

Ethics at a Glance

Principle of Respect for Persons

In its simplest form, **respect for persons** maintains that human beings have intrinsic and unconditional moral worth and should always be treated as if there is nothing of greater value than they are. This principle rests on the unique capability of human beings to behave as rational agents, that is, self-aware and capable of objective thought and the ability to reason. The ability to reason is believed to give humanity an intrinsic dignity that must be respected above all other considerations.

This inherent value attributed to human beings means that each person is an end in him or herself and should not be treated solely as a means to some other end. It also implies that all persons have equal worth and should be treated equitably and in ways that we ourselves would want to be treated. Principles of truth telling, loyalty, privacy, and confidentiality are all rooted in this basic requirement of unconditional respect and value.

Finally, as rational agents, we are free and capable of making our own decisions and choosing actions based on our own goals and reasoning. In other words, we are self-determining or autonomous. The principle of respect for persons affirms the primary importance of allowing individuals to exercise their moral right of **self-determination**. To violate their ability to be self-determining is to treat them as less than persons. In doing so we deprive them of their essential dignity.

The concept of **autonomy** is an important extension of this principle. You act autonomously when your actions are the result of your own deliberation and choices. Yet there are many ways in which autonomy can be compromised. Likewise, there are justifiable restrictions that can be placed on individual autonomy. For example, **paternalism** is the principle that allows a physician to act contrary to a patient's wishes if there is evidence that the patient is not acting in his or her own best interests and on the basis of a higher level of expertise. Other allowable restrictions to autonomy include the **harm principle**, which protects others from harm; the **principle of legal moralism**, which allows society to render an act illegal on the basis of social values and judgments; and the **welfare principle**, which allows autonomy to be restricted for the benefit of others (Munson, 2004)

For more on the principle of respect for persons and autonomy see:

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

<http://www.seop.leeds.ac.uk/entries/personal-autonomy/>

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/autonomy-moral/>

Ascension Health

http://www.ascensionhealth.org/ethics/public/key_principles/respect_persons.asp

<http://www.ascensionhealth.org/ethics/public/issues/autonomy.asp>

University of Washington School of Medicine

<http://eduserv.hscer.washington.edu/bioethics/tools/princpl.html#prin2>