

# Human Dignity & Genetic Enhancement

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# Human Dignity & Genetic Enhancement

## Abstract

The technology of genetic enhancement has manifested the potentials to impact the development of human capacities in such diverse ways that some consider the technology as a possible **threat to human dignity**. The threat at issue assumes the cogency of the very concept of human dignity structured in a certain way and presupposes the concept as supervenient on a specific set of necessary and sufficient capacities or conditions definitive of the sense of humanity embedded in human dignity. **I argue** that the question whether the genetic enhancement might encroach on human dignity is to a large extent dependent on how we frame the notion of human dignity, particularly on whether we are willing to see it as an **elastic concept, capable of evolving in response to the changing environment** and the development of technologies, the technology of genetic enhancement inclusive.

“What ideas, if embraced, would pose the greatest threat to the welfare of humanity?” When the editors of Foreign Policy magazine posed this question to a group of prominent policy intellectuals in 2004, neoconservative thinker Francis Fukuyama chose transhumanism as the world’s most dangerous idea.

In his response to the question, Fukuyama described transhumanism as “a strange liberation movement” that wants “nothing less than to liberate the human race from its biological constraints.” He isn’t alone in his alarm. This year, from the left of the political spectrum, Marcy Darnovsky from the Center for Genetics and Society warned that with the development of new effective gene-editing techniques “we could see the emergence of genetic haves and have-nots, with new forms of inequality and discrimination.”

Transhumanists advocate the advancement and application of modern biotechnology, nanotechnology and information technology to empower human beings to evolve and flourish beyond their current physical, cognitive, psychological and even moral limitations. One of the chief transhumanist objectives is to radically lengthen healthy human life expectancy, enabling people to thrive for hundreds, if not, thousands of years. On the horizon are technologies that can safely and comprehensively edit human genomes to cure illnesses and repair immune responses.

the liberal society that transhumanism's opponents reverse.

One crowning achievement of Enlightenment humanism is the principle of tolerance, of putting up with people who look different, talk differently, worship differently and live differently than we do. In the future, our descendants may not all be unenhanced *Homo sapiens*, but they will still be moral beings who can be held accountable for their actions. There is no *a priori* reason to think that the same liberal political and moral principles that apply to diverse human beings today would not apply to relations among future humans and transhumans.

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## Questions

- (1) What sort of **concept** is *human dignity*?
- (2) How to understand the **controversy** when it is applied to the context of genetic enhancement?
- (3) What sort of dialectical **process** might emerge with regard to the controversy?

Spectrum of the controversy



Genetic enhancement does **not pose a threat** to human dignity & minimal legal censorship is needed.

Threat-opponents

Genetic enhancement should be **judged case by case** & government's policies should vary in different cases.

Most policy-makers

Genetic enhancement **poses a threat** to human dignity & should be banned to a large extent.

Threat-exponents

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## A threat to human dignity?

"It is commonly said that enhancement, cloning and genetic engineering pose **a threat to human dignity**. This is true enough. But the challenge is to say *how* these practices diminish our humanity. What aspects of human freedom or human flourishing do they threaten?"

Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, Ch.1, 2009

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## Useless Concept?

"Appeals to **human dignity** populate the landscape of medical ethics. . . . Is dignity a useful concept for an ethical analysis of medical activities? . . . **Dignity is a useless concept** in medical ethics and can be eliminated without any loss of content."

Ruth Macklin, "Dignity is a useless concept: It means no more than respect for persons or their autonomy," *Editorial, British Medical Journal*, vol 327, Dec 2003

Macklin's central argument: "appeals to dignity are either **vague** restatements of other, more precise, notions or mere slogans that **add nothing** to an understanding."

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## Criticism of Ruth Macklin

**Criticism 1:** “Must we conclude that those human beings who do not yet have the powers of rational autonomy (infants), or who have lost them (those with dementia), or who never had them (those with congenital mental impairment) are beneath human dignity?”

Adam Schulman, “Bioethics and the Question of Human Dignity,” in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 2008

**Criticism 2:** “when medical students practice doing procedures (usually intubation) on newly dead bodies . . . . this situation clearly has nothing to do with respect for autonomy since the objects is no longer a person but a cadaver. . . . [It is merely] to do with respect for the wishes of the living [relatives of the dead].”

Ruth Macklin, “Dignity is a useless concept: It means no more than respect for persons or their autonomy,”  
*Editorial, British Medical Journal*, vol 327, Dec 2003

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## Dynamical Conception of Human Dignity

- 1) Macklin's observation is **true** that it is **vague**
- 2) But it does **not** follow that it is a **useless** concept
- 3) Source of its vagueness: (a) its multi-faceted, contextual meanings.

### Oxford English Dictionary

- ✓ The state or quality of being **worthy of honour or respect**
- ✓ A high rank or position
- ✓ Composed of serious manner or style
- ✓ Sense of pride in oneself; **self-respect**



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## Varieties of Human Dignity

Nordenfelt notes four types of dignity:

- ✓ ***Menschenwuerde***: Possessed by all human beings and cannot be lost as long as the persons exist;
- ✓ **Dignity of merit**: Depending on social rank and formal positions in life;
- ✓ **Dignity of moral stature**: As the result of the moral deeds of the subject;
- ✓ **Dignity of identity**: As the identity and integrity of the subject's body and mind (dependent on one's self-image & others' assessment)

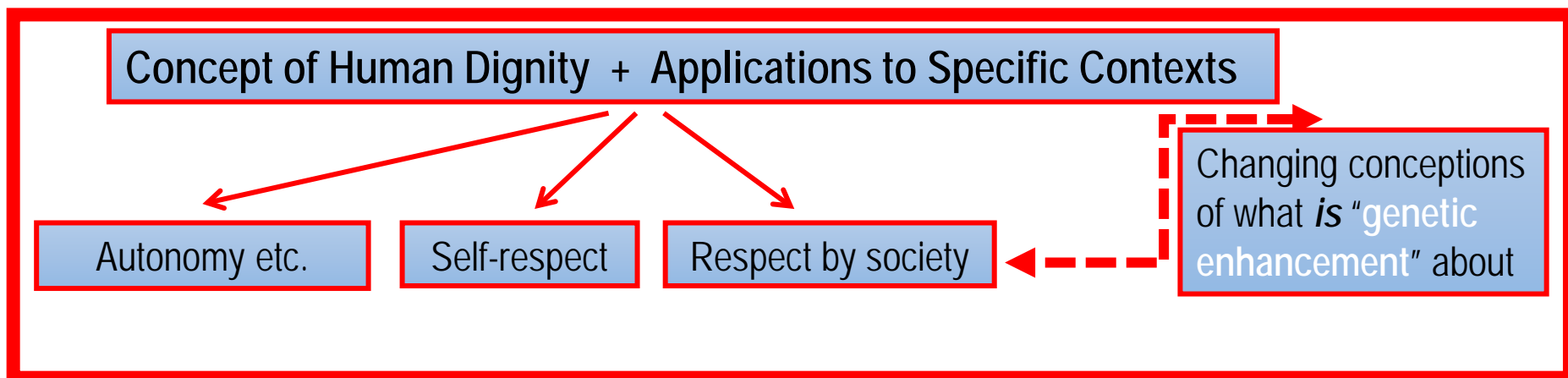
"The Varieties of Dignity," Health Care Analysis, vol 12, 2004

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## Dynamical Conception of Human Dignity

- 4) Source of its vagueness: (b) **(My position)** the application of the concept is not static, but **dynamical**, interacting with the specific contexts in which the concept is applied, *contexts whose conceptions might keep changing*.
- 5) A full-blown sense of dignity requires the **alignment (reciprocal adjustment)** of the core ideas (autonomy, respect by society, self-respect) and re-conceptions of the contexts.



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## Dynamical Conception of Human Dignity

- 6) To a large extent, there is a **reciprocal interaction** between
- ✓ Conceptions of the contexts where human dignity is applied
  - ✓ Nature of autonomy
  - ✓ Self-respect
  - ✓ Respect by society.
- 7) Each component are in **constant evolving adjustment** in order to align with the others & form a coherent perspective, whether it is judged from the perspective of the threat-exponents or threat-opponents.

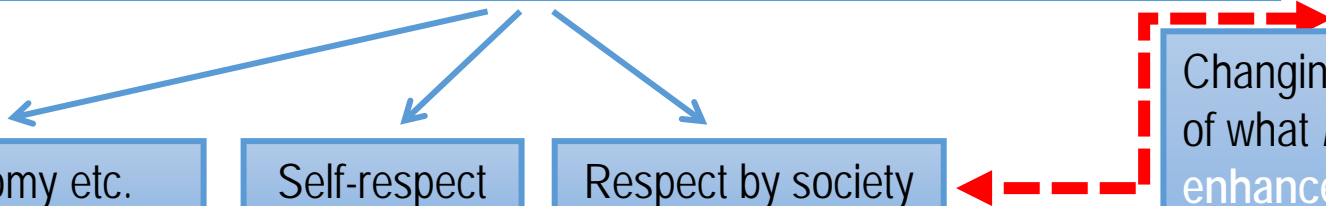
Concept of Human Dignity + Applications to Specific Contexts

Autonomy etc.

Self-respect

Respect by society

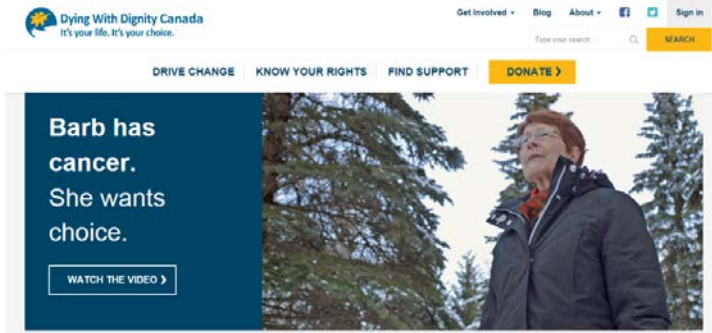
Changing conceptions of what *is* "genetic enhancement" about



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## Example of Euthanasia



<https://vimeo.com/129845732>

- "There is a lot of **fear** in my mind associated with considering my life coming to an end as I expect that it would come to an end with this sarcoma — and that's with a lot of **pain**, with a lot of **organ shutdown**," she says. "So it's **terrifying** to think that, if I don't have **choice**, it could be very nasty, both for myself and for my family members."
- When the Supreme Court of Canada struck down this country's laws against assisted dying, Barb Gibson-Clifford cheered in her kitchen.
- "I was overwhelmed a bit," she says. "It felt so powerful to me that the **nine judges were in consensus** and spoke as an entity."

General Concept of Dignity + Applications to Specific Contexts

Autonomy etc.

Self-respect

Respect by society

Changing conceptions of what *is* "euthanasia" about

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## Example of Changing Conceptions of Euthanasia

1. "Euthanasia" literally means "good death."
2. In the modern usage, it could be seen as a special case of suicide: terminally ill patients ending their lives with the assistance of physicians.
3. It is sometimes called "Physician-assisted suicide."
4. "Suicide with dignity": almost an **oxymoron**, difficult to secure the societal support or respect from society.
5. "**Physician-assisted suicide**": **worse**, dragging physicians into a difficult position

Assisted suicide - Assisted death - Assisted dying

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## Example of Changing Conceptions of Euthanasia

6. “**Physician-assisted death**” **better**, this changes not only the language but also the conception of the context at hand.
7. **Death** in the PAD could now be seen as a natural process (as in the case of advance directive for passive euthanasia/rejecting resuscitation), this would distance the physician from the more controversial issue of suicide.
8. The term “PAD” could be seen as a response to the **reciprocal process of conceptualizing the act of euthanasia as death with dignity**.
9. In PAD, “death” refers to the exact moment when one dies. Seeing a **good death** as **a process of dying well** may further change our understanding of the issue at hand and better consolidate respect from society.

Assisted suicide - Assisted death - Assisted dying

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## Example of Changing Conceptions of Euthanasia

10. Dying as a process now **overlaps** with the span of living, forming a part of it.
11. The slogan of the *Swiss Dignitas*: "To live with dignity, & to die with dignity."
12. **Dying well can now be seen as living well (e.g., painless) to the last minute.**
13. If PAD is re-conceptualized as **physician-assisted (living & dying with dignity)**, its sense of palliative care by doctors till the last minute of living is highlighted as the core understanding of what euthanasia is about. This helps to secure alignment of the societal support (respect by society) through changing the conception of the act of patient's death from suicide to a process of dying with dignity assisted by physicians.
14. If the respect by society is conceptually consolidated, this would further enhance the self-respect. Dying with dignity is a conceptual movement.

Assisted suicide - Assisted death - Assisted dying

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General Concept of Dignity + Applications to Specific Contexts

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graph TD; A[General Concept of Dignity + Applications to Specific Contexts] --> B[Autonomy etc.]; A --> C[Self-respect]; A --> D[Respect by society]; E[Changing conceptions of what is "euthanasia" about] -.-> D;
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Autonomy etc.

Self-respect

Respect by society

Changing conceptions of what *is* "euthanasia" about

General Concept of Dignity + Applications to Specific Contexts

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Autonomy etc.

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## A threat to human dignity?

"It is commonly said that enhancement, cloning and genetic engineering pose **a threat to human dignity**. This is true enough. But the challenge is to say *how* these practices diminish our humanity. What aspects of human freedom or human flourishing do they threaten?"

Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, Ch.1

General Concept of Dignity + Applications to Specific Contexts

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## A threat to human dignity?

“One aspects of our humanity that might be threatened by enhancement and genetic engineering is **our capacity to act freely, for ourselves, by our own efforts, and to consider ourselves responsible – worthy of praise or blame – for the things we do and for the way we are.**

“This suggests that our moral response to enhancement is a response to the **diminished agency of the person whose achievement is enhanced.** The more the athlete relies on drugs or genetic fixes, the less his performance represents his achievement.”

Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, Ch.2

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## Kantian explanation of the dignity of autonomy

“Although in the concept of duty we think of subjection to the law, yet we also at the same time attribute to the person who **fulfils all his duties a certain sublimity and dignity.**

“For it is not in so far as he is **subject to the law** that he has sublimity, but rather in so far, in regard to this very same law, he is at the same time **its author** and **is subordinated to it** only on this ground. We have also shown above how neither fear nor inclination, but **solely reverence for the law**, is the motive which can **give an action moral worth.**

“Our own will, provided it were to act only under the condition of being able to make universal law by means of its maxims – this **ideal will** which can be ours is the proper object of reverence; and **the dignity of man consists precisely in his capacity to make universal law, although only on condition of being himself also subject to the law he makes.**”

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## Kantian explanation of the dignity of autonomy

“And precisely we encounter the paradox that, without any further end or advantage to be attained, the mere dignity of humanity, that is, of rational nature in man – and consequently that reverence for a mere Idea – should function as an inflexible precept for the will; and that it is just this **freedom from dependence on interested motives which constitutes the sublimity of a maxim and the worthiness of every rational subject** to be a law-making member in the kingdom of ends; for otherwise he would have to be regarded as subject only to the law of nature – the law of his own needs.”

Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated H.J. Paton, p. 106

Autonomy -> (ideal) will to act on the universal law -> overcoming animal desires -> transcending the law of (animal) nature -> worthiness of dignity -> sublimity -> on the basis of supernatural existence

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## A threat to human dignity?

“Though there is much to be said for this account, I **do not** think that the main problem with enhancement and genetic engineering is that they **undermine effort and erode human agency**.

“The deeper danger is that they represent a kind of **hyper-agency**, a Promethean aspiration to **remake nature**, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires. The problem is not the drift to mechanism but the **drive to mastery**. And what the drive to mastery misses, and may even destroy, is **an appreciation of the [naturally] gifted character** of human powers and achievements.”

Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, Ch.2

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## A threat to human dignity?

“To acknowledge the giftedness of life is to recognize that our **talents and powers are not wholly our own doing**, nor even fully ours, despite the efforts we expend to develop and to exercise them. It is also to **recognize that not everything in the world is open to any use we may desire or devise**. An appreciation of the giftedness of life constrains the Promethean project and conduces to a certain **humility**. It is, in part, a religious sensibility. But its resonance reaches beyond religion.”

Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, Ch.2

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## A threat to human dignity?

"It might be replied that nontheological notions of sanctity and gift cannot ultimately stand on their own but must lean on borrowed **metaphysical assumptions** that they fail to acknowledge. This is a deep and difficult question that I cannot attempt to resolve here. It is worth noting, however, that liberal thinkers from Locke to Kant to Habermas accept the idea that **freedom depends on an origin or standpoint that exceeds our control.**"

Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, Ch.5

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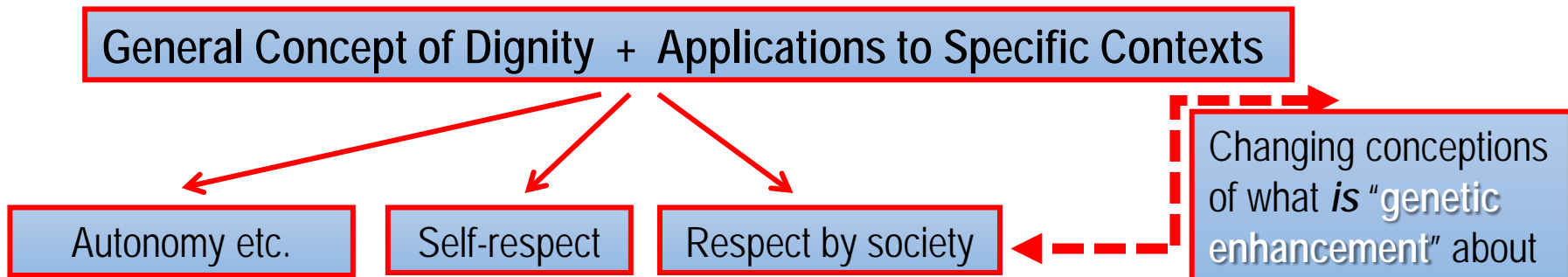
## Sandel's ethics of giftedness

"What would be lost if biotechnology dissolved our sense of giftedness?"

"My concern with enhancement is not as individual vice but as habit of mind and way of being."

"It will transform three key features of our moral landscape – **humility, responsibility, and solidarity.**"

Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, Ch.5





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## Sandel's ethics of giftedness

"But changing our nature to fit the world, rather than the other way around, is actually the deepest form of **disempowerment**. It distracts us from reflecting critically on the world, and deadens the impulse to social and political improvement."

Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, Ch.5

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Conceptions of what is (specific) genetic enhancement about:

No threat to human dignity

Threat to human dignity

- |   |        |  |
|---|--------|--|
| (a) Therapeutic                         | ←————→ | Non-therapeutic                                  |
| (b) Removing defects                    | ←————→ | Pursuing perfection                              |
| (c) Restoring <b>normality</b>          | ←————→ | Expanding human capacities to <b>abnormality</b> |
| (d) Empowerment                         | ←————→ | Disempowerment                                   |
| (e) <b>Naturalness</b> (gift of nature) | ←————→ | <b>Unnaturalness</b> (artificiality)             |

General Concept of Dignity + Applications to Specific Contexts

Autonomy etc.

Self-respect

Respect by society

Changing conceptions of what *is* "genetic enhancement" about

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## Sandel's ethics of giftedness

“Genetic engineering to **create designer babies** is the ultimate **expression of the hubris** that marks the loss of reverence for life as a gift. But stem cell research to cure debilitating disease, using unimplanted blastocysts, is a noble exercise of our human ingenuity to promote healing and to play our part in repairing the given world.”

Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, Ch.6

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## Conclusion

- 1) Macklin's criticism of the concept of human dignity is misguided, as she assumes that it is a static concept. She disregards the internal dynamics of the application of the concept in various contexts.
- 2) Dignity is a **very general** concept, comparable to a philosophical **principle**, from which we might **derive** different **theorems**, or general applications in different specific contexts. **Dying with dignity** is one case, & **genetic enhancement with dignity** is another.
- 3) Given the generality of this concept as a principle, how we use it would be **a function of its interaction with our re-conception of the specific contexts**.
- 4) A **broader implication**: any argument concerning the human dignity of genetic enhancement should not assume a static concept of dignity. **Sandel** seems to do so from chapters 1 to 5: human dignity originates from our respect for natural giftedness of talents & abilities. But he puts himself in an **unstable position** in chapter 6, where he supports embryonic stem cell research for therapeutic purposes. In our terms, Sandel is **conceptualizing embryonic research** as falling within our respect for **natural giftedness**.