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A brief study about the dignity of man

The dignity of the human person... We use this term so frequently, but do we in fact understand its meaning? It is an inborn, permanent, inalienable and at the same time binding value vested to every human being in spite of what the person does or how the person behaves (9).

The Catholic University of Lublin Encyclopaedia qualifies dignity as "special value of man as a person both staying in interpersonal relations and remaining in final bond with the Supreme Being – God. Human dignity validates and gives sense to his personal life and also favourably values man's relation to his own being and the social groups that an individual identifies himself with. However, a component constituting an attitude to social groups is self-evaluation, which means experiencing one's own value and a positive image of oneself. Positive self-assessment motivates for morally valuable behaviours, makes immune to any forms of manipulation or negligence and spurs better managing difficult situations. First of all it assumes a sense of internal freedom, subjectivity and responsibility (2). It is also perfection which is born in morally valuable deeds and becomes fixed in a person's personality. Thus, we have here two approaches to dignity – resulting from the first definition, dignity of man as an individual, and dignity of personality, which is derived from human nature and man's character.

Dignity can be examined in a philosophical aspect (ethics mainly), psychological, religious and legal ones. According to modern ethics, there is one more kind of dignity, professional dignity. It is a pattern of behaviour that results from an individual's socio-professional role and his actual position in the society (5). Dignity of man originates in man's specific role as an intelligent being, as God's creation to His image and resemblance. This is how the creation of man is described in the Book of Genesis of the Old Testament, said to be the oldest document containing the idea of human dignity. The Old Testament also speaks of human rights. Its representation in modern world is the Declaration of Human Rights established on 10 December, 1948 in Paris. Ennoblement of man is depicted in the Gospel, where Christ unified with every human being by His incarnation (1). On the basis of these texts, some authors attribute a Christian origin to the idea of dignity of man. However, ancient philosophy must not be forgotten. Ancient philosophers (Protagoras, Cicero, Seneca) claimed that man's position was exceptional in the universe. In ancient philosophy dignity had a slightly different meaning – it resulted from respect for a public person exercising power (9).

As for personal dignity, it is associated with certain patterns of behaviour in man. A man of dignity acts in accordance with his own system of values. He remains faithful to his own convictions and beliefs. He does not conform to any manipulations. He does not give priority to material values above his own views and rules. Hence, absence of dignity is a denial of certain values in favour of benefiting materially or aspiring to certain positions in the society. This endeavour to achieve success is realized by means of lie and humiliation of oneself and others (5). Personal dignity can be lost as a result of pressure from outside; it could be a job or a social

status. A person under this kind of influence deserves our compassion, not contempt. This is why our behaviour should be directed towards perception of other people as individuals equal to ourselves in every aspect, and protection of their dignity. It should also be oriented at creating our own system of values so that others can perceive us as men of dignity.

Dignity stands above biological-social value. According to Rudolf Allers, different people have different value but they have the same dignity (4).

Summing up, the sources of dignity are an individual's moral strength together with his own system of values, his active attitude to the surrounding reality and a feeling of freedom. (5) To be free means to depend on oneself, make decisions that shape an individual with respect to morality. This ability to form oneself is self-determination, a feature that decides about man's special position and his natural dignity (3). Value, material value is a feature of an object. But dignity is part of a human being and this dignity is a value in itself. No utilitarian value should be misinterpreted as value of man, as only man has dignity. Social utilitarian value of man has nothing to do with personal dignity (4).

A sense of freedom is a consequence of possessing a mind which gives man domination over the world, and this particular position of man in the world can be defined as dignity. This constitutes elementary basis for humanistic ethics, oriented towards a human being. Ethics is a discipline of science which shows how to behave to do good and avoid evil. Ethics places a human being in the centre of its scope but it recognizes priority of common welfare over individual well-being.

The object of our interest is most of all normative ethics, which deals with actual moral attitudes, it aims at determining and justifying certain rules. It attempts to define the supreme virtue. It discusses the problem of moral act, it asks what conditions must be met in order for behaviour to obtain the status of a moral act. Man as a moral lawmaker was a concept predominant in Immanuel Kant's philosophy. He bases morality on the concept of man as a being blessed with a mind and a free will. In his opinion, there is one categorical imperative in interhuman relations: "Act so as to use humanity, whether in your own person or in others, always as an end, and never merely as a means..". It can as well be interpreted in this way – "Act so that the maxim may be capable of becoming a universal law for all rational beings" (12).

The above introduced rules of general ethics are reflected in medical ethics. A job of a doctor is in many respects an exceptional one. It is service to other beings. using one's own knowledge to save other people's health and life. Thus, the presence of ethics in medical science is of particular importance, especially in the face of the present crisis of civilization, which is mainly moral in nature (10). Every doctor is a human being. By doing his job and performing his duties he does not stop to be one. He should, then, act in accordance with a system of values based on dignity of man as a intelligent and responsible being. The document that defines moral norms of doing a job of a doctor is the Code of Medical Ethics. Its Article 3 reads: "A physician shall treat patients as equals and not allow race, religion, political views or social status to have any effect on his actions towards them." According to Article 12, "A physician shall treat patients with compassion and respect to their personal dignity and their right to privacy" (8).

These statements might seem banal to some. And indeed they are commonly known. However, are they respected? This could be answered both from the doctor's and the patient's point of view. Doctors asked about their attitude towards the patients answer mostly that they treat the patients with respect. At the same time they admit they have too little time to talk, to keep their relations with the patient as man rather than man as subject of their medical examination and treatment. As for the patients' opinions concerning their relations with the health care workers, they are often negative. The patients complain that little attention is paid to them by the doctors. They accuse doctors of disinterested approach to them. They complain about not fully understanding some of the doctors' statements when talking to them. This dissatisfaction in patients is manifested in a number of ways: they do not follow the doctors'

advice, they resort to unconventional medicine or they finally accuse doctors of medical mistakes (6).

One should remember that an illness is more than a clinical fact defined in medical terms. This is also the condition of the patient as man with an illness. Health care workers should treat the patient in compliance with an integral human idea. They should be aware of the values and meanings that make the illness and their job meaningful giving them a chance for a social meeting with every single case (7). Having to do with man they cannot be blind to human dignity, nor can the therapy that deprives him of his dignity. And every treatment can deprive of dignity if it treats the person as an object, which is the main concern of psychologism (4).

"Human life is simultaneously and inseparably physical and spiritual" (7). It is the physical-spiritual unity of the human being that decides about personal dignity. It also determines dignity of human body. The patient's body cannot be seen as pure matter composed of cells, tissues and organs. It is an integral part of a human being. The doctors and other health care workers ought to remember it. Let us then treat an ill person instead of an ill organ (11).

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SUMMARY

The present paper is devoted to the problem of human dignity, exploring its philosophical, psychological and religious aspects. This issue is so important in all spheres of everyday life and yet we often forget about it when we deal with our mundane problems. The paper also analyzes human dignity with regard to medicine, especially the doctor- patient relationship. It encourages a respectful attitude toward the patient as a human being.

Krótkie rozważania o godności człowieka

Praca poświęcona jest problemowi godności człowieka. Przedstawia jego aspekty: filozoficzny, psychologiczny, religijny i prawny. Zagadnienie to jest ważne na każdej płaszczyźnie życia codziennego, a często o nim zapominamy, zmagając się z problemami dnia powszedniego. Praca analizuje również problem godności człowieka w odniesieniu do medycyny. Rozpatruje relacje między lekarzem a pacjentem. Zachęca do traktowania pacjenta z szacunkiem należnym osobie ludzkiej.