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Humane dignity

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Dignity is a majestic and powerful idea not only in modern and contemporary ethics, but in contemporary political discourse as well. References to dignity are common in moral philosophy, being part of a relatively tight circle of ideas that includes rational agency, autonomous choice, humanity, respect, rights, recognition, decency, and moral worth. The idea did not originate with Kant, but Kant put, it seems, a definitive and lasting stamp upon it and the circle of moral ideas to which it belongs. This is not to say that dignity is tightly and uniformly interdefined with these other notions in one particular way. The least varying connection, however, is that dignity is a kind of moral worth human beings possess that entitles them to respect. This, with variations, is the kind of thing moral philosophers and some political theorists say. People who are not moral philosophers, but who command the concept of dignity, may say that some treatment of a person is "beneath" his or her dignity, that it is indecent or disrespectful to treat a person that way; they may even say that someone's dignity was lost or destroyed. We also, in common speech, have the idea of an "indignity," a treatment beneath or out of keeping with what a human being deserves and one a human being should not, as we say, "suffer."

One reason more and more people, in many places in the world, do command this concept with some of its standard connections is the global spread of human rights discourse. From the adoption of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with its

opening pronouncement that all members of the human family possess "inherent dignity," and "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and right," the discourse of human rights and its allied language of dignity is a twenty-first century lingua franca of politics in what is called the "world community," circulating the concept of dignity world-wide. I do not mean to say that it is only due to the European tradition that gave form to the legal and moral regime of human rights that human beings have some notion of a particular kind of human worth. On the contrary, I suppose instead that there is something in the concept of dignity recognizable to people of many regions, cultures, and faiths that has enabled this idea to be grasped and affirmed as widely as it has been, given the circulation of human rights discourse (on the argument about the Western European nature of human rights, see Sen 1999; Lauren 2003; and Afshari 2007). In our time a body of ostensibly authoritative declarations and conventions invoke the idea of dignity as a fundamental–indeed foundational–premise from which an impressive assortment of human rights of several types are claimed to flow.

I want to re-examine the idea of dignity, starting with what is problematic in an understanding of dignity that connects it in a tight circle with full or fully mature capacity for moral agency, essentially an idealized and exclusive concept of dignity for which Kant's thinking, especially in his *Groundwork of the metaphysic of morals*, is the paradigm. I want to discuss some strategies, overlapping and mutually compatible but distinct, for reconstructing this concept in a more humane and humanly inclusive way. The three "humanizing" strategies I will suggest in conclusion are naturalizing dignity, rendering dignity relationally, and differentiating our concept of dignity. These strategies are intended to preserve the normative force of the concept of dignity as an ideal of human interaction, recognition, and concern; they continue to give a central place in our understanding of dignity to those who are fully, symmetrically, and reciprocally accountable to each other. But they attempt to widen the net which catches the humanity of many who may not appear to be the paradigm cases of full, symmetrical and reciprocal accountability.

To begin, I want to look at the nexus of notions with which dignity is intertwined in the Kantian formation, to see what is problematic about the circle they form, and to consider some alternatives to reconstructing the concept in the ways I will explore. I then turn to these strategies of reconstruction, to invite a conversation about what is promising or worrisome in these ways of rethinking dignity, or whether there are other ways, and to invite consideration in thinking about why we need a concept of dignity at all, and what moral work we need the idea of dignity to do.

1. Worries about the "Kantian" idea of dignity

An ideal of dignity deeply rooted in the Kantian tradition is both idealized and multiply exclusive: beings with rational wills and hence powers of autonomous choice have that distinctive moral value called 'dignity.' All such beings possess dignity, but *only* such beings do, and dignity refers to the *only* value there is that is moral value. All and only such beings deserve respect, the paradigm moral attitude, for this view. The feature that qualifies such beings is their endowment with rational will and thus autonomous choice, and that feature is also that about them which we must aim to respect, even if it can be argued that we must refrain from, for example, physically damaging or avoidable painful physical and psychological treatment as a way to show respect to the rational will "within."

This conception of dignity and its implications for moral attitude and behavior is multiply exclusive. Those human beings who do not possess rational wills and the power of autonomous choice do not possess the all-important moral value of dignity. Since there is no other kind of value that is moral value, it seems that beings, including human beings, who do not possess the entitling capacity not only fail to possess dignity and to be entitled to respect, they seem to fail to possess any distinct moral value. They may nonetheless possess "relative" value due to their importance to others who happen to love and cherish them, but it seems they are not entitled to the responses or attitudes constitutive of truly moral recognition. At the same time, the responses of love, delight, cherishing, care, pity, and concern

these human beings evoke in others are not seen as forms of truly moral recognition. In the case of those who do possess rational will and so dignity, on this view, what we must morally respond to in them is the feature by virtue of which they possess that moral value, their capacity for rational willing, not their ability to suffer pain or humiliation or rejection, for example, unless these forms of treatment can be shown to at the same time also affront their status and function as autonomous beings or perhaps to interfere with means necessary to act so as to treat persons as ends. Furthermore, what the dignity of these fully operational moral agents commands on the part of others of the same moral status is respect as autonomous beings, but only this. Other "feelings," such as compassion, sympathy, empathy, pity, admiration, or gratitude, are merely "pathological" on the Kantian scheme; feelings that are mere animal inclinations can endow their objects with a value relative to human desires, but this relative value is not moral value.

I don't suppose that many contemporary neo-Kantians, or even contemporary Kantians, are willing to defend this view in precisely this stark form, but I think the original Kantian logic is likely to follow the notion of dignity in at least this way: Dignity will be associated with moral capacity, moral capacity will be associated with a rather high level and sophisticated kind of rational deliberation and choice, the possession of the relevant endowments for moral agency will confer an entitlement to respectful treatment, and respectful treatment will be that which acknowledges and perhaps affirms the value of just this sophisticated moral capacity. Explicating Kant in a way that endorses his view, Christine Korsgaard says that "the distinctive nature of humanity *as such*, is simply the capacity to take a rational interest in something," and "humanity is the power of rational choice, but only when choice is fully rational is humanity fully realized" (Korsgaard 1996, 114, 123). Insofar as humanity functions positively in our moral valuation, "It is your powers as an agent that are to be promoted" (127). Axel Honneth, in his insightful account of recognition, identifies as a common premise of modern moral thinking (shared, for example, by Hegel and Mead) that "subjects are

to be recognized as both autonomous and individualized beings," both equal and particular (Honneth 1995, 171, 175). The addition of particularity is important, and I affirm it later, although the standing in question envisions a morally fully-fledged and morally responsible agent. In Stephen Darwall's recent book, *The Second Person Standpoint*, dignity is "the status of an equal member of the moral community" to hold others who are such accountable; the second-person standpoint defines the moral community, and second-personal address presupposes "a common normative standing as free and rational persons" (Darwall 2006, 243, 265). Darwall also says that "any second-personal address seeks reciprocal recognition by its very nature" (265), apparently equating reciprocal recognition (two-way recognition with parties aware of its mutual character), with symmetrical recognition (reciprocal recognition *as equal*), an equation that I will believe must be questioned. I mention these views in lieu of a survey to suggest that the tight links among dignity, moral agency, moral worth, respect, and recognition, and the categorical (all or nothing) logic of these concepts, stemming from the Kantian paradigm, are continuing and forceful.

The tight circle of concepts to which dignity has belonged produces exclusions, and these exclusions follow from not only the original Kantian but also prevalent neo-Kantian ideas about dignity as the paradigmatic, or the only, moral standing and its links to full moral agency. They unavoidably raise questions: What of human beings who do not possess full moral capacity (even defined by a threshold of ability) or who possess a limited or reduced kind of it? What of those forms of pain, suffering, insult or diminishment that human beings endure at the hands of others which either do not directly assault their moral capacity, or that not only assault or insult moral capacity but which punish, hurt, refuse, or repudiate what is human in them that is not, or not only, their moral capacity? If respect is the paradigm attitude that salutes another's moral value, what then of those other attitudes that grasp and address another's humanity, like compassion, cherishing, pity, and gratitude? And what of the uniquely human features of individual expression, attachment,

desire, joy, sadness, and grief that embody the individuality of human individuals who possess less or little in the way of those rational capacities, or whose capacities are differently configured?

2. Do we need the concept of dignity, and why?

Perhaps the concept of dignity is part of a metaphysical mythology we do not need, and one that stands in the way of addressing well-being and ill treatment and so the comfort and suffering of human beings, and perhaps other beings, in a realistic and humane fashion. Such a view is at home with some kinds of utilitarian thinking. In one recent op-ed piece Singer applies philosophical views for which he is already well-known. Writing on the case of Ashley, a 9-year-old child whose severe mental disabilities give her the functioning of a 3-month-old, Singer responds to critics of her parents' decision to treat her chemically and surgically to keep her small and light in size and sexually nonmature in order to better care for her. Singer criticizes a statement by Ashley's parents that this treatment will give her more dignity. Singer's response is that dignity is an irrelevant category to apply to any individual with human's 3-month-old mental capacity, however precious Ashley is to her parents and siblings. Singer says, "what matters in Ashley's life is that she should not suffer" (Singer 2007). This viewpoint challenges those who consider dignity important in this case to explain how dignity can even make sense in this case, and in many other cases of several reduced mental capacity.

Soran Reader has laid down another aggressive challenge, as it were from the opposite end, to what she terms the "agential bias" that permeates American and European moral philosophy in the self-portrait of persons as paradigmatically "active, capable, free, and independent" (Reader 2007, 603-604). Reader argues that the other, non-agential aspects of a person–suffering, weakness, vulnerability, constraint, dependency–are elements of human life that should receive attention for the profound degree to which they shape our lives. More strongly, they are not fallings away or privations or lapses in being a person, but are in fact presupposed, according to her, to our more highly valued agential features (588). If that is so, we should

"recognize and dignify" the non-agential aspects as just as much aspects of "full, complex personhood" (592). Reader lays down a challenge to incorporate (an appropriately loaded word, with its reference to our essentially embodied existence) many more aspects of what is human into a picture of humanity and (I assume) its dignity, but also to abandon the idea that certain moral capacities, especially forms of intellectual capacity and executive control, have a preeminent place, even if they still have an important one.

I hasten to apologize to Singer, and even more so to Reader (who does not address the topic of dignity directly), for not engaging these important views in depth. I use their views here purely to exemplify some striking challenges to the usefulness–the scope and sufficiency–of the concept of dignity predicated on the idea of certain higher moral and mental capacities. They focus questions sharply about the extent to which a picture of human beings as uniquely endowed with moral personality, a valuation of human beings to the extent that they do possess that endowment, and a definition of that endowment largely in terms of normal adult human intellectual and reflective capacities and capacities of independent self-control, intellectual or not, adequately captures the moral value of humanity or those features which determine the moral pull of one human being on another. These challenges have the virtue of raising a stark question: is it a *moral mistake* to be drawn into a way of thinking that treats the full complement and development of mature moral capacities as an endowment of human beings that lays special claims upon us in our treatments of and responses to them?

In response, I take the position that it is not a mistake, and it is a necessity to acknowledge that full moral capacity–the capacity to engage at a threshold level in relations of reciprocal accountability organized by normative expectations that assume the authority of moral and other norms–is a distinctive feature of human beings with distinct moral significance (see Walker 2006 on the central role of accountability and trust in sustaining moral relations). I do not disagree with Reader that there is an agential bias in our dominant philosophical conception of human persons, but I do not think the

moral weight that attaches to agency is simply a mistake. We wouldn't have morality as we know it without this *characteristic, although not universal,* set of human capacities. All those who possess some functional threshold level of this capacity are indeed placed distinctly with respect to all others who possess it: they are bound to participation in fully mutual and symmetrical accountability, the calling-to-account of one another without which no norms have effective social authority. There is no need to deny that a normal and fully reflective mature ability to participate in interpersonal accounting is a distinctive human species characteristic that makes possible the exquisitely intricate normative structure of shared human life of which morality is one part. There is increasing scientific evidence that this capacity is not entirely cognitive, but involves emotional sensitivities as well, and surely more attention must be paid to the embodied character of the expression, recognition, and responsiveness of human beings in ways that constitute moral relations.

On the one hand, a view such as Reader's is too quick to diminish the moral significance of the difference that human agential capacities make to there being such a dimension of human life as morality. On the other hand, it minimizes differences between those vulnerabilities, dependencies, and passivities that are woven through, or that predictably punctuate, uncompromised human agency and those that are in fact disabling of agency in some respect. Disability theorists teach us to be very careful how we conceive of features of individuals as disabling when forms of disablement really arise from the hostility of humanly constructed physical and social environments to the expression of some people's agency (Wendell 1996; Scully 2009). Still, there are disabilities that transcend the limits of environmental hospitality and diminish or circumscribe agency. The ethics of care and dependency teach us to remember that we all always vulnerable and interdependent, and that all of us at some times in our lives are among those not fully able (Tronto 1993; Sevenhuijsen 1998; Kittay 1999). These facts and our universally shared experiences of them, whether they are admitted and emphasized or

not, are as integral to humanity as are capacities for self-control, reflective choice, reciprocal understandings and interpersonal accountability.

To say that all those who possess some functional threshold level of this capacity can distinctively enter into fully symmetrical accountability, however, is not to say that *only* those who can participate in fully symmetrical reciprocity with each other are parties to the practices of responsibility of which accountability is always a central dimension. First, there are many reciprocal relations of accountability that are not fully symmetrical. Institutional roles of authority and subordination between those equally capable provide one example. Relations between children and adults, not equally capable in all or many respects, and more generally relations between those lacking certain competencies and those who possess them, relations of care or guardianship, are others. Many of these relations involve forms of non-symmetrical reciprocity: they are relations in which there are normatively acceptable ways for the participants to respond to each other, but their respective prerogatives and obligations with respect to each other are not identical. Many forms of these nonsymmetrical but reciprocal relations are morally defensible, and even morally required. Yet it is also true that historically the model of morally justified asymmetrical relations has repeatedly been used to justify arbitrary and socially imposed asymmetries on adults fully capable of and entitled to symmetrical standings: men over women; the aristocrat over the commoner; higher over lower class or caste; civilized over barbarian; free over slave, etc. (Aristotle's ethical and political views are the classic philosophical loci of this kind of philosophical apology for hierarchy, but the patterns of thinking has persisted down the centuries.) Furthermore, all differentials in reciprocal moral standing, whether justified or not, are subject to abuse. The different or unequal bases of reciprocity may be exaggerated, improperly generalized over areas where they need not obtain, or simply exploited by the stronger to exercise power over those who are unlikely to be able to complain, or whose complaints are unlikely to be credited. But the indefensibility of some forms of nonsymmetrical reciprocity

does not erase the reality and defensibility of other unavoidable kinds of nonsymmetrical, yet reciprocal, relations.

Further, the competence to participate, wholesale or retail, in relations of reciprocal accountability does not exhaust what is valuable to or among human beings. This competence is not the only thing about human beings that we reasonably cherish and seek to protect, enjoy, and enhance through practices of responsibility that embody moral values. Human beings lacking in forms of competence to participate in moral accounting need not be lacking in other valuable and valued features of humanity, for only some of these valued human features require capacities for reflective choice or responsible agency. Other such features cherished by and among human beings are humanly distinctive forms of attention, orientation to our surroundings, expression, feeling, connection, and relation. Peter Singer is impatient with the idea that a child, especially an infant, can be said to have dignity. But this is a real question: how might we apply that idea to the infant and the child? It is obvious that young children can experience shaming and degrading conditions of belittlement, dirtiness, poverty, or abuse, but it is also true that even small children have cognitive capacities and emotional differentiation that infants do not. And yet, despite Singer's impatience, people very commonly say they believe severely mentally compromised human beings, despite a lack of certain cognitive and emotional functioning, should nonetheless be treated, as much as is practically possible, with dignity. The challenge is to rebut Singer's presumption that this is a sentimental rhetoric. Rebutting this presumption, though, might involve precisely, among other things, attending to the role of certain sentiments that are understood when expressed, perceived, or responded to as signature attributes of the human kind, and hence ones that figure in what we are able to think of as an adequately dignified or undignified situation or treatment for a human being.

Dignity need not be the only morally weighty consideration pertaining to the treatment of human beings. One might worry about trying to pack too much into the idea of dignity, or making too much of our moral sensibility rest upon considerations of dignity. This itself

might be a symptom of domination by a Kantian (or more broadly, an agential) perspective in which dignity monopolizes the moral field. After all, on the face of it, suffering and well-being have their own moral weight as considerations about how to treat human beings as well as other non-human creatures. On the other hand, over a wide range of cases, one does not grasp what human beings can suffer or what it means for them to fare well without understanding particular forms of suffering that arise from human sensibilities and particular forms of enjoyment that are imbued with humanly distinctive desires and responses, again not confined to rational agency. Importantly, it is unmistakably human as well to experience particular forms of suffering and delight at the distinctively human experiences of *other* human beings, including others' experience of our own reactions to them. It is unmistakably human to experience indignation and pity at the treatment of others, and also to react emotionally to the reactions or failures to react of those among us who witness pitiable, degrading, or unconscionable treatment of others, whether or not those so badly treated are capable of sharing or appreciating these reactions. It does not seem forced to think of human dignity as implicated in these reactions to human beings (nor does it require us, for example, to deny that there might be analogous reactions to the treatment of other feeling beings). As was stressed by theorists such as David Hume and Adam Smith in the sentimentalist moral tradition (Kant's contemporary counterpoint), morality has greatly to do with capacities for "fellow feeling" of both positive and negative sorts, and with feelings about the feelings that we show and that are shown by others. Perhaps dignity has more to do with the recognition and the operations of this aspect of our common humanity than has yet been fully explored.

How might we begin to rethink the idea of dignity to capture some of this complexity? We need, I believe, to preserve the truth that human beings as a species-type possess special features in virtue of which they are capable of constituting moral relations, and that all human beings capable of reciprocal and symmetrical accountability do stand in a special relation to each other as bearers of full and

symmetrical mutual accountability. Yet other human beings are encompassed in relations of reciprocity that are not entirely or fully symmetrical, and some are held among us in a kind of trust in and for humanity even if they are capable of little or very partial reciprocity. Finally, there is much that is distinctively (whether or not uniquely) human that we have reason to value among ourselves (and not only for the reason that it distinguishes us as human). The question remains: how is the tight circle of notions connected to dignity opened to constitute an arc of recognition, reciprocity, responsibility, and response that fully comprehends (in both senses of that term—to include and to understand) humanity?

3. Humanizing dignity

I begin from the idea that dignity is a *standing*, that is, a socially and interpersonally effective position comprising values, prerogatives, entitlements, liabilities or responsibilities that others are bound to recognize and in response to which others and the one who possesses dignity act and interact. We might think of dignity as realized in the shared understanding and coordinated expression of this standing by ones who possess it and others with respect to them. If dignity is a standing in this way, and so is an essentially interpersonal construction, then dignity is underpinned and required, but not fully determined, by independent features of the one who possesses it. To possess dignity is to be able to express and exercise this standing, at least to some extent and in some ways, and the expression and exercise require that others not block or thwart this expression and exercise, but also to have others give at least implicit recognition and in some degree appropriate supporting responses to its expression and exercise. Dignity then is constituted in a successful enactment of at least some of its characteristic exercises both by one who possesses dignity and those who must recognize it. The possessor of dignity must exercise capacities and engage in expressions that exemplify and claim dignity, and those who must give it recognition must also exercise their capacities to provide confirming and supporting responses. If there are multiple capacities and expressions from either side that

exhibit and affirm humanity, then those characteristic exercises and responses that constitute dignity will be multiple. It will not be only the display and recognition of some rational capacities that will claim or affirm the dignity of human beings.

The way I have just described it makes dignity an interpersonally effective standing that is multiply conditioned or relative. It is interpersonal, and so requires uptake to be successfully expressed. Its enactment is also relative to certain capacities relevant to its exercise; if there is not only one human capacity that grounds dignity, then it can be expressed and can seek recognition through some capacities rather than others, either at a particular time or over time. Finally, its successful enactment requires a certain threshold that is recognizably human, whether or not it is paradigmatic for the fullest development of a particular kind of human functioning; since uptake is a crucial part of successful expression, others must be able to respond in particular ways that affirm and complement its recognizable humanness. I hasten to acknowledge that this is all abstract in the extreme. I quickly turn to three directions in which we might seek concretely to rethink dignity as an interpersonally effective standing: *naturalizing* it; rendering it explicitly *relational*; and *differentiating* it in terms of multiple morally affirming (and rejecting) responses.

Naturalizing dignity

To decisively break from the abiding Kantian tendency to tie dignity solely to some form of rational capacity requires thinking about what *in* humans as we *actually* find them we *as* humans recognize as deeply human, and so what it is we have reason to value in valuing human beings. I have not found very deep or extensive articulations of the idea of humanity and its dignity other than Kant's guiding one, but this is what we need. The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one contemporary reference point. But being a political document and not a piece of moral philosophy, the Declaration vaults from the initial assertion of the inherent dignity of human beings to a sweeping manifesto of twenty-seven substantive rights. A contemporary proponent of human rights, the philosopher James Nickel,

argues against theoretical compactness and in favor of a "many-legged" defense of human rights that interprets dignity as requiring all those "ways to recognize and respond to the value or worth that is found in life as a person," including "any particular feature of persons that has distinctive value" (Nickel 2005, 394). Nickel focuses on four sorts of moral claims secured by dignity: to have a life; to lead one's life; and to be free of severely cruel and degrading, as well as severely unjust, treatment. This goes in the right direction, although it does not give much guidance to those aspects of our humanity that comfort, move, and connect us but that are not so directly implicated in "leading" a life of one's own. Here the connection of dignity with full human agency remains strong.

Human capabilities theorists Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum introduce a more richly pluralistic picture of potentials for the full roster of characteristic human functionings. In Nussbaum's version, the one that most clearly articulates a particular vision of capabilities, the capabilities list has ten items ranging from life, bodily health, and integrity, through cognitive and emotional powers, to communion with nature, freedom to play, and a certain control over one's environment. This "thick" picture of human good is still very much oriented to agency through functionings, although it is decidedly more generous with respect to the range of functionings included. But "the list" remains a list, rather than an exploration of the diverse expressions and experiences of ourselves and others as human. Nussbaum simply annexes to this list bits of neo-Kantian machinery: that certain capabilities exert a "claim" that they should be realized and that each person exerts a claim as "an end" to the realization of her or his capabilities (Nussbaum 2000, 70-86, especially 74, 83). A more worrisome feature of this otherwise welcome pluralism about what is characteristically human is the disconcerting tendency of Nussbaum to refer to the absence of capabilities as the "absence of a human life," to describe one who lacks the capabilities for some functionings as "not really a human being" (73), or to characterize acts in the absence of certain capabilities as a "merely animal" way of life. But human beings are a complexly endowed kind of animal, and the idea of human dignity

needs to capture and protect our humanity without erasing our animality. Nussbaum's more recent statements of her capabilities approach, in the 2006 book *Frontiers of Justice*, approach the relation between dignity and capabilities more carefully. Nussbaum now says that the capabilities themselves articulate the dignity of which a human being is *worthy*, and that a human life is inescapably that of an animal body with a developmental trajectory and persistent vulnerability. Even in the more recent work, however, Nussbaum persists in describing some severely incapacitated human lives as "not fully human" or "not a human life at all" conflating the normative role of the capabilities in prescribing acceptable treatment of human beings with a use of the capabilities list as a criterion to qualify or disqualify the humanity of some humans (Nussbaum 2006).

I am suggesting that we need space for an account that fully *naturalizes* the idea of the dignity of human beings, finding dignity not only in the rational agency of those human individuals who can be fully accountable (or in enough ways independently capable of functioning) but within a larger field of relations and responses. The relations and responses that are important are those that join us in what human beings recognize as particularly human modes of connection, what Eva Kittay describes as "a matrix of relationships embedded in social practices" in and through which we learn responses, responsibilities, and feelings that embody appropriate acknowledgments (Kittay 2005, 111). Dignity must refer to a standing in which human beings are free from, and actively shielded from, a variety of treatments, environments, and human relations incompatible with what dignity protects. Treatments incompatible with dignity include those that deny the presence of humanity in a human individual, such as relegating some human "kinds" to inferior grades of humanity or subhuman status, as has been so commonly done in human societies based on gender or racial or ethic categories (Walker 2003). They include ones that denigrate human beings for displaying attributes that are in fact inescapably human as if they are something "lower" than human (being vulnerable physically and psychologically or displaying need, fear, or pain) and ones that exploit a human attribute

so as to denigrate a human individual (in the extreme case forms of torture, and more commonly exploitation through the needs of human beings). One case of exploiting a human attribute to denigrate a human being which we cannot take lightly, given its long history and social impact, is the common philosophical habit of declaring some particular characteristic human property as definitive or constitutive of humanity. By consequence of such stipulations, the humanity of a human individual who lacks that property or its fullest development may be denied, or the individual lacking the property may be declared not fully human, or of a lower grade of humanity, or (commonly) is simply ignored for the purposes of theoretical discussion (see Reader 2007; Kittay 2009). But dignity must also refer to the affirmation and positive and enabling support for the varieties of what is human, as well as openness to the enjoyment by and among human beings of what is human.

Capacities for rational choice, autonomous action, and moral responsibility are distinctive human attributes, and treating human beings who possess these valuable human attributes as if they did not, exploiting those attributes to denigrate human individuals, or aiming at the destruction and thwarting of those attributes does deny or assault human dignity. But the human characteristics that call upon the responsibility of accountable others are not exhausted by the rational capacity for accountability. Responsibility is called upon by human capacities for and vulnerabilities to many kinds of pain, suffering, insult, terror and neglect, as well as responsiveness of human beings to experiences of comfort, pleasure, physical integrity, skill, and control; by human capacities to respond to and to evoke and sustain shared or pleasurable or caring responses in others through touch, voice, feeling, shared attention, laughter or weeping; by the capacity to give and respond specifically to care, kindness, recognition, and fellow feeling (Kittay 2005, 122). Other characteristics that call out the responsibility of accountable agents are the humanly familiar kinds of expressiveness, absorption, and possessiveness that reveal human attachment, imagination, and memory, often in strikingly individual form. Human expressiveness includes but is not limited to capacities

for more or less intentional self-representation. Much of what we love, enjoy, and are moved by in others, and what we long to feel is loved and cherished in ourselves and capable of moving others, are familiar and sometimes individuating features–physical, emotional, expressive–that have little to do with our rational capacities as agents but everything to do with our human purchase on others and our irreplaceability as human beings. (See also Vanlaere and Gastmans 2007).

Relational dignity

Second, we need a fully *relational* way of conceiving and using the idea of dignity. Eva Kittay says that it is a mistake to sort individuals for moral consideration by intrinsic properties rather than by the relational property of being a member of the human family (Kittay 2005, 124). Annelies van Heijst argues that while the idea of intrinsic dignity should be retained, we need nonetheless to think of dignity as "secured, or even produced, in an interactive process of attentive caregiving" (van Heijst 2006a, 91). She quotes Paul Valadier saying that dignity in this sense "is a relationship, or rather, it manifests itself in the gesture by which we relate to others to consider them human, just as human as we are..." (94). I have already suggested that there are multiple characteristic features of human beings that are exercised and that are acknowledged in the kind of expression and recognition that constitutes dignity as an interpersonally effective standing. I want to say it is our humanity, in its varied expressions and enactments, that constitutes our claim to dignity, but that dignity is a *claim* that may or may not be honored. It is the affirmative response to the valid claim that constitutes the standing that is dignity. This is why it is comprehensible to speak of individuals' dignity being denied.

Differentiating responses to dignity

Finally, when I speak of the need for a *differentiated* conception of dignity I refer not only to the varieties of human characteristics, expressions, and functions that we share and can acknowledge or affirm in other human beings, but to the varieties of response through which we can affirm or deny, celebrate or denigrate, support or thwart

the humanity of these and their bearers. Dignity has been tightly linked to a particular kind of morally significant response: the attitude of respect that recognizes the moral personality and agency of others. It is not news that the attitude of respect, while it can be given a more extensive meaning, is heavily weighted toward non-interference in the exercise of rational self-control in those capable of it. The association between autonomy, negative liberty, noninterference, and dignity runs deep and runs in several directions through moral and political thought in the European and especially in the American tradition. But the idea that respect is the only or the primary attitude that constitutes the uptake of dignity is as exclusive as is the idea of dignity premised on rational agency to which it corresponds.

Assaults on dignity can take the forms of indifference, neglect, exclusion, ridicule, rejection, devaluation, and implicit as well as aggressive contempt. These are *failures* of human beings to meet others' humanity with forms of affirmation, confirming expression, communion, attention, and enjoyment. Annelies van Heijst comments at one point on disturbing reports from Dutch nursing homes, saying simply: "Practically no one spends some time with them, sits with them, talks to them or caresses them" (van Heijst 2006a, 90). It is remarkable how hard it remains theoretically to make the idea of human dignity responsive to such simple but urgent ways humanity can be denied, insulted, ignored and erased. There are nuanced physical and emotional responses that confirm a human presence–a greeting, a smile, a gaze, a touch. To meet with none of them or too few can be a profound offense to dignity. And it is a common feature of the intentional denial or instrumentalization of others' humanity–whether in concentration camps and prisons, or in nursing homes or other institutional environments–that efforts are made to render some distinctly human or especially humanly individuating aspects of a human presence obscure or deniable.

4. Conclusion: A twenty-first century agenda

We might hope that fundamental moral theory in the twenty-first century will move beyond pervasive fictions of equal rational actors in

symmetrical relations and will tax itself with the problems of asymmetry in so many human relations. Asymmetrical relations of power and dependency require us to explain and defend the central moral value of keeping human beings in humanly dignifying relations to each other. One problem of asymmetry arises in the universal human situation of various forms of dependency, interdependency, and vulnerability; a second is the persistent fact of social subordination, inequality, or exclusion of, or spasms of persecution and violence toward, some groups of human beings by others. These problems place different demands, but I have suggested that at their root lies a strenuous task: to rethink the moral ideal of dignity that grounds demands for full recognition of the full humanity of every human individual and for truly humane responses to the humanity of others.