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### Human Rights & God: Universality, Human Dignity and Moral Absolutism

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# Human Rights & God

Universality, Human Dignity, and Moral Absolutism

A Thesis

Presented by

Caleb Yoon

To the

Human Rights Studies Department

Donna-Dale Marcano

Thesis Advisor

## **Abstract**

While the current human rights tradition has come out of a common sentiment to move away from religion—for religion has, historically, been an immense source of human rights violations—the origins of human rights need to be considered, and perhaps more importantly, why human rights must exist in the first place. In his article “No human rights without God,” Daniel Philpott contends that three essential characteristics of human rights necessitate the integration and acknowledgment of God: universality, human dignity, and their “trump card status” (Philpott, 2014). Philpott counters the notion that reason alone can establish human rights’ universality, focus on human dignity, and their need for paramount importance, and argues that reason alone cannot provide grounds for these three vital aspects of the human rights tradition. Arguing that, objectively, humans are nothing more than a set of relatively more complex biological and neurological processes, he contends that a higher must reveal the unique nature of humankind. Through this thesis, however, by examining these three facets of human rights that Philpott claims are justified through Christianity—or similar faiths holding that there is a singular God—it will be discovered that a Godly perspective can justify universal moral norms and human dignity but fails at establishing “trump card” status through moral absolutism. However, this is not a fault of God but rather one of the limitations of historical events and the constant manipulation of God’s Word. While Philpott’s argument may fail regarding Christianity’s ability to justify the “trump card” status of human rights, human rights certainly provide a framework with which the moral absoluteness of God can be taught.

This thesis is not written to say that human rights cannot be effective without the Christian God, but rather that this primarily human endeavor of recognizing and protecting human dignity has a finite scope in that it was born from the human atrocities by thinkers who

share the same imperfect nature of those who initially violated said human rights. If we are to equate humanity with imperfection, the fallacy of human rights disappears, for the very term “human” implies a sense that we are always making mistakes, learning from them, and striving to be better. And ultimately, this is the best we can do in an imperfect world as imperfect beings.

Where does this assumption of fundamental fallibility come from? One basis of natural rights stems from the idea that man was created in God’s image, “for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker” constitutes a common basis of deserved rights (Locke, 73). However, John Locke and many other natural rights advocates missed a critical part of the Bible, that although man was created in God’s image when Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, they thus cursed all their descendants to be separated from God; this separation between man and his Creator invalidates the notion that humankind deserves anything, including rights, for outside of an earnest and personal relationship with God, humankind is doomed. To speak more on human fallibility the Bible states “therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” (*NIV*, Romans 5.12). One might ask why should all of humanity suffer for one man and one woman’s sin? A difficult question, to be sure, but people pay for the mistakes of others all the time. To say that a classroom punished by the acts of one rebellious child is not comparable to all of humanity’s punishment in the eyes of God, the creator of literally everything, is arrogant of us.

## Acknowledgments

This entire process has been an incredibly difficult and raw excursion into my belief system and faith in God. Having spent the past few years at Trinity College studying human rights—a movement largely divorced from religion—I have had to reconcile the faith with which I grew up and the new, exciting subject area of my major. As my thesis advisor, Donna Marcano can attest, my topic for my thesis has jumped around over the past year, impeding my ability to gather a finalized set of sources and begin my writing process. In many more ways than one, this thesis serves as the first step in a long, and at times, excruciating journey back from a world of pain and trauma. Perhaps, my thoughts kept meandering throughout the year in terrifying anticipation of what comes next after graduation. Luckily, I was not alone. As the year went on, I spoke with many people about my desire to reunite faith and human rights, for a reality in which both were mutually exclusive was not one I wished to live in. The ideals of equality and justice of human rights align so well with the teachings of Jesus Christ in the Bible and the Words of God. Of course, in this world, those same teachings and Words are commonly brandished as weapons against the very same human rights I so wished to live by; this saddens me greatly. But I am hopeful that the human rights movement can be strengthened by the Word of God and that a proper integration of the two realms of thinking and living can lead to greater effectiveness of not only the human rights movement but how Christianity is perceived by especially those who are consistently persecuted and marginalized by those who claim they are born anew within Christ.

Accordingly, I would like to thank God for calling me as His child and commissioning me to spread a life-saving message through whatever work I commit to during my time here.

I wish to thank, from the bottom of my heart, my thesis advisor, academic advisor, and professor, Donna Marcano for being a vital part of this process. She has been and continues to be an invaluable source of wisdom and compassion. Thank you for always lending an ear during times of need.

A huge thanks must be given to my parents and brothers for without their patience and love throughout the years, I would not be anywhere close to where I am today. Thank you all for consistently being pillars of Godly faith in an otherwise confusing and overwhelming world.

I also want to thank my fiancé for always listening to me when I attempted to sort out the chaos that are my thoughts concerning this thesis or anything else for that matter. Thank you for always being willing to listen.

To those I have had the utmost honor of meeting at Trinity College—especially those in Temple of Hip Hop, IDP, the Human Rights Studies department, and Theater & Dance department—thank you so much for accepting me as a part of your communities. It pains me that I have but a little time left here on campus, but I hope these friendships may last as long as I draw breath.

I hope to make you all proud.

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## **Introduction: Human Rights and its Relationship to Christianity**

Though human rights have become somewhat of a ubiquitous concept in the past century, semantically deciphering the meaning of the word “right” can be a rather insightful exercise. Rights delineate a prerogative to or from certain privileges, protections, or freedoms. When applied to the concept of human rights, rights are those prerogatives that all humans, theoretically, have simply by virtue of being human. Most simplistically, human rights can be either negative rights or positive rights—negative rights being protection from something and positive rights being an entitlement to something. Additionally, a right implicitly has a correlating duty although the responsibility of the duty falls upon varying sources depending on the nature of the right. For example, if we are to examine Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “No one shall be subject to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile,” we can see that it describes a negative right from the mentioned circumstances and critically, it places the duty of protecting that human right onto the governing body within which people reside (UDHR). In this manner, human rights have been an incredibly powerful tool for individuals to fight oppressive regimes and bring international attention to crimes against humanity. Because human beings are entitled to human rights by virtue of being human, they have the ability to make demands concerning the fulfillment and enjoyment of those intrinsic rights. This power to make demands is the essence of what Philpott refers to as the necessary “trump card” status of human rights. Relevantly, this powerful tool has also been the target of criticism from many scholars who see human rights as potentially dangerous for the integrity of governments and states. However, as we have seen throughout the past seventy years or so since the UDHR was created, human rights have been essential ammunition in a world rife with oppression, inequality, and conflict.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in its concluding statement in the Preamble, states that:

The General Assembly, Proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction (UDHR, emphasis added).

The focus of this thesis and Philpott's claim lie upon the phrase "to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance," a phrase that expresses the absoluteness of the human rights movement. Although an alternative phrase such as "to secure their majority-reaching and mostly-effective recognition and observance" would not nearly have the same sort of impact, it could be more realistic. One could argue that the human rights movement is more importantly utilized when dealing with acts of grave injustice instead of ones on a smaller scale. By focusing on incidents that involve the mass deprivation of human rights and dealing with acts on a mass scale, the universality and effectiveness of human rights enforcement can be foreseeably achieved. But in regards to this thought, I ask, how many people need their rights deprived for it to become a human rights issue and not simply an isolated incident outside its jurisdiction? For if the human rights movement considers itself as a means to an end, the end being universal recognition of moral duties and respect for others, it needs to be able to reach even the isolated incidents, not just the ones on a mass scale.

The sheer difficulty with which to ensure human rights even to those on a micro-level could be viewed as a fallible aspect of human rights, that perhaps the movement veers too idealistic in its goals. However, what is it to be human? Is it not to make mistakes, learn from them, and strive to be better? Even a state that aims to deprive people of their rights wishes to

learn from their mistakes and improve at depriving those rights. Although an ironic example, it still lends support to the very idea of being human. If we are to equate humanity with imperfection, the fallacy of human rights disappears, for the very term “human” implies a sense that we are always making mistakes, learning from them, and striving to be better. And ultimately, this is the best we can do in an imperfect world as imperfect beings.

Firstly, this thesis will address both secular-leaning and faith-leaning attempts at establishing universal moral norms. Then, it will accordingly address both secular-leaning and faith-leaning attempts at defining human dignity. Lastly, it will address some issues concerning the “trump status” of human rights and the lack of empirical data for the establishment of moral absolutism in Christianity. Concluding this thesis will be a brief case study of White Evangelicalism.

## **Chapter I: Universal Moral Norms**

### **Introduction**

To be successful in its attempt to establish universal rights and duties, human rights, initially, need to argue for universality concerning moral norms. This can be particularly difficult in a globalized world in which moral norms tend to be directly derived from different cultures, religions, and philosophies. Take, for example, the recent controversy concerning mask-wearing in the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, mask-wearing was seen as an affront to individual rights in the West whereas, in the East, mask-wearing was a simple task not only to protect oneself but more importantly, to achieve the moral goal of protecting others from infection. While this ideological difference can also be examined from a right-to versus right-from perspective, it goes to show the different moral standards that cultures can impress upon their constituents (Kemmelmeier & Jami, 2021). Furthermore, morality is commonly connected to religion as most religions tend to have some set of divine rules and standards given to humankind, delivered to govern how humans interact with each other and themselves. However, if morality is simply established by a higher power, many have raised criticism concerning this approach for it, in some manner, weakens the idea of free choice. Considering that the basis of our understanding of morality is free will, it is clear how divine commandments could undermine the quality of moral decision-making. Surely, there must be common ground between secular and religious lines of thought concerning morality. I would also be remiss to exclude the cultural relativist critique in this section, a perspective that argues that there is no universal moral truth. This chapter will attempt to understand some early forms of conceptualizing morality and ultimately argue that morality is best framed within the context of Jesus Christ.

### **Secular-Leaning Attempts at Defining Universal Moral Norms**

Early attempts at defining morality have typically employed rationality as a basis, but David Hume, a prominent philosopher in the 18th century, approaches morality through a combination of empirical and *a priori* reasoning—the former concerned with experience and the latter being purely theoretical—and establishes that morality cannot be derived from reason in the first part of Book III in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume speaks to the idea that morality is something to be judged by how certain decisions and actions stir certain emotions or feelings within those observing (Hume, 471). This aligns with much of the way morality is conceived to this day. For example, if someone steals your laptop, it will certainly make you feel emotions of betrayal and hurt, leading you to the conclusion that the thief acted immorally. Hume, illustrating the simplistic way in which action is judged, aptly states, “There is no spectacle so fair and beautiful as a noble and generous action; nor any which gives us more abhorrence than one that is cruel and treacherous,” pointing to the raw reaction that certain actions produce when observed by an audience (470). He does not fail to acknowledge the subjectivity in one’s reaction to certain objects—he provides the example of a music composition versus a bottle of wine—because certainly, one would attribute higher pleasure to one such object over another. This subjectivity can easily be transferred to the conflict between virtue and vice—good and bad—blurring the lines between a universal set of moral norms. But, critically, he ponders the source from which human beings determine whether an act is of vice or virtue, questioning if the source is of nature<sup>1</sup> or something else entirely (474).

Unfortunately, Hume runs into several problems here. The first of which is the revelation of the seemingly contradictory nature of vice and virtue in that they inhabit both the space of natural phenomenon where nature is considered that which can be understood. Hume then considers, from a realist position, that virtue is perhaps the more unnatural phenomenon in the

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<sup>1</sup> What he means by “of nature” is that which is natural versus unnatural.

world which seems too ironic to him, for how could the wonderful ideal of virtue be an unnatural phenomenon. Concluding that virtue and vice cannot be delegated amongst the categories of being natural or unnatural, he returns to his original stance that virtue is defined by pleasure and vice by pain (475). Having walked around in a circle, Hume leaves us without much more insight into the matter but of that which we already took to be implicitly true.

Hume decidedly defines morality empirically, by how certain sentiments are invoked in response to certain actions. Immanuel Kant, however, argues that morality should not and cannot be conceptualized empirically—according to experience—and that for morality to be effective as a universal principle, it must be realized *a priori*. Kant wishes to define morality as a “supreme practical principle,” desiring an ultimate basis on which to make good decisions and judge the virtue of an action (Kant, 17). Exploring what a good action entails, Kant contends that it is not the action that can be judged good or bad, but the will behind that action that determines morality (5). In other words, the result or means through which an action is taken does not influence the goodness of that action, for if the will behind the action is not good it cannot be deemed good. He makes a clear connection between will and duty, specifically in that will is derived from a duty to follow law. This is especially important particularly in human rights discourse since all rights have implicit duties and, therefore, by setting into reality a set of duties, universal moral truth can perhaps be realized through the universal acceptance and adherence to globally accepted law. There are two main conclusions that Kant arrives at through his meditations:

Act as though the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature (24) [and]  
Act in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means (29).

The first speaks to the importance of reflecting universal law within your actions, or conversely, acting only in ways that adhere to the supreme principle of morality. Importantly, however, is his

use of the phrase “through your will” which highlights the inseparable connection between will and duty. The second conclusion, a sentiment that Kant is popularly known for in human rights discourse, is that human beings should never be a means to an end, simply ends in and of themselves. What this implies is that Kant believes that humans have intrinsic moral worth and that actions should respect that intrinsic good instead of using others as a means to achieve some supposed good. This sentiment has become integral in the human rights culture as the emphasis is placed on the rights inherent to every individual despite whatever goal one wishes to enact.

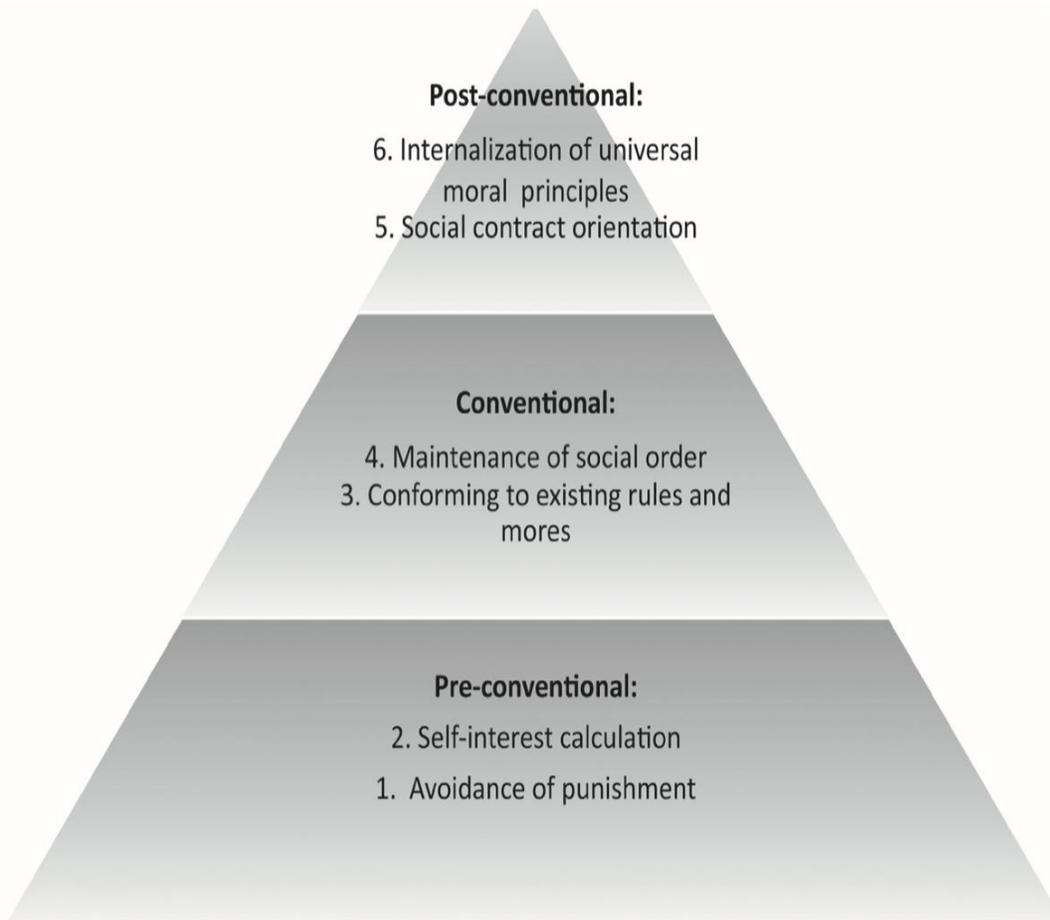
However, Philpott would argue that the basis of morality stipulated by Hume and Kant is not sufficient for justifying the universality of human rights’ moral norms. Recall his argument that human beings are merely more complex combinations of biological and neurological mechanisms. For if this is the case, human beings cannot be differentiated all too widely from animals who, in their way, express emotive reactions to certain behaviors and employ certain, if primitive, forms of rationality.

On the other hand, through a scientific lens, psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg delineates moral capacity through a course of developmental growth throughout one’s life: his six stages of moral development<sup>2</sup>. Beginning at the pre-conventional level, human beings—most typically at an early age—seek to further their selfish interests, whether to avoid punishment or increase the reward. Even if actions are done to provide pleasure to another, ultimately, the goal of that action is to receive some sort of personal recognition or praise. At the conventional level, actions may reflect a higher understanding of the way the world is constructed in that one may act in a certain way because they know that society deems that action as a correct or rightful one. This level, however, lacks an internal voice—or moral compass—that is based on something more inherent.

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<sup>2</sup> See following diagram.

Lastly, at the post-conventional level, there is a certain self-reflection that occurs where one reconciles the reality in which they grew up with the values they wish to espouse (Christie, 123).



Lawrence Kohlberg's Six Stages of Moral Development

(122)

### Thoughts and Criticisms

Kant's theory on what constitutes good certainly causes some self-reflection on my part for, it seems, every day I find myself committing actions that neither someone else nor I would deem good. For example, I find it incredibly difficult at times to take responsibility for the implications of my actions, opting instead to spin up a flimsy excuse in lieu of the truth, which

oftentimes is that it simply did not align with my will. However, according to Kant, the question of goodness lies with not my action—rather, inaction—but with the will behind such deception. If my will was simply to save face and transfer blame to some imaginary event, then I indeed am immoral. Surely, I would not want the maxim of my action to become a universal moral norm in that I would prefer others to tell me the truth. Such is the golden rule: “what you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others” (Cunningham, 105). My will to maintain a self-image is often not a will to deceive but is motivated by a fear of judgment, that perhaps my forgetfulness or incompetence would incur judgment from others. Unfortunately, this part of me remains in the pre-conventional stage of moral development. How then can I align myself with pure moral truth when it so heavily conflicts with the fear of social judgment? Apart from overanalyzing every single decision I am faced with, I have little choice in cultivating the goodness of my choices while attempting to navigate such an unforgiving world. I find myself in excruciating relation to Apostle Paul’s lamentation:

<sup>15</sup>I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. <sup>16</sup>And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup>As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. <sup>18</sup>For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. <sup>19</sup>For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup>Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it (*NIV*, Romans 7.15-20)

The crucial difference, here, is that there lives sin within oneself. By conceptualizing sin akin to immorality, there perhaps lies greater truth within what it means to do good versus evil. But I digress.

### **Faith-Leaning Attempts at Establishing Universal Moral Norms**

When attempting to argue for universal moral norms within Christianity, one immediate conflict arises: not everyone is Christian. So how can Christianity expect to establish universal

moral truth? Commonly, when people think of universal moral truth in Christianity, the Ten Commandments come to mind:

<sup>3</sup>You shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup>but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup>You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

<sup>8</sup>Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup>but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

<sup>12</sup>Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup>You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup>You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup>You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup>You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup>You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor (*NIV*, Exodus 20. 3-17).

This set of rules, also known as the Decalogue, has provided a moral framework for Christians for millennia but leaves room to question whether human beings, without these words of God, would be running rampant through the streets as immoral beings. Of course, countless more moral lessons throughout the Bible serve as part of this moral framework, but the question remains. Adriana Cavarero and Angelo Scola in their book, *Thou Shalt Not Kill: A Political and Theological Dialogue*, address this conundrum by emphasizing the importance of Christ in Christian theology in that Jesus, being the Christ, embodied moral law in its essence and that moral truth cannot be defined within universal norms but within the personal relationship with Christ (Caverero & Scola, 21). They argue that Christ represents an unconditional form of love

for humanity, and by considering that morality is concerned with rightful actions, of which love is the most rightful, Christ not only embodies morality but transcends it. This is certainly a compelling argument because Jesus of Nazareth displayed a level of humility and love for humanity unrivaled by other divinely sent or divine beings of faith due to His nature of being God in human form. But it still fails the test of universality for, outside of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, this deep and complex relationship with morality ceases to exist according to Cavarero and Scola.

Taking a step back, perhaps it would be a more fruitful exercise to define humanity's origin in an attempt to realize some fundamental connecting truth allowing for universal moral truth. Digging deeper into the source of humanity, Dolores Christie states that, similar to that of "an artist [who] always infuses a bit of himself when he paints or sculpts another person, God likewise instills God's true reflection in human beings" referring to the idea of *imago Dei*<sup>3</sup> that will be mentioned throughout this paper (Christie, 108). The idea that God has created humankind in His image has a stronger pull toward universal moral truth in that even if one does not engage in a personal relationship with God there still exists a universal attachment to the Creator; this commonality can potentially lead to the discovery of universal moral truth. Not only does *imago Dei* require a certain level of self-love out of respect for being made with a specific purpose, but it requires mutual respect for other human beings who are, according to God, also made in His image (110). Much in the same vein as Kant who argues that human beings should never be a means to an end, *imago Dei* necessitates inherent respect for others who are made in the same manner as us. Crucially, Christie develops her argument by pointing to the freedom with which human beings can make decisions and the responsibility with which we must deal with the consequences of our decisions. This clarification is extremely important as it places the

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<sup>3</sup> Image of God.

onus of moral action upon human beings<sup>4</sup>, for although they are made in God's image, the final decision to act according to that image remains. Importantly, the freedom of choice and the ability to reason properly maintain our humanity in that God has given humanity the capacity to act freely.

Bill Cosgrave, an Irish Catholic priest, takes a rather different approach to morality through the Christian lens. Examining the nature of Christian morality, he speaks to the existing approaches to understanding Christian morality, one being how Cavarero and Scola argued God's love in the form of Christ embodied and even transcended moral law. Another method used to understand Christian morality was through a method named autonomous ethic, an approach that understood human beings to be the finders of moral truth instead of morality being something handed over by God (Cosgrave, 297). However, in this autonomous ethic approach, morality was essentially human and discoverable without God or faith and instead with reason, returning morality to a secular place. In the consequent approach to Christian morality—faith ethic—three conditions were stated as integral:

- a) Christian morality is not to be discovered simply by unaided reason; b) its content cannot be identified with philosophical ethics, and c) its specific character cannot be limited to consideration of context and motivation (297).

These conditions were stated to draw a definitive dividing line between faith and secular-based approaches to understanding morality. However, this approach is quite a radical one and perhaps takes the separation of faith from other forms of thinking to an extreme place. The eventual approach that Cosgrave takes in his article is an empirical one that begins with our moral experiences, for exploring these very human experiences allows for greater connection and understanding. Because of the easily relatable humanity of morality, Cosgrave aims to

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<sup>4</sup> This is perhaps the counter argument to the issue of divine commandment in conflict with free will.

conceptualize morality primarily within its human boundaries before contextualizing it within divine ones.

Cosgrave defines morality as a quintessential human phenomenon in that morality is simply how humans should live their lives. It is the standard against which actions should be measured to ensure the well-being of not only ourselves but those in shared communities. He summarizes this sentiment quite succinctly, sharing that “living morally is *the art of right relationship* with each other and the world and indeed with oneself,” highlighting this mutual enhancement between self, other, and environment (299). A relevant observation arises here within his article, that morality is distinctively autonomous from religion, giving the example of moral people who are not religious. Essentially, he points to the fact that morality is not solely derived from a divine source, that it can very well exist outside of relation to God. He provides a critical example of questioning whether moral norms existed before God gave Abraham and His people the Decalogue, expressing that surely there existed moral norms and standards before God gave human beings the ultimate set of moral standards (303). Ultimately, while morality surely can exist without God, Cosgrave argues that God provides a stronger moral framework through His son, Jesus Christ. One is certainly able to make moral decisions based on norms that are practiced and taught in their environment, but it is through how Jesus Christ interacted with others and treated the less fortunate that mere secular morality is expanded upon and enhanced.

A popular example is a way in which Jesus Christ treated the marginalized, namely Matthew the tax collector. In Matthew 9, Jesus Christ calls upon Matthew, a tax collector, who by all measures was considered to be on the bottom of the social ladder in society at the time. During His time on Earth, Jesus commonly spent time with the most marginalized of society:

<sup>10</sup>While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup>When the Pharisees saw this,

they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”<sup>12</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.<sup>13</sup> But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (*NIV*, Matthew 9.10-13).

By all secular-leaning definitions of morality, there exists no moral obligation to engage with those who have wronged society in some way or the other. But it is the reason that Christ provides in verse 13 in which He states that it is not the righteous He has come for but the sinners that display the transcendent nature of Christ’s morality. Philpott would undoubtedly argue that this transcendent nature of Christ provides a stronger moral framework with which to justify human rights.

### **Cultural Relativism**

Although this is a bit of a tangent, it is crucial to mention the cultural relativist position here. The cultural relativist, or particularist, position states that there is no universal basis for morality. In human rights, it focuses on the formation and adoption of human rights. Essentially, the particularist argues that because the world contains a multitude of varying cultures, moral frameworks, and regional nuances, the current human rights tradition, namely the UDHR, imposes a certain Western set of ideals and ethics onto the rest of the world. While there are surely some condemnable practices or customs in any culture or region, the diversity of culture and norms needs to be considered when devising a so-called universal set of rights. The particularist may even go so far as to contend that the universality of human rights can be nothing more than an unrealistic expectation, a pipe dream. The struggle, however, lies with the inevitable truth that “we do not have a choice between being either universalists or particularists: we must be both at the same time,” demonstrating the complexity of applying an idealistic concept to the real world where the lines between universal moral truth, state sovereignty, and

cultural nuance blur (Dembour, 53). Given that universality is such a difficult ideal to attain, perhaps it would be a more fruitful approach to examine some real-life examples.

In one such case, *Schalk and Kopf vs. Austria*, two men who wished to be married were refused the right to be married thus taking their case to court citing Article 12 of the European Convention on Human Rights which states that men and women both have the right to marry (European Court of Human Rights, 2010). Their appeal was eventually denied by the European Court of Human Rights lending support to particularist critique. The particularist would argue that this case highlights the unwillingness of states either to implement human rights law when it clashes with self-interest or to consider the diversity of human experience within a more conservative and religious state. There lies an inherent contradiction to the particularist's objection expressed by the question: whose cultural rights are more important? In this specific case, the European Court expressed that a blanket allowance of same-sex marriage would conflict with state sovereignty and the cultural and societal nuances in each state under the ECHR (European Court of Human Rights, 2010). A cultural relativist could easily take on the mantle of either side in this case, either arguing for the maintaining of regional religious and traditional norms or the embracing of a burgeoning culture of sexual acceptance.

In another case, *Obergefell vs. Hodges*, which took place in the United States, the Supreme Court upheld that same-sex marriage was legal under the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which states that the right to marry is a constitutional right and the institution of marriage must be respected if performed in another state that outlawed same-sex marriage (US Supreme Court, 2015). This case raises some important concerns for the particularist while, at the same time, supporting their critique. Because the United States was largely built on Christian values, same-sex marriage has become one of the main points of contention for conservatives.

By allowing an un-Biblical union between two members of the same sex, conservatives fear the uprooting of Christian ideals and foundation, core components of what they view constitutes the United States of America. Through the cultural relativist lens, both sides to this argument are viable. One cultural relativist may argue that because the culture in the U.S. is largely Christian, same-sex marriage should not be an institution that is respected and enforced for it conflicts with the cultural majority. On the other hand, another cultural relativist may contend that queer culture in the U.S. has been a long-standing, historical movement and that its relevance and importance should be considered especially considering how swiftly times are changing. This duality of cultural relativism is one of the reasons why the particularist critique can be so convoluted for it argues for a very vital perspective of respecting cultural nuance but allows too much room for endless debate and uncertain agreement.

How then, can consensus ever be reached with all these cultural relativists and particularists running amok on both sides of every argument? In any case, it seems that the cultural relativist's role in human rights discourse is not to write law or define which human rights are universal but to advise those lawmakers and human rights writers to consider the duality, and more often, the plurality of every situation. Dembour expresses this sentiment quite neatly, stating that "Properly understood, the particularist critique is less a critique than a corrective to the ever-possible excesses of universalism" (Dembour, 53). Simply put, particularism acts as a check against the dangers of blanket universalism in the context of human rights. In this manner, particularism is especially compelling as it serves the dual role of critiquing and correcting, thus, ideally, making human rights ever more accepted and implemented. In conclusion, cultural relativism, while potentially causing temporary standstills

in the human rights movement, should be acknowledged and embellished to create an increasingly sturdier form of human rights.

The pertinent question arises here of whether integration of Christian ideals into human rights would constitute the dangerous form of blanket universalism that cultural relativism critiques as being detrimental to human rights. It is an important question, to be sure, but recall the Preamble of the UDHR which states that universal recognition and acceptance is the goal of human rights. Although Christianity may represent the ideal universalism that secular human rights thinkers desire, it surely takes up that responsibility with ease.

Another example of this dialogue takes form with Xiaorong Li, in her essay, “‘Asian Values’ and the Universality of Human Rights,” who contends that despite the cultural relativist claim that “Asian values” invalidate the universality of human rights, there exists an arena in which its universality can be validated and therefore should be accepted: intercultural dialogue (Li, 397). Li pointedly objects to both the use of the term, “Asian values,” and its supposed meaning emphasizing its convenient, seemingly isolated role in oppressive governments and the inherent ambiguity that it casts over the multicultural continent of Asia. Throughout her essay, Li argues against three claims that Asian governments make when arguing for national sovereignty in the context of human rights. The first claim states that rights are culturally specific and that the context out of which the Western notion of human rights sprouted differs from that of Asian culture (399). Li observes that because Asian regions have adopted other Western ideals such as capitalism and consumerism, their objection lies not with human rights’ origin, but rather its core values. In fact, Li seems to find it quite silly to assume that something so important to the well-being of humankind can be so effortlessly invalidated due to relative foreign origin. Identifying the need for universal human rights by pointing to authoritarian governments in the

East, Li concludes her first argument with the fact that human rights have evolved to include non-Western ideals such as economic, social, and cultural rights, rights that will empower the very people these governments are oppressing.

The second claim of such governments states that the individual is not as important as the community. A common argument against the adoption of human rights law because of its individualistic nature, this claim is shown to have ill effects on these governments through the process of equating the community, state, and regime (402). Li argues that this equation allows governments to ignore individual rights under the guise of “family values” and to oppress communities and demographics in the supposed alignment with Confucian ideals of social harmony (403). Li believes that individual freedoms are vital to the integrity of a community, in that people need the ability to voice their discomfort otherwise resulting in communal decay. The third claim states that social and economic rights hold more importance than political and civil rights, which implies that in the paramount decision between food or freedom, these governments assume their citizens will pick food and will be eventually granted individual rights (403). Her biggest objection to this dilemma is that, more often than not, authoritarian governments will suppress political and civil rights while also failing to ensure the social and economic rights that they implied. Li then argues that both sets of rights are interdependent and that one set enables the well-being of the other.

Li concludes with ways in which a value can be seen as universal or culturally specific. Firstly, the origin of a value can determine its universality. Secondly, the ability with which a value can be applied to a different culture can affect universality. Lastly, whether a value holds validity without the context of a certain culture can determine universality. Li then constructs an opposing cultural relativist argument that states that because human rights have origin in Western

ideals, because human rights cannot be applied to every society, and because certain values are only acceptable in certain cultures, human rights cannot be universal. But Li counters with the reality of human rights discourse, the fact that intercultural dialogue has reached common ground on shared beliefs, indicating that consensus can be reached on so-called universal human rights. Li claims that “an idea that has survived the test of rigorous scrutiny will be reasonable or valid not just within the boundaries of particular cultures, but reasonable in a non-relativistic fashion,” vocalizing her faith in reasonable discourse and its positive implications for the universality of human rights (407).

So it would seem that even when debate exists about whether certain human rights arise from certain human traditions and do not apply to others, there are mechanisms with which consensus can be reached. The cultural relativist perspective is especially important to consider in this thesis because of its emphasis on constantly questioning the relative universality of human rights. Quite frankly, without this perspective, this thesis may never have existed. However, I expect many cultural relativists will object to this thesis primarily in that it does propagate a certain, restrictive perspective on human rights and aims for a funneling of human rights through a Christian perspective. But I cannot stress enough the importance of framing human rights through a correct interpretation of the Bible and an authentic Godly perspective. Let us move on to human dignity.

## Chapter II: Human Dignity

### Introduction

Human dignity, a concept that many might, in this day and age, take for granted to be universally accepted, is an idea that originally had to be argued for. While, historically, many of the arguments concerning the inherent moral worth of a human being stem from theological perspectives, thinkers and philosophers have attempted to define human dignity through the examination of rationality and the conceptualization of violations of human dignity. In this chapter, I will examine some of the prominent, secular ideas concerning human dignity, their strengths, and ultimately, their shortcomings. After addressing some of these arguments, I will argue that the source of human dignity cannot stand firmly on the proposed secular ground and instead must be founded on a faith-based perspective.

Harkening back to the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it proclaims that the “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” (UDHR). In its accompanying International Human Rights Covenants—both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—the recognition that “that these rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human person” appears in both documents (OHCHR). These crucial documents in human rights make it viscerally clear the importance of human dignity in the human rights movement but assume the reader has an understanding of what human dignity means.

So what is human dignity? And what is its relationship to human rights? Jack Donnelly aptly describes the relationship between human dignity and rights not as synonymous but as human rights being an attempt to manifest and guard human dignity (Donnelly, 1982). The

crucial difference is that human dignity “express[es] particular understandings of the inner (moral) nature and worth of the human person,” a concept focused on intrinsic nature, while human rights are a man-made concept aiming to promulgate certain ways in which human beings should be treated (Howard & Donnelly, 1986). Donnelly would likely recognize that while human dignity does not require human rights, the human rights movement certainly necessitates a strong conception of human dignity. Human dignity is again elucidated within the Kantian notion that human beings should be treated as an end, in and of themselves, instead of a means to an end, underscoring the paramount importance and conclusiveness of individual human life and dignity (Schachter, 849). While the concept of human dignity may still appear to be unfettered by doubt, history has painstakingly shown that human dignity is not self-evident and therefore must be justified in some manner of argument.

For much of modern humanity’s lifespan, arguments—rather, commands—concerning human dignity came from a divine source. However, historical attempts at defining human dignity through secular veins have come not without valid reason. While there are countless examples of scholars interpreting, or perhaps more accurately, manipulating divine texts to support their ambition, one particular example stands out: African-American slavery and the Bible. One particular passage in the Bible has been used as an argument for slavery; it reads:

“<sup>5</sup>Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; <sup>6</sup>not with eye-service, as men-pleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; <sup>7</sup>with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free” (*KJV*, Ephesians 6.5-7).

In this passage, Apostle Paul, speaking to believers in Ephesus through his letters, seems to be relaying the words of God that encourage the practice of slavery and, furthermore, commanding servants, or slaves, to obey their earthly masters with the same reverence that God commands.

Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that God's command is one not of obedience to other humans but one of divine obedience "to the Lord, and not to men" (*KJV*, Eph. 6.7). Ignoring any sensible interpretation of this passage, southern slaveholders in early America used passages such as this to justify the abhorrent practice. Additionally, despite the numerous passages in the Bible condemning slavery<sup>5</sup> or the divine text's holistic view on human dignity vis-à-vis *imago Dei*<sup>6</sup>, slaveowners could avoid a moral dilemma through a simple rationale that if they were to own slaves and be Christian, they were not sinful for God seemingly allowed the practice (Butler, 18). Such methods of manipulating divine texts have been used for centuries to violate the dignity of human beings, rightfully warranting a secular conceptualization of human dignity.

### **Secular-Leaning Attempts at Defining Human Dignity**

Broadly thought to also have been one of the most prominent and early conceptualizers of human dignity, Immanuel Kant defined human dignity as a measure of a person's capacity for autonomy and the corresponding duties to respect other people's capacity for autonomy (Bayefsky, 811). In many ways, this line of reasoning from Kant influenced greatly the formation of modern human rights in that rights always come with corresponding duties, although, as previously stated, the onus of the aforementioned duties may vary right by right. However, Rachel Bayefsky poses a pertinent question in her article, "Dignity, Honour, and Human Rights: Kant's Perspective," in which she essentially asks whether those who hold dignity by the matter of their "capacity to set oneself an end" retain their intrinsic dignity if unable or unwilling to adhere to the corresponding duty to respect the rational capacities of others (819-820). This is surely an important query as, within the Kantian notion of human dignity, dignity requires both

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<sup>5</sup> Galatians 5.1, Galatians 3.28.

<sup>6</sup> Image of God.

the capacity for autonomy and the correlating duty to respect others' autonomy. In the words of Kant, "morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity," potentially leading to this problematic conclusion that human dignity may not be as intrinsic as we initially thought it to be (Kant, 33). If we are to keep the modern essence of human dignity as we understand it, surely one act of immorality is not enough to void someone of their dignity, but if we are to take that to an extreme, do the perpetrators of crimes against humanity or war crimes retain the same dignity that we claim to ascribe to all human beings by virtue of being human? Let us continue to explore the notion that rationality gifts human beings with intrinsic worth.

Commonly, the rationality argument has been utilized to advocate for the unique capabilities of human beings, for rationality differentiates human beings from other animals. The ability to reason, foresee potential needs, and self-reflect has enabled the modern human to make significant advancements in technology and culture, propelling us to a place where we can sit back and formulate thoughts of the world in which we inhabit. Chak Kwan Chan and Graham Bowpitt argue in their book, *Human Dignity and Welfare Systems*, that human dignity consists of humans' rationality and sociability, of their ability to make decisions for themselves and connect with others (Chan & Graham, 13). This approach takes a Nussbaum-esque<sup>7</sup> capabilities approach to human dignity in that the inherent worth of human beings can be measured in their potential. Critically, it is the ability for humans to be autonomous that acts as the highest-priority capability for Chan and Graham, that human beings can think for themselves and choose where to invest their resources and passion. Tied to human autonomy is the inevitable, and commonly argued, necessary socialization of human beings. Approaching human nature from a Confucian

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<sup>7</sup> Martha Nussbaum was a philosopher who argued for an approach to human rights concerning the inherent capabilities of human beings.

perspective, Chan and Graham argue that the ability to live an autonomous life does not necessarily lead to a wholly human life, that human identity needs to be further developed through social interactions and that through the extension of human interaction with those around can a human being's capacity fully be realized (15). Within this study, an apparent conflict arises in which Eastern, Confucian philosophy, stating that interconnectedness and community are integral components to the dignity of a human being, stands in stark contrast to the Western, Kantian philosophy which holds the individual and autonomous capability as the highest standard of human dignity. This philosophical conflict, of course, remains a hotly debated topic in human rights discourse. How do we then attempt to define human dignity amidst cultural differences that give birth to two starkly opposite lines of thought?

Perhaps, instead of attempting to define human dignity, it would be a more fruitful endeavor to define what certainly and indubitably constitutes violations of human dignity. Aptly described by Oscar Schachter, the sentiment, "I know it when I see it even if I cannot tell you what it is," applies rather nicely to this venture in that it allows for the empirical exploration of human dignity (Schachter, 849). He provides quite an extensive list of violations of human dignity as follows:

1. Statements that demean and humiliate individuals or groups because of their origins, status or beliefs.
2. Vilification or derision of beliefs that people hold in reverence. Teaching that particular races, ethnic groups or religions hold "ridiculous" or dangerous views, or otherwise belittling cherished beliefs.
3. Denial of the capacity of a person to assert claims to basic rights.
4. Punishment of detained persons by psychological or physical means that are meant to humiliate or ridicule their beliefs, origins or way of life.
5. Dissemination of negative stereotypes of groups (ethnic, religious, social) and implications that members of such groups are inferior.
6. Psychiatric treatment that involves coercive means to change beliefs or choices that are lawful.

7. Restrictions on opportunities and means to maintain family life as, for example, by denying access to family members or requiring members of families to inform authorities of the acts or beliefs of others.
8. Denial of educational or employment opportunities to persons on ground of their membership in groups or their beliefs.
9. Restrictions on equal participation in political processes because of beliefs, status or origin.
10. Degrading living conditions and deprivation of basic needs.
11. Abuse and insolence by officials, especially to persons suffering from infirmities or social opprobrium.
12. Medical treatment or hospital care insensitive to individual choice or the requirements of human personality (852, emphasis added).

Schachter's first two statements focus primarily on the notions of human dignity discussed, namely the respect for the capacity of human beings to develop and enjoy unique beliefs, and to be able to set for themselves an end. The rest of the list details ways in which human dignity and autonomy are either violated or denied, providing the reader with a clear framework in which to conceptualize human dignity. It is a fairly simple mental exercise to reframe Schachter's list as positive actions to be taken to ensure and respect the inherent dignity of others. Taking number eight, for example, it would be, for most, beyond a doubt that generally upholding human dignity would call for equal access to education or employment for all persons. Of course, this is an idealistic goal but surely a realistic one at least in the context of the United States, or similarly wealthy countries, which boast of a land full of opportunity and freedom. However, despite Schachter's attempt to define the boundaries of human dignity, he admits that a reasonably clear definition of human dignity is required, otherwise we "cannot easily reject a specious use of the concept, nor can we without understanding its meaning draw specific implications for relevant conduct," underscoring the importance of developing a concrete understanding of the intrinsic worth of every human being by virtue of being human (849). Ultimately, I share this sentiment.

## Thoughts and Criticisms

The notion of human dignity proposed by Immanuel Kant, that human beings have intrinsic worth due to their ability to make decisions for themselves and respect the same capacity in others, certainly has merit but fails to encompass several groups, namely children, the mentally disabled, and those persons in strict, homogenous communal societies. John Wall, in his article, "Human Rights in Light of Childhood," highlights the relevant critique of Kant's theory of human dignity in that while Kant certainly believed that children were, in and of themselves, an end, he implied that children deserve not the same rights as adults due to their inability to lead autonomous lives (Wall, 530). Conceptualizing children as fundamentally irrational beings, Kant relegates children to a purgatory confined within his definition of human dignity in that children, while having the capacity for rationality and autonomy, cannot act on those capacities.

Additionally, when thinking of those who are mentally disabled, with afflictions that prevent rational thinking, at least in the visible and tangible form that most view rationality, how are we to imagine them to have the same intrinsic dignity as able-bodied and able-minded people under the rationality argument of human dignity? Lastly, for those in communal societies in which divergent action or thought is often condemned, can it really be argued that they have the same capacity for setting their unique end? Perhaps not. It would, however, be unthinkable to state that these groups do not share the same human dignity that we can enjoy.

Taking a step back and tackling the very core of where human worth originates also gives birth to some pertinent criticisms of a secular conceptualization of human worth. The exercise of attempting to define or measure the innate worth of an individual seems, to me, a futile and fundamentally fallible endeavor. Such as in the case of human slavery in which slave-owners place different monetary values on other human beings according to their physicality and

capabilities. Of course, in their eyes, the very human beings they placed on the market are not viewed to be of the same origin or holding the same human dignity, but retrospectively, here arises the same fallibility. The attempt to derive a sense or value of human worth, crudely stated metaphorically as monetary value in this example, assumes an “us versus them” framing. Crucially, I am not arguing for an equating of secular thinkers to slave-holders but identification of the conundrum of valuing human worth within human understanding. There is clearly a finite limit to how we can attempt to divine human dignity, while at the same time, being the very humans whose dignity cannot be rightfully justified utilizing our very limited understanding of the world in which we inhabit.

### **Faith-Leaning Interpretations of Human Dignity**

There lies an inherent contradiction between human rights theory and Christianity in that human rights discourse ascribes to the Kantian notion that humans are not simply a means to an end, that they have inherent value in and of themselves. However, in Christian doctrine, the value of humans lies with God and His love for mankind, the likeness with which He has created mankind. Why then should human rights discourse be adopted and implemented by the Christian community, for does it not seem to propagate a purely secular viewpoint on humanity? Instead of viewing it as a purely secular exercise, Christian doctrine can easily take the cultural relativist approach and understand that each human has worth according to their likeness with God and that human rights, although propagated through secular tradition, the desire to live in an equitable world espouses many of the same ideals of which Jesus Christ spoke: equality, dignity, and respect. Although it may miss the big picture—that salvation and consequently equality, dignity, and respect ultimately come through Jesus Christ—are human rights not a worthwhile endeavor to support considering the world in which we inhabit? A world full of pain and

suffering, full of people who wish to exploit and capitalize on others to amass power or personal wealth, desperately needs a system in place to minimize injustice. Furthermore, in Christian lines of thought—namely that of evangelicalism—Jesus Christ teaches of spreading His Word to all nations and people. Thus, not only is the human rights tradition the best system the world currently has to combat injustice, but it is also a convenient vessel with which to spread the accurate ideals of Christ. In this rather cursory overview of secular-leaning lines of thoughts concerning human dignity, gaps in defining the source or nature of human dignity arise. While there are certainly many more arguments for a secular understanding of intrinsic human worth, we will merely address the critiques that have already been expressed.

The aforementioned idea of *imago Dei*, in other words, the image of God, appears in many religious traditions, particularly in the Judeo-Christian convictions, and serves as both the originating and conclusive statement when it comes to human dignity. However, even *imago Dei* is an idea that many take for granted much like the concept of human dignity. In his book, *Justice*, Nicholas Wolterstorff delves into the question of what the image of God truly means or what it means to be molded in God’s likeness. He quotes the first chapter of the Bible, Genesis:

“<sup>26</sup>Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. <sup>27</sup>So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1.26-27).

Utilizing the historical equation of the two words, likeness and image, Wolterstorff argues that the conceptualization of this unique relationship with God, whether it be through the literally interpreted mandate of dominion over animals or the identity of being created as male and female, is not sufficient to ground human rights for it fails to encompass certain groups (Wolterstorff, 352). He points out that, within the definition of *imago Dei* concerning dominion

over animals, certain humans—in his example he uses Alzheimer’s patients—fail to have the capacity of dominion, potentially excluding them from God’s image. Additionally, I wish to highlight the dilemma in which people who no longer identify with being male or female—or in the extreme case when they are born hermaphroditic—can, according to this definition of *imago Dei*, no longer can enjoy this status of being made in God’s image. Wolterstorff would likely agree with my objection and argues that it is, instead, God’s universal and permanent love for all those created in his image, what he terms as “bestowed worth,” is the source of human worth (352).

Distinguishing between different types of worth, Wolterstorff defines “bestowed worth” as the perceived worth of a subject granted by some external source. He discusses the idea of instrumental worth, an idea in philosophy, simply stated, that seeks to identify the objective benefit—worth—of a given subject (354). This instrumental worth stands in contrast to non-instrumental worth which can be simply defined as subjective as opposed to the objective nature of instrumental worth. He gives the example of George Washington’s house, Mount Vernon, which has immense “bestowed worth” in the eyes of many Americans and yet may appear in the eyes of a foreigner, as a mediocre architectural work lacking much, if at all, any intrinsic worth. Meditating upon three possible forms of love that God may have for people, Wolterstorff examines love as attraction, love as attachment, and love as benevolence as potential sources for divine “bestowed worth” (358). He swiftly rules out love as attraction for he realizes that this love merely recognizes and covets the non-bestowed worth of its subject while failing to add any worth to the object of love. Love as benevolence often accompanies love as attraction, he claims but crucially is unable to bestow worth to the subject without some definitive action.

However, love as attachment is often divorced from the non-bestowed worth of its subject, such as in the case of an old, Snoopy doll I was particularly attached to as a toddler. Apart from being an ordinary, cheap stuffed doll of the beloved Snoopy from the cartoon, *Peanuts*, the Snoopy that I held so dearly was covered in dried blood as I was prone to nose bleeds quite often, as my parents would later tell me. However, despite its lack of non-bestowed worth, I loved that doll and could not part with it. Wolterstorff, then having realized the importance of love as attachment, provides the example in which a queen decides to befriend one of her ambassadors, elevating the perception of the new friend to one that perhaps causes others to be envious of the friend's new status. What is essential in this form of love, however, is that the queen's attachment to her new friend has bestowed an immense worth on this individual not only in the queen's eyes but in the eyes of the people around her. Wolterstorff concludes that if this Godly love of attachment applies to a human being, it is accompanied by great worth placed on that individual (360). I do find myself wondering if others do not see and envy this Godly love and if it is worth anything at all.

Having established a core aspect of human dignity that comes directly from God's love, we can consider what constitutes worth from a bottom-up approach. Working on a similar goal as Kant, Martin Luther King Jr., in his meditation, *The Measure of a Man*, interprets the dimensions of a complete life in the twenty-first chapter of Revelations which states "The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal," referring to the new Jerusalem that a man named John saw coming out of the heavens (*KJV*, Rev. 21.16). King's framing of this verse to speak about the nature of man is quite compelling. He claims that this new Jerusalem that emerges from the sky represents the life that humans ought to strive for, namely that the length of life refers to the ability for humans to conceive and achieve personal goals or ambitions, and that the breadth of

life is the necessary concern for others, and that the height of life concerns the relationship with God (King, 15). The length of life portion of his claim mirrors much of what constitutes human dignity for secular-leaning scholars in that the human capacity to ascertain an end for themselves defines, in some part, human dignity. What differentiates King's conceptualization of self-determination is its necessary connection to the will of God, simply put, the attached higher meaning to the otherwise seemingly trivial events of life. He considers this component of a full life vital for the cultivation of the proceeding two requirements: depth and height. Depth of life concerns the capacity to translate individual needs to the needs of surrounding communities or persons. Critically, it is the ability to "surround the length of... life with the breadth of life" that constitutes a full life (17). This is not an unusual claim to make; recall, most recently, Chan and Graham highlight the importance of addressing the needs of others in Confucian lines of thought.

Lastly, and most importantly, King contends that the height of life, the reaching, and love for God, is the most critical component of a full life. He acknowledges that there are, indeed, many of those who master the first two components—length and breadth—but lack this third, most essential component. He states:

But never forget that there is a first and even greater commandment, 'Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy mind.' This is the height of life. And when you do this you live the complete life (20).

Ultimately, this serves as reinforcement for the direction I wish to take King's statement. While length and breadth of human life certainly are vital for human beings to live fulfilling lives, I argue that within the context of the passage that King quotes—Matthew 22:37—Jesus emphasizes the paramount importance of loving God. The Pharisees at the time attempted to test Jesus by asking which commandment holds the most importance to which he replies "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (*KJV*, Matt. 22.37). While certainly, a balance between self-care, compassion, and faith would bring about a

fulfilling life, I believe that Jesus is teaching about the utmost importance of the elongation of the height of life, in other words, that by loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind, all other things will come naturally. If we are to recant Wolterstorff's argument concerning human dignity defined by God's love for us, it would be a simple mental task to spell out the converse, that human potential can be best achieved by modeling God's love for us, for God.

### **Thoughts and Criticisms**

Despite my acceptance of Wolterstorff's conclusion, I cannot help but critique his reasoning concerning the narrowing of God's love for us in that he fails to articulate the possibility that God's love for human beings in all three forms of love—attachment, attraction, and benevolence—bestows immense worth. Acknowledging that he necessarily needs to focus on one form to strengthen his argument, I can easily use the same example he uses of the queen and her new friend to argue that our bestowed worth derives itself from all three forms of love. If we are to consider, again, the queen who has bestowed a certain amount of worth on her friend by virtue of her royal status, it can be said that the queen, with all her resources and power, may bestow upon her friend immense worth through acts of gift-giving and that her friend has a considerably higher worth just based on the material objects now in her possession. Similarly, God has not only shown human beings love as attachment but love as benevolence which has provided His children with eternal life as stated in 1 John, “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son” (*NIV*, 1 John 5.11). Concerning love as attraction, the prophet Jeremiah so states “<sup>3</sup>The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness’” revealing the love as attraction that God has for his creation (*NIV*, Jeremiah 31.3). This gift of eternal life and love as attraction surely bestows great worth upon His creations.

Philpott claims that understanding human dignity, and only in the manner in which every human has immeasurable and inherent worth, is crucial to the efficacy of human rights for, without a consensus on the invaluable worth of every human, human rights demands lose their strength (Philpott, 2014). Although this has been but a brief excursion into the ways with which human dignity is conceived, it becomes all too clear that there are too many excluded groups in the secular conceptualization of human dignity. For human rights demands to be justified in every single case, there needs to be a unifying source of human dignity, one that cannot be rightfully justified without a divine source of creation. While the argument of *imago Dei* surely serves as the basis for human dignity, Wolterstorff argues that God's love as attachment for human beings ultimately instills worth that remains the most convincing. His argument certainly holds value in that God's love for human beings even falls outside of whether they choose to believe in Him or not, for because He has created us from dust, His love is not defined by reciprocity. Much like how a parent will love a child unconditionally even if that love is not reciprocated, God loves all human beings.

## **Chapter III: “Trump Card” Status**

### **Introduction**

Human rights entail rights that are inherent to each and every human individual based simply on the virtue of being human. Not only does every human being have these rights but there must be mechanisms with which these rights can be enjoyed otherwise they are lifeless ideals. The most fundamental mechanism with which to enjoy a right is simply to declare it. When a government confiscates someone’s ability to speak freely, one must declare their right to freedom of speech and this right must be of paramount importance to their liberty. In our globalized society, freedom of speech—the right to speak without fear of retribution—is one of the most respected rights. Suppose, using their freedom of speech, someone declared their right to own a stuffed dolphin and demanded that the government provide them with said stuffed animal otherwise their rights will have been violated. This right to own a stuffed dolphin surely does not maintain the same importance as the right to freedom of speech which is why that right is not listed or recognized in any official document. Each right, for example, in the UDHR had to be argued concerning its relevance and importance amongst human beings. Human rights, in general, had to be argued for, although in light of the atrocities of World War II, many had widespread consensus. But importantly, each human right necessarily has to meet a level of importance otherwise the entire structure would crumble. Philpott argues that this criterion is met through the moral absoluteness of Christianity, or faith in general, which gives human rights their immense power and influence.

### **Valuing Human Rights**

Ascertaining the value of certain human rights over other rights is a compelling and vital process in human rights discourse. The rights delineated in the UDHR certainly have higher

significance than, say, the right to own a dog. But the process of arguing for human rights' paramount importance is not always an easy one. Maurice Cranston, a prominent philosopher, explores this hierarchy of rights and even the existence of human rights in general in his article, "Are There Any Human Rights" in which he argues that the criteria for a right to be a human right are universality, practicability, and paramount importance (Cranston, 1983). Cranston's argument directly influenced the criteria with which Philpott formulated his argument. Focusing primarily on the issue of paramount importance, I wish to emphasize Cranston's criterion of paramount importance as a right that if violated would constitute a grave affront to justice. What this means is that, for example, the right from torture, if violated, would be terrible and immoral. When compared to a violation of someone's right to own a dog, the right from torture certainly is one of higher and paramount importance. When extrapolated to the entirety of human rights, each right needs to hold the same paramount importance, otherwise, they would be useless claims amounting to no particular result. How then can a consensus be reached on the power and efficacy of human rights?

In one instance, in his essay, "A World Consensus on Human Rights?" Charles Taylor argues that a global consensus on universal norms of conduct can potentially be reached despite the differing values that constitute the foundations of those norms. Emphasized in his argument is the absolute need for one major distinction, that a clear line is drawn between a norm and its justification. Focusing on the conflict between the Western notion of human rights and the Eastern's critique of said "rights," Taylor begins by explaining that the line between norm and justification is not quite clear in the Western context. Because the notion of human rights came out of the notion of Natural Law and that humans were born under a Law of Nature, the Western human right "operates both as a legal norm and as underlying justification" (Taylor, 413). What

Taylor means here is that the language of “rights” in the West has blurred the line between a norm of conduct and its justification for they are so intertwined. This becomes problematic when other countries try or are forced to try, to adopt the Western tradition because the very language of norms that the West claims to be universal in fact clashes with the philosophies of other countries, namely those in the East.

For human rights to be an effective system, it requires universality, not only in its adoption, but in its implementation. Universal adoption tends to be the topic of most contention amongst philosophers, often clashing with multiculturalism, non-Democratic ideologies, and non-Western ideals. Charles Taylor delivers a compelling argument for reframing how we think of the universal adoption of human rights in his essay. He argues for the unpacking of human rights’ values and justifications, and following, an

“agreement on norms, yes; but a profound sense of difference, of unfamiliarity, in the ideals, the notions of human excellence, the rhetorical tropes and reference points by which these norms become objects of deep agreement for us” (420).

In other words, he believes a consensus can be reached on universal human rights, or norms, through deep discourse and the resulting appreciation of each culture or belief system. But even as compelling as Taylor’s argument is, there still exists the issue of attaching some higher, definitive power to the words in which human rights inhabit.

### **Thoughts about Moral Absolutes in Faith and Christianity**

When attempting to establish human rights’ “trump card” status in the context of Christianity, however, care must be taken. Careful consideration must be had to not promote the use of Christian moral absolutes to condemn or oppress others as it has commonly been used in the past. The absoluteness of God’s teachings and of Christianity must not be equated to an inflated sense of superiority over all over faith-based teachings and especially must not lead to the reliving of past crimes against humanity in the incorrectly invoked name of Jesus Christ.

As the world becomes increasingly more globalized, the absolutism of Christianity has come under examining eyes, particularly in light of the countless bloody crusades previously justified by the very absolutism that makes Christianity so unique. Examples include the colonization of Black and Brown people who were viewed to be subhuman compared to their White counterparts or the systematic genocide of Jews during the Holocaust (Hick, 79). However, as sentiments toward Christianity become more pluralistic and the world grows more tolerant, rightfully so, the central message of Christianity's moral absoluteness becomes muddied. Hick argues that the question of Christian superiority, no longer *a priori* in this day and age, "has to be posed as an empirical issue" although I feel that this endeavor may be close to impossible (86). Empirically, it, perhaps, is close to impossible to show that the moral absolutes of Christianity allow for the cultivation of human rights. Too often are the ideals of Christianity, even currently, used as a tool to violate human rights. Furthermore, for Philpott's claim about Christianity's ability to grant human rights' trump card status to be true, the moral superiority and absolutism of Christ need to be shown. However, as I will explain in the concluding remarks, this is not an endeavor I believe I have the current capacity to show nor do I believe I ever will.

## **Chapter IV: A Brief Case Study of White Evangelicalism**

Throughout America's brief yet eventful life span, there has been conflict between conservative and liberal values. Within the last couple of centuries, this conflict can be closely studied and observed with the Civil War and the consequent abolishment of slavery, the Civil Rights movement, women's suffrage, and more recent conflicts concerning the LGBTQ+ community. Though none of these conflicts are unique to the United States, there exists a close relationship between conservative values and Christianity, one that has given birth to extremist ideals and acts of discrimination and violence. The term "evangelical" has adopted a negative connotation in public eyes, many of whom view the Christian denomination deeply intertwined with the Republican Party, far-right ideologies, and extreme patriotic values (Butler, 1). Not only has this led to an immense conflict between White Evangelicals and the systematically oppressed, but between authentic Christian beliefs and a convoluted theology that manipulates the Bible to maintain the status quo. By manipulating and adhering to self-serving interpretations of the Bible, many atrocities and crimes against humanity can be committed under the guise of righteous behavior. The fallacious nature of White Evangelicalism, built on ideals of race superiority and the maintaining of existing power structures, ultimately needs to be rectified and reunited with correct Biblical theology to realign itself with human rights discourse.

Butler contends that racism has been an integral tool with which White Evangelicals have amassed and solidified power in America (Butler, 4). Not only has it been a crucial part of establishing and maintaining the status quo, but it has also become an inherent part of evangelicalism's identity in the United States in that, despite non-White participation in evangelicalism, there exists an inseparable connection between evangelicalism and White power. Racism is surely a grave affront to human rights, especially in the context of Christianity which

follows the teachings of Jesus Christ who proclaimed that “<sup>8</sup>you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (*NIV*, Acts 1.8). At this point, in this paper, the reader will have assumed the direction in which my faith lies, and according to the Bible, evangelicalism is an ideal that should be extended to all nations, no matter racial or ethnic background. Observing the various ways in which White Evangelicals have fought racial equality, explicitly or implicitly, it simply boggles my mind as to how such a self-evident concept as human equality seems to be lost on a majority of supposedly God-fearing American people.

However, as racial segregation quickly became a more controversial topic to back as a political party in the late 1900s, the religious right, including White Evangelicals, sought an alternative cause for unification purposes: abortion (Clift, 2021). This political galvanization surrounding abortion is commonly thought to be the origin of the religious right’s emergence, however, Randall Balmer argues that, prior to *Roe v. Wade*, the general consensus concerning abortion amongst the religious right was that the issue was of solely Catholic concern (Balmer et al, 2014). As Butler so determinedly argues in her book, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*, the uniting force in the religious right and White Evangelicals alike was racism (Butler). The current situation concerning *Roe vs. Wade* and the battle surrounding abortion and women’s bodily rights over the last century proves that this political phenomenon is still prevalent to this day. According to *Christianity Today*, White Evangelicals are twice as likely as the average American to oppose abortion, establishing themselves as the most pro-life religious group in America (Shellnut, 2022). Unable to continue fighting for racial segregation, as that would entail political suicide in today’s climate—although former President Trump’s rhetoric and the opinions of his fan base certainly refute this perceived risk—abortion has

become a pillar of the religious right's political stance. David Barnhart, a Methodist pastor, provides some insight into the efficacy of fighting abortion as a political tool:

“The unborn” are a convenient group of people to advocate for. They never make demands of you; they are morally uncomplicated, unlike the incarcerated, addicted, or the chronically poor; they don't resent your condescension or complain that you are not politically correct; unlike widows, they don't ask you to question patriarchy; unlike orphans, they don't need money, education, or childcare; unlike aliens, they don't bring all that racial, cultural, and religious baggage that you dislike; they allow you to feel good about yourself without any work at creating or maintaining relationships; and when they are born, you can forget about them, because they cease to be unborn. You can love the unborn and advocate for them without substantially challenging your own wealth, power, or privilege, without re-imagining social structures, apologizing, or making reparations to anyone. They are, in short, the perfect people to love if you want to claim you love Jesus, but actually dislike people who breathe. Prisoners? Immigrants? The sick? The poor? Widows? Orphans? All the groups that are specifically mentioned in the Bible? They all get thrown under the bus for the unborn” (Barnhart, 2018)

For a group claiming to espouse the ideals of Christ, it is rather odd—although quite sensical—that they would fight for the group rights of the unborn while consistently marginalizing others in need. However, this is not to say that the unborn is a group to which no consideration must be taken. But to say, as my fiance insightfully stated, that both sides to this political argument are technically pro-life, that they are merely attempting to place differentiated values on the lives of people, a job solely meant for God.

Ultimately, as a group that so publicly declares their devotion to God and Christ-like values, White Evangelicals evidently do not live out those ideals, using the guise of fighting for rights of the unborn to avoid the very pertinent responsibility to combat, for one, the systemic racism in our country. Especially considering that they are a group that historically has benefited so much from slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation, an argument can easily be made that they have a moral responsibility to rectify the mistakes of the past.

## Concluding Remarks

Philpott claims that faiths that admit “little room for violation or exception” make strong candidates for faiths through which human rights can be justified, however, to show that faith has superiority over all forms of thinking or living is a task beyond the scope of human ability (Philpott, 2014). So far, his first two claims of Christianity’s ability to lend credence to the universality of human rights and conceptualization of human dignity hold considerable value in that empirical approaches to both certainly lead to the conclusion that the strength of human rights is bolstered through Christ. However, where his argument begins to falter is in his last position of “trump card” status for it requires an argument to be made for the absolutism of Christ which I believe can only be provided by the grace of God. Too long have I tried to ascertain evidence of the absolutism of God and, for far too long, have I failed. This is the definitive line at which my thesis departs from any semblance of academic significance—much to the inevitable chagrin of my advisor—but it is a line I wish to draw considering the premature stage of life in which I currently find myself.

There is, however, empirical value to the absolutism of Christ that I can only speak to from personal experience and to the sentiments of those around me. As I write this thesis, I cannot help but shake my head in wonder at the fact that, after almost a decade, I am finally graduating. Throughout that time I have experienced the most devastating of rock bottoms in my life, and yet by some seemingly miraculous series of events, I find myself able to carry on without the constant onus of past trauma weighing me down. The only aspect of my life that has been constant during this time is God. In Isaiah 43, there lie the words:

<sup>1</sup>But now, this is what the Lord says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine” (*NIV*, Isaiah 43.1).

This Word of God confirms that indeed God has redeemed even me. I have committed acts that have easily pushed me into the realm of irredeemability, and yet there remains One who says otherwise. Of course, I have had the greatest privilege of knowing people who have emulated God's love in ways I had previously thought to be impossible, but as loving as they can be, they are still human, like me, and therefore can only have so much influence on how I view myself when in the darkest of places. It is in those darkest places that I have found God. In the black vastness of my echo chambers, with no one else to turn to except the Father who created me, I have rediscovered my true identity as a child of God. Having been led to the opportunity of studying Human Rights at Trinity College, I firmly believe that God has provided me with a vessel in which to do the work He truly wishes: saving lives. And for that, I cannot help but be eternally grateful.

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