Social Justice Ireland

Human Dignity and Human Rights

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The discussion and reflection on human dignity can be traced back to the writings of ancient philosophers and religious traditions. Coming from its Latin and Greek roots 'dignity' suggests respect and intrinsic value.

Jack Donnelly reflecting on the definitions of early thirteenth century dictionaries notes that "'dignity' indicates worth that demands respect."[1] Alan Gewirth defines human dignity as "a kind of intrinsic worth that belongs equally to all human beings as such, constituted by certain intrinsically valuable aspects of being human."[2]

Mette Lebech takes a historical look at the development of the concept of human dignity. She talks about four stages in the development of the idea of human dignity. She says that 'each depends on a time-typical framework and exemplifies a logical possibility':

(1) Cicero may represent the cosmo-centric framework of Antiquity, which explains human dignity on the basis of nature.

(2) Thomas Aquinas represents the Middle Ages Christo-centric framework, which explains human dignity in relation to Jesus Christ.

(3) Immanuel Kant can represent the logo-centric framework of Modernity, explaining human dignity as a tribute to reason.

(4) Whereas Mary Wollstonecraft represents the polis-centred framework of Post-Modernity, which explains human dignity in relation to social acceptability'[3].

Commenting on the four frameworks, Lebech says:

> 'Human dignity as the fundamental value of human beings is common to the frameworks treated, yet each understands it to rely upon, or to be conditioned by, different features of human reality: human nature; God-relatedness; the faculty of reason; or recognition within society'[4].

In conclusion Lebech states: 'Whereas the explanatory factors of the various frameworks indicate the essentially human, none of them taken in isolation provides us with a sufficient

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[1] Donnelly, Jack. (2009) *Human Dignity and Human Rights.* Swiss Initiative to Commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the UDHR Protecting Dignity: An Agenda for Human Rights. University of Denver, USA p10

[2] Gewirth, Alan. (1992) Human Dignity as the Basis of Rights, in *The Constitution of Rights: Human Dignity and American Values,* edited by M. J. Meyer and W. A. Parent. Cornell University Press p.12

[3] Lebech, Mette. (2004) *What is Human Dignity?.* Maynooth Philosophical Papers. Vol 2, eprint. P2

[4] Ibid p.10

condition for human dignity. As indicators of the human they point towards the *being* whose existence is of fundamental value'[5]

Social Justice Ireland understands human dignity as the intrinsic worth of each person and is inviolable.

Donnelly argues that 'human dignity' provides the foundation for human rights. He says 'I thus want to emphasise the mutual co-constitution of human rights and human dignity. Human rights reflect – or at least analytically can be understood to reflect – a particular specification of certain minimum preconditions for a life of dignity in the contemporary world. But our detailed understanding of human dignity is shaped by our ideas and practises of human rights. And the practice of human rights can be seen as justified, in some ultimate sense, by its production of beings able to live a life of dignity'[6].

Human rights provide mechanisms for the realisation of a life of dignity. Donnelly notes that: 'simply being human makes one worthy or deserving of respect. Human rights can thus be understood to specify certain forms of social respect – goods, services, opportunities, and protections owed to each person as a matter of rights - implied by this dignity'[7].

The history of the discourse on human dignity is long and complex. It was not until 1948 that it was clearly articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

 The Preamble to the declaration says 'recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.' Article 1 states; '**All** human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood'[8].

Human rights are the rights of all persons so that each person is not only a right-holder but also has duties to all other persons to respect and promote their rights. Thus there is a sharing of the benefits of rights and the burden of duties.

Alan Gewirth[9] notes that human rights have important implications for social policy. On the one hand the State must protect equally the freedom and basic well-being of all persons and on the other hand it must give assistance to persons who cannot maintain their well-being by their own efforts.

Social Justice Ireland believes that every person should have the following basic socio-economic rights:

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[5] Ibid p.12
[6] Ibid p.83
[7] Ibid p 10
[8] http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml
[9] Gewirth, Alan (1993), *Common Morality and the Community of Rights,* published in 'Prospects For a Common Morality, Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr., Editors. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, USA. (p 44)

- Sufficient income to live life with dignity,
- Access to meaningful work,
- Access to appropriate accommodation.
- Opportunity to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.
- Access to appropriate education
- Access to essential healthcare
- An environment which respects their culture

Social Justice Ireland is an independent think-tank and justice advocacy organisation of individuals and groups throughout Ireland who are committed to working to build a just society where human rights are respected, human dignity is protected, human development is facilitated and the environment is respected and protected.