

The Origin and Meaning of Dignity: A Quranic Perspective with an Emphasis on the Views of Ayatullah Javadi Amoli



Sayyid Muhammad-Reza Hashemi $^{\rm 1}$ / Sayyid Ehsan Rafi ${\rm `i}$ Alawi $^{\rm 2}$

Abstract

Dignity is one of the fundamental concepts in human life, but there are disagreements in its meaning. This article intends to clarify some issues by looking at the Qur'an. The first question concerns the source of dignity, and the second, its meaning. For this purpose, after reflecting on Ayatollah Javadi's point of view, this article puts forward an argument for his view. The result of this article is that human dignity in all its aspects is directly related to God, and religion as a whole is the only source of dignity. The achievement of this article is expressing the unique definition of human life in the Quran, a compelling argument for the aforementioned theory. In addition to defining two distinct types of dignity, this article clarifies how to apply the theory to these two types. This research follows an interpretative method called thematic interpretation, Although, an analytic approach is considered.

Keywords: dignity, Quran, Javadi Amoli, religion, human life.

¹ . Ph.D. (Level 4) Student of the International Institute for Islamic Studies (IIIS), Qum, Iran, s.hashemi@pu.ac.ke.

². Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy and Ethics, Baqir al-Olum University, Qom, Iran, rafiealavy272@gmail.com.



Introduction

Human dignity is an issue that everyone agrees upon today, and in various fields, especially human rights, dignity is fundamental and crucial. Dignity is usually divided into two types: inherent dignity and acquired dignity. In the Holy Quran, both types of human dignity are directly linked to God Almighty. About inherent dignity, God states: "And We have certainly dignified the children of Adam." (Quran 17: 70) This verse indicates a causal connection between God and human dignity. Another verse implies a strong tie between God and acquired (non-inherent) dignity. It reads: "The most Godwary among you has indeed the greater dignity in the sight of Allah" (Quran 49: 13) This connection raises two questions:

1- How is this connection justified? To explain this connection one needs to scrutinize the relationship between dignity and its origin. Reflecting on the verses of the Qur'an can transform and reform our view about everything related to the dignity of human beings, enlightening us about the origin of dignity. The theory presented in this study, which belongs to Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, is that religion is the only origin and source of dignity. The innovation of this research is to present a Quranic argument for the aforementioned theory. Therefore, this article will examine two sets of verses, one regarding the theory and the other supporting the argument.

For this purpose, we will reflect on some verses in which a derivative of the root ka ra ma (δ) is used. Respectively, the equivalent word to "dignity" in the Arabic language is karāmah. Karāmah in the Qur'an has been translated into several English words, like nobility, generosity, and honorability, all of which convey the meaning of dignity. Some other Arabic words in the Qur'an may be used in this sense, which we will not discuss since the Quranic argument supporting the leading theory of the research is general enough to render those words unnecessary to deal with.

The argument proves the above theory by investigating the meaning of human life from the Quranic point of view.

2- As for the above-mentioned theory, one may well ask how to distinguish between inherent and acquired dignity. The distinct requirements of these two types raise two questions about the relation of dignity to God: 1. What is the definition of inherent dignity when attributed to God? 2. What is the definition of acquired dignity when attributed to God? This article investigates the leading theory in detail by answering these two questions. This investigation applies the theory to each of the two kinds of dignity, and this is the other innovation of this article.

Presenting the theory and then arguing for it, and finally, applying the theory to each of the two kinds of dignity, the entire article attempts to discover the Quranic idea only through the Quranic verses. Thus, the method of the present study is hermeneutical while appealing to a sacred text as the source. What is being done here is a thematic interpretation. Technically, interpretation reveals the meanings of the Quran and clarifies God's purpose. (Zarkashī 1988, 2: 285) Collecting verses related to a subject in the Holy Quran and examining them to obtain the opinion of the Quran is also called thematic interpretation. (Subhānī 2002, 1: 23) This research is categorized under Quranic studies. Since the discussion is an inter-religious study, the addressees of the article are Muslims and whoever pursues Ouranic issues. The research, however, constructs a foundation for dignity, leading the intellectuals to look at the issue more precisely. Indeed, many works have been written about dignity in the Quran but this article focuses on the viewpoint of Ayatollah Javadi, and attempts to clarify, argue for, and develop his theory.

Theory: Exclusiveness

Before defining dignity, it appears urgent to recognize the origin and source of dignity; otherwise, its nature will be unintelligible. Each



definition has its roots in its origin. The origin clarifies the epistemological foundations of the definition for us and tells us where the definition comes from. So first of all we should introduce the source of understanding a concept.

According to Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, one can deduce from the Quran verses that the pillar of Islamic education is dignity, and the primary duty of religion is to teach dignity, and religion has no mission other than dignifying human beings. We can liken religion to a course for acknowledging dignity. In this article, religion means Islam which is the message of God revealed by Gabiel to the Holy Prophet in a sacred text, called the Holy Quran. Remarkably, in the Quran, every detail of the whole process of revelation connects with dignity. Analyzing the relevant verses and clarifying the causal connection between religion and dignity, I prove that dignity is premised upon religion. Consequently, the verses indicate that religion is the origin and source of dignity. The uniqueness of the religion in this role is the leading theory. In the following, I will discuss the relationship between dignity and God, angles, sacred texts, prophecy, and related concepts.

The initial verses revealed to the Prophet Muhammad are the first verses of Chapter 'Alaq, (Kulaynī 1996, 2: 628; Subhānī 2006, 7: 108) in which God states: "Recite, and your Lord is the Most Generous Who taught by the pen." (Quran 96: 3-4) The word used in this verse, *Akram* ($i \geq c_1$), translated into 'Generous,' is a derivative of *k*-*r*-*m*. God begins by describing Himself by dignity and then says: "Who taught." Here is a question: "what was the lesson's content he taught?" Some examples will reply to it.

If one says: 'A mathematician teaches,' it denotes the lesson, which is Mathematics. Alternatively, 'A scholar of Ethics teaches' means the teacher is teaching Ethics. That is why when Qur'an says your Lord who is *Akram* is teaching, it means He teaches *karāmah* because of the attribute



by which He describes Himself. This way of referring to dignity in education clarifies the content of that education. If God states at the beginning of revelation to the Holy Prophet that He teaches dignity, He considers dignity as the pillar of religious education and the core message of religion (Javādī Āmulī 1990, 19). God also dignifies Himself in some other Quranic verses, like: "And whoever is grateful -his gratitude is only for [the benefit of] himself. And whoever is ungrateful- then indeed, my Lord is Free of need and Generous." (Quran 27: 40)³ Therefore, God, who is *Akram*, teaches *karāmah* to human beings.

Prophets are the intermediaries for educating dignity. In a frequently narrated hadith, the Holy Prophet says, "I have been appointed as a prophet of God solely to complete the noble traits of character" (Bayhaqī 2003, 10: 323; Tabrisī 1993, 10: 500; Majlisī 1982, 16: 210).⁴ Because of the word "solely" (innamā), which is used for exclusiveness, the only aim of the last Prophet is to accomplish the task of the previous prophets, and that is to teach people "the noble traits of character" (makārim al-akhlāq). A vast amount of literature about the meaning of makārim al-akhlāq can be found in the Islamic corpus. Makārim-the plural form of makrumah-is a derivative of k-r-m. Thus, the unique goal of sending all the prophets is to teach people the morality that promotes dignity. (Javādī Āmulī 1369, 20) This hadith is the second implication of dignity as the main lesson of religion. Consequently, the Qur'an called the Prophet, who is the perfect man and wants to educate religious teachings to all human beings, karīm, meaning dignified person. The Quran says: "Indeed, the Quran is the speech of a dignified apostle." (Quran 69: 40)

The Quran speaks of angles and says: "[T]hey are [His] dignified servants." (Quran 21: 26) The word used in this verse, *mukramūn*,

³. Also see: (55: 27, 78), (82: 6).

⁴. The main hadith in Arabic is: "إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ لِأُتَمَّمَ مَكارِمَ الْأَخْلَرَقِ".



indicates that angels, who are divine ambassadors, are called degnified servants because they are commissioned to deliver the message of dignity, and "they do not venture to speak ahead of Him, and they act by His command." (Quran 21: 27) In another verse, the Quran states: "Indeed, there are over you watchers, degnified writers." (Quran 82: 10-11) The verse declares the dignity of angles since they carry God's message to the prophets, and they are called dignified due to the content of the message. This meaning is repeated more explicitly in this verse: "[the Quran is carried in the hands of envoys, dignified and pious." (Quran 80: 15-16) The bearers of divine programs, angels, are honorable and free from imperfection.⁵ The embassy of angels, who are the dignified ambassadors, is also in the area of dignity. As God praised the ambassadors for their dignity,⁶ they have no message other than dignity.⁷

That is why the Quran introduces itself, which contains religious instructions, a dignified book. It reads, "[It is recorded] in dignified sheets." (Quran 80:13) And in another place, the Quran says: "Indeed, it is a degnified Quran" (Quran 56:77). The instructional program of this sacred book is to adorn human beings by dignity. Hence, when the Quran orders "recite as much of the Quran as is feasible" (Quran 73: 20), it, in fact, recommends to benefit from the lessons on dignity as much as you can. When it is said that a polite letter is written, it means that the content of the letter is polite. Then, dignified Quran discovers from its content.

⁵. Elsewhere the Quran says about Gabriel: "it is indeed the speech of a noble messenger." (81: 19) This verse also makes it clear that Gabriel, as the bearer of the message of revelation, is praised for dignity.

⁶. The difference between angels and humans is that angels do not have acquired dignity. (Tabātabā'ī 1996, 14: 275)

⁷. Some of the interpreters of the Quran say that angels' dignity is because they bring religion to the people. (Ālūsī, 1994, 15: 245)



The Teacher, the intermediaries, the ambassadors, and the scripture are all dignified and noble. Therefore, dignity is the foundation of religious education for God praises with dignity all the revelatory epistemological origins of humans. Consequently, the provision of believers is a dignified (karīm) provision since they benefit from religion. The Ouran states, "As for those who have faith and do righteous deeds, for them will be forgiveness and a dignified provision." (Quran 22: 50).8 Furthermore, finally, believers will return to a dignified place, and they will receive a dignified reward. The Quran states, "If you avoid the major sins that you are forbidden. We will absolve you of your misdeeds and admit you to a dignified abode [into Paradise]" (Quran 4: 31). In another verse, it reads, "The day they encounter Him, their greeting will be, 'Peace,' and He holds in store for them a dignified reward" (Ouran 33: 44).⁹ So the inhabitants of the Heaven are dignified: "and you will be requited only for what you used to do-[all] except Allah's exclusive servants. For such there is a known provision—fruits—and they will be held in dignity, in the gardens of bliss" (Quran 37: 39-43). On the contrary, Hell is "neither cool nor dignified" (Ouran 56: 44). The way that the Ouran delineates the general atmosphere of the religion shows that the ultimate aim of God is to cultivate one's dignity.

But the theory is that religion is the "only" origin and source of human dignity. Had God not taught dignity to human beings, there would have been no other way for them to acknowledge it because in the first verses revealed to the Prophet, God says, "Recite, and your Lord is the Most Generous - Who taught by the pen - Taught man that which he knew not" (Quran 96: 3-5). The meaning of the verse is not that God has taught human beings something they did not know, and if they struggle, they will obtain it with the aid of ordinary means. The meaning is that human beings

⁸. Some other verses indicate the same theme, like: (24: 26) (33: 31) (34: 4).

⁹. See also: (36: 11) (37: 42).



learned something that, if it were not taught to them, it would have been impossible for them to realize.¹⁰ In this regard, God, addressing the Prophet, states, "And Allah has revealed to you the Book and wisdom and has taught you that which you ever did not know" (Quran 4: 113). In another verse, God addresses the people, saying, "Just as We have sent among you a messenger from yourselves reciting to you Our verses and purifying you and teaching you the Book and wisdom and teaching you that which you ever did not know" (Quran 2: 151). In these two verses, a derivative of *'lam* in the form of a simple present verb is collocated with the past tense verb *kāna*, which implies absolute negation. (Tabrisī 1993, 1: 430; Tūsī, n.d., 2: 30)

One may argue that the intellect understands some parts of religion independently, so not all revelatory teachings must be understood dependently. However, it is true that some religious teachings are comprehensible to reason, and only part of it is superrational, religion as a whole is far from the reach of reason. When God says: "... Taught man that which he knew not," (Quran 96: 5), he intends the whole religion as a system in which all parts of it are interrelated, and to have faith in some without others is useless. The whole system of religion can dignify human beings, not part of it.

Therefore, without God, human beings could not acknowledge dignity. With the advancement of science, humans do not become needless of prophets. Prophets teach them what they cannot achieve. So, in verse 5 of chapter 96, the independence and self-sufficiency in knowledge have been

¹⁰. Tabarī in his comntary on the Qur'an says: "مما علمه و لم يكن يعلمه» (Ṭabarī 1991, 30: 163).

It means the Prophet learned something that has never known and there was no other way to know that. We will explain this point later.

Also see: (Tabātabā'ī 1996, 5: 80)



denied, not the actuality. It means humans have known something that they had not have the potentiality to know independently and without the aid of the revelation. So far, we have stated our theory. Now it is necessary to present our Quranic argument for supporting the theory.

Quranic Argument for Exclusiveness

Human beings excel over other beings because of humanity. It is this distinction that has given them dignity (Essien D 2022, 100). Dignity is not a part of the human body like a body's color or organ. It relates to a type of life called human life or humanity. Hence, humans have dignity due to their distinct types of life.¹¹ It is not meaningful to speak of dignity unless a being possesses human life. So, if we want to know the nature of dignity, we must first understand the nature of human life. The question is what the viewpoint of the Qur'an is about the nature of human life. By Proving the dependence of human life upon faith ($\bar{m}\bar{a}n$) and righteous deeds, this article argues for its leading theory: the dependence of dignity on religion.

The most important right given to every person is the right to life, without which other rights are ineffective. In Qur'anic culture, the right to life stands at the center of human rights. However, the Islamic conception of human life is unique and different from others' understanding. From the Qur'anic point of view, humans are three groups: some have only

¹¹. It may be well asked that if dignity is tied to a distinct human life so what the meaning of dignity in God, the angels, and the sared text is. The answer to this question is that this is the distinction between human life and other living things but the source of this distinction is the connection with religion, which in this connection with religion, humans have in common with all the means of revelation. The existence of commonalities does not negate the fact that humans have a distinct life which demands special dignity.

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vegetative life, like plants. The only thing that gives meaning to their lives is well-eating and well-dressing. For them, well-being is to nourish their physique well, which is the ultimate goal of their life. This group is deprived of any social tendencies such as ambition and wanting much power. Some others benefit solely from both vegetative and animal life and are preoccupied with lust, anger, and ambition. What leads them is their imaginations rather than the faculty of reason, let alone the revelation. The Quran condemns these people since they are stuck in animal life: "Those are like livestock; rather, they are more astray. It is they who are the heedless" (Quran 7: 179).

The third group is those who enjoy human life. The Ouran expresses that believers are the only group who has human life. In a unique categorization, God says that people are either alive or disbelievers: "It is not but a message and a clear Quran to warn whoever is alive and justify the word against the disbelievers" (Quran 36: 69-70). This contrast shows that the believer is alive and the disbeliever is dead. In another verse, God addresses the Prophet, stating: "Indeed, you will not make the dead hear, nor will you make the deaf hear the call when they have turned their backs retreating. And you cannot guide the blind away from their error. You will only make hear those who believe in Our verses so they are Muslims [submitting to Allah]" (Quran 27: 80-81). Another verse reads: "And not equal are the living and the dead. Indeed, Allah causes to hear whom He wills, but you cannot make hear those in the graves" (Quran 35: 22). disbelievers are in the grave of body and physique; that is why they are dead. This type of life dedicated to believers is called a good life. The Quran says: "Whoever acts righteously, [whether] male or female, should he be faithful, We shall revive him with a good life" (Quran 16: 97).

Therefore, this is the revelation that gives us human life. God says in the Quran, "O you who have faith! Answer Allah and the Apostle when he summons you to that which will give you life" (Quran 8: 24). God and His Prophet invite us to accept something that gives us life. It means that



without faith, we are all dead. Imam Ali said, 'There is no life but with religion and no death but with denial of sincere belief' (Majlisī 1982, 77: 418). But the question raised here is what the role of intellect is. The answer is that intellect merely prepares the ground. The Prophet states, 'Indeed, all good and benefits are obtained by reason, and he who does not have a reason does not have religion.' (Harrānī 1983, 54). Notably, in some hadiths, Imams consider reason as the standard of humanity. Imam Sādiq said, "The reasoning capacity is the chief pillar of human existence" (Kulaynī 2000, 1: 60).

However, intellect here has a special meaning. Some other hadiths expose a deep connection between intellect and faith so that the existence of each one is necessary for the existence of another. In other words, anyone who benefits from wisdom will indeed have faith, and he who does not have faith has no wisdom. Imam Ali says, 'A wise man is he who builds up his resurrection' (Āmidī 1987, 145). Imam Sādiq was asked about the quiddity of the reason, and he replied, 'Reason is that by which God is worshipped, and a place in Paradise earned.' The Imam was then asked, 'What do our enemies have?' The Imam replied, 'That was just wickedness and cunning, which seemed like reason, but it was not reason.' (Kulaynī 2000, 1: 26). Consequently, Human life depends on understanding and practicing religion, and since we have tied dignity to human life, dignity also depends on religion.

Meaning of Inherent and Acquired Dignity

God states: "Certainly, We have honored the Children of Adam" (Quran 17: 70). Allamah Tabātabā'ī believes that this verse expresses the position of all human beings, (Tabātabā'ī 1996, 13: 155) which means God blessed all human beings with dignity. This is inherent dignity. One reason for inherent dignity is that everyone is a creature of God who is the source of dignity. God says: "[I]ndeed, all dignity belongs to Allah." Because of this attribution to the source of dignity, human beings have been sanctified.



Furthermore, God has said about human beings: "So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My spirit, then fall down in prostration before him." (Quran 5: 29; 38: 72). What does it mean that God breathed into human beings of His spirit? to answer this question, two concepts among the attributeds of God Almighty should be analyzed: Truth and Goodness.

On the one hand, God is the Absolute Truth (Quran 22: 6). From this point of view, the meaning that God breathed from His soul is that human has the spirit of truthfulness. Human beings intrinsically seek the truth and demand it. According to the Quran, this spirit is a characteristic of human creation. the Quran reads: "So set your heart as a person of pure faith on this religion, the original nature endowed by Allah according to which He originated mankind" (Quran 30: 30). As stated in the verse, religion conforms to the original nature of human beings because it is true, and our nature is seeking the truth.

On the other hand, God is the Absolute Goodness (Quran 20: 73) (Ibn 'Arabī 2001, 2: 111). Moreover, all good things go back to Him. In the Quran, God says that He created humans while they can distinguish between good and evil: "by the soul and Him who fashioned it, and inspired it with [discernment between] its virtues and vices" (Quran 91: 7-8). This capital of benevolence is another part of inherent human dignity. This part is related to human knowledge as the previous part deals with human tendencies. So, humans have two characteristics in their original nature: They know good and tend to the truth. This is the meaning of blowing the spirit of God in humans and the meaning of inherent dignity. Just as God is the Absolute Truth and the Absolute Goodness, humans have the spirit of truth-seeking and benevolence.

Hence, it should be noted that it is because of humans' meaningful relation with God that they have inherent dignity. Both God and humans have dignity, although, when we say the dignity of God, we mean that God



is inherently dignified and is the giver of dignity (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 1991, 707). But when we say the dignity of humans, it means that they are the recipients of dignity, and God has given them this dignity. Even the inherent dignity of humans has been given to them by God because they are the creatures of Him.

With this explanation, the meaning of another verse becomes clear. After creating humans, God states: "so blessed is Allah, the best of creators!" (Quran 23: 14). God praised Himself because the human has been created perfectly in both: the faculty of reason and the faculty of tendency. That is why in another verse, God says: "O Iblis! What keeps you from prostrating before that which I have created with My [own] two hands?" (Quran 38:75). Creating with two hands is a metaphor to the fact that He created the human perfectly in two aspects. One relates to the theoretical reason—the truth-seeking dimension of reason—and the other relates to the practical reason—the dimension of benevolence in reason.

Reason is the distinct aspect of humans from other animals. Humans have been created perfectly in both dimensions of reason, and due to reason, humans have inherent dignity. This kind of dignity has its requirements. For instance, if someone has not been at war with you, his blood is honorable (Quran 60: 8), and if he was killed in battle, you have no right to mutilate him (Ibn Bābwayh 1992, 4: 157) because he has inherent dignity. Although we should recognize the dignity of all human beings, this is the minimum. We must first protect and then develop it. Here acquired dignity manifests.

In Islam, acquired dignity depends upon God-wariness ($Taqw\bar{a}$). God states: "O mankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most Godwary among you. Indeed Allah is all-knowing, all-aware" (Quran 49: 13). The strength and weakness of dignity are based on the severity and



weakness of $Taqw\bar{a}$. Whoever wants to gain acquired dignity should observe its requirement, i.e., piety. Sometimes humans decline to the point where they become more predatory than animals. In the Quran, God says: "they have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, they have ears with which they do not hear. They are like cattle; indeed, they are more astray. It is they who are the heedless" (Quran 7: 179). They can be even worse as the Quran says: "then your hearts hardened after that; so they are like stones, or even harder" (Quran 2: 74). In that case, they no longer have any benefit from the acquired dignity.

On the other hand, there is no limit to human dignity since there is no limit to piety as God Almighty has said: "So be wary of Allah, as much as you can" (Quran 64: 16). The perfect example of a person having unlimited dignity in Islam is the perfect human being. Since the perfect human being has a strong connection with the unlimited source of dignity, God, he has unlimited dignity. Regarding this connection, God says in the Quran: "To Allah belong the Best Names, so supplicate Him by them" (Quran 7: 180). The first Imam of Shi'a clarifies this verse by saying: "We [the Imams] are the Best Names." (Majlisī 1982, 27: 38). It shows the strong relation between the perfect human being and the source of unlimited dignity, and because of this relationship, he has unlimited dignity.

Conclusion

Religion has been sent for humans so that they attain their worthy dignity. All parts of the religion speak of dignity, and all the means of revelation of religion have been praised for their dignity. Religion is the only origin and source of dignity because human life is totally dependent on religion. Human dignity, in both kinds, inherent and acquired, relates to God. Inherent dignity has its roots in theoretical reason and practical reason. In their theoretical reason, humans are truth-seeking, and in practical reason, they seek benevolence. God is the one who is Absolute Truth and Absolute



Goodness. This perfect nature of human beings is the meaning of God's blowing into humans of His spirit. Acquired dignity originates in $Taqw\bar{a}$, and it has no limit.

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