Research paper

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THE METAPHYSICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN PERSON AS THE FOUNDATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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Abstract

This article examines the profound correlation between the metaphysical understanding of the human person and the grounds of human rights. It explains how concepts of human nature, being, and consciousness form the philosophical underpinning of human rights and asks what it actually means to be human a query that transcends biological existence to ask about moral agency, personhood, and dignity. The study considers major philosophical positions, from classical and Christian philosophers including Plotinus, Boethius, and Aquinas, to modern positions such as Descartes' dualism and Kant's rational autonomy. Further, the study analyzes African metaphysical philosophies with a focus on the community and fluidity of personhood. The research argues that the metaphysical conception of the human person on inherent worth and rational self-determination substantiates natural rights theologies and is a necessary condition for both the expression and justification of human rights. Through a discussion of various schools of philosophy, the work reveals how the evolving metaphysical views affect the articulation, justification, and emergence of human rights, with implications for current discourses of ethics, law, dignity, and freedom.

Key Words: Metaphysics, human rights, human person, human dignity, personhood, and personal identity.

1. Introduction

Metaphysical reflections on human nature, being, and consciousness over time have played a significant role in shaping understandings and rationales of human rights. This philosophical quest strives to address the age-old question: what does it ultimately mean to be human? By extending beyond a strictly biological or material explanation to include the aspects of moral agency, individuality, and inherent dignity, metaphysics provides the core attributes that justify the holding of rights. This study contends that a satisfactory metaphysical explanation of the human person is a precondition for the formulation of ethical systems and the realization of human rights, shedding light on how identity, autonomy, and dignity shape legal and moral safeguards in society.

2. Background of the study

Through the ages, this subject has been dealt with by different philosophers in diverse manners. Plotinus, a neo Platonist, argued that human individuality is an issue of spiritual, and not merely physical, distinctions and that each person is formed by a unique spiritual principle. Boethius continued to define a person as "the individual substance of a rational nature,"[1] viewing personhood in terms of an individual possessing rational faculties and self-awareness, attributes that go beyond general biological terms like "man" or "animal." Thomas Aquinas introduced the concept that it is existence that both enables the individuality and essence of a human person; personhood was conceived by

him as a "distinct subsistent of an intellectual nature,"[2] emphasizing rational capacity and individual existence.

In modern philosophy, this awareness drifts toward more scientific and rational paradigms. René Descartes infamously asserted, "I think, therefore I am,"[3] in arguing for the human person as fundamentally a thinking, self-aware entity made up of body (material) and mind (immaterial). Rationality, for Descartes, was the defining characteristic of personhood and, by extension, of the rights one has.

3. Metaphysical understanding of human person

Ontology is a metaphysical science that concerns itself with the nature of being and existence. It poses fundamental questions about what exists and the basic categories of being. When ontologically applied to the human person, it attempts to find out what it is actually to be human, transcending mere physical appearance.[4] Key themes are the relationship of body and soul whether human beings are simply physical or possess some non-physical entity like a soul or consciousness and the concepts of substance and form, from Aristotelian philosophy, employed to analyze the unity and difference in living organisms. Ontology thus provides a framework to make judgments

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[1] Boethius, *The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans By Stewart, D.D. And E. K. Rand, (New York; Microsoft Corporation, 2007), 82.

[2] Mary Clark, "An Inquiry into Personhood," *The Review of Metaphysics* 46, no. 1 (September 1992): 3-28. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20129291

[3] Rene Descartes, *Meditation on First Philosophy*: *With a Selections from The Objections and Replies,* trans. Michael Moriarty (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xii

[4] Marc Cohen and C. D. C. Reeve, "Aristotle's Metaphysics," ed. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelmanin, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2025). URL=<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/>.

about human rights, ethics, and personal identity by giving an entire image of what is a human being.

Philosophers have long grappled with the riddle of human life, in particular emphasizing self-consciousness, reason, and consciousness. Kant's dualistic account is that human beings are present in both the world of sense (the world of phenomena governed by causality) and the world of intelligibility (where the world is governed by reason and freedom). In the empirical world, human beings are under natural causality, while as rational agents they have moral freedom so as to be ethically responsible. According to Kant, freedom is a prerequisite for moral responsibility human beings have to think of themselves as free to act in accordance with rational moral law, not just in obedience to impulse or inclination.[5] For him, genuine morality stems from duty and obedience to universal law, not emotion. This two-sidedness provides a way to reconcile determinism and free will, establishing a foundation on which human existence can be conceived as conditioned and still free.

The mind-body problem is the interaction of the intricacy of consciousness (mind) with the physical body. René Descartes convincingly argued for dualism by proposing mind (a nonmaterial, thinking substance) and body (material substance) as fundamentally dissimilar. His declaration "I think, therefore I am"[6] identifies the precedence of the mind as the issue of human life. Although Descartes had body-mind interaction, he never properly explained the mechanism, with ongoing philosophical difficulty a result. This dualism raises pertinent questions about sensations, moral agency, and deeming mind superior to body. Contemporary philosopher David Chalmers separates "easy problems," such as cognition, behavior, and memory that can be explained by science, from the "hard problem," the subjective nature of conscious experience. The hard problem illustrates the difficulty that an exhaustive physical explanation does not encapsulate the nature of subjective consciousness, as illustrated in Chalmers' "zombie" thought experiment. He criticizes physicalism's inability to explain consciousness fully, suggesting subjective experience may not be susceptible to explanation in terms of physical processes and mechanisms. This discussion reflects how the concept of human person involves serious consideration of consciousness and its relationship with the body.[7]

Personal identity deals with what constitutes the individual as the same person through time despite changes of body and mind. David Hume denies the existence of a permanent, unchanging self and proposes instead the "bundle theory" where the self is merely a collection of constantly shifting perceptions.[8] Continuity and identity are products of the mind arising from similar experiences rather than underlying facts, he argues. Memory plays a key role in that it relates past and present selves, but Hume insists that identity finally depends upon relations of resemblance and causation among perceptions. Philosophical debate has focused on body vs. mind conditions of identity continuity of body over time or memory, personality, and consciousness sameness. Derek Parfit is one famous advocate of the psychological continuity theory, which regards personal identity as sequences of psychological connections, such as memories and intentions, overlapping across time.

Relational being rethinks selfhood by underlining that identity is ontologically rooted in social relations and not individual nature. The relational self emerges through the relations with others in which meaning, self-concept, and moral sentiments get actualized in family, community, and societal relations. A majority of philosophical and cultural thinking like feminist, environmental, and African philosophies like those of the Igbo underline communal relations as constitutive of being. The self is entwined with its social and environmental contexts. Furthermore, selfhood is actualized through dialogue and shared perception, not isolation, so that identity is an ever-changing, co-constructed process shaped by relational histories and shared experiences.[9] Such a perspective resists individualism by highlighting interdependence, shared responsibility, and situatedness in networks of social relationships.

Personhood is even broader in African philosophy. Philosophers like Ifeanyi Menkiti and John Mbiti note that personhood is a communal and spiritual process rather than just a biological fact. In this view, self-actualization, community engagement, and subjective (first-person) experience are at the forefront in the development of identity and the ethical basis for rights.[10] This is contrary to the typical individualism and essentialism of Western philosophy, and instead argues personhood to be dynamic and relational.

4. **The Historical Development of Human Rights**

The evolution of human rights throughout history is a complex process shaped by philosophical, cultural, legal, and political developments over thousands of years. It started in the ancient world with primitive laws and codes of conduct evolving into modern international norms protecting universal dignity and rights.

During ancient times, some of the most important milestones are the Code of Hammurabi (around 1700 BCE), one of the earliest legal codes that focused on justice, proportionate punishment, and limitations on kings, setting early foundations for rule of law. Persian Emperor Cyrus the Great was an example of tolerance and respect for diversity in the way he ruled, prefiguring contemporary principles

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[5] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57.

[6] Descartes, *Meditation on First Philosophy,* xii.

[7] David Chalmers, *Conscious Mind*: *in Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 24-94.

[8] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Waiheke Island: The Floating Press, 2009), 393.

[9] T. S. Hazzan and M. M. Stern, "Promoting Continuity or Maintenance of Selfhood," *Person-Centered Care, Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine* 18, no. 1 (2023): 2, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10787111/

[10] Jonathan O. Chimakonam and Uchenna Ogbonnaya, *African Metaphysics, Epistemology and a New Logic: A Decolonial Approach to Philosophy* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 111-115.

such as religious freedom and self-determination.[11] Greek thinkers Aristotle and Plato redirected the focus away from law codes and toward philosophical foundations of rights. Plato equated justice with social harmony and obligation, implying rights are beneficial to the community and individuals alike. Aristotle focused on political context of rights and the necessity of balanced rule to foster virtue and justice. Together, these writings established human rights on the basis of law, moral virtue, social cooperation, and political realism.

The Stoic period (3rd century BCE to Roman times) then philosophically elaborated upon these ideas by means of the natural law hypothesis and cosmopolitan society held together by shared reason (logos). Stoics, while insisting on universal human dignity and moral goodness, did not promote overt rights as we know them but impacted subsequent Roman legal ideas like *ius* gentium (law of nations) and Christian scholasticism, which was developed in particular by Thomas Aquinas.[12] But Stoicism endorsed the social arrangements of its time and its ethics were virtue-based, not rights-based, so its role as a philosophical foundation, not a direct predecessor to modern human rights.

During the medieval period (5th to 15th century), society was dominated by feudalism and power from religion, but important legal and ethical thought on rights developed. Medieval *ius* commune incorporated Roman and canon law, making such rights as support of welfare enforceable, but within religious view. Religious writings in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam contained ethical teachings of justice, protection of life, and right of property that established early moral codes which governed later legal development. Historical texts like the Magna Carta (1215) restricted monarch power and set the stage for due process and legal rights, which were an example of future constitutional progress.[13]

The Enlightenment era marked a breakthrough, evolving philosophical understandings of rights from religious natural law to secular, universal inalienable rights. Scholars such as Hugo Grotius helped chart pivotal advances in international law and moral obligations outside religious empowerment. Grotius argued on the basis of natural laws applicable even independent of presuppositions concerning divinity, building foundations for secular human rights and intervention on justifiable grounds. By the end of the Enlightenment, human rights were seen as universal rights a part of human nature, though their metaphysical and legal basis continues to be disputed.

In the modern age, human rights developed in the context of historic political revolutions—the American Revolution (1775-1783) proclaimed "all men are created equal"[14] with inalienable rights, injecting dignity and self-governance into political philosophy. The French Revolution of 1789 politicized more rights in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, emphasizing liberty, equality, and fraternity, but also revealing loopholes in implementation and integration. Democratic constitutions drew inspiration from these documents, with debates on citizenship, membership, and the scope of rights ongoing and being brought to the fore.

The scale of the 20th century's horrors, most notably World War II, provoked a world consensus towards the establishment of the United Nations (1945) and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948.[15] These were a global commitment to protect human dignity and instituted institutional safeguards for accountability beyond national sovereignty. This modern era also saw the advent of international treaties, conventions, and human rights movements, extending protection to different sections and areas like work, political rights, and social justice.

5. The Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights

The philosophical foundations of human rights explore why these rights exist and why they should be universally accepted. This inquiry engages with moral, ethical, and legal dimensions to deepen our understanding of human dignity and protection. Various traditions, from natural law to social contract theory and Kantian ethics, offer differing justifications for human rights, shedding light on their intrinsic value and necessity in society.

Natural law theory maintains that moral laws are rooted in human nature, can be uncovered by reason, and are the basis of all human laws. Rooted in ancient philosophy and developed by thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and John Locke, natural law maintains that rights are universal and innate, not conferred by governments. Aquinas's natural law, which is focused on eternal law as the wisdom of God, provides that human persons possess rights derived from human dignitycreated in the image of Go8dand are discernible by rational reflection. Aquinas emphasizes the interdependence of the rights to life, liberty, and property, all in the service of the common good and moral order.[16] Locke, for his part, envisioned the idea that life, liberty, and property are inherent rights men possess by nature, and government's authority rests on the protection of these rights. His social contract emphasized consent and included the revolutionary right to revolt against tyrannical rulers, demanding individual autonomy and equality.

Social contract theory, formulated by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, grounds human rights in the formation of political societies through collective consent. Hobbes considered the state of nature to be anarchic and

[11]Micheline Ishay, *The Human Rights Reader*: *Major Political Essays, Speeches, And Documents from Ancient Times to The Present*(New York; Routledge 2007), 17.

[12]Richard H. Helmholz, "Fundamental Human Rights in Medieval Law", in *Fulton Lectures, University of Chicago Law School* (2001): Chicago Unbound, https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/fulton_lectures/1/. 3

[13]Katherine Fischer Drew, *The Magna Carta* (London: Greenwood Press, 2004), 134.

[14]Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*. retrieved fromhttp://www.foundingfathers.info/documents/decindep.html

[15]Kerri Woods, *Human Rights* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 37.

[16]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947),1334.

violent, calling for an absolute sovereign to provide peace and security, for which individual freedoms are willingly relinquished in return for protection. Although Hobbes valued order, he understood that sovereign authority is based on individuals' consent.[17] Locke built upon this model, insisting on limited government whose main task is to protect natural rights, assuring equality and the right to revolt against tyranny. Rousseau was different in idealizing the state of nature as peaceful and egalitarian and in denouncing the emergence of private property as a source of inequality. Legitimate political authority, in Rousseau's view, derives from the "general will," the common interest above special interests. His ideal is one of direct citizen participation, democratic government, and an equilibrium of freedom and equality in a social contract that guarantees rights through common law reflecting collective consent.

While natural law grounds rights in universal moral order and inherent human dignity, social contract theories ground rights in political consent and the collective organization of society. Aquinas grounds rights in reason and divine law, Locke affirms individual liberties and property rights safeguarded by government, Hobbes prioritizes security and sovereign power, and Rousseau emphasizes democratic participation and equality as the basis of legitimacy.

6. The Metaphysical Conceptions of The Human Person Influence the Development and Implementation of Human Rights

The concept of human dignity is at the center of human rights moral and legal theory firmly rooted in metaphysical and ethical traditions. It maintains the inherent worth of every human being independent of social, cultural, or temporal distinctions. Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy provides an essential account by identifying rational freedom and autonomy with human dignity. For Kant, dignity is a value that is absolute, incomparable, and commands respect for persons as ends unto themselves and not as means. His formula of the categorical imperative calls for universal respect for persons, thus bases human rights on a moral ground as protections owed to all human beings by virtue of their rational capacities and freedom.[18]

Beyond Kant, metaphysical debates about personhood emphasize its ontological status in terms of independence from social or legal recognition. Philosophers such as Robert Spaemann root personhood in the integration of freedom and nature, conceiving the person as an individual "self-being" that is more than a social or biological classification. This metaphysical framework preserves the integrity of the person and demands equal respect across all social hierarchies, thereby providing a solid foundation for universal human rights.[19] The metaphysical nature of personhood involves duties over and above obligations at law to an intrinsic moral commitment to respect and protect human dignity.

In most theological and philosophical traditions, the human person is conceived as being a synthesis of body, mind, and spirit. The biblical idea of imago Dei articulates a spiritual and moral similarity to the divine, which gives foundation to the sanctity and inherent dignity of human life. This trichotomous approach explains why human dignity is more than biological existence, paying heed to the mind's capacity for rationality and moral responsibility and the spirit's relation to the transcendent.[20] These insights underlie ethical principles protecting life, liberty, and the whole spectrum of human potentialities, requiring that rights must encompass physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions.

African philosophical discourse, e.g., Gbadegesin's interpretation of Yoruba conceptions of eniyan (personhood), likewise demonstrates a holistic, relational conception of human person integrating body, mind, spirit, and communal morality. Such a conception of human rights recognizes human rights as inseparable from moral obligation and social membership and resists purely individualistic or legalistic explanations and instead posits rights in terms of ethics, spirituality, and community relations.

Natural law and natural rights theories base themselves on metaphysical assumptions about human beings as rational agents imbued with intrinsic moral worth. From Stoicism, to Aquinas, to Grotius, natural law affirms universal moral principles accessible to reason and separated from positive law. It maintains human rights as universal and inalienable and serves as a yardstick by which oppressive laws can be measured.[21] The natural law resonances find deep roots in foundational texts, anchoring contemporary human rights in enduringly moral and metaphysical realities.

Freedom and responsibility are found to be inseparable metaphysical features of being human. Ontological freedom, as defined by Jean-Paul Sartre and others, is an aspect of human being, meaning both possibilities and accountability. Sartre believe that "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."[22] Human rights uphold this freedom the power to act on one's own in accord with reason and moral lawyet responsibly exercised in respect of others' rights.[23] Thinking people like Levinas affirm that freedom is ethical and relational, calling the individual into responsibility to the Other. This interdependence of duty and rights calls to mind that

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[17]Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J. Gaskin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 115.

[18]Matt McManus, "Kant's Theory of Human Dignity," *Philosophy Now* 150 (June/July 2022): 16, https://philosophynow.org/issues/150/Kants_Theory_of_Human_Dignity.

[19]Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference between Someone and Something* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 45.

[20]John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 45.

[21]Cicero, *De Legibus(On the Laws)*, trans. Clinton W. Keyes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 18.

[22]Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 34.

freedom is not license but moral engagement in a just social order.

7. Conclusion

In general, metaphysical conceptions of the human person through conceptions of dignity, rational autonomy, personhood, and freedom influentially shape the conceptualization and enforcement of human rights. They provide an eternally universal, universally valid basis that transcends cultural and temporal diversity, demanding that laws and institutions support the unbendable value of every human being. This metaphysical foundation remains central to an understanding, defense, and elaboration of human rights in contemporary ethical, legal, and political thought.

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