

# What The Vatican Got Right About Human Dignity and What It Got Wrong

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Pope Francis presenting “Infinite Dignity” on 8 April 2024 (NYT, 2024a)

In a series of books and essays, I’ve presented and defended a moral and sociopolitical doctrine I call *broadly Kantian dignitarianism*:

*Broadly Kantian dignitarianism* is a universalist moral and political theory that ascribes absolute, non-denumerably infinite, intrinsic, and objective value or worth—aka *dignity*—to all *human real persons*, and asserts that everyone ought always and everywhere to treat everyone, including themselves, with sufficient respect for their human dignity, which means (i) *universal anti-oppression*, i.e., never treating anyone, including yourself, either as a mere means or a mere thing, and (ii) *universal benevolence or kindness*, i.e., always trying to promote the satisfaction of everyone’s true human needs, including your own. The very ideas of “universal human equality” and “universal human rights” presuppose the truth and rightness of broadly Kantian dignitarianism; and the very idea that “crimes against humanity”—including systematically persecuting people on the basis of their religious beliefs, ethnicity, race, sex or gender, “disappearing” people, genocide, murder, rape,

slavery, torture, and so-on—are all absolutely immoral and heinously wrong, indeed evil, *also* presupposes broadly Kantian dignitarianism. Moreover, if we also feel the need of an argument from moral or political authority, then we can cite Frederick Douglass as one of the most morally and politically important proponents of broadly Kantian dignitarianism....

According to my broadly Kantian theory of human dignity.... human dignity is the absolute, non-denumerably infinite, intrinsic, and objective value of *human real persons* as ends-in-themselves, and human real personhood is constituted by a unified set of innate cognitive, caring-based, and practical capacities present in all and only human animals possessing the essentially embodied neurobiological basis of those capacities. These capacities are (i) *consciousness*, (i.e., subjective experience), (ii) *self-consciousness* (i.e., consciousness of one's own consciousness, or second-order consciousness), (iii) *caring* (i.e., desiring, emoting, or feeling), (iv) *sensible cognition* (i.e., sense-perceiving, remembering, or imagining), (v) *intellectual cognition* (i.e., conceptualizing, believing, judging, or inferring), (vi) *volition* (i.e., deciding, choosing, or willing), and (vii) *free agency* (i.e., free will and practical agency). These innate capacities are natural, and human persons are natural, therefore human dignity is natural: no appeal to God or anything non-natural is required. Let's call these seven capacities, collectively, *rational human mindedness*. Some human animals are born permanently lacking the essentially embodied neurobiological basis of rational human mindedness or have suffered its permanent destruction by accident, disease, or violent mishap, and therefore *some* human animals do not have human dignity because they are not human real persons. So not necessarily all human animals are real persons. Conversely, not necessarily all real persons are human: it's really possible for there to be real persons belonging to other animal species, whether on the Earth or other planets. If so, then they'll have dignity too. This means that broadly Kantian dignitarianism rejects speciesism: from a moral and political point of view, what's special about creatures like us is the fact of our *real personhood*, and *not* the fact of our belonging to the biological species *homo sapiens*. (Hanna, 2023a: pp. 1-2 and 6; see also Hanna, 2018a, 2018b, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2024; Bromell, 2021; Hanna and Maiese, 2009; and Maiese and Hanna, 2019)

In fewer words, according to broadly Kantian dignitarianism, human dignity is the absolute, non-denumerably infinite, intrinsic, and objective value or worth of human *persons*, by virtue of their possessing a unified set of basic innate cognitive, caring-based, and practical capacities that are jointly constitutive of their *free agency*. These capacities are naturally present in all and only human animals possessing the essentially embodied neurobiological basis of those capacities. In turn, everyone always ought to treat everyone else with sufficient respect for their human dignity, and we also ought to design, create, and sustain all and only those social institutions that are constructive and enabling, and sufficiently respect human dignity .

So when, on 8 April 2024, the Vatican released a declaration about human dignity, “Infinite Dignity” (Vatican, 2024; NYT, 2024a, 2024b), I was naturally extremely interested to read what it had to say. Here are the first two sections of that document:

1. (*Dignitas infinita*) Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter. This principle, which is fully recognizable even by reason alone, underlies the primacy of the human person and the protection of human rights. In the light of Revelation, the Church resolutely reiterates and confirms the ontological dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ. From this truth, the Church draws the reasons for her commitment to the weak and those less endowed with power, always insisting on “the primacy of the human person and the defense of his or her dignity beyond every circumstance”....

2. This ontological dignity and the unique and eminent value of every man and woman in the world was reaffirmed authoritatively in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, issued by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948.... As we commemorate the 75th anniversary of that document, the Church sees an opportunity to proclaim anew its conviction that all human beings—created by God and redeemed by Christ—must be recognized and treated with respect and love due to their inalienable dignity. The anniversary also provides an occasion for the Church to clarify some frequent misconceptions concerning human dignity and to address some serious and urgent related issues. (Vatican, 2024)

If we focus on the first two sentences of article 1, and the first sentence of article 2, it’s easy to see that so far, there is a significant overlap between broadly Kantian dignitarianism on the one hand, and the Vatican’s metaphysical, moral, and sociopolitical views on human dignity on the other. More generally, as an inspection of the whole document will reveal, I think that the Vatican got the basic metaphysics of human dignity right, that it got the relevant subtle distinctions between different conceptions of dignity and different uses of the term “dignity” right, and also that it also got the essential connections between human dignity, morality, and sociopolitics right. Moreover, both broadly Kantian dignitarianism and the Vatican strongly agree that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued by the United Nations General Asssmbly in 1948 is an essentially dignitarian statement of moral and sociopolitical principles.

Nevertheless, if we then focus on the third and fourth sentences of article 1, and on the second and third sentences of article 2, some crucial differences are immediately manifest. According to broadly Kantian dignitarianism, human dignity requires no theological or divine foundation whatsoever, but is instead grounded on a unified set of

innate human capacities that arise naturally. And as one reads further into the document, we see that the Vatican also falsely imposes wrongheaded Roman Catholic doctrines and conservative ideology about abortion, gender theory, sex change, surrogate motherhood, and more generally about the supposed natural rightness of male-female sex differences, and euthanasia/ assisted suicide, on the concept of human dignity.

None of these doctrines or ideology are accepted by broadly Kantian dignitarianism, simply because neither abortion (under certain carefully-specified conditions—see, e.g., Hanna, 2018b: ch. 3), nor gender theory per se, nor sex change per se, nor surrogate motherhood per se, nor euthanasia/assisted suicide (again, under certain carefully-specified conditions—see, e.g., Hanna, 2018b: ch.6) violates sufficient respect for human dignity. Nor, from a broadly Kantian dignitarian point of view, is there anything metaphysically, morally, or sociopolitically essential about male-female sex differences, just as there’s nothing metaphysically, morally, or sociopolitically essential about racial differences. Broadly Kantian dignitarianism rejects all forms of conservative ideology; sharply on the contrary, it’s the foundation of a radically progressive social and political theory (Hanna, 2018c, 2020a, 2020b, 2023d; Maiese and Hanna, 2019; Hanna and Paans, 2022; Maiese et al., 2023).

So, from a broadly Kantian dignitarian standpoint , we could redact “Infinite Dignity” by deleting all references to God, Jesus, the Catholic Church, the Pope, abortion, gender theory, sex change, surrogate motherhood, the supposed natural rightness of male-female sex differences, and to euthanasia/assisted suicide, and thereby create a philosophically defensible document.

All things considered, I’m pleased that the Vatican is onboard with dignitarianism and also that on some fundamental metaphysical, moral, and sociopolitical points, it’s right about human dignity.

But I’m also very worried that the Vatican’s serious mistakes about contemporary hot-button issues concerning religion, abortion, gender theory, sex change, surrogate motherhood, the supposed natural rightness of male-female sex differences, and euthanasia/assisted suicide, will hurt the larger cause of dignitarian morality and sociopolitics by triggering irrelevant psychological associations and taboos. These hot button issues were of course highlighted by the news media (NYT, 2024a, 2024b), and as a consequence, I very much doubt that many people will ever actually read the document (Vatican, 2024) and think critically about it for themselves.

Above all, it would be a tragedy if, on the one hand, some people were to *accept* dignitarianism just because of those false doctrines and ideologies, and irrelevant

psychological associations and taboos, and another equal but opposite tragedy if, on the other hand, some other people were to *ignore* or *reject* dignitarianism just because of these false doctrines and ideologies, and irrelevant psychological associations and taboos. For if I'm right, then broadly Kantian dignitarianism is the *only* rationally acceptable way forward for humankind (Hanna, 2023d). So either accepting dignitarianism or ignoring/rejecting dignitarianism *for the wrong reasons* implicitly attacks and undermines *everyone's* future prospects.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I'm grateful to Martha Hanna for drawing my attention to (Vatican, 2024) and also for thought-provoking conversations on and around the main topics of this essay.

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