

What can education learn from recent thinking around the concept of dignity and the intersection between identity and protected groups?

Dr Bob Bowie

Canterbury Christ Church University

Abstract

International UN declarations link dignity to equality as foundational ideas. They then connect dignity to education in the vision of education expressed those declarations and documents. Dignity is also a concept much debated in current literature in law, medicine, philosophy and theology. It is an idea rarely explored directly in educational literature. This paper explores an application of contextual conceptual analysis to the 'dignity discourses' that offer insights and clarify challenges in navigating the intersections between key groups that have bearing on educational settings. The method of contextual concept analysis was developed in a doctoral thesis in human rights education (Bowie 2011), and in this paper this method is applied to current and recent dignity literature. The focus is the work of two scholars: First, George Katab (2011) and the idea dignity links status and stature of present human life, however unequally endowed with talent, with a view to future human beings through a serious engagement with those of the past; Second, Jeremy Waldron with his 2009 Tanner lectures that argued from a juridical perspective to retain a connection between dignity and rank; Education is an exercise in hope in the future, with an enquiring eye to the learning of the past. It is frequently predicated on a presumed equality of opportunity for all rather than rank or status, though educational structures may be permeated with inequality and status. How different groups perceive future flourishing differ and this difference requires negotiation in any common educational enterprise.

1. Introduction:

Teachers in plural societies framed by human rights legislation, may feel they should prioritise universalising themes in religion: shared values, social concern, to bring justice to the unjustly treated. Such themes appeal to central human rights principles but how are the experiences of differently lived lives, by religion or by group, treated by such universalism? This paper argues dignity is an important starting point for making sense of this question. Dignity is present in many religions and human rights legislation. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) says,

‘Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.’
(Preamble)

It’s a prominent modern belief (Henkin 1990, xi & p.193) and this paper draws on two scholars: George Katab (2011) who thinks dignity links the status and stature of a human life, however unequally endowed with talent; Jeremy Waldron (2009) who retains a connection between dignity and rank as a moral foundational. It goes on to suggest human flourishing is also an essential facet to dignity. It is when we make sense of flourishing that the question of differently lived lives is clarified.

2. High rank, extended to all

The modern concept of dignity extends an ancient exclusive meaning to all. Waldron argues it is:

“a high-ranking status, comparable to a rank of nobility—only a rank assigned now to every human person, equally without discrimination: dignity as nobility for the common man.”
(Waldron 2009, p.216)

Dignity confers status, authority, self-possession and control. Waldron starts from a recognition that inherent dignity grounds rights though people are said to have their dignity robbed from them and it can be the thing which is sought,

“The idea of human dignity must coexist with the knowledge that human beings have never lived up to their moral and existential standards, whether personal or public with much consistency...” (Katab 2011, p.119)

The gap between professed human worth and the situation ‘on the ground’ is a space to be explored by educators and learners. This unfinished business of life demands our attention if we are concerned with wellbeing, justice, and the problem of human fallibility. Religion seeks to understand through notions of sin, punishment, karma and samsara for instance, alongside the image of God, Christ in us, the vice regent of Allah and so on. The Kingdom is coming but it is not yet fully here.

Waldron follows Kant that dignity is fundamental worth beyond price. His unusual starting point is the Roman sense of dignity as rank, high honor and privilege, linked to the monarch. But Waldron points to the transvaluation of values that occurred in dignity, whereby it is found in the lowly folk:

“True dignity abides with him alone, [w]ho, in the silent hour of inward thought, [c]an still suspect, and still revere himself, [i]n lowliness of heart.” (William Wordsworth, OED)

We are all ennobled in dignity. It:

“... involves an upwards equalization of rank, so that we now try to accord to every human being something of the dignity, rank, and expectation of respect that was formerly accorded to nobility.” (Waldron 2009, p.229)

3. Foundation, status, stature

Why bother with a definition of dignity when we can use accounts of degradation and humiliation? Waldron thinks we need an account to understand what the law is doing in relation both to acts of humiliation and also human dignity. It's not just what is done to us, but but what life is or should be. Dignity is interconnected to the actions and powers of justice. Waldron also thinks there is a underlying moral foundation drawing on Pico della Mirandola. The capacity for every person to be that which she wills - to be the normative agent. Sometimes that normative agency is the telos of our rights, that which our rights bring about, and sometimes our rights vindicate our normative agency. Waldron concludes that dignity is *foundational* or *foundationish* rather than a foundation in a simple way.

Kateb agrees that the existential notion of the equalisation of worth is the basis to any theory of rights and system of justice built around it. Kateb defines this existential notion:

“The core idea of human dignity is that on earth, humanity is the greatest type of beings -- or what we call species because we have learned to see humanity as one species in the animal kingdom, which is made up of many other species along with our own -- and that every member deserves to be treated in a manner consonant with the high worth of the species.” (Kateb 2011, p.3)

He distinguishes human dignity qua “status” and human dignity qua “stature”. Human beings have equal value and the human species has a value superior to all other earthly species¹

¹ We should note here that Lynne Rudder Baker's *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (Cambridge 2000) makes a similar case for human uniqueness on the basis that humans alone possess the capacity for a strong first-person perspective, but she allows some animals to possess a weak first-person perspective. In this paper I shall leave

"All individuals are equal; no other species is equal to humanity. These are the two basic propositions that make up the concept of human dignity" (Kateb 2011, p.6).

Such strong claims about the status of human beings raises a further difficulty. How is the move from inherent worth to self worship avoided? Humiliation and degradation is wrong but there are also dangers self idolisation, self devotion or, as Kateb puts it, pride and hubris. Educators may recognise this when with angry claims of learners to 'my rights' mask selfishness. We might justify dominion over the world and the plundering of the environment by our special status. Kateb counters this with his concept of the stature of dignity - stewardship, to treat all nature as if it deserved to know it was being served, a second personal relationship with the natural world. Kateb advances one reason to become the stewards of nature - gratitude.

"What can I say? ... To know and admire nature is a form of gratitude for existence, if not for one's own life, then for the rest" (Kateb 2011, p.118)

Nature is a fitting object of wonder and wonder can constrain self divination and self-worship. This takes the focus of self in a way not unlike the way some have recontextualised dignity within biblical perspectives centred on creation, redemption and sanctification (Soulén & Woodhead 2006). Kateb is striving for a secular account of dignity but there is a hint of humility, sinfulness and a need for repentance in his dignity-as-stature idea. Kateb is trying to resolve the ancient problem of reconciling the worth of the human person with their failings, their sinfulness - the created 'good' Adam (before the fruit of the tree of knowledge), and the banished 'fallen' Adam.

4. Human flourishing

For Waldron dignity is rank and it grounds rights and for Kateb dignity involves both status and stature, some understanding of moral character. I suggest more can, and needs to be said here. Dignity involves human flourishing that is consistent with, and expressive of, their intrinsic worth. This kind of dignity is influenced by human actions, those of the self and others, in that the extent to which dignity can flourish depends upon the willingness of others and the self to let it flourish. UN documents mention the idea of the full development of the human personality, when defining education. There is a link between education and the worth of the human we are educating. Some see discussion about the loss of dignity as discussion about

"the meaning of human flourishing, what it requires of us in justice, and how it can be variously understood and protected in communities constituted by their commitment to a common good...What is the basis for regarding a particular thing as both good for me and good for

aside the question of non human sentient beings, their personhood and their flourishing although these are clearly important ethical questions.

others like me, both within the communities to which I belong and across their boundaries?"
(Carozza 2008, p.8)

Dignity offers a focal point and a signpost for exploring human rights, drawing on diverse experiences in different disciplinary domains and drawing on diverse cultural and religious interpretations. It speaks to the developing, whole, multidimensional person. Living in dignity entails human development and all round flourishing. Inherent worth requires human flourishing or such worth is unrealised, ignored potential,

"The assumption of this innate 'worthfulness of the individual' is most significant from the point of view of democratic education which intends the full, all-round development of every individual's personality. This implies that education should take into account all his needs psychological, social, emotional and practical and cater to all of them". (Mohanty 2003, p.39)

Without development there can be no possibility of education; human lives can diminish. UN declarations frequently point to this - Education shall be, 'directed to the full development of the human personality' (UN General Assembly 1948, Article 26, para. 2). The child should grow up in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding, 'for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality' (*Convention on the Rights of the Child: Preamble*, UN General Assembly 1989). This development is something that extends into the different roles we take on in life.

"...the varied roles that each human being is expected to assume during his or her lifetime, roles that are essential to the formation of the individual's unique identity and welfare."
(Andreopoulos 2002, p.15)

For Reardon, an account of the wholeness and individuality of the human person and the fulfillment of social responsibility are all characteristics of a good society. She argues:

Integrity refers to the wholeness of the physical, mental, aesthetic, and spiritual facets of the person. The good society provides for the expression and development of the multiple facets of the person and holds them to be inviolable. Good societies are built on the active recognitions of the individual and group rights and the fulfillment of the individual and social responsibility.
(Reardon 1995, p.5)

There are of course a wide variety of expressions that seek to define human development (eg Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum and their work on the capabilities approach to human development (Nussbaum 1999; Sen 1985, 1993) The link between the innate worth of the person and the fullness of their development becomes clear when it manifests within human society and is facilitated or otherwise by human institutions. Within society, the extent to which the dignity of the human person can fully be recognized and allowed to flow through the extensions of what it means to be human is controlled, or

limited, unlike the basic unlimitable inherent worth. The extent to which a person flourishes in all the ways they may flourish, is an expression of recognition of their individual worth. A humiliated person, a person who has had dignity rejected or denied, is 'de-flourished'.

A critical challenge remains. Multidimensional human life lives out life in multiple, and therefore differing ways. This is a reality passively, shall we say, as different people, and groups of people, experience differently lived lives from their particular context which might be formed by their social group membership (gender, ability, and so on). It is also a reality actively pursued for those people able to make choices about their lived lives. Living in communities, at school, at home, or at work, necessarily entails limitation arising from the recognition and consideration of each other in informing decisions and actions. Therefore the individual flourishing cannot be considered in isolation from the flourishing of others around them. All should have a chance to flourish to the extent that they do not diminish the flourishing of others. While dignity as inherent worth may be irremovable, and dignity as stature may vary according to moral character, dignity as flourishing is limiting. Different religious traditions, philosophies or meta narratives construct differing accounts of human flourishing, different accounts of the good life that are informed by their doctrines, traditions and shared experiences. This is not an odd feature of religion, but an inevitable consequence of human creativity and freedom.

Education is frequently predicated on a presumed equality of opportunity for all, rather than rank, though educational structures may be permeated with inequality around status. As educators, our instinctive optimism for the future and our belief of the creative potential of new minds are both expressions arising out of a foundational belief in the dignity of the human person. Education must be predicated on the dignity, the worth of the human being, that creative potential that we must allow to flourish as a result of life experience and life experimentation. It should enable human flourishing, an educative dimension to dignity that complements inherent worth and stature. The key question of how all may flourish in ways that do not diminish others is central to striving for this educational task.

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