WHY PEOPLE MATTER
A Christian Engagement with Rival Views of Human Significance

Edited by
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Preface

The need for a book such as this is substantial. Books long available on such topics as “worldview” compare biblical-Christian outlooks with other outlooks on a wide range of topics. However, such projects have not included sufficiently in-depth treatment of the widely and deeply held conviction that “people matter.” As noted in the introduction, how people view and handle many of the most important contemporary issues flows directly from this conviction and from the outlook that shapes the way that people build upon it.

Over time conversations among various contributors to this present volume fostered an unshakable sense that this book needed to be written, and the authors signed on one by one. Work on this book began in earnest when this outstanding team of authors gathered for a weekend at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois. Each participant had been invited to make a presentation on one particular way of looking at the world, based on their respective expertise. After each presentation the team engaged in an energetic discussion of what needed to be included in a chapter addressing that way of thinking.

Armed with many insights, each author then began developing the first draft of their chapter. Next, all such drafts received at least two detailed critiques from fellow authors and the following exceptional critiquers who joined the project specifically to help make the book the best it could be:

Charles C. Camosy (Fordham University)
J. Kameron Carter (Duke University)
Millard J. Erickson (retired, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary)
Fabrice Jotterand (Regis University and University of Basel)
C. Ben Mitchell (Union University)  
J. P. Moreland (Biola University)

Authors were now in a position to produce revised versions, which I as the book editor and Bob Hosack and David Cramer, editors at Baker Academic, refined and edited in dialogue with the authors.

Trinity International University, an anonymous foundation, my colleague John Dunlop, and my family provided the time and means necessary for me to do the research, writing, and editing of this book. Special thanks go to Trinity president David Dockery; deans Tite Tienou, Graham Cole, Tom Cornman, and Don Hedges; and my departmental colleagues for their support and encouragement. At various stages along the way, several graduate students—Rebecca Blevins, Austin Freeman, Madison Pierce, and Janie Valentine—provided invaluable assistance. For the numerous people above who contributed to this project in so many ways—as well as the anonymous foundation that contributed the necessary funding—I am profoundly grateful.

You have the result of this collaborative undertaking before you now. It draws on decades of study that the authors have invested in the particular ways of looking at the world that they discuss here. And it benefits from the range of perspectives represented by the contributors, who are younger and older, female and male, black and white.

People matter. So much hinges on recognizing and living this conviction. But for such recognition and action to take place and to be sustainable, such a conviction must be supported rather than undermined by people’s ways of thinking and looking at the world. The present work commends a vitally needed way to shore up this conviction—a credible and consistent way to explain why people matter.

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Introduction

The reason this book matters has to do with the huge importance of many ethical debates today, together with the seeming impossibility of resolving those disputes. People on opposing sides of the issues often seem to be living in different worlds, concerned about very different things. However, a closer look at their arguments reveals that there is substantial common ground after all. Opposing “sides” in so many disagreements argue that people matter—that how people are viewed and treated is crucially important. Sometimes the appeal is to human dignity; sometimes to human autonomy; sometimes to the importance of respect for dignity, autonomy, or some other human attribute. But the common theme is that people matter and ought to be treated accordingly.

If there is a common conviction generally at work on all sides of various debates, then there is hope for finding a way forward—a way of resolving disputes. It is worth taking time here in the introduction to provide some illustrations of debates in which both sides make their argument on the basis of human significance—on the basis that people matter. After that we can
consider other evidence that human significance is central to the big issues of the day. We will then be in a position to ask: Since so many people appeal to the conviction that people matter, why is there so much disagreement over contemporary ethical issues? As we will see, the problem is not the conviction that people matter; rather it is the reason why people matter. But first we need to demonstrate the widespread support for the idea that people do in fact matter.

**Opponents Agree That People Matter**

Consider the following debates in which opposing sides argue their position on the basis that people matter. Examples abound in the realm of bioethics and in many other areas of contemporary life. Regarding bioethical disputes, many debates arise concerning end-of-life issues. When physician-assisted suicide/death was first legalized in the United States, the Oregon law that legalized it was called the “Death with Dignity Act.” The idea was that people matter—that they have (or ought to have) dignity—and therefore they ought to have the legal option of physician-assisted suicide/death. At the same time, opponents argued against legalizing the practice precisely on the grounds that its legalization would violate human dignity—both that of the patients and that of other vulnerable people. Appeals to human dignity by both sides also take place in the broader euthanasia debate, where the question is whether it is right to go beyond legalizing assisted suicide/death to allowing some people to end the lives of others.

Mutual concern for human significance appears in debates over beginning-of-life issues such as abortion as well. In US court decisions such as Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey and Stenberg v. Carhart, appeals to human dignity appear in both the majority opinion and the dissenting opinion. In the United States, autonomy is invoked even more frequently than dignity. However, whether one is appealing to dignity or autonomy, the core concept—championed on all sides of the debate—is that the people involved

5. 530 U.S. 914 (2000). See the majority opinion at 920 and the dissent at 962.
in abortion should be respected.\textsuperscript{6} Similarly, reproductive cloning is rejected by the World Health Organization as “contrary to human dignity.”\textsuperscript{7} Yet others who support the practice recognize the importance of demonstrating that conceiving children through this means is fully consistent with human dignity.\textsuperscript{8}

Protecting people because they matter is a widespread concern in many other debates in health care as well. Consider the matter of organ donation and presumed consent. Many people oppose the idea that we can presume that dead people have given their consent for donating their bodily organs to others in the absence of any indication to the contrary. A key argument for this position states that acting on this presumption is a violation of human dignity.\textsuperscript{9} However, others are quick to maintain that the chances of such violation are “nearly nil” and that instead respect for human autonomy warrants the presumption of consent.\textsuperscript{10} Appeals to the importance of respecting people feature prominently in debates over the rationing of health care resources as well. Some advocate forms of rationing by maintaining that such rationing best respects the dignity of all, while others oppose such rationing precisely on the grounds that it fails to respect human dignity.\textsuperscript{11}

Not only more traditional health care debates but also debates over emerging biotechnologies illustrate the way that people on opposing sides appeal to the idea that people matter. Consider, for example, debates over the development of embryonic stem cell treatments. In response to claims that the dignity of disabled and dying patients requires pursuing restorative stem cell treatments that involve the destruction of human embryos, some claim that producing humans in embryonic form and destroying them for the benefit of others is an affront to human dignity.\textsuperscript{12} Meanwhile, in the debate over radically enhancing humans through biotechnology to the point that they become “posthuman,”

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Carl Cohen, “The Case for Presumed Consent to Transplant Human Organs after Death,” \textit{Transplantation Proceedings} 24, no. 5 (1992): 2169–70.
\end{itemize}
the dignity of the entire human race is front and center. Advocates of such enhancements recognize the need to explain how radical human enhancement is an affirmation of human dignity. Opponents emphasize the same concern for dignity, even though they affirm a different bioethical position: that radical enhancement rendering persons no longer recognizably human is a violation of human dignity.

Examples of debates where opposing sides appeal to the widespread conviction that people matter, then, abound in the realm of bioethics. Examples are just as abundant, though, in other areas of contemporary life. Consider debates over how to address the problem of poverty. Some argue that governments should give impoverished people money and other resources out of respect for their dignity as humans, while others insist that such handouts are demeaning and thus undermine dignity. Both sides in debates over affirmative action similarly agree that a high regard for all people is an important lens through which to evaluate an issue. One side argues on this basis for favoring members of a disadvantaged group whom discrimination has harmed in the past. The other side argues on the same basis against such favoritism. Where the use of drones is up for debate, there is agreement that a high regard for all people entails a regard for the safety of all. On such grounds some people discourage drone use, while others commend such use precisely because of its safety.

Debates over the infliction of punishment on people reflect the same core concern about human significance. A common reason for always opposing torture is a commitment to treating all people, even criminals, in a humane way. However, some argue that such respect for people can motivate one to support torture or “enhanced interrogation” techniques under at least one condition: when they might enable a more humane outcome for people who could be harmed unless a criminal divulges certain information. The death embryos, see Patrick Lee, “The Pro-Life Argument from Substantial Identity: A Defence,” Bioethics 18, no. 3 (2004): 249–63.

penalty has stimulated similarly animated debate in which human dignity has played an important role. Conflicting opinions of US Supreme Court justices in the cases of Furman v. Georgia and Roper v. Simmons illustrate this well.\textsuperscript{21} In his concurring opinion in the Furman case, Justice William Brennan locates the problem with capital punishment in its violation of human dignity; in the Roper case, Justice Anthony Kennedy argues that the death penalty can be carried out in a way that respects human dignity.\textsuperscript{22}

Endless further examples could be offered of debates where the conviction that “people matter” plays an important role on both sides, including debates over same-sex marriage, hate speech, genetic engineering, sex reassignment surgery, prostitution, decriminalization of drugs, shooting down hijacked aircrafts, protection against self-incrimination, life imprisonment, the use of lie detectors, and hunger strikes.\textsuperscript{23} The frequent appeal to human significance by people on both sides of the same issue suggests how widely shared is the conviction that people matter.

**Widespread Affirmations That People Matter**

Another way to establish the widespread recognition of human significance is to observe how commonly people appeal to the importance of such notions as human autonomy (along with broader understandings of freedom) and human dignity. Willard Gaylin and Bruce Jennings, among many others, marvel at autonomy’s “extraordinary moral power and appeal.”\textsuperscript{24} While they emphasize how “ubiquitous” this concept is in the West (“Americans live, breathe and dream autonomy”),\textsuperscript{25} others note in the East (e.g., China) the huge influence of a more family-oriented form of autonomy—considered there to be particularly respectful and supportive of people.\textsuperscript{26} Meanwhile, in

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Furman v. Georgia, 408 U.S. 238 (1972); Roper v. Simmons, 543 U.S. 551 (2005).
  \item \textsuperscript{22} For elaboration, see Helen J. Knowles, “A Dialogue on Death Penalty Dignity,” *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 11, no. 2 (2011): 115–28.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Gaylin and Jennings, *Perversion of Autonomy*, 47–48.
\end{itemize}
the rapidly growing field of bioethics, many acknowledge that “autonomy trumps all.” As Charles Foster observes in his analysis of a wide array of bioethics-related legal decisions that appeal to autonomy, “the great god autonomy” is “the governing principle.” It has become so influential that it has achieved “ideological status.”

Among many other concepts that similarly underscore the widespread affirmation that people matter, a prime example is the idea of human dignity. Its importance is signaled by the many significant international documents and national constitutions in which it plays a central role. The following uses convey a sense of the widespread reliance on this concept.

The United Nations has produced some of the best-known international affirmations of the dignity of all humans. With a founding charter that celebrates the “inherent dignity” of “all members of the human family,” the United Nations issued a Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 whose preamble contains similar wording. Its first article echoes this language: “All human beings” are born “equal in dignity.” In 1966 this document plus two other documents—the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights—became known as the International Bill of Rights. All three documents maintain that various human rights have their grounding in the dignity of all humans. In 2005 this outlook shaped another international document developed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights. That declaration affirms the central importance of human dignity at least a dozen times, insisting that it is a universal moral principle (articles 3 and 28).

Various European international documents have been equally forthright regarding the essential place of human dignity in guiding how people ought to act. For example, the Council of Europe’s 1997 Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine was designed to “protect the dignity” of “all human beings.” Two years later the European Commission issued its Basic Principles in Bioethics and Biolaw 1995–1998. Noting the increasingly widespread

recognition of human dignity, this document concludes that dignity “has been universalized as a quality of the person as such. It now refers to both the intrinsic value of the individual and the intersubjective value of every human being in its encounter with the other.” Accordingly, it is not surprising to find the European Court of Human Rights often appealing to human dignity as a basis for its decisions—for example, in Goodwin v. United Kingdom.33

This reliance on human dignity is by no means confined to European courts and organizations. The Inter-American Court on Human Rights has also shown a propensity to cite human dignity as a basis for its decisions, as in Boyce v. Barbados.34 Major regional documents have likewise acknowledged the importance of human dignity.35 According to the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man issued by the Organization of American States, all people “are born free and equal, in dignity and in rights.” The African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights by the Organization of African Unity calls dignity an “essential objective for the achievement of the legitimate aspirations of the African peoples.” Meanwhile, the Arab Charter on Human Rights by the League of Arab States acknowledges both a “belief in human dignity” and a “right to a life of dignity.” Other examples abound.36

Many national constitutions affirm support for human dignity as well. The concept has appeared in over forty constitutions since the beginning of the twentieth century.37 That includes countries as diverse as Germany, Japan, Brazil, Israel, and South Africa.38 According to Article 6 of the German Constitution (Basic Law), for instance, “The dignity of humanity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority.” South Africa’s Constitution likewise states: “Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected. . . . The dignity of humanity shall be inviolable.” Even China’s basic law acknowledges that “the

36. E.g., the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. For citations see Barroso, “Here, There,” 441.
personal dignity of citizens of the People’s Republic of China is inviolable.” 39 Similarly, the Supreme Court of Canada and the Israeli Supreme Court have affirmed human dignity to be a constitutionally grounded fundamental value. 40

In light of such widespread international support for the importance of human dignity, similar support for this concept in the United States is not surprising. The US Supreme Court has employed this term in its deliberations over the meaning of the First, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution. 41 The concept played a central role in the deliberations of the US President’s Council on Bioethics, which devoted a major study and report to this topic. 42 Both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have invoked it. To the United Nations, President Bush insisted: “We have no intention of imposing our culture, but America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity.” In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, President Obama maintained: “Only a just peace based upon the inherent rights and dignity of every individual can truly be lasting.” 43 The dignity of every human is as compelling an idea in the private realm as in public. Business leaders such as Jack Welch readily commend taking it seriously. 44 And cultural observers such as Francis Fukuyama note that the conviction that people matter “is innate to or characteristic of all human beings, whether they are great and proud conquerors or humble greengrocers.” 45

Why It Matters That People Matter

In light of the above discussion, it is no wonder that one detailed study has concluded: “Dignity unifies us as a species, transcending class and cultural divides.” 46 Whether “dignity” per se or respect for some other indicator of significance such as “autonomy” is in view, the challenge here “is to take full

39. Detailed citations for these three examples are in Haigh, “South Africa’s Criminalization,” 190–91.
42. US President’s Council on Bioethics, Human Dignity and Bioethics (Washington, DC, 2008).
45. Fukuyama, End of History, 168.
advantage of the great potential for consensus across countries, regions, cultures, and faiths” regarding the conviction that people matter.\textsuperscript{47} Whereas it often seems futile to engage in debates over particular contemporary issues, discussions at a deeper level may well turn out to be more fruitful. People with opposite positions on issues share the core conviction that people matter—that they should be treated with respect rather than abused. If people have that much in common, then the opportunity for fruitful discussion is great.

In light of the self-centeredness of human nature, people often feel particularly strongly that they themselves should not be abused—that they matter. This feeling creates a vested interest in the question of why people matter. Because they know that people (at least themselves) matter, they need to be able to explain why. Minimally, it is an issue of self-preservation. Moreover, how they explain why people matter will determine the particular course they take from what they know to be true—the conviction that people matter—to the positions they develop on various contemporary issues. How they explain human significance is governed by their basic life outlook or way of thinking.

The problem today is that many people have a life outlook that is incapable of supporting their conviction that people matter. Although they have never stopped to think about it, their outlook undermines their conviction. Many people have not consciously adopted a particular way of thinking in this sense—their life outlook has simply been imbibed from the surrounding culture. Only when they see that their outlook is in conflict with a core conviction that they hold dear are they likely to give conscious thought to which life outlook they should adopt. Only when people’s way of thinking changes is there a substantial prospect for changes in their views on issues that their former way of thinking has shaped.

What are these influential ways of thinking—these life outlooks? This book will begin by considering five of them. For the sake of having one-word terms by which to refer to them, this book will use the terms \textit{utilitarianism}, \textit{collectivism}, \textit{individualism}, \textit{naturalism}, and \textit{transhumanism}. But readers should not let these \textit{isms} intimidate them. Each stands for a way of thinking about or approaching the world—a life outlook—that one will recognize in the daily news, in one’s next-door neighbor, and perhaps even in oneself. The \textit{ism} in each term indicates that the outlook identifies one particular thing as having supreme importance over everything else. That thing may have to do with the importance of society, the individual person, or science.

The first three outlooks ground human significance in humanity itself, whether in society as a whole or in the individual. Grounding significance

\textsuperscript{47} Lagon and Arend, \textit{Human Dignity}, 17.
in society commonly takes one of two forms: utilitarianism or collectivism. Utilitarianism is the outlook in which maximizing utility (benefit) reigns supreme. The benefit of everyone needs to be taken into account. What is right is whatever produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people. When one hears the common refrain “The end justifies the means” in a social setting, utilitarianism is at work. It evaluates each thing that people do in terms of its consequences. Each action is a means to achieve some end; and if the end is beneficial enough, then the means are justified.

A somewhat different version of this focus on the “good of the whole” is collectivism. Utilitarianism includes in the right-wrong calculus the consequences for each individual affected by any decision under consideration. Collectivism, on the other hand, does not really see individuals but only the groups, or collectives, that constitute what matters about their identity. A person is a member of an ethnic group, an age demographic, and so on—not unique in any meaningful sense. Much marketing fosters and thrives on such an outlook. All that needs to be known about people and considered in decisionmaking is a function of their group identities. This way of thinking about people sorts, orders, understands, directs, or even seeks to control groups of people. It can also shape one’s own identity, which may happen when people come to see themselves only as a small piece in a much larger machine, as in the military. When people insist that their organization and not they as individuals did something wrong—something that they manifestly did do—collectivism has dominated their thinking.

Those who recognize the shortcomings of a more communal or social perspective may do so because they think that the individual should be prioritized over the collective. The third ism, individualism, is the life outlook in which people each have their own values and preferences, and those determine what is right for them. There are no objective truths or standards binding on all. Personal choice is the prevailing standard. In the common refrain “It’s my life and I can do what I want,” individualism has gained the upper hand. This outlook does not simply affirm that each individual is important; it insists that the perspectives and wishes of the individual trump all other considerations where that individual is concerned.

For other people, their way of looking at the world is not so much shaped by a preoccupation with society or individuals as it is by the dictates of science. This commonly happens in one of two ways. One way is by relying on naturalism. According to this outlook, all that exists is the material world—that which can be scientifically, empirically measured and verified. “What you see is what you get” and “Seeing is believing” are everyday expressions of this outlook. According to
this outlook, there is no God, nor are there immaterial human components such as self-awareness that cannot ultimately be reduced to physical or material substances. Humans and all of life on earth are the result of the blind, random forces of evolution. There is no design or intelligence behind the world’s past or future.

Another life outlook shaped by science is transhumanism. According to this view, biotechnology can enable people not just to improve themselves as humans but to become better than human—to become “posthuman.” One or more capacities of posthumans would so exceed those of present humans as to render them something beyond merely human. For example, the length of their healthy life could so substantially increase that even the possibility of living forever could become realistic. Human intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities could increase far beyond anything yet seen in the human race. Uploading one’s consciousness into a computer or robot is just one of the many transhumanist scenarios increasingly appearing in novels and movies.

Each such popular ism—utilitarianism, collectivism, individualism, naturalism, and transhumanism—has a certain appeal and many followers. However, each is fatally flawed. Each contradicts something that people widely acknowledge is vitally important: the conviction that people matter. In parts 1 and 2, our authors comment on these outlooks and their flaws in detail: Gilbert Meilaender on utilitarianism (chap. 2); Amy Laura Hall on collectivism (chap. 3); Russell DiSilvestro on individualism (chap. 4); Scott Rae on naturalism (chap. 5); and Patrick Smith on transhumanism (chap. 6). As these insightful discussions indicate, each of the outlooks considered is complex and requires careful examination in order to understand both its allure and its ultimate insufficiency. Parts 1 and 2 thus powerfully demonstrate the need for a better life outlook, one that can adequately explain why people matter.

One excellent alternative to these isms is biblical Christianity, as discussed in part 3. Central to the contrast is the way that a Christian outlook roots human significance in God rather than in humanity or science. As I explain in chapter 7, one way that a Christian outlook does so is by affirming that people are created in the image of God. Being in the image of God means that people have a special connection with God and that God, particularly as embodied in Jesus Christ, is the standard for who people are to be. There is nothing about particular individuals, groups, or their scientific tools that gives humans significance; rather, significance comes from the infinitely significant God. God has a special connection with humans and intends for them to be a genuine reflection of him. God is why people matter—people as individuals and humanity as a whole. This recognition has had a tremendously liberating impact in the world to date with inspiring potential for the future.
Because people are so specially connected with God, anything done to a person is also done to God. As David Gushee describes in chapter 8, that outlook informs teachings throughout the Bible in which the great significance of people is prominent. In support of human significance, four aspects of the Old Testament stand out: its creation theology, its depiction of God’s compassionate care for humans, its covenantal and legal materials, and its prophetic vision of a just wholeness (shalom) for Israel and all creation in the promised eschatological future. In the New Testament, three primary elements also lend substantial support to the idea that people matter: the nature of Christ’s ministry, key events in Christ’s life (the incarnation, cross, resurrection, ascension), and the ethos and moral vision of the early church. Gushee develops all seven of these areas to illustrate the resounding affirmation of human significance that flows from the God of Scripture.

The concluding chapter of this book endeavors to weave together the insights from the three preceding parts. After summarizing the most important reasons why the five isms are unable to support the widespread conviction that people matter, it affirms how a biblical-Christian outlook provides a strong basis for human significance at many of the very points where the outlook of various isms is weak. The book thus concludes by commending a biblically grounded Christian outlook as providing the best basis for affirming human significance—not grounded in humanity or science but in God and God’s design for humans.