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## An Ontology of Dignity<sup>1</sup>

The idea that dignity is inherent to the human person resonates as intuitively true, yet we have been unable to adequately articulate a common-sense definition of dignity that is simple and clear, and that does not presuppose knowledge of other concepts or entities in order to be understood. At best, we point to examples to explain what dignity means, or we resort to other terms that either presuppose dignity or are its close conceptual neighbors, such as esteem, worthiness, decorum, honorableness, suitability of appearance or behavior, and so on. But often, the meaning of dignity is just assumed to be understood or too obvious to require an explanation. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, refers to dignity as an inherent property of mankind as if this assertion were self-explanatory. Can we indeed say, and not merely show, what is dignity? In this essay, I will argue that an ontology of dignity will help us precisely to do this.

Before proceeding with this task, it shall be important to review what has already been presented in the literature on this subject. The accounts of dignity advanced to date can be divided into three types. The first type is what we shall call the ostensive definition, since it offers only an implicit expression of a definition for dignity. Compared to the other two categories, the ostensive definition is undoubtedly the wallflower of the party, for it goes largely unnoticed despite its longevity and, according to some, its universality across time and cultures. The second type is the rationality criterion, and it is the most recognizable of all three. Although the rationality criterion emerged in the modern period, it is still indeed the dominant position today. The third type, the social account, is the trendiest of all three because it enjoys much favor today inside and outside the

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in German as “Eine Ontologie der Würde” in Ralf Stoecker (ed.), *Menschenwürde: Annäherung an einen Begriff*, öbv&hpt, Wien 2003, pp. 175-191.

academy. The social account has been embraced in contemporary discussions as the rival to the rationality criterion. Let us examine each of these separately in what follows.

### *The Ostensive Definition*

The chief feature of the ostensive definition is that it presupposes the infallible intelligibility of human dignity. The defenders of this position would say that the warrant for this presupposition lies in the nature of each human person to experience the intersubjective recognition of a shared transcendental connectedness to an eternal being.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, human dignity is founded on the eternal being of the divine person in whose likeness human persons have been created. In paragraph 1700 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we find that “the dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God.” The truth of this proposition would be settled by pointing to any individual human person as evidence. If the existence of God is accepted, then the above proposition is ostensively true; hence, the name for this type of definition.

The strength of any ostensive definition depends on the subject’s apprehensibility of the example employed as the instance of the referent. Suppose that we wish to define the color red to a particular subject. Since *red* is a primitive word—i.e., it is not derived from any other word—we cannot articulate a definition other than an ostensive definition. Accordingly, the standard dictionary definition of red provides only examples, such as the color of a ripe tomato. Let us now suppose that the subject is blind. In this case, we cannot merely point to a vine of ripe tomatoes as an exemplification of the color red. A similar problem arises with an ostensive definition of dignity consistent with the Christian

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<sup>2</sup> This is basically the phenomenology of interpersonal religious experience. In the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl explains that intersubjectivity is the constituted ego community. Rees Griffiths writes, “A theology may be a hypothesis, but religion is always an immediate experience and a living personal faith,” in *The A Priori Elements of Religious Consciousness*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1931, p. 4. To dispute this, he adds, is to deny that “man has, from the early beginnings of which we any record, viewed the world in a religious setting and linked his individual and tribal life with an invisible divine being.” *Ibid*, pp. 25-26.

tradition. If the subject has no knowledge of God and his existence, then an ostensive definition will be ineffective for the subject.

It may very well be the case that dignity is a primitive term. If this is indeed the case, then the ostensive definition is weak, for it presupposes the infallible intelligibility of dignity based on a special kind of knowledge (of God) that is empirically demonstrable to be neither uniform across religions, nor universal in the history of mankind; hence, its intelligibility is most certainly fallible.

In the case of the ostensive definition, it is precisely its approach of making the epistemic matter of the knowledge of God its central focus that has made it so assailable by verification objections. A better strategy would be to set aside this particular epistemic matter in order to tackle first the scientific enterprise of examining and describing real states of affairs that manifest dignity in the world in order to show how these descriptions correspond to or reconcile with intuitions about the intrinsic intelligibility of dignity. Additionally, fallibilistic knowledge is a firmer epistemic terrain upon which to rest an ostensive definition of dignity. There are some important contributions that have vigorously exploited this avenue in the sphere of philosophy of religion, although these have not yet been imported to the arena of ethics in which the mainstream secular discussions on the matter of dignity are being presently adjudicated.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Rational Criterion*

The foremost exemplar of the rational definition is Kant's ethical account of dignity. Kant's distinctive concern is to vindicate the authority of reason. A person, he observes, possesses dignity because he is rational and

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<sup>3</sup> Arguably, Gustav Bergmann paved the way for the fallibilistic *apriorism* revival; see "Synthetic A Priori," *Logic and Reality*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1967. The contemporary giants of theistic fallibilistic *apriorism* are Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga. For the former see, *The Existence of God*, Clarendon Press, 1979. For the latter, see *Warrant and Proper Function*, Oxford University Press, 1993. Non-theistic versions of fallibilistic *apriorism* have also been advanced. See Barry Smith's "In Defense of Extreme (Fallibilistic) Apriorism," *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. 12, no. 1, 1996, pp. 179-192; and Laurence Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason: A Rationalist Account of the A Priori*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

autonomous.<sup>4</sup> It is the mark of humanity to have the ability to choose ends and to pursue them strategically. The reasoning about ends is for Kant the highest form of rationality because it leads the person to what is good, and it also causes him to desire that which is good and thus to pursue what *ought to be* pursued. The rationality criterion reveals the two fundamental ingredients in the Kantian moral framework: the good and the duty to pursue the good. These make possible for man to self-legislate his own moral life. Autonomy arises in the context of man's moral self-legislation, which is to act accordingly to those maxims that can be consistently willed as universal law. Kant calls this rational directive the categorical imperative. We are free to accept or to reject the categorical imperative, but only when we accept it do we freely follow our own law of pure practical reason and, thereby, acquire autonomy.

But Kant still needs to explain how dignity is apprehensible by all rational and autonomous persons. For this, he brings his metaphysical framework to bear on this epistemic investigation. When Kant introduced the expression *synthetic a priori* into the philosophical vocabulary, he circumvented the matter of defining the membership conditions for those judgments in the *synthetic a priori* category and, instead, took on the task of investigating how *synthetic a priori* judgments could be possible. He observed that we may find *synthetic a priori* propositions in mathematics, but he insisted that it is impossible for sensible beings like us to have direct knowledge of mathematical objects, since these are not perceivable by the senses. How, then, could mathematical objects conform to our *a priori* judgments of them?

Contrary to the view that we have direct access to things-in-themselves, Kant insisted that our sensible awareness of things-in-themselves is contingent on the structure that we impose on them as representations of what they are, and these representations are the only objects of our experience. We are thus able to have *a priori* knowledge of the objects of experience, and not of things-in-themselves. In virtue of the categorical imperative, we are able to transcend to this realm of objects of experience because this realm is governed by laws of reason. Our

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<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant (original publication 1797), *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

apprehension of dignity in other persons results, then, from the recognition of their rational nature as members of this realm. And since, for Kant, man's rational nature is an end in itself, he can say that man's value does not depend on external material ends and, thus, his dignity is intrinsic, unchanging, and eternal.

It is quite plausible to suppose that this formal account of dignity is built around two axioms from which everything else is derived. Axiom 1: Persons will strive to achieve their ends. This axiom is not problematic, since the pre-empirical assumptions underlying this axiom appear intuitively obvious—e.g., persons choose, persons act. But the second axiom gives rise to a problem. Axiom 2: Reason directs persons to the good as an end. Kant's prototypical exemplar of humanity is the discerning person who recognizes the good and desires it for its own sake. It is not disputable to say that persons often recognize the good and, arguably, that persons have the faculty for recognizing the good.<sup>5</sup> Yet, it is equally undisputable to say that persons often fail to recognize the good. Sometimes, persons knowingly choose what is wrong and participate in evil deeds with much delight.<sup>6</sup> Reason does not, then, necessarily direct persons to the good. In fact, reason is often used as a tool for justifying wrongdoings. Consequently, reason could potentially be employed to disguise evil.

We must consider, too, the possibility that our knowledge of the good may be obtainable by non-deliberated means. We need only consider any immediate apprehension of beauty, or any immediate recognition of injustice, to find instances in which reason or any sort of deliberation does not mediate our knowing something. If the good is indeed intelligible to man, then it is quite plausible that its intelligibility requires no mediation at all. Kant's formalism also prevents him from entertaining material considerations, such as particular cases where there are cognitive or psychological obstacles in which the good is either difficult to grasp or not apprehensible at all.

A question jumps to mind. Why assume the noble and duty-bound model of humanity and not the indecorous and self-centered model of

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<sup>5</sup> This is the position of Thomas Aquinas.

<sup>6</sup> John Crosby, "How Is It Possible Knowingly To Do Wrong?" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 74, 2000, pp. 325-333.

humanity? It would seem that the latter model would lead to greater considerations of universalizable maxims. Laws, for example, are inspired by undesirable behavior and so they direct behavior to more desirable ends. In fact, laws exist because transgressions are assumed. Kant's account breaks down at every exception of the person whose will is determined by reason to pursue the good. In a possible world constituted only by transgressors, a prison for example, is the dignity of any prisoner diminished because his misguided use of reason did not lead him toward the good? More fundamentally, how is it that the prisoner comes to recognize the good in order to desire it? This question is significant, since according to the Kantian metaphysics we could only know the good as an object of experience and not the good in itself. The good as such is nothing more than a construct of the mind. It is conceivable, then, that the prisoner in whose entire life the good was excluded as an object of experience would not ever know or recognize the good in order to desire it. His mind's constructs could not shape a *noumena* in which the good is an object of experience. Here, Kant's metaphysics betray his moral philosophy because reason in the latter has a quasi realism that stands in the face of his idealism in the former.

Finally, the rationality criterion of dignity does not recognize the dignity of infants, children, the elderly suffering from dementia, and the mentally ill, since no person by this description is either fully rational or autonomous and they are, therefore, excluded by the general rule. It is important to point out that this exclusionary problem does not arise only with the rational account of dignity, but that it is present in the very old description of man's essential nature as a rational, individual substance. I have argued elsewhere that we can eliminate this problem by simply saying that the *potential* for rationality is an essential feature of the person.<sup>7</sup> This application of the Aristotelian framework indeed solves the exclusionary problem of man's feature of rationality. But let us recall that the Kantian account makes dignity dependent on rationality, which may be characterized as discovering the good, choosing the good as an end, and striving to achieve the good. So if we were to apply this solution to the

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<sup>7</sup> "What is Economic Personalism? A Phenomenological Analysis," *Journal of Markets & Morality*, Vol. 4, no. 2, 2001, pp. 151-175.

rational account of dignity, at best we could say that infants and children have the potential to be vested with dignity when their rationality is actualized, and that senile and mentally ill persons are not vested with dignity, since they have either lost or never gained their rational faculties, respectively. This is counter-intuitive and, consequently, it has no practical usefulness.

### *The Social Account*

There are several variations of the social account, but it would be fair to say that their common feature is the view that dignity arises in the encounters between persons. The two *relata* in the social process are the conceiver, on the one hand, and the other persons who constitute a social framework, on the other. The relation works like this: the conceiver's sense of dignity is dependent on the recognition of his personhood by other persons (the social framework) and on the corresponding attitude of regard and compassion from the persons in the social framework toward him as a member of the same kind. But the case may be different, since the conceiver's dignity may be diminished or strengthened by the responses of other persons in his social framework. The social conception of dignity is, then, putative because dignity is given in beliefs.

The chief difference between the ostensive definition and the social account is that the latter allows for many beliefs, even disparate ones. It is precisely this feature that renders the social definition suspect. And the sources of the differences in beliefs are not limited to culture or some other kind of formation; they also include perspectival variations in an individual. We could imagine instances in which the dignity of some persons is not honored in the same way as some other persons. The Nazis, for example, only honored the dignity of the so-called Arians, and not that of anyone else. This emphasis on beliefs, whether temporally enduring or dependent on circumstances, does not help to clarify what dignity is. In virtue of its underlying assumption that there are many beliefs, the social account must inevitably confront those cases of disagreement and unmet expectations. These cases will reveal instances of failure on the part of some to honor the dignity of others, and this exposure may lead to prescriptive analyses useful for applied ethics.

Another problem of the social account is that it does not recognize the dignity of Robinson Crusoe cases. Most especially, the social account neglects the instantiation of dignity in individuals with autism who cannot fully belong in the human social world even when they are physically a part of it. Yet, our common sense understanding of dignity suggests that persons belonging to any of the categories excluded in this account are fully vested with dignity.

The more perverse consequence of the social account is that it falls prey to relativism. If the dignity of any one person is grounded, either in whole or in part, upon societal consensus, then we can imagine the absence of consensus in a homogeneous society toward persons of a different culture, appearance, language, and so on. The weakness of relativism is that it does not recognize error, our making mistakes, and our just being plain wrong. False judgments are part of the everyday human experience, and the social account makes dignity too susceptible to wrong beliefs. This account is, then, fundamentally unsatisfactory.

### *Importing the Tractarian Sachverhalt to a Gestalt Structure*

Let us now steer the examination toward a new direction: the structure of Wittgenstein's Sachverhalt. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein describes Sachverhalte as thinkable configurations of objects that stand in a determinate relation to each other.<sup>8</sup> The possible configurations of objects are many, but these possibilities are not accidental.<sup>9</sup> Every possibility of an object's occurrence in a Sachverhalt is contained in the nature of the object from the beginning.<sup>10</sup> A speck must have some color, a tone some pitch, and an object of the sense of touch some hardness.<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein points to Sachverhalte as entities that are distinct from objects.<sup>12</sup> He tells us that Sachverhalte are facts that make up the world, and that objects are simple. But he does not really give an explicit description of either from which we

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<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, (original publication in 1921), Routledge, London and New York, 1974, 2.0272, 2.031, 3.001.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 2.012.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 2.0121, 2.0123.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 2.0131.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 2.02, 2.0231, 2.0271.

could distinguish, for example, a real state of affairs from an event, or a Wittgensteinian object from an individual object found in ordinary experience.

We shall ignore the puzzles presented by his enigmatic simple objects, how these are entities distinct from Sachverhalte, and any inquiries about negative Sachverhalte, for the attempt is not to remain faithful to Wittgenstein. Rather, my attempt is more modest: to borrow Wittgenstein's insight about the material necessity of objects in a Sachverhalte and apply it to a structure of a person and his dignity as a two-object Gestalt. His insight is this: Sachverhalte are subject to definite laws of constitution that are written, so to speak, in the nature of the objects therein. This is the only property of the Tractarian Sachverhalt that we shall apply in our examination, for the attempt here is to provide a realist account of dignity. We shall call this modified Sachverhalt, a *personhood Gestalt*. It very well may be that the Tractarian account must necessarily exclude those objects of experience that Wittgenstein deems mystical simply because he does not advance an ontology of Sachverhalte.<sup>13</sup>

For the most part, analytic philosophers "see Sachverhalte as involving both individuals and universal properties."<sup>14</sup> There is, however, a different view proposed by Mulligan, Simons, and Smith, who interpret states of affairs as "involving individuals alone, linked together by relations of foundation."<sup>15</sup> In their words, "some objects are such that, in virtue of their form, they call for others as a matter of necessity..."<sup>16</sup> The necessary coming together of these objects in a Sachverhalt, as interpreted by Mulligan, Simons, and Smith, arises from the relations of dependence

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<sup>13</sup> See Barry Smith, "Logic and the Sachverhalt," *The Monist*, Vol. 72, no.1, 1989, pp. 52-69. Smith writes that what Wittgenstein lacks "is an ontology of Sachverhalte of the sort that would allow him to also provide an account of the ways in which such entities are related to our everyday thinkings and other cognitive activities (for example to those acts of seeing that in which our judgments get verified)," *ibid*, p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> According to Mulligan, Simons, and Smith, some philosophers have been constrained to resort to views of this kind because "analytic-philosophical interpreters of the *Tractatus* have standardly lacked a theory of lateral foundation relations, relations which may bind together individual objects." See, Kevin Mulligan, Peter Simons, and Barry Smith, "Truth-Makers", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 44, 1984, pp. 287-321.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 310.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 310.

between these objects. A tone, for example, is dependent on a particular pitch. But there is no reverse relation of dependence, so a pitch is not dependent on a tone.

There are, then, dependent objects and independent objects. Dependent objects are the independent object's individual accidents or moments.<sup>17</sup> Mulligan, Simons, and Smith borrow the notion of individual accident from the *Categories*, where Aristotle describes it as a property that "cannot exist separately from what it is in."<sup>18</sup> Motion, for example, cannot exist independently from a moving ball; hence, motion is an individual accident of the ball when it is moving. In this realist account, then, motion is not a universal that is exemplified in the moving ball. Rather, it is a particular object present in the moving ball, but motion is not a *part* of a moving ball.

Let us suppose that the sentence "This man possesses dignity" is made true—à la Mulligan, Simons, and Smith—by a personhood Gestalt constituted by two objects: this man and dignity as this man's individual accident. On the one hand, there is an individual substance—this man—and on the other hand, there is a particularized individual accident—his dignity. These two objects are configured in a personhood Gestalt such that the latter is *in* the former. In other words, dignity is in this man. The same applies for the sentence "This man has a headache." The headache is in this man, but it is not a part of him. Accordingly, his headache cannot exist separately from him. This man's dignity, too, cannot exist independently from him.

Why is dignity a particularized individual instead of a universal, or an essential property? An individual is a substance that endures through time and changes in its relations to other individuals. This appears befitting to dignity. When a person ceases to exist, the intuition is that his dignity is not bound up with his existence. The importance of proper burials across time and cultures suggests that man is capable of discerning the

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<sup>17</sup> Individual accidents or moments are different names for the same thing, but we shall employ the former hereinafter. Descartes, Locke, and Hume refer to individual accidents as modes. Tropes as moments appear in a variety of trope theory advanced by Peter Simons that builds on Husserl's foundation relations. See "Particulars in Particular Clothing: Three Trope Theories of Substance," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 54, 1994, pp. 553-575.

individuated dignity of a particular person from the person himself. The survival of a person's dignity past the person's death is indicative that dignity cannot be an essential property of the person. Moreover, our recognition of a person's dignity apart from the person himself (especially after death) also puts into question the possibility that dignity is a universal. If this were the case, it would be difficult to explain how the instantiation of dignity in a particular person would carry on when this bearer ceases to exist. We could say that a particular person's dignity is somehow transferred from an existent bearer to a non-existent bearer, but then we would have two distinct substances to complicate the matter even further.

The possible quibble that may be raised is that if dignity is an individual accident, then this makes it dependent on the existence of a particular substance person. Let us consider this objection from a common-sense perspective. It is not the cadaver that continues to instantiate the particular person's dignity that he enjoyed while alive. We honor the memory of deceased persons; we honor their work posthumously; we honor their belongings, reputation, and so on. All of these characterize a particular person's dignity as a particularized individual that endures even when its bearer ceases to exist. A particular person's dignity is thus not identical to any other person's dignity, since dignity is bound up not only with a particular person as such, but also with his legacy and other people's memories of that particular person in a way that is wholly distinct from any other. This suggests that dignity, as an individual accident, may be a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for numerical identity, and numerical identity does not expire when a person ceases to exist. There is only one Einstein, only one Picasso, only one Mozart, and we continue to identify each of them distinctly after their death not because of their notoriety—for we individuate the personal essence of each of our loved ones who are deceased in the same way—but because the particular dignity of each person survives his death by attaching to our remembrance of his individual achievements, his respective contributions, his being the way that he was.

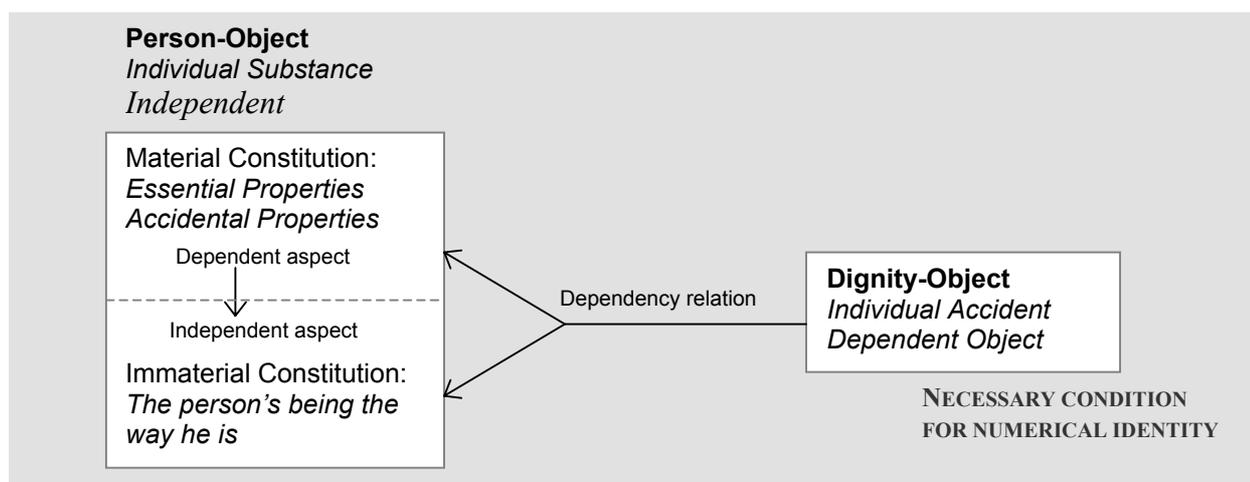
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<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Categories*, 1a 20.

What, then, does it mean to say that dignity is an individual accident? The ordinary intuition is that dignity is present in every person. The Christian understanding of dignity and Kantian ethics, too, support this intuition. The description offered here is that dignity is an individual accident that is the dependent object in a two object personhood Gestalt. The independent object in this personhood Gestalt is the object-person. This personhood Gestalt is necessarily, and not accidentally, configured such that there are two objects necessarily present: dignity, as an individual accident, and an object-person. And this necessity of the dignity-object in such a Gestalt is a *de re* necessity because it is not possible for the object-person to exist without this individual accident. In other words, dignity is a particularized property and it is in its nature to be present in the personhood Gestalt with the particular object-person to which it corresponds. The object-person is a particular with the essential and accidental properties of personhood that make up his unique material constitution. This individuated human person also may be broadly understood as a numerically distinct continuant that comes into being as an independent substance.<sup>19</sup> All of these relations between the person-object and the dignity-object are consistent with our intuitions. Let us now take a look at an illustration of the ontological structure we have described so far:

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<sup>19</sup> It is important to clarify that the beginning of personhood does not coincide, by necessity, with the beginning of human life, for personhood requires the status of independent substance whereas human life does not. According to Barry Smith and Berit Brogaard, a person's independent substance status occurs sixteen days after the coming into being of human life. See, "Sixteen Days," *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2003, pp. 43-78.



Graph 1: Personhood Gestalt

The ontological structure that we have erected thus far is not yet sufficient for an adequate account of dignity. It is crucial to address now the epistemic correlate of this ontological structure in order to address the issue that dignity may be affected by beliefs. We often hear comments to the effect that the dignity of the person must be preserved, thus suggesting that dignity is something that could be intentionally diminished. Comments like these arise especially as a concern for the dignity of those who cannot claim it for themselves, such as children, the mentally impaired, the elderly, and the subjugated in any form. Epistemically speaking, then, dignity can be perceived as either present in varying degrees or absent in a person. But there are two points of view to consider.

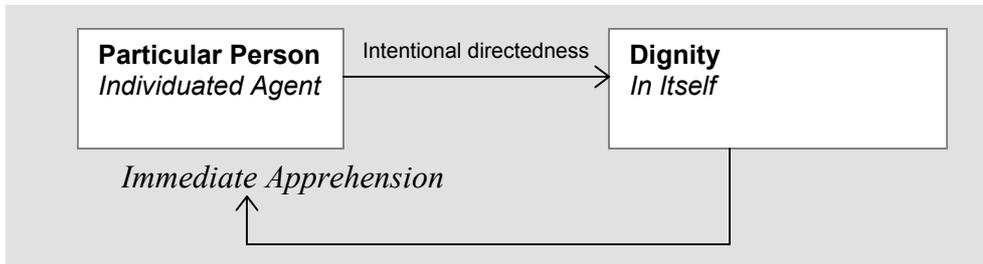
The first point of view is that of one's own sense of dignity. The awareness of one's sense of dignity may be either immediate or mediated. An immediate awareness can be either positive or negative. In the case of the latter, we can imagine this experience as the recipients of, for example, an act of emotional violation. In the case of the former, we can imagine the immediate sense of one's own dignity one obtains when displaying moral integrity or an appropriate appearance. The awareness of one's sense of dignity may be also recalled in memories of these situations. But even when one is proudly aware of one's sense of dignity with a confidence grounded in one's personhood, the beliefs of other persons to the contrary may diminish one's sense of dignity. In this case, our attention is pulled

away from an immediate awareness of dignity in itself—i.e., the particularized dignity-object that corresponds to our personhood—toward an awareness of dignity that is filtered by our perceived responses from others. Instead of apprehending dignity in itself, we apprehend dignity as an intentional phenomenon shaped by the social world around us.

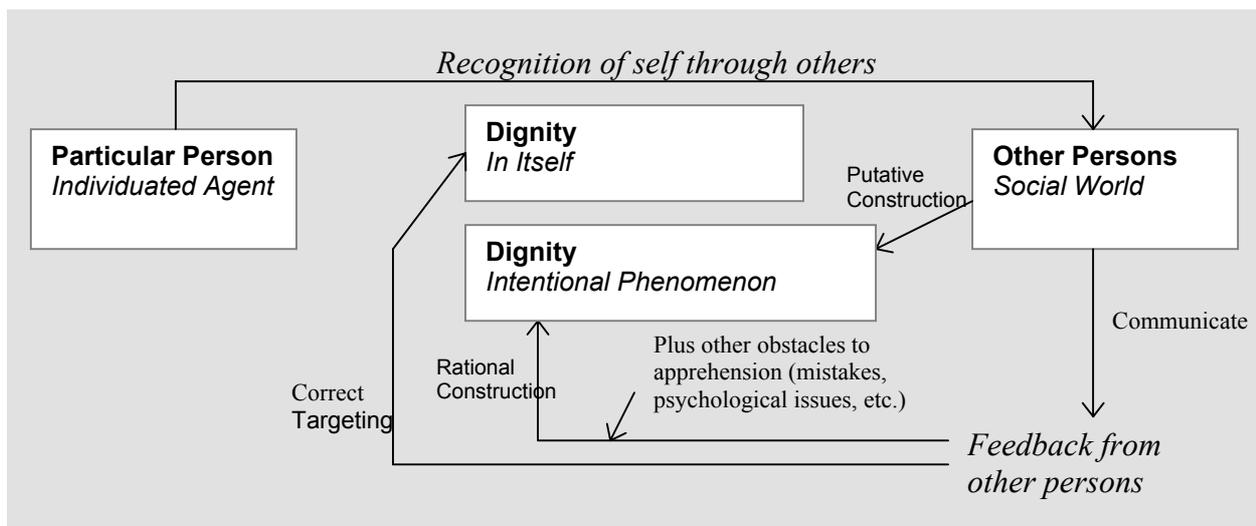
Our sense of dignity is, then, mediated by how we are perceived or treated by others. One could be mistaken, of course, as error in one's judgments about other persons is always the risk in virtue of our human condition of imperfect knowledge, linguistic ambiguity, psychological issues, or emotional fragility. I could be deluding myself, for example, that I am admired and honored by every member of my social world. Or, I could convince myself that my social world finds me dispensable or disqualifies me as a member of the human species. If my latter judgment is correct, however, then this perception becomes an obstacle to my apprehension of dignity in itself. This problem is not very harmful, since one is capable of recognizing one's epistemic obstacles and steering judgment toward dignity in itself. It is thus important to distinguish our sense of dignity and its vagaries due to circumstances on the one hand, and the particularized dignity-object that corresponds to our personhood on the other. The latter is enduring and unaffected by beliefs.

This brings us to the second point of view: that from the perspective of the social world. The social world's intentional construct of one's dignity is potentially dangerous if this construct is a denial of our dignity, and the danger lies not only in our becoming convinced that the social construct of one's dignity is accurate. The more perverse outcome of this is that one may fall prey to the uncritical measures taken by a powerful social world with respect to our existence. The Nazi extermination of Jews, the Chinese army's massacre of Tibetans, the genocide of natives of North and South America by the hands of European settlers, and the segregation of African-Americans in the southern United States are all examples of the harmful consequences of a powerful society's failure to apprehend the dignity of each person that, by consensus, this society deems dispensable. The only possible explanation of this perverse belief, other than mere insanity, is that the aggressors perceive the victim as not human and, thereby, lacking in dignity.

Putting together the foregoing observations, the epistemic account of dignity may be illustrated as follows:



GRAPH 2: A PRIORI KNOWLEDGE OF DIGNITY



GRAPH 3: FALLIBILISTIC KNOWLEDGE OF DIGNITY

There are two additional observations that we may draw from the last illustration. The first is that persons do not infallibly and predictably grasp the meaning of dignity all of the time. The second is that the intentional construct of dignity is ontologically subjective—i.e., it is dependent on the perception of subjects for its existence. Barring Robinson Crusoe cases, persons have the occasion to immediately and directly recognize dignity—i.e., in *a priori* knowledge—as a sense of their own nature that is

inexorably connected with all other persons. This human connectedness makes itself manifest in instances of intersubjective transcendence, such as when we experience a visceral response of pain in the face of human suffering, or of loss when confronted with the knowledge of tragic deaths, even if we have no personal acquaintance with the victims. Intersubjective connectedness also is manifest in those instances in which one feels or observes in others the particular elevation of the human spirit and character that inspires awe and reverence toward mankind and what is higher. These kinds of experiences may serve as the occasion for our acquiring a tacit knowledge of the particularized property of human persons that we call dignity, a property we find difficult to articulate explicitly.

### *Defining Dignity*

The mystery of dignity is no different than the mystery of the color red or the mystery of love. Each is a primitive term that is not derived from any other, which makes each impossible to define. Nonetheless, the quest for knowing dignity more profoundly is not illusory because there is much to be obtained from an investigation of the relations of foundation between dignity and persons. The following is a preliminary list from which we may start further investigations:

1. Dignity belongs to metaphysics—more specifically, to the ontology of personhood—and not to ethics. According to the Hungarian philosopher Aurel Kolnai, the presence of dignity provokes responses that are in line with moral approval.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, dignity is not, itself, a moral quality and the examination of dignity does not fall in the province of ethics. To say that a human person possesses dignity is to describe a state of affairs with two objects: a person, and dignity as this person's individual accident in virtue of which the person merits no moral status.
2. The epistemic correlate of dignity is every person's sense of dignity. This sense is not a part of any sort of moral behavior. We can be either right or wrong about our own sense of dignity. The truth or

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<sup>20</sup> Aurel Kolnai, "Dignity," *Journal of Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1976, pp. 251-271.

falsity of our beliefs about our sense of dignity is settled by dignity in itself as presented in point one above.

3. What affects our moral agency are those deliberate actions directed at either preserving or diminishing our sense of dignity, or that of others. The former are morally meritorious actions, and the latter are morally reprehensible actions.
4. Indignation is a third-party response to the lack of recognition of a person's dignity on the part of another. But indignation also occurs as a first-person experience. In either case, indignation is a judgment directed at a complex personhood Gestalt that is constituted by one or more individual personhood Gestalten.

In short, dignity is the primitive individual that unifies the material constitution of the person with his being the way he is and, when this person ceases to exist, it continues as the individual accident of his being the way he is. Dignity thus brings about a Gestalt unity to the complex material and immaterial constitution of personhood.

#### ABSTRACT

Dignity has been understood either in the context of Kant's formal ethics or, more ordinarily, as a mystical property that is given in man but that can also be stripped from him in social interactions. This paper examines three accounts of dignity: the ostensive definition, the rational criterion, and the social account. As an alternative, I offer an ontological account of dignity as a constitutive part of what I call a *personhood Gestalt*. More specifically, I argue that dignity is neither a universal, nor an essential property of a person. Rather, dignity is an individual substance because it endures through time and changes in its relations to other individuals. And this is consistent with our ordinary intuition that a person's dignity is not bound up with a person's real existence, for else we would not have the practice of burials for deceased persons, the erection of memorials honoring fallen heroes, or other expressions of honor we display toward the dead. Moreover, I also argue that dignity is an individual accident dependent on a particular object-person whose constitution has a material aspect as well as immaterial aspect. I describe the immaterial aspect of an object-person in a common-sensical way as the person's being the way he is, although this can also be understood as the person's soul. Dignity thus brings about a Gestalt unity to the complex material and immaterial constitution of personhood.