

(Re)considering Human Dignity in the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence: Where Does It Stand?

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Abstract

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) necessitates discussions on ethical frameworks for its usage in healthcare. While existing frameworks focus on patient autonomy and equality, this essay centers on the concept of human dignity, and its potential (in)compatibility with AI. It explores the questions: *What is the importance of human dignity in ethical discourse? Is preserving autonomy and privacy synonymous with preserving dignity? As AI evolve from an assistant to an autonomous decision-maker, where does dignity stand?* This essay cautions against the risks AI poses to human dignity and emphasizes the importance of integrating dignity into AI ethics discussions.

With the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI), discussions aiming at establishing ethical frameworks to address AI usage in healthcare have become increasingly imperative. Existing frameworks largely focus on enhancing patient privacy and autonomy, as well as eliminating biases in AI systems. Instead of examining these ethical considerations, this essay focuses on the concept of human dignity, and its potential (in)compatibility with AI. Specifically, it explores the following questions: *What is the importance of human dignity in ethical discourse? Is preserving autonomy and privacy synonymous with preserving human dignity? As the role of AI transitions from an assistant to an autonomous decision-maker, where does human dignity stand?* In addressing these questions, this essay serves as a caution regarding the risks of AI on human dignity; it also emphasizes the necessity of integrating human dignity into discussions on AI ethics.

The Role of Human Dignity in Ethical Discourse

To begin the discussion on the relationship between human dignity and AI ethics, it is essential to acknowledge that human dignity remains a contentious concept. Theorists of human dignity have described the concept as ambiguous, lacking a concrete definition and practical application (1–7). Critics even argue that dignity is a useless concept, having no meaning beyond the respect for persons and autonomy (6,7). In contemporary discourse, where practicality is celebrated, many prefer to talk about ethics in more defined and tangible terms such as autonomy, beneficence, and privacy—rendering dignity an outdated concept.

However, the concept's ambiguity should not warrant its dismissal in discussions of AI ethics—or ethics overall. The importance of human dignity lies in its role as the central organizing principle for ethical and legal discussions (8,9). As Sulmasy rightly argues: “the true foundation for all moral duties is respect—that is—respect for intrinsic dignity (10).” Historically, human dignity has been central to many legal and ethical frameworks, including

the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which emphasizes it as the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace (11). In medicine, it remains a fundamental value, as reflected in the Declaration of Geneva and Hippocratic Oath (12,13).

Of course, the concept's role as the central organizing principle and its prevalence does not mitigate its vagueness or limited applicability. However, viewing dignity as the root and organizing principle of ethics can provide a foundation to ground our discussions, and a reference point to return to amid confusion.

Conceptions of Human dignity

As Inherent Worth of Human Beings

"Human dignity" refers to the intrinsic value and worth of humans (4). Theorists have sought to define and categorize dignity. Some categorized it dichotomously, distinguishing between inherent (innate) and attributed dignity (based on one's accomplishments or societal roles (4,5). Others proposed more complex frameworks (4,14). This essay primarily considers inherent dignity, most notably articulated by Immanuel Kant, who posits that "Every man is to be respected as an absolute end in himself," to use him as a mere mean is a "crime against the dignity that belongs to him as a human being (15)." In other words, inherent dignity is unearned and does not change based on one's status, virtues, or behaviors; it exists simply by virtue of being human.

Relationality in the Actualization of Human Dignity

While human dignity is inherent, its actualization is relational. According to Hailer and Ritschl, human dignity is "imparted on others by speaking and acting ... there has to be someone who tells me that I have human dignity (16)." Similarly, Miller states, "Relationality is the condition of the possibility of our fundamental worth as human beings. We are, in essence, dependent upon the presence of and interactions with others for our dignity (5)." Put simply,

although human dignity is inherent, its actualization requires actions that acknowledge and respect it. Thus, human dignity can only be actualized within relationships, necessitating the presence of another person.

In a thought experiment, Miller questions whether a man existing alone on a planet—who possesses rationality, emotional capacities, and is “in nearly all the way that we understand ourselves to be human (5)” —has dignity in the absence of relationships. Without interactions with others, there is no other person to impart dignity, and the self-understanding and moral frameworks essential for recognizing and realizing one’s own dignity fail to develop (5). Thus, it is through our connections with others that our inherent worth as human beings—dignity—is affirmed and actualized.

The Range of Values and Meanings of Human Dignity

On a more practical conception of human dignity, Moody, drawing on the perspective of Bimbacher that dignity is not a “unitary and homogeneous concept”, argues that dignity represents a “network of meanings (1).” Moody lists a range of meanings encompassed by the idea of dignity, which includes self-respect (vs. shame), privacy (vs. exposure), power (vs. vulnerability), equality (vs. favoritism), individuation (vs. objectification), autonomy (vs. dependency), and more (1).

From this list, we can infer that when we discuss autonomy, privacy, and so on, we are simultaneously considering human dignity. However, the multi-encompassing nature of human dignity also means that upholding one or more aspects does not equate to upholding dignity in its entirety. As will be discussed in greater detail, when exploring ethics through the various meanings of human dignity without a clear focus on its core concept, we risk losing sight of human dignity itself.

Human Dignity in the Age of AI

Let's explore the impact of AI on human dignity. Consider a scenario in which an AI completely replaces human doctors in healthcare. This AI possesses all the technological advancement required to eliminate issues pertaining to autonomy, privacy, biases, and other conceivable ethical challenges except human dignity. In this scenario, can this AI uphold human dignity? Recall that the realization of human dignity requires a relationship. Unless there is a way for human dignity to be respected without the presence of another person, it is impossible to realize a patient's human dignity solely through AI—a non-human entity—at least not in its current state of agency.

Here, one could question whether it is necessary for AI to be able to convey human dignity in healthcare settings, provided that it does not undermine it, since dignity can be imparted by persons on individuals in other contexts. This raises the question: What is the significance of human dignity within healthcare settings specifically? In healthcare settings, patient's expression and recognition of dignity are often limited. They are vulnerable to “assaults on dignity (1)” due to the frailty and powerlessness that accompany illness (1,3). Uncontrollable physical issues, like incontinence, or procedures involving the nakedness of the human body evokes feelings of shame (1). The inability to care for oneself, which increase dependency on others, fosters a “fear of indignity (3).” In a context where indignity is prevalent, it becomes crucial to have someone to impart, affirm, and emphasize human dignity.

Additionally, we can also consider the impact of AI on human dignity by examining how it affects the concept's range of values as described by Moody. This approach aligns closely with existing discussions about AI's impact on autonomy, privacy, and related issues.

Numerous studies highlight how AI data usage threatens privacy and autonomy (17–19), while limited training data jeopardizes equality (20,21). Formosa's research indicate that AI is consistently viewed as a dehumanizing decision-maker (22). People reported feeling more

respected and dignified by human decision-makers, especially with morally significant decisions (22). This perception of AI as objectifying stems from its algorithmic decision-making nature, which lacks negotiation and human interaction (23). These examples demonstrate that AI currently fails to uphold essential values of human dignity—such as privacy, autonomy, equality, and individuation—and it remains uncertain whether these shortcomings can ever be fully addressed.

Importantly, we must again consider whether preserving the values encompassed by human dignity is synonymous with preserving dignity itself. The values suggested by Moody constitute only a part of human dignity. To equate preserving values with preserving dignity, we would need a complete list of values. However, questions arise: does such a list even exist, and can human dignity be defined solely by its range of values? Even if this list were available, as Hailer and Ritschl rightly argue, by focusing solely on the values of human dignity without addressing the concept itself as the central organizing principle, we risk creating a medical community and society that "constantly seeks ever finer legal prescriptions and rules," leading to a "highly impersonal, mechanized, and ultimately intolerable form of ethics (16)."

In this essay, I briefly discussed the importance of considering human dignity in AI ethics, outlined various conceptions of human dignity, and illustrated ways in which AI jeopardize its respect—namely through limitations in relationality and its inability to uphold intrinsic values of dignity. While I compared discussions on tangible values such as autonomy and equality with that of human dignity, my intention is not to disregard discussions on these values, which are paramount for regulating AI usage. Instead, I hope to emphasize the need to focus on human dignity itself, lest we become fixated on specific outcomes and overlook the foundational ethical principle, paving the way for a new era defined by impersonal rules and cold machinery.

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