UNIT 1. THE DIGNITY OF THE PERSON

1. What is a person?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights concedes the status of person to every human being and thus grants them a series of universal and inviolable rights that presuppose dignity. By the mere fact of existing every person has dignity, a value that makes her worthy of respect.

What does “person” mean? The term person has its origins in ancient Greece, but it was Roman civilization that extended the usage and meaning of person as the subject of rights, that is, an individual that is not simply a thing, an animal or a slave. Person meant the Roman citizen that possessed the traits that made him a person: freedom and dignity.

What makes a human being a person? The philosopher Boethius (480-524 b.C.) defined person as the individual of rational nature. This implies that the special value or dignity of persons is derived from the possession of reason. Thus reason and freedom, which would not exist without reason, are the fundamental characteristics that turn human beings into person.

By the mere fact of being born a human, an individual is considered a person. However, throughout history, and even today, there have been many societies that do not recognize this. In ancient Rome slaves were not considered persons and were treated as animals, even though they were human beings. The person has “something more” than a slave: persons are beings with dignity. In this way, being considered a person confers a human being a “plus” that improves her status.

2. Characteristics of the person

The fundamental characteristics of a person are the following:

- **Individual being.** Each person is an independent, unique and unrepeatable individual, different from all the others because she has her own identity.

- **Social being.** Although they are individuals, persons cannot exist separately, only in relationship with other people. Our parents, friends, teachers and the rest of individuals that surround us make up the social environment in which we develop our lives and also fulfill a social role.

- **Rational being.** Persons are endowed with conscience and intelligence, but the trait that distinguishes us from the rest of beings is reason, that is, the capacity to think, question the world and ourselves and find explanations for the phenomena that we experience. Reason has been traditionally considered the main feature that makes a human being a person, a “superior” being in comparison with things and animals.
• **Free being.** Unlike automatons or robots, persons have freedom, which enable them to take decisions and chose their own actions among diverse possibilities without being determined to act automatically in a certain way.

• **Moral and responsible being.** As persons can decide what to do in life, they can also distinguish between good and evil, between correct and wrongful actions. Consequently, persons are responsible for their actions in the sense that they must account for them before the others.

• **Being endowed with dignity.** Owing to the fact that a person is rational, independent and free, she is endowed with dignity, a special and absolute value by which she deserves respect. According to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, a person is an end in itself, not an instrument to get something else. A good way to understand the value of human dignity is the idea that things can have a price, but persons have value, not price.

We are persons not only because we have been born human, but also because we create a life project taking responsibility for our own free actions. People make themselves, that is, they build their own personal identity throughout their life. Every individual must decide freely the kind of person that she wants to become and in this process norms and values come into play.

3. **Personality**

All human beings are persons, which is a common trait, but every person is unique, different from any other and unrepeatable. Each person has a series of physical, psychological and moral characteristics that differentiate her from the other. **Personality or personal identity** is what makes us unique. Personality is the set of stable psychological traits that make up the identity of an individual. Personality or personal identity is constantly evolving and it is the result of the interaction of several factors:

• **Genetic factors.** These are the genetically inherited biological traits that form a person’s basic temperament which, in principle, cannot be changed.

• **Environmental factors.** The influence on an individual exerted by culture, family and social environment, as well as all the experiences that a person goes through in different situations.

Although personality is created by the interaction of all these forces, it does not mean that a person is determined by her genes or by the social environment in which she grows up. All these factors influence or condition our personal identity, but do not determine it completely. Individuals build their own personality consciously through their actions, that is, they possess a free will that enables them to choose their acts, therefore they can self-determine or determine themselves as the desire. Nonetheless, the circumstances in which a person’s life is developed impose a series of limitations to her freedom, within which she has a range of possibilities or alternatives among which to chose.

To establish our own identity implies facing and answering questions such as: **Who am I? What makes me different from others? Which way should I take in life? What kind of person do I want to**
become? What values are important for me? Which behaviour models am I following or wish to follow? The construction of one’s own identity is a process where reason plays an important role since rational thinking and reflection are the best tools we have to guide our lives where we really want them to lead, truly using our freedom instead of letting others lead us and being mere spectators of our own life.

4. Adolescence and personality

Even though the construction of one’s own personality is a process that never ends, there is a period or stage in every person’s life that is crucial in that process: adolescence. From the moment they are born, children are immersed into what is called the socialization process, which is a complex process by which every human being acquires the necessary cultural information to integrate and develop into society, which includes language, knowledge and skills, but especially a set of values and norms. Children learn how to behave thanks to the socialization agents, fundamentally the family, school, group of friends and the media. However, a time comes in every individual’s life when she acquires all necessary elements to begin to take control over her own existence.

Adolescence is a key and necessary stage in the construction of every person’s identity for it is the time when basis is laid for future development. In adolescence a series of changes:

- **Biological changes.** Body’s maturation.
- **Psychological changes.** Development of new intellectual skills and the augmentation of self-awareness and awareness of the world.
- **Social changes.** Transformations in the relationships towards parents and friends, so that independence with respect to family increases and greater identification with the group of friends appears.

Adolescence is therefore a critical period in which the individual abandons childhood and tries to find her own identity and place in the world. During childhood one is under the adults’ protection and guidance and learns series of norms and behaviour patterns; the adolescents, however, discover their capacity to understand reality and their freedom and instead of simply accepting the world as it is, they question the reasons behind all that they have learned. Hence the rebelliousness and inconformism typical of adolescence, since every subject seeks her independence and freedom and wishes to become an adult. Thus coming of age is not only a matter of bodily growth but also of usage of one’s own capacity to think rationally and independently.

5. Heternomy and autonomy

Adolescence is the process of coming of age, but in philosophical terms, this is not simply turning 18. Kant defined the process by which someone stops being a minor to reach the age of majority or maturity as the pass from heternomy to autonomy.
**Heteronomy.** A heteronomous person is one that receives the norms of behaviour externally and accept them uncritically. Such person follows behaves obeying other people's orders or tradition or simple desires, in any case, the heteronomous person is always carried away by something external and does not control her own life. The reasons or motives for their heteronomous behaviour is mere obedience, fear of punishment, a desire to please other people or simple lazyness or convenience. The autonomous subject is not authentically free and remains a minor in a moral sens.

**Autonomy.** The autonomous persons, on the contrary, gives herself her own norms and rules freely after having reflected and decides for herself what to do in every situation, not because something external determines her to do so, but because she follows her own criterion. However, acting autonomously does not mean to “do what one feels like” in any occasion, but it consists in acting complying with rules that one has prescribed to oneself making use of rone’s own reason. That is why when someone takes a decision autonomously is because that is what one oughts to do, taking into consideration that our actions have an impact on ourselves and other people’s lives.

According to Kant the "minority" is the inability to use one's own understanding without another person's guidance because due to a lack of decisiveness, courage or effort one feels comfortable depending on others and letting them decide what to think and how to act. A completely developed person is an autonomous subject that is capable of analysing critically the world, use reason to orientate oneself and decide which way to take in life.

**6. Ethical values**

We human beings come to this world without instructions and neither have we a set of instincts that guide our behaviour; that is why we need to learn for ourselves how to act in every situation. Human life implies taking decisions all the time and, although many of those decisions are taken almost automatically, in many circumstances we are presented with problems that put us to the test. Some of the most difficult situations in a person's life are precisely those in which we have to decide what is good and what is wrong in a moral sense.

The reason behind this is that we have a **moral dimension.** Besides being free and being able to decide what to do in our life we have a specific human capacity that animals do not possess, that enables us to distinguish between good and evil, between what we actually do and what we should do. This means that we are capable of evaluating actions as just or unjust, good or wrong, honest and dishonest, virtuous or vitious, etc.

When we have to act we choose and decide what to do. This choice is not randomly taken since we are rational beings. If we have serveral alternatives we select that one that we prefer because it has “something” that makes it better than others. That “something” is its value; for example, the generosity of a friend, the beauty of a picture, the utility of a pen, etc. **Values are special qualities that we recognise in objects, people or actions.** There are various kinds of values, such as economic or aesthetic values, but the ones we are interested in are moral or ethical values.
Moral values make up the guide we use to evaluate and improve one’s own behaviour and also that of others. Human beings appreciate moral values for themselves, not because they provide us with some sort of selfish benefit. For example, values such as justice, generosity, honesty, sincerity, dignity, equality can be considered universal values in the sense that any person desire them and they should be respected by anyone because they are essential to promote a harmonious coexistence and personal development.

Regardless of whether they aware of it or not, every person has a hierarchy of values, that is, they consider some values more important than others. Such hierarchy allows us to take decisions when conflicts appear in our lives. Reflecting critically about the values that our environment is promoting and that we accept is a fundamental task to attain a more autonomous and happier society.

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

Look for examples of historical situations or contexts in which groups of human beings have not been considered persons and submitted to a inhuman treatment.

Activity 2

If we established contact with an alien civilization, would we consider them persons? If an artificial intelligence with capacities equivalent that of human beings were developed, could it be considered a person?

Activity 3

What does the expression “Every person has a price” mean? Do you agree with it?

Activity 4

Order the following factors according to the importance you think the have in the formation of your personal identity

Genetic inheritance – Relationship with friends – Family environment – School – Neighbourhood – Characters in movies, TV series, video games

Activity 5

Which traits of your personality would you like to change and why? Do you think it is possible to change them? How could you change them?

Activity 6
Make up a list of moral or ethical values and organise them in order of importance. Explain the reasons for your choices.

**Activity 7**

Are moral values equal for all human beings, that is, universal, or do they vary according to culture or education and therefore are relative?