metaphors, which may illuminate certain functional aspects of cognition, but are ultimately inadequate as frameworks for understanding the depth and complexity of human existence. A machine, by its very nature, is designed to solve problems that lie outside itself; its purpose is externally assigned rather than internally generated (Rowan, 2018, p.1-27). Consider a clock: through a series of intricate mechanical operations it displays time, yet time is not an internal concern of the clock. When it fails to keep time accurately, clearly a malfunction, the failure is not meaningful to the clock but to those who depend on it. The value of a machine therefore rests entirely on its utility and conformity to predetermined functions.

Modern Age Fallacy of Reductionism

Richard Dawkins' claim that "human beings are machines created by our genes" has a certain heuristic value. It helpfully underscores the role of genes as fundamental units of heredity, dynamic carriers of biological information that not only transmit traits across generations but

also adapt and evolve over time. Yet, when such a statement is elevated into a global interpretive principle, it produces a categorical error: it fails to account for the full nature of human existence. Williams is particularly emphatic on this point, arguing that the mechanistic construal of human beings as gene-driven machines is "intellectually incoherent" (Rowan, 2018, p.21). He identifies three levels at which this reductive strategy breaks down (Rowan, 2018, p.19-25).

First, he notes that scientific reductionism has often generated a philosophical crudity about causality and materiality. Reducing biological life to mathematical formulae may illuminate structural patterns, but it does not capture the lived reality or the qualitative nature of human life. Secondly, he critiques the authoritative mode of scientific discourse, summarised in the formula X is only really Y, which dismisses alternative interpretive frameworks. This form of linguistic power, he argues, sanctions the exclusion of dimensions of experience that are nonetheless perceptible and meaningful. Thirdly, drawing on a loosely theological register, Williams warns that such reductionism tends to treat the world as composed merely of "dead matter," thereby neglecting the richness, intelligibility, and relational depth inherent in human experience. A scientific language that collapses reality into mechanistic descriptions is therefore insufficiently sophisticated to account for a world that, in Gerard Manley Hopkins' evocative phrase, "is charged with the grandeur of God," a world in which the intelligible order of the universe and the self are profoundly interconnected.

Are we in the danger of losing our sense of the human?

A pressing question of our time is whether we are in danger of losing our sense of the human. The accelerating development of artificially intelligent systems, driven fundamentally by machine learning, now shapes not only our technologies but also our self-understanding. These advances create the impression that humanity is being propelled toward a "transhuman" horizon, an imagined solution to our perennial longing for immortality (Bert, 2017). Yet the deeper concern is that such developments risk eroding our conceptual grasp of what it means to be human. As machine learning increasingly structures human experiences, decisions, and relationships, it subtly influences the language through which we interpret ourselves. This constitutes one of the most serious intellectual challenges of our age: the threat of diminishing our sense of the human.

Against this backdrop, it becomes essential to affirm that the human being is neither a machine nor a self-contained soul. Avoiding both mechanistic reductionism and disembodied spiritualism, what is needed is a vocabulary rooted in the organic, lived reality of human existence. The language of personhood offers precisely this grounding. As Williams argues, the human person is "inescapably a hybrid reality: material, embedded in the material world, subject to the passage of time, and yet mysteriously able to respond to its environment so as to make a different environment" (Rowan, 2018, p.45). This description resists the flattening tendencies of both reductive materialism and abstract metaphysics by situating the human being within a rich interplay of embodiment, agency, temporality, and relationality.

In the classical Christian tradition, personhood is defined as "an individual substance of a rational nature" (*Dignitas Infinita,* 2024,§9). While such language emerges from metaphysical inquiry and may appear esoteric to those outside that discipline, the core insight is straightforward: a person possesses inherent worth simply by virtue of existing, independent of specific abilities, stages of development, or social contribution. This account affirms dignity as intrinsic rather than earned.

However, the theological articulation of personhood has not received universal acceptance. Prominent scientists such as Richard Dawkins and Lee Silver (Lee, 2006) reject these claims with considerable force. Dawkins, for example, challenges the notion of personhood in embryonic development by asking when, in the continuum from single-celled zygote to newborn infant, a "person" can meaningfully be said to emerge (Richard, 2017, p.290). Observing that biological development is gradual, he concludes that no single moment of "personhood" can be identified. In *The Selfish Gene*, he further argues that a human foetus - "with no more human feeling than an amoeba"- is accorded reverence and legal protections exceeding those granted to adult chimpanzees (Richard, 1976, p.10). His contention is that such privileges arise merely from species membership rather than from any identifiable qualitative property.

This critique, however, arises from the very reductionism that constrains Dawkins' framework. By treating personhood as a set of measurable criteria, he overlooks the hybrid and irreducible character of personal existence. If one were to distribute a checklist of traits and evaluate the "persons" in a room according to their scores, those meeting the threshold might be deemed worthy of respect, while those falling short would not. Such an approach has historically led to grave moral distortions. While Charles Darwin explored the biological evolution of humanity, his half-cousin Francis Galton developed statistical methods to identify supposedly superior human traits. Galton estimated that "the truly eminent men number only 250 in a million" (Adam, 2022, p.43), a view that later influenced eugenic programmes, from the racial purification policies of Nazi Germany to forced sterilisation initiatives among marginalised populations in twentieth-century India. These are the predictable consequences of defining humanity by "ticking boxes" that measure perceived fitness or value.

Nevertheless, philosophers such as Peter Singer continue to advance criteria-based models of moral status. Singer argues that moral value is dependent on consciousness and the capacity to suffer; thus, foetuses, infants, or individuals lacking certain cognitive faculties supposedly possess diminished moral standing compared to self-aware adults. While such approaches aim to rationalise moral consideration, they risk reinstating the very hierarchies of worth that have historically enabled profound injustices against the vulnerable.

Dignity of Person as the Image of God

I resonate with Williams' assertion that it is impossible to formulate a definitive conceptual definition of the human person. The difficulty arises from the irreducibility of personhood:

human beings cannot be exhaustively captured by any set of properties, whether framed as "rational," "political," or otherwise. We are always more than what happens to be factually true about us. The human person exceeds any bundle of traits or general descriptions of human nature. This is because personhood is realised not in isolation but within a web of relationships. As Williams notes, "a person is the point at which relationships intersect" (Rowan, 2018, p.33). Therefore, personhood lies in our human "capacity to live in the life of another; to have life in someone else's life" (Rowan, 2018, p.33). In this sense, I become an environment for the other, and my ability to decentre myself, an eccentric movement beyond my own interior horizon, opens a reality that transcends the confines of substance. It is therefore impossible to extract some abstract, self-contained essence called "the person" from the complex relational field in which human lives are embedded.

Christian theological anthropology deepens this relational understanding. The notion that human beings are created in the image of God affirms that every person possesses a sacred and inherent value that surpasses all distinctions: sexual, social, political, cultural, or religious (John, 2019, p.167). To bear the *imago Dei* is to exist already in relationship: to be seen, addressed, and loved into existence by God. This divine attention confers human identity; it is the act of *being seen* that *forms* the image in the other. Therefore, personhood emerges in an encounter with *the other*: the impression created on *the other* forms a shared relational space, precisely because *I am seen*.

This sacred impression of God upon humanity is what Christian thought recognises as human dignity. This means that each person has presence and meaning within the life of another; our lives are interwoven in such a way that we literally "live in another's life." This relational dignity rests on the recognition that the other is always already oriented toward realities beyond my own horizons. The other is not an object to be mastered or controlled, but a subject who stands in relation to God and to the world in ways I cannot fully apprehend. Respecting the other thus requires acknowledging the infinite possibilities that exist within them, possibilities not defined by my categories, expectations, or powers. Such an understanding preserves the integrity of personhood by grounding it in relationality, transcendence, and intrinsic worth, rather than in reductionist or functionalist criteria.

A Theological Response to the "Displaced Other"

Human dignity is our universal "common home." Yet the lived reality of the human condition is one of profound plurality: our genetic makeup, physical appearances, social contexts, and life circumstances differ widely. At times these disparities appear so stark that one may feel that some lives are favoured over others. A child suffering from brain cancer or a child born in a slum may come to question why such inequities exist. Our diversities are so extensive that they invite the troubling question of whether inequality is woven as deeply into our existence as dignity itself.

In response to this tension, the Christian moral tradition provides a compelling counterclaim. *Dignitas Infinita* reaffirms that "unless this basic principle is upheld, there will be no future

either for fraternity or for the survival of humanity" (*Dignitas Infinita,* 2024,§4) Similarly, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights also recognises these inalienable rights for every individual, regardless of circumstance. Yet the challenge remains: can human dignity, as a principle or conviction, remain operative and meaningful precisely when circumstances become most difficult? How do we uphold dignity in adverse situations: toward migrants, internally displaced persons, or those facing ethnic discrimination? These questions are both vast and urgently relevant in our contemporary context in Sri Lanka and the world at large.

To approach these realities, I extend the philosophical framework of relationality as a lens for theological ethics. This leads to a threefold realisation.

First, the dignity of the other, "something I cannot master, own, or treat as an object like other objects" (Rowan, 2018, p.38), places demands on my relationship with them. In situations of adversity, this demand becomes more acute, for the vulnerability of the other becomes visibly present. I may find myself as the "stable self" facing the "displaced other," an encounter marked by an existential imbalance. This disparity generates a moral tension, yet it also invites a free and courageous response. I remain capable of meeting the displaced other with what Paul Tillich would call existential courage, a courage grounded in recognition and responsibility.

Second, when I understand myself as already *seen* and *engaged* by God, I perceive within God a movement of kenosis, a self-emptying love. Put simply, God relinquishes divine distance and becomes human beside me, creating an environment in which I can exist and flourish. In this relational nearness, God becomes the One-who-is-with-us, and it is here that the unconditional love of God is most profoundly revealed. The incarnation is thus a theological paradigm for relational presence.

Third, my own existential kenosis, my self-emptying, is how I, in turn, become an environment for the displaced other. Stepping out of the centre of my world, I reject the temptation of alienation and instead embrace authentic reverence for the dignity of the one before me. This creates a cooperative, imaginative, and transformative space for shared learning. In this movement, I become a safe environment where the other's dignity can be recognised, protected, and nurtured.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I reckon that the task of information age is to recover a language adequate to the complexity and sacredness of the human condition. Neither reductionist science nor disembodied spirituality can provide such a language. Human dignity is not merely a normative principle but a concrete, relational practice that enables us to reclaim our collective humanity, especially amid adversity in a pluralistic world. The article proposes that a relational and incarnational framework, one grounded in love, reverence, and shared vulnerability, can sustain a coherent understanding of human identity and dignity. This vision affirms that to be human is to be called into relationship: to live not in alienation, but most truly in the lives of others.

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