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The Personalist Concept of Human Dignity and Views on Human Nature in Economics

ABSTRACT

The concept of human dignity not only arouses considerable interest among theologians and philosophers but also among scholars from other disciplines, including lawyers, historians, sociologists, and psychologists. It plays a fundamental role in understanding social life and guiding political actions. Since economics is a social science, a question arises as to whether and how it incorporates the issue of human dignity into its theories. This article aims to analyze the understanding of human dignity in contemporary schools and currents of economic thought. The authors, drawing on the rich tradition of the concept, developed especially in Christian personalism, have formulated their own concept of human dignity (the personalist concept of human dignity), which served as a basis for analyzing various concepts of human nature in economics. Images of human nature play a key role in shaping economic assumptions and enable the creation of theories in this field. In turn, human dignity is inextricably linked to the concept of human nature. The analyses conducted allowed us to prove the thesis that the perception of human nature concerning its dignity in contemporary schools and currents of economics is heterogeneous. Numerous weaknesses

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were also demonstrated regarding the perception of human nature and human dignity especially within the dominant concept of *homo oeconomicus*.

KEYWORDS: human dignity; Christian personalism; Catholic social teaching; homo oeconomicus; heterodox economics; humanistic economics; personalist economics

INTRODUCTION

Human dignity is a subject of interest not only to philosophers and theologians but also to historians, lawyers, sociologists, and psychologists. It serves as an important reference point for thinking about the state and law and often guides actions undertaken on the international stage. Many constitutions include in their preambles or first articles provisions relating to human dignity (cf. Czarny, 2001). Consequently, a question arises about the significance of this issue for economics as a social science. This article attempts to determine how contemporary schools and currents of economic thought relate to the issue of human dignity. While the subject matter of economics does not directly encompass this issue, certain concepts of human nature are present, which explicitly or implicitly refer to dignity.

The concept (image, model) of human nature constitutes a crucial element of the assumptions (which are often tacit) adopted within economics. It is precisely the assumptions concerning human nature that form the basis of many economic theories. The subject of human choice, its criteria and causes, as defined in individual economic theories, are influenced by a specific image of human nature. Similarly, when examining the activities of firms, their goals, and the scope of their assumed responsibility, we also refer to dimensions of the concept of human nature. At the macroeconomic level, where decisions affecting the direction of societal development are made – such as tax policy in the context of significant civilizational challenges – economics utilizes

assumptions about human nature and the surrounding world. The concept of human nature also underpins answers to questions concerning human relationships with other people, nature, and the role of specific principles in regulating economic order, such as the issue of justice.

The main aim of this work is to present and compare how various concepts of human nature in contemporary schools and currents of economic theory relate (implicitly or explicitly) to human dignity. Therefore, the operational objective of the work was to formulate a concept of human dignity in order to be able to define these references. We posit that within economics the perception of human nature concerning its dignity is diverse and thus heterogeneous.

We will begin our considerations by presenting the evolution of the concept of understanding human dignity in Christian thought, especially in Christian personalism (Section 1.1). Based on these considerations, we will propose our own concept of human dignity, which can therefore be described as personalist (Section 1.2). This will allow us to examine how the most popular concept of human nature in economics – *homo oeconomicus* – relates to dignity (Section 1.1). Against this backdrop we will present and illustrate from the perspective of human dignity alternative and often critical images of human nature in economics (Section 2.2). The main conclusions of the work and future research perspectives will be outlined in the summary (Section 3).

1. THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN DIGNITY

1.1 Historical outline

Reflections on human dignity date back to ancient Greeks and Romans. It was most commonly perceived as “honour, recognition, and respect for virtue (ability, courage, excellence)” expressed in the models of the “aristocratic warrior, citizen, sage, and mag-

nanimous man" (Podrez, 2003, p. 4). Such an understanding of dignity, today called "personal dignity", does not belong to every human being, as it is a certain perfection, a value acquired through upbringing, self-improvement, the influence of the social environment, or held by virtue of occupying a particular position (Mazurek, 2001; Podrez, 2003). However, sometimes a universal dimension of dignity was recognized, today referred to as the "dignity of the human person", meaning that dignity is innate and belongs to every human being (even a slave) due to certain characteristics (such as intelligence, rationality, or awareness of law) that elevate them above other living beings (Protagoras, Sophocles, Cicero), or through participation in the nature of the primary being or deity (Stoics, Seneca) (Mazurek, 2001).

The theological understanding of human dignity was fully revealed in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in the pages of the Old and New Testaments. Confirmation of human dignity is found both in the Old Testament's Book of Genesis, describing the creation of human nature "in the image and likeness of God", and especially in God's assumption of human nature in the person of the Son – Jesus Christ – His life as the incarnate Word, death, and resurrection in human flesh, as described in the New Testament (Krapiec, 2003).

In the Middle Ages, there was a deepening of the understanding of human dignity in its universal dimension based on Christian humanism. Dignity was then considered integrally, firstly at the metaphysical level. Centuries ago, Boethius formulated the famous classical definition of a person: "an individual substance of a rational nature" (Woznicki, 1987, p. 126), which was later developed in the 13th century by Thomas Aquinas: "'Person' signifies what is most perfect in all nature – that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature" (Aquinas, 1920, I, 29, 3). According to Aquinas, man is a free being with his own purpose (he is a purpose in himself, he exists for himself), the most perfect in all of nature. It is to rational and free beings that dignity belongs

(Granat, 2007; Mazurek, 2001). Secondly, dignity was considered at the theological level, emphasizing the personal likeness of humans to God (*imago Dei*). In particular, Aquinas stated that “the name ‘person’ is fittingly applied to God; not, however, as it is applied to creatures, but in a more excellent way” (Aquinas, 1920, I, 29, 3). He further explained that “although the word ‘person’ is not found applied to God in Scripture, either in the Old or New Testament, nevertheless what the word signifies is found to be affirmed of God in many places of Scripture; as that He is the supreme self-subsisting being, and the most perfectly intelligent being” (Aquinas, 1920, I, 29, 3).

In opposition to the medieval universal and integral interpretation of human dignity, proponents of a naturalistic interpretation (including Descartes, Hobbes, and Hume) maintained that human dignity is only a value acquired by a person either in the course of their rational actions or in connection with their specific behaviors or achievements, and thus may be a kind of virtue (Podrez, 2003). In place of medieval theocentric humanism, Renaissance and Enlightenment thought postulated anthropocentric humanism (cf. Maritain, 1938; Sadowski, 2010), which limited the understanding of human dignity only to personal dignity, making the approach to human dignity reductionist. On this basis, subsequent philosophical concepts of modernism emerged, in which “the meaning and function of dignity are determined by the source, the basis of human expression, and who the person becomes in the process of volitional-moral (Nietzsche), existential (Kierkegaard), and socio-economic (Marx) liberation” (Podrez, 2003, pp. 6–7).

Original among Enlightenment thought on human dignity was Kant’s writing, as he adopted an ethical and metaphysical perspective on dignity. According to him, a human being is an end in themselves and can never be treated merely as a means to an end. He expressed this in the form of the so-called categorical imperative: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the

same time as an end and never simply as a means" (Kant, 1993, p. 429). People as ends in themselves (the metaphysical aspect of human dignity) cannot be assigned a price, and thus possess dignity that is incomparable with anything else, resisting summation and being not substitutable (Kant, 1993, 1996). The basis of innate human dignity is their ability, as rational beings, to establish moral law and subordinate themselves to it (the ethical dimension of human dignity). This means ethical autonomy of the individual, who determines for themselves what they should adhere to (Sadowski, 2010; Tokarczyk, 2000).

To some extent a continuation, but even more a significant development, of Kant's thought in the 20th century is the ethical current of considering human dignity, within which dignity was recognized as a fundamental moral norm. Part of this approach is Christian personalism in ethics, characterized by the command to affirm persons in their dignity through concrete acts, especially through love ("the personalist norm") (Podrez, 2003; Wojtyła, 2015). And love for God, for others, and for oneself reveals the actual hierarchy of values, whose source is moral norms arising from the understanding of human dignity (Podrez, 2003). Moreover, dignity in the view of Christian personalism is not only the source of moral norms, influencing feelings, desires, needs, and aspirations of the person, but is also a testimony to the ontological perfection of the human being, thanks to which they are capable of comprehensive development and directing themselves towards spiritual goods (Podrez, 2003; Szymonik, 2015; Wojtyła, 2011). Thus, according to Wojtyła, dignity is both given to the person (in nature) and also entrusted to them (it is obliging) throughout the dynamism of their humanity (Szymonik, 2015). This expresses the characteristic integral approach to human dignity in Christian personalism, which combines the previously shown dimensions of human dignity: ontological, metaphysical, and ethical (cf. Mazurek, 2001; Messner, 1977).

The greatest theoretician of Christian personalism was Maritain, whose ideas significantly influenced Catholic social teaching, including the decisions of the Second Vatican Council (Sadowski, 2010). From the perspective of future considerations, it is worth emphasizing, firstly, Maritain's distinction between the person and the individual (Maritain, 1929). The concept of person emerged thanks to Christian theology and denotes someone not only rational but also of spiritual nature (possessing a soul), endowed with freedom of choice and constituting an autonomous whole in relation to the world (Sadowski, 2010). The concept of individual should be related to animals or plants because individuality is based on specific material requirements. Individuals are merely parts of the universe, the resultant of forces and influences whose laws govern them (Maritain, 1929, 1966). Secondly, Maritain was a fierce critic of the Marxist concept of human nature. In his assessment, Marxism absolutizes human labor, which becomes the very essence of the person. Seeing in work the highest human dignity is irreconcilable with the Christian understanding of human dignity (Maritain, 1938; Sadowski, 2010).

An important contribution of Maritain to promoting the Christian approach to human dignity was his active participation in the work on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (United Nations, 1948). In the preamble to the Declaration, "the inherent dignity" is emphasized, from which "the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" derive. Article 1 defines the foundations of human dignity: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Such an understanding of human dignity is generally consistent with the universalist approach to dignity in Christian thought, although for obvious reasons there is no reference in the Declaration to God as the basis of human dignity. Pope John Paul II stated that the Declaration is "a milestone on the long and difficult path of the human race"

and “one of the highest expressions of the human conscience” (John Paul II, 1979, 1995).

Hand in hand with the development of theological and philosophical Christian thought concerning human dignity evolved Catholic Social Teaching. The Declaration *Dignitas Infinita* on Human Dignity (2024), prepared on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, can be considered a summary and contemporary interpretation of the Catholic Church’s teaching in this matter. *Dignitas Infinita* emphasized the fundamental significance of the ontological dimension of dignity (combining the previously discussed theological and metaphysical dimensions): “In the light of Revelation, the Church resolutely reiterates and confirms the ontological dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ” (Declaration..., 2024, no. 1). Ontological dignity, which belongs to every human being by virtue of existence, is “indelible and remains valid beyond any circumstances in which the person may find themselves” (no. 7). The Declaration also defines three other types of dignity that are “losable”. Moral dignity concerns how a person uses their freedom: by doing evil people “behave in a way that is ‘not dignified’ with respect to their nature as creatures who are loved by God and called to love others. Those who act this way seem to have lost any trace of human nature and dignity” (no. 7). Social dignity refers to “the quality of a person’s living conditions” (no. 8), so poor living conditions of the poor can mean living in an “undignified” manner. Existential dignity touches on discussions about a “dignified” life and one that is “not dignified” in relation to ontological dignity, which in the latter case can mean, for example, life in a state of severe addiction (no. 8). Thus, the Catholic Church has recognised the significance of certain types of personal dignity, while confirming the primacy of ontological dignity (as the dignity of the human person), which is their point of reference. In this way, the Declaration, like the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, fits into the integral treatment of the dignity of the human person and personal dignity (cf. Mazurek, 2001).

1.2 Understanding human dignity

In Christian thought (theological, philosophical, Catholic social teaching), the human being is created by God in His image and likeness, called to a relationship with Him, and above all to love Him and be loved by Him. From the vocation to a relationship of love with God arises, in turn, the duty/task of loving oneself and other people. A human being is a rational, free, creative being called to development and self-improvement, and their dignity defines what humanity essentially is, thus forming the basis for the idea of human rights (Podrez, 2003; Iglesias, 2001).

Based on the above considerations, concerning especially the thought of Christian personalism, for the purposes of further deliberations, we define human dignity (the dignity of the human person, ontological dignity) as an inalienable and inherent (it cannot be lost and is not granted as a result of rights or the equivalent of rights), as well as universal and non-gradable (pertaining to every person equally), and obliging (requiring a response from the person) quality of the human being, comprising “intrinsically valuable aspects of being human” (Gewirth, 1992, p. 12).

We will call the intrinsically valuable aspects of being human the attributes of human dignity, as they favorably distinguish the dignity of human being from the dignity of other living beings, as God’s creatures, from our world. Considering the above reflections, the most important attributes of human dignity include in particular:

- rationality and the resulting reasonableness;
- free will and closely related ontological autonomy of the human being;
- the calling to/the duty of development and self-improvement;

- relational nature, i.e., the ability to engage in deep relationships with other people and God (including relationships of love);
- the ability to recognize, accept, and fulfill obligations (or commitments) towards oneself and others (and thus to take responsibility for one's own decisions), which arise from specific norms.

Individual attributes of human dignity may, for various reasons, not manifest in the lives of specific people (the attributes are all capabilities) due to various external (causes beyond the person) and internal obstacles (causes within the person). This does not negate or diminish the (ontological) dignity of these individuals. For example, a person who does not develop and improve themselves, thereby not manifesting their dignity in this aspect of their humanity, is not deprived of dignity (or part of their dignity). They possess human dignity, which for some reason does not manifest in a certain element of their humanity (through a specific attribute or attributes of human dignity), because it is covered/suppressed by these causes-obstacles. Such a person does not utilize the fullness of their dignity of being human, which may threaten their personal dignity – moral, social, or existential.

The above features (inalienable, inherent, universal, non-gradable, and obliging) and attributes of human dignity form our personalist concept of human dignity. The dignity of the human person is the basis for certain rights belonging to every human being, particularly:

- the right to freedom, including freedom of conscience and religion, arising from the gift of free will and the ability to live a conscious moral life;
- the right to equality, including equal treatment, equal opportunities, and satisfaction of basic needs, due to the inalienable, inherent, universal, and non-gradable character of human dignity;

- the right to education and knowledge acquisition as a consequence of rationality and the possibility of development and self-improvement;
- the right to live in society and various communities, including and especially in the family, due to the relational nature of the human being;
- the right to happiness in connection with development and self-improvement and the relational nature of the human being.

Human dignity understood as ontological dignity is inviolable (nothing can, by definition, violate its features or attributes), whereas the rights derived from dignity are violable. The human dignity is not socially, economically or politically entangled, but the rights that result from human dignity are entangled in various ways, and therefore dependent and capable of being violated.

2. HUMAN DIGNITY AND CONCEPTS OF HUMAN NATURE IN ECONOMICS

It follows from the above considerations concerning human dignity that the understanding of this concept and the meaning attributed to it depend on the adopted concept of human nature, because the idea of human dignity is inseparably linked to the concept of the human person. Among various possibilities for studying the significance of dignity in economics (cf. Mazurek, 2001; White, 2009), we have therefore chosen the fundamental perspective: an analysis of the concepts of human nature in contemporary schools and currents of economics in terms of their reference to the above-adopted concept of human dignity.

A given image of human nature in economics may explicitly or implicitly:

- refer, adequately or inadequately, to the features defining human dignity,

- attribute or not attribute (and thereby distort the understanding of dignity) to the human being specific attributes of their dignity,
- promote the protection or violation of human rights derived from their dignity.

Below, the individual images of human nature in contemporary currents and schools of economics will be analyzed precisely in this key.

2.1 Human dignity and homo oeconomicus

Homo oeconomicus (economic man) is a concept of human behavior in the neoclassical (or even broader, mainstream) school of economics, which dominates contemporary economic discourse. Its fundamental assumption about human nature is rationality—one of the attributes of human dignity. But how does mainstream economics interpret rationality?

1. The key observation is that rationality does not concern the choice of action goals but solely the means or methods of achieving them. The goal is predetermined, closely linked to a utilitarian concept of human nature, namely the maximization of one's own utility (Horodecka, 2022). It is assumed that the means employed to achieve the goal should be minimized (Koslowski, 1992, p. 74). This approach excludes feelings, emotions, and moral judgments from the decision-making process (Stępień & Szarzec, 2007, p. 15). In this context, the concept of homo oeconomicus refers to so-called instrumental rationality (Roncaglia, 2009, p. 501), or Zweckrationalität (Goldschmidt & Nutzinger, 2009, p. 9), which focuses on finding the shortest path to a predetermined goal – the higher utility of individual choices – even if this path involves moral “shortcuts”, as exemplified below. This form of rationality should be distinguished from value-oriented rationality (Wertrationalität) (Weber & Winckelmann, 2009, p. 12). Instrumental rationality is certainly not an attribute of human dignity in the context of Christian philosophy, as it

clearly impoverishes and distorts the image of a person engaged in economic processes. Instead, it has become a tool of economic imperialism within the Chicago School, whose leading theorist Gary Becker stated that the economic approach to human nature and its rationality is so capacious that it can be applied to all human behavior (Becker, 1976).

2. Actions understood in this way as rational can lead to results that are inconsistent with the common good or may neglect the moral consequences and premises of choosing a particular goal. This does not align with the accepted concept of human dignity, for whom deep relationships with others and adherence to one's moral commitments are important. For example, a consumer might decide to purchase food that suits personal preferences but has a destructive impact on the development of emerging countries, or opt for a holiday that generates high emissions. From an investor's perspective, it could involve buying shares in a company whose operations harm the environment or rely on the exploitation of slave labor in supply chains. Such self-interested actions significantly contribute to the destruction of the common good – both in environmental terms (climate as a common good) and social terms (implicitly accepting unjust and undignified treatment of people and their labor), which undermines the foundation of human development and, consequently, human dignity.

Third, rationality in the concept of *homo oeconomicus* determines human choice processes by assuming that individuals are slaves to their own preferences. This introduces a form of determinism in their actions, as discussed by Haaker (2013), which, as behavioral economics indicates, fails to achieve beneficial solutions in certain situations (e.g., the prisoner's dilemma). Moreover, the preferences assumed here reflect the utility of individual choices for the person but not their moral, relational, or emotional value, which may not necessarily be connected to the outcomes of actions but to the principles upon which they

are based. It is difficult to attribute utility to choices made not for the sake of their outcomes (measured by utility) but out of a sense of moral duty, based on what the individual deems right in their conscience. An example might be choosing meat substitute products, not because they taste better to the consumer, but in the name of higher values – such as rejecting violence against animals. This, again, departs from the concept of human dignity, which inherently includes inner freedom – the ability to make choices based on their righteousness, not merely on benefit.

4. It is also assumed that individual rationality automatically translates (as a result of market forces) into general rationality (Horodecka, 2022, p. 86). Therefore, the maximization of individual utility will lead to the maximization of overall utility. This approach overlooks the role of interactions between the individual and society in building the common good. Such a perspective stems from the neoclassical concept of society “composed of individuals independent of others (atomistic), competitive towards each other, and egoistically oriented towards their own interests” (Horodecka, 2022, p. 89). All this contradicts the relational nature of humans as one of the attributes of dignity.

5. The concept of *homo oeconomicus* inherently attributes greater possibilities for happiness and development to individuals based on their income level. The higher the income, the more a person is able to achieve happiness. This diminishes the significance of attaining happiness and satisfaction through other choices of important relevance to economic processes, economic development, and the common good – for instance, building relationships with others or acting for the benefit of others. While one might find a place for such actions in the choice of so-called utility of leisure time and the income earned during that time, it is worth noting that the importance of this leisure time (which could be devoted to starting a family, engaging with local and global communities, etc.) is not recognized in terms of creating the common good or even for the economy. It is as if this time is

removed from the economic cycle. Such assumptions are inconsistent with the concept of human dignity, according to which, although the importance of the material foundations of human existence is acknowledged, individuals are not limited in achieving happiness – understood in a eudaimonic sense – by the amount of income they earn.

Another example of the negative consequences of adopting the homo oeconomicus model in mainstream economics is the undervaluation of human labor. Orthodox economists treat human labor merely as one of the basic factors of production, rather than as a value significant from the perspective of human dignity. This approach to human labor fosters the violation of workers' rights (e.g., the right to fair remuneration), which are part of social human rights within the aforementioned rights to live in society and various communities.

It is worth emphasizing, as other authors have noted (Brzezicka & Wiśniewski, 2014), that homo oeconomicus is more of an anomaly in human behavior than a rule. Nevertheless, it was accepted in its practical application as if this truly represented human nature. Only behavioral economics, by providing convincing experiments, has criticized the fundamental assumptions upon which it was based. Kargol-Wasiluk et al. (2018) reach similar conclusions, highlighting that homo oeconomicus is a model of “oversimplified human nature” omitting many characteristics observed by behavioral economics.

2.2 Human dignity in alternative concepts of human nature in economics

Contemporary alternative and critical perspectives on the concept of homo oeconomicus in economics include the approaches of behavioral economics, evolutionary economics, feminist economics, ecological economics, and humanistic economics (Horodecka, 2022). These are characterized below in relation to the adopted

definition of human dignity, its specific attributes, or the human rights derived from them.

2.2.1 The behavioral concept of human nature

The behavioral concept of human nature (Altman, 2016; Camerer, 1999; Horodecka, 2022) is, to some extent, akin to the neoclassical concept, as it assumes that individuals primarily seek satisfaction and happiness, which they can achieve not so much through utility maximization but through satisfactory choices. It is thus “an attempt at reconciling homo oeconomicus with the concept of human nature prevailing in psychology and based on the cognitive behavioral paradigm” (Horodecka, 2022, p. 136), or, as Camerer put it, “a reunification of psychology and economics, rather than a brand new synthesis” (Camerer, 1999, p. 10575). According to proponents of this approach, individuals are only seemingly autonomous in these pursuits, as they are, in reality, subject to the laws governing their nature. Behavioral economics attempts to describe these laws to provide empirical foundations for the concept of human nature. This aligns with the scientific approach characteristic of psychological sciences, strictly consistent with the behavioral-cognitive psychological paradigm initiated by Bandura (1969), which underpins the concept of human nature in behavioral economics. Therefore, we can only speak about human nature in terms of what we can empirically confirm and prove using scientific methods.

In this framework, we cannot discuss considerations of dignity, which here is merely a theoretical construct, as its existence cannot be proven by human nature alone. Therefore, human dignity per se is not a topic of interest for behavioral economists, who focus on understanding human behaviors. However, they recognize important manifestations of it, including morality (Kargol-Wasiluk et al., 2018), shaped not only externally by social value systems and norms but also by internal value systems and emotions. These

are important prerequisites for discussing morality (it is through the emotions our behavior evokes in others, and consequently in ourselves, that we know and learn that we have done something wrong, even before we consciously realize it).

In behavioral economics, certain important attributes of dignity are considered, including the relational nature of human nature, as relationships are seen as sources of positive experiences or satisfying human needs. Discovered laws concerning human actions indicate that individuals are not selfish, as they perceive others not only as objects that increase their utility but also as subjects whose interests should be considered. This could suggest possible references to the Kantian concept of dignity. However, in behavioral economics, non-selfish actions result from the fact that they allow individuals to function better and survive (Illies, 2015). They have acquired these abilities in the evolutionary process as a species of “cooperative primates” (de Waal, 2006, p. 79). Because the key is the interest of the whole – survival – individuals who do not adhere to principles of cooperation will be “punished” for their actions, regardless of whether this punishment is in the interests of particular individuals. Although the necessity of cooperation fosters the establishment of interpersonal relationships, it also poses dangers to human freedom as a community member.

Some behavioral economists critically address such a concept of human nature, suggesting that justice or altruism are not genetically conditioned but are shaped in the process of socialization (Fehr, 2006). It is upbringing and economic culture, through which the rules of reciprocity are transmitted during socialization, that are responsible for shaping economic, social, and moral behaviors (Cialdini, 2017).

In the behavioral concept of human nature, there exists, on one hand, the idea of biologically conditioned self-interest aligned with the interest of the whole, which promotes a cooperative stance (Krupp et al., 2005, p. 828). On the other hand, some believe that cooperation is culturally conditioned, and thus individuals

acting justly or altruistically do not do so because of biological determinism. They utilize mechanisms discovered during socialization to protect something essential to their dignity—namely, their subjectivity as community members. This second understanding of the conditions of cooperation infringes less upon human rights to freedom and provides a better approximation of interpersonal relations than the concept of *homo oeconomicus*, which does not consider the interests and needs of others, focusing solely on self-interest.

2.2.2 The human being according to evolutionary economics

In evolutionary economics, the human being is perceived as a diverse entity whose heterogeneity results from the influence of culture and time. They are treated as a “holon” with many different dimensions, rooted in culture and time (Aruka & Mimkes, 2006), society, the world, and the environment. Evolutionary economics considers the human being in the context of their surroundings. Just as humans pass on information about themselves through biological reproduction, so social genes (quasi-genes) transmit important information for societal integration—norms, customs, routines, institutions, and economic systems (Horodecka, 2015, 2017, 2022, p. 156). Its representatives emphasize the moral character of economics itself (“economics is inherently a moral science”; Boulding, 1969), and therefore also of its fundamental agent: the enterprise (Davis, 2011). The economic entity is guided by morality, values, and ethical choices, and possesses self-consciousness that goes beyond mere self-awareness. For Boulding, it is precisely this ability—to make ethical judgments—that is crucial and makes the world of ethical values the driving and organizing force in human life. It is these shared values—resulting from such abilities of individuals and communities—that mean we cannot explain even the simplest systems, such as exchange systems, without

considering them. According to Boulding, values give social organizations the character of evolving systems.

Therefore, for Boulding, speaking of individual choices oriented towards pleasure or utility, as if independent of the system in which they are made, makes little sense, because even “personal” preferences are part of the culture in which we grow up. That is, they can survive only if the culture allows them to. This is similar to how our values are shaped, which we derive from common values. Cultures are not collections of mechanically connected elements but holistic structures that are self-sustaining in terms of integrating principles. Values and value judgments play a key role in integrating human systems.

The multidimensional perspective on the human being is a strong point of this concept, especially compared with the homo oeconomicus model. It emphasizes the integrity of human development with their environment, rooting the human being in their surroundings, making them more attentive rather than isolated from other living beings or nature. They do not treat them instrumentally from a position of power but rather recognize mutual connections. Recognizing one’s own biological nature is an affirmation of creation and the corporeality of the human being, so important in understanding human dignity in Christian thought (which is firmly opposed to the Gnostic dichotomy of matter and spirit). In this approach, the human being is not an isolated entity guided only by utility directed at themselves but necessarily considers others and their values. Individual values are part of those that enable the whole to integrate (this has an almost Christian analogy – people as part of the Body of Christ, the Church, and its call to unity).

The relationship of the human being to others develops from the above characterization of their relationship to the environment. Evolutionary economics assumes mutual interconnection and co-development of individual elements of society, considering their variability over time, adaptability, and ability to cooperate

and compete (Horodecka, 2020). Thus, it implicitly refers to the attributes of dignity: relationality and human development, as well as the creation and respect of norms (not necessarily moral ones).

In evolutionary economics, reason is attributed a role beyond the function of a “calculator” present in neoclassical economics. It constitutes a factor of self-fulfillment for the human being, similar to humanistic economics. Rationality, going beyond utility calculation, touches on other issues, such as rules and norms in society and organizations that promote or hinder development.

Evolutionary economics emphasizes an important attribute of dignity: human development. In this context, a characteristic question is what positive and negative impacts the environment can have on the chances of human development and potential. The issue of human development finds fuller reflection in humanistic economics.

2.2.3 Feminist economics on human nature

Feminist economics attaches particular importance to the aspect of relationality and “care” in defining the human being, closely aligned with the so-called care economics (Gubitzer & Mader, 2011). This is reflected in the assumptions concerning human nature. In this approach, it is noted that a human does not appear in the world as a “finished product” but as a child who needs the care and concern of others. This obvious observation is not, however, widespread in economics, where the human being is presented as a ready economic agent. Feminist economics rightly advocates that issues of individual development should be considered from the very foundations of economic theories. In this aspect of the feminist approach, we can discern an important attribute of human dignity: engaging in close relationships with others based on care and concern, which can be relationships of love.

Focusing on human needs rather than preferences, and attempting to define and discuss them, has led to the publication of Nussbaum's article on basic human needs in the flagship journal of feminist economists (Nussbaum, 2003). Within these, we find references to many attributes of dignity (e.g., human development, free will) and rights derived from the definition and attributes of dignity (the right to equality, development, dignified work), which is an important step towards recognizing human dignity in economics, even if it is not explicitly named.

Feminist economists address situations where the issue of possession is more important than the fundamental attributes and rights arising from dignity. They point out that the realization of economic interests often occurs at the expense of the basic rights of people with less political or economic power. Economic inequality strongly limits the rights of the weaker, particularly children, the elderly, the sick, migrants, and also women, even though they have the same dignity and the right to it is constitutionally enshrined. It is no surprise that representatives of this economic trend in the program journal *Feminist Economics* refer to Sen, who noted that the mere possession of freedom and the protection of rights are not sufficient (*Congratulations to Amartya Sen*, 1999). Therefore, economics should focus on ensuring that everyone has the choice of various capabilities of being someone or doing something in life (Sen, 2008), especially that this encounters many economic, cultural, and social constraints. In this case, the egalitarian attribute of human dignity (in terms of opportunities) is evident.

Within feminist economics, the issue of human responsibility for the environment is also addressed—not because subjectivity is recognized in it, but rather because it is, like many other aspects, a manifestation of inequality in interpersonal relations, leading to the exploitation of the weaker by the stronger. The environment often bears the costs of satisfying economic interests, and environmental changes primarily affect less well-off people, including

women and children to a greater extent. Economists of this trend draw attention to the linkage of social injustice with ecological problems, which often result from the interests of stronger market entities (e.g., large corporations oriented towards increasing shareholder profits), rather than the interests of residents living near company sites or employees. Such activities can lead to ecological disasters that most affect the poorest strata of the population, including women, due to both their traditional responsibilities and the fact that the burden of feeding and raising children often falls on them.

Economists of this current (e.g., Nelson, 2003) indicate the necessity of perceiving the world as open, interconnected, and flexible, in contrast to the neoclassical approach, which treats it as a closed system of laws and mechanisms, free from valuations of form and quality, which can be studied using tools of mathematical theory and econometrics. In this postulate, the approach of feminist economics to human moral responsibility is revealed, indirectly expressing concern for creation (human being and nature), which provides the basis for human life in society.

Feminist economics also honors human dignity in the sense that it does not attribute freedom, prosperity, and rights to a person based on their economic merits. On the contrary, it recognizes that their basic rights can be violated as a result of overriding economic interests. For a person to exist, develop, and survive, they need the care of many people. However, the economy does not place great value on such actions, which leads to the depreciation of work performed within care (e.g., at home) (Himmelweit, 1995). Recognizing this aspect is extremely important because the consequences can lead to a person, in situations where they have no "merits" towards the economy, being deprived of their basic rights resulting from dignity. Feminist economics recognizes such inequalities and the resulting situations that negatively affect human dignity, preventing individuals from accessing education, self-determination, and fulfilling basic needs (Nussbaum, 2003).

Again, it “embodies” the human being, indicating that a person can be severely limited in their ability to realize their potential, and that it is not desire, choice, or whim that causes us not to “realize” our humanity, but existing systemic inequalities based on categorical differences – that is, predefining who will have greater development opportunities and who will not. Such an approach emphasizes an important dimension of human dignity: in its essence, it is unrelated to visible features such as skin color, gender, or origin. Divisions along these lines seem to the creators of feminist economics to be degrading to human dignity and require counteraction at the systemic level.

2.2.4 The concept of human nature in ecological economics

Ecological economics, in its heterodox variant, shares common roots with evolutionary economics (Boulding, 1991; Costanza et al., 1992; Daly, 2007; Georgescu-Roegen, 1977; Norgaard, 2010), which distinguishes it from environmental economics that remains within and draws from mainstream foundations (Screpanti et al., 2005). In its heterodox approach, ecological economics attaches particular importance to the role of values and ethical norms in economics, expressed in the adopted hierarchy of means and ends, where economics serves important goals established at the level of ethics, religion, and philosophy (Daly & Farley, 2011). This stance directly influences the concept of human nature proposed within its framework. One significant achievement of this branch of economics is the understanding that not only currently living people have value but also future generations. Consequently, ecological economics aims to include this perspective in its theoretical foundations.

Economics cannot, therefore, limit itself solely to considering choices made by individuals at the present moment, ignoring the consequences of these choices for future generations. Future generations also have the right to development, happiness, and

the satisfaction of basic needs, as rights arising from the attributes of their dignity. To achieve this, higher ethical values such as justice must be considered fundamental principles in economics and adopted individually and collectively. Within ecological economics, therefore, an attribute of human dignity is recognized in the form of human responsibility for the natural environment and harmonious coexistence with it, respecting ethical principles regardless of utility.

It has also been pointed out that excessive consumerism poses a threat to individual development and that relationships between people should be considered in economics, especially in the context of their role as responsible citizens (Horodecka, 2022). This perspective derives from the Aristotelian concept of *homo politicus* (Faber et al., 2002, 2024; Nyborg, 2000). According to these approaches, the human being is not only responsible for adhering to principles towards other individuals but also needs the community to develop and shape themselves. This directly relates to the attributes of human dignity, which include the right to live in society and co-shape it in a way that enacted laws are consistent with moral law, or at least not contradictory to it. Moreover, the human being takes responsibility for their environment, not merely passively adapting to it.

2.2.5 Humanistic economics and human nature

Humanistic economics encompasses those trends in economics that adopt a humanistic concept of human nature – normative, multilayered, and multilevel – emphasizing self-development, self-realization, and human morality (Horodecka, 2022, p. 161). This concept, based on humanistic psychology (represented by Maslow, Rogers, and Adler, among others), assumes that the human being strives for recognition, self-realization, fulfillment in life, and transcending themselves. They deserve support and the

creation of conditions that enable them to utilize their potential and achieve self-realization (human flourishing).

Hindering human development, also due to prevailing economic relations – for example, undignified wages, poor working conditions, or lack of access to education – is noticed and addressed by humanistic economists. Deep inequalities, material deprivation, and objectification resulting from economic relations are perceived as disturbing and incongruent with the deep conviction – arising from one of the attributes of human dignity – that every person deserves, by virtue of being human, the right to development, happiness, and the satisfaction of basic needs.

Not only economic deprivation but also excess can infringe upon this right to development. Humanistic economists recognize the necessity of moderation, expressed in distinguishing morally good needs from undesirable wants (O’Boyle, 2011). This relates to the concept of the “dual self”, where the “higher self” strives for development, while the “lower self” is guided by self-preservation instincts and seeks personal gain (Lutz et al., 1988, p. 17). To overcome this difficulty, the human being needs constant self-improvement, nurturing connections with their true “Self”, which requires transcendence through love. These enduring relationships enable conscious living and decision-making aligned with one’s life goals (Horodecka, 2022, p. 166).

According to Lutz, one of the main representatives of this trend, a “truly human economy” must primarily be based on a convincing image of what it means to be human, and thus on a satisfactory philosophical anthropology (Lutz, 1993, 1999; Lutz & Lux, 1979). It must capture what is characteristically human in a manner consistent with common-sense knowledge based on everyday experience (Lutz, 1999). In Lutz’s view, humanistic economics assumes that the human being has the capacity for critical self-awareness, abstract thinking, autonomous will, moral freedom, treating others as subjects, empathy, and understanding others’ perspectives. These features, relating to some attributes of

human dignity, allow for transcending selfishness and manifest through moral commitment and altruistic behavior (Lutz, 1995).

For economics to be more human, it should also be perceived as a moral science, taking into account social norms and focusing on the common good. Failure to consider values such as justice, community, equality, and dignity in economic policy can lead to the erosion of these values and the creation of an individualistic, competitive society driven by a lust for power and consumer greed (Lutz, 1995).

3. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The main aim of this work was to present and compare references to human dignity in economic theory. To this end, we examined concepts of human nature in contemporary schools and currents of economics. Referencing these images of human nature to the category of dignity was made possible by distinguishing two levels of characterizing dignity (defining its features and attributes) and adopting the assumption that human dignity is the basis of human rights. Using this analytical tool, we have proven the thesis that the perception of human nature concerning its dignity in the examined schools and currents of economics is diverse and thus heterogeneous.

The way dignity is approached in individual concepts of human nature was variously aligned with the previously established criteria concerning the features and attributes of dignity, as well as the rights derived from it. The economic man model (*homo oeconomicus*) deviated most strongly from those criteria in which the concept of human rationality has serious weaknesses with respect to human dignity. On the behavioral model, the criterion of free will was not met, but at the same time the depiction of the model human there allowed us to assume the existence of other attributes of dignity that follow from natural laws rather than

a choice. Evolutionary economics, by developing the assumption about human rationality as adaptation, drew attention to important attributes of human nature, such as relationality, necessary for survival, as well as creativity and the pursuit of development. In the remaining concepts, attention is drawn to the emergence of a new element in the portrayal of dignity, namely, beyond the presence of numerous attributes of dignity, a focus on promoting the protection of certain human rights derived from dignity.

Particular attention should be paid to the concept of human nature in humanistic economics, because it is only within its framework that direct references are made to the category of human dignity. Thus, it is the most consistent with the postulates of Christian personalism and Catholic social teaching concerning human dignity. Within this current in economics, the necessity of the most far-reaching changes in perceiving economics as a science is also proposed, advocating its recognition as a moral science.

The presented analysis of the concept of human nature in economics in relation to its dignity only outlines this important issue. They show that there are so many different concepts of human nature in economic theory, which is why the category of dignity of the human person appears as an important category for economists' inquiries. Therefore, further in-depth studies are needed concerning both the concepts of human nature in economics and the relationship between these concepts and human dignity. It is also worth considering the issue of referring in economic theories to the human being as a person rather than an individual. In this case, works within economic personalism (cf. Grabill, 2003) or personalist economics (cf. O'Boyle, 2014) can serve as a guide.

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