

‘Do not make yourself a worm’ – Reconsidering dignity as a duty to oneself

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Abstract:

Discussions about the dignity of human beings often focus on violations of a person’s dignity that are performed by other persons. However, human beings can also violate their own dignity or at least they can expose it to a violation by others thoughtlessly or intentionally. In his *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant states that ‘[o]ne who makes himself a worm cannot complain afterwards if people step on him’. He presupposes that persons can infringe or even forfeit their own dignity – for instance through servile behaviour – and that violating one’s own dignity is a violation of a duty towards oneself. Starting from the tension between dignity in terms of *honour* and *worth* in current debates and in Kant’s own thinking, as well as between understanding dignity as *absolute* or *relational*, I develop a comprehensive account of dignity as a duty to oneself. I argue for a twofold obligation towards oneself to respect one’s own dignity: A) a duty (as the necessity of an action done out of respect for the moral law) to respect one’s authority as an autonomous person in the Kantian sense, and B) – beyond the Kantian framework – an obligation arising from the practical necessity that follows from one’s self-understanding as a self-determined, self-expressive individual personality in a socio-cultural context. Finally, I outline the consequences of the idea of ‘making oneself a worm’ for the concept of dignity in the realm of rights by discussing why, even though persons can behave like worms, others ought not to step on them.

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‘Do not make yourself a worm’ – Reconsidering dignity as a duty to oneself

‘One who makes himself a worm cannot complain afterwards if people step on him’ (Kant, 1996, p. 188 [437]²). Kant formulates this statement in his *Metaphysics of Morals*. He presupposes that each person owes it to herself to act as a person in order to maintain her own dignity and introduces a duty towards oneself to respect oneself and to avoid servility. This duty is directed against ‘bowing and scraping’ before others and against behaving in a manner that is ‘unworthy of a human being’ (ibid.).

The statement about making oneself a worm has a certain appeal. The metaphorical expression addresses our sense of honour. It refers to the experience that people sometimes behave in a ‘worm-like’ manner, and that degrading and humiliating themselves indeed makes them more vulnerable to degradation and humiliation by others. The current discourse on human dignity usually focuses on violations of a person’s dignity that are performed by other persons (see for example Margalit and Goldblum, 1996). However, the phenomenon of servile behavior is related to the experience that human beings can also violate their own dignity. At least they can expose it to a violation by others either thoughtlessly or intentionally. In modern liberal societies the rules of etiquette and authority structures that enforce the ‘bowing and scraping’ of servile persons have been replaced by ideals of equality and mutual respect. But even if people do not actually bow before each other, nobody would deny that servility and self-degradation have not been eliminated. They occur in personal relationships as well as in work relationships and within hierarchical social structures. Violations of one’s own dignity that follow from submissive behaviour patterns become even more disturbing, when such behaviour is no longer clearly prescribed by social rules and codes of conduct.

Kant is usually regarded as one of the founding fathers of the modern idea of human dignity in terms of the inviolable and inherent, absolute and equal worth of every human being. It may thus seem surprising that in his statement about the worm and in the reflections on dignity in his *Doctrine of Virtue* he obviously presupposes that human beings *can* make themselves worms and that they can violate or even forfeit their own dignity. This seems to be at odds with the

² The page numbers added in square brackets to citations of the works of Immanuel Kant refer to the “Akademieausgabe”.

paradigmatic definition of dignity as unnegotiable *worth* (in contrast to a price) that Kant develops in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. The idea of the self-violation of one's own dignity through submissive behaviour rather reflects an older idea of dignity in terms of *honour* or rank that is closely connected to phenomena like pride and shame and thus to a person's self-image.

Starting from the tension between dignity in terms of *honour* and dignity in terms of *worth* in current debates and in Kant's own thinking, as well as between understanding dignity as *absolute* or *relational*, I will build upon Kant's idea of a duty towards oneself to respect one's own dignity in order to develop a comprehensive account of dignity as an internal relation within the human being that is directed towards the realization of an absolute ideal. According to Michael Rosen it is the core idea of having duties towards oneself that 'our duties are so deep a part of us that we could not be the people that we are without having them' (Rosen, 2012, p.157). I will amplify this core idea by defending a twofold obligation towards oneself to respect one's own dignity. This obligation will be described as the necessity of an action done out of respect for the moral law or rather for our own authority as lawgivers in the Kantian sense, *and* – beyond the Kantian framework – as an obligation arising from the practical necessity that follows from one's self-understanding as a self-determined, self-expressive individual personality in a socio-cultural context. Finally, I will sketch the potential consequences of the idea of 'making oneself a worm' for the concept of dignity in the realm of rights by discussing why, even though persons can behave like worms, others ought not to step on them.

This paper is not primarily interested in a mere Kant exegesis. It will use Kant's theory as a starting point to develop a comprehensive understanding of dignity as grounding a duty to oneself. The investigation will be based on a sober interpretation of Kant's account of dignity, but also engage with work by Hill, Waldron, Rosen and other positions in recent discussions on the ethics of dignity.

1) Different types of dignity

Human dignity is regarded as the foundation, the sum or the purpose of inalienable human rights and as being innate and not meritorious. It claims absoluteness and is at the same time proclaimed in defence against violations (humiliation, degradation, objectification) of a human being through

another human being or through social or institutional structures. Human beings do not have to strive for this kind of dignity – they possess it a priori.

The fact that the relevance of human dignity is *proclaimed* – for instance, in the first article of the European charter which says that ‘human dignity is inviolable’ – shows that human beings strive to *defend* their own dignity as well as the dignity of other human beings against external violations. However, defining human dignity connected to human rights in the way that I have sketched above is only one approach to a complex ethical concept that is not defined once and for all, but still open to discussion.

As already mentioned, there is a tension between understanding dignity in terms of honour or in terms of worth. This distinction plays an important role in the revitalization of current discussions on dignity by Jeremy Waldron (2012) in his reflections on ‘Dignity, Rank, and Rights’. He wants to overcome the focus on understanding dignity as worth, which typically draws on Kant, and reintroduce notions of status and rank into the debate. This means to understand ‘dignity as nobility for the common man’ (Waldron, 2012, p.22).

In ancient Rome *dignitas* is attributed to ‘the *elevated position* of the ruling class’ (Sensen, 2011, p.153; cf. Stoecker, 2011, p.8). A distinction is made between initial dignity and its realized stage. The nobleman is thus born into a rank with special dignity, but he must realize his disposition. He ought to act in a noble way, he must fulfil his social role, and correspond to a code of honour. One’s rank and aristocratic dignity implies duties towards other noblemen as well as to inferiors. The dignity of a person depends on the recognition of others, which is ensured by a hierarchic system and by clear rules of social interaction.

In the course of history, this idea of aristocratic nobility was universalized, in particular by Cicero.³ He attributes a noble status to all human beings, according to their elevated status in nature, which is characterized by their capacities of reason and freedom (cf. Sensen, 2011, pp.155-161). Furthermore, Cicero explicitly argues for a duty to oneself to live according to those capacities and to realize one’s dignity. His reason to deal with dignity (*dignitas*) in the context of his treatise on dutiful action (*De Officiis*) is precisely the danger of not doing justice to one's own dignity.

³ For a better understanding of these historical developments see Ralf Stoecker’s investigations on ‘Three Crucial Turns on the Road to an Adequate Understanding of Human Dignity’ (2011).

Merely striving for pleasure instead of striving for perfection is unworthy of the nobility of human beings (Cicero 1913, I 106). Within this traditional paradigm of dignity, it is most important to *strive towards attaining dignity for oneself* – much more important than protecting or preserving the dignity of others. The universalization of dignity as nobility can be interpreted as a decisive step from understanding dignity in terms of honour to understanding it as an equal and universal worth of human beings. However, this historic movement within the understanding of dignity does not really seem to be a radical shift. The idea of dignity as honour has left visible traces in conceptions of dignity as worth.

In his introduction to Waldron's book Meir Dan-Cohen carves out the following differences between honour and worth: honour is of social origin, while worth has metaphysical origins; the scope of honour is limited, the scope of worth universal; 'honor is typically uneven and hierarchical [...] worth is evenly distributed over humanity as a whole'; and finally 'honor is contingent' whereas 'worth is categorical'. (Waldron and Dan-Cohen, 2012, p.4) According to Dan-Cohen the greatest advantage of Waldron's reinterpretation of dignity as rank is that 'equal dignity is better anchored in evolving social practice than in Kantian metaphysics' (p.5). Waldron, however, focuses on one particular social practice which is legal practice. He argues that 'dignity seems at home in law' (p.13) and one should thus start from a law-based approach to achieve a better understanding of dignity instead of interpreting it primarily as a moral idea.

Though I think that this is indeed a promising approach and Waldron has successfully shown how it can allow for a deeper understanding of our use of the concept of dignity, such a law-based approach does not make sense for an interpretation of self-violations of one's own dignity. It would be going too far to interpret them as a legal problem. And it is not by chance that Kant also discusses them in the *Doctrine of Virtue* and not in the *Doctrine of Rights*.⁴ The dignity that is at stake in servile behaviour can be defined as '*dignity proper*, i.e. dignity as it is described outside the legal context', but within a framework of social relationships and practices (Neuhäuser and Stoecker, 2014, p.298). This type of dignity 'depends on being treated with respect by others and on being able to present oneself as being of equal dignity in various social contexts' (ibid.). For Waldron, the legal process that respects persons as 'being capable of explaining themselves'

⁴ Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* consists of two parts, the *Doctrine of Rights*, discussing the realm of positive rights, legislation and peaceful (cosmo-)political order, and the *Doctrine of Virtue*, discussing the conditions and challenges of a virtuous life and ethical duties.

(Waldron and Dan-Cohen, 2012, p.54), is the paradigm example of respecting the capability of persons to present themselves as beings of equal dignity. However, I believe that starting from the phenomenon of failed self-representation as a being of equal dignity in social contexts offers a deeper understanding of the reasons why we should protect practices that allow individuals to protect, realize and represent their own dignity.

The aspect of presenting or representing oneself as a being with dignity can be described as a third type of dignity. Michael Rosen distinguishes accordingly between dignity as status, as intrinsic value and as dignified manner or bearing. The latter is closely related to the embodiment of self-respect (see Pollmann, 2011). Waldron refers to ‘noble bearing’ and its embodiment in ‘walking upright’ as well (Waldron and Dan-Cohen, 2012, p.21). Behaving in a dignified manner can be regarded as an expression of one’s status and as an important condition of fulfilling one’s duty towards oneself to realize one’s own dignity.

In a similar approach Eva Weber-Guskar has recently suggested understanding ‘dignity as an attitude that every person has the capacity to possess, but which is only realized when a person fulfils certain standards of behavior’ (Weber-Guskar, 2019, 3). According to Weber-Guskar, having the attitude of dignity means being aligned with one’s self image, which provides norms and reasons to act, within a moral framework.⁵ Dignity is described as ‘a relation a person holds to herself that is also dependent on and relevant to her relation to other persons’ (ibid.). I agree with Weber-Guskar’s emphasis on dignity as a self-relation. However, while she suggests that only ‘the realized potential’ (ibid.) can be defined as dignity, I will insist on the idea that dignity ought to be regarded as the internal claim to realize this potential – a claim with the authority to establish a duty toward oneself.

In the following investigations I will make use of the distinction between dignity in terms of worth and in terms of honour. However, I will base my conception of dignity more fundamentally on a distinction between the following two types of understanding the concept of dignity (see also Bauer, 2008)⁶:

⁵ The condition of the moral framework is added in order to avoid attributing dignity to the murderer who lives in alignment with his self-image.

⁶ One can also relate these two types of dignity to Aurel Kolnai’s definition of Dignity as a Quality which presupposes that the term “means Worth or Worthiness in some ‘absolute’ sense” (type A) and at the same time it has “descriptive content” (type B), relating to qualities like “composure, calmness, restraint”, as well as “qualities of

Type A: Absolute Dignity

- Dignity is an absolute equal worth of every human being and / or a common worth of the human species.
- Dignity is understood as an inherent and innate property of the human being as such.
- Dignity ‘is just there’. It is a given value and a fact.⁷

Type B: Relational Dignity

- Dignity is attributed to a person through herself and / or others as a recognition of a special status, related to capacities and / or merits.
- Dignity is understood as an essential element of an individual, personal way of living⁸ or of an attitude towards oneself and others.
- Dignity must be realized *procedurally*. It ‘is made’ or achieved, expressed or embodied in one’s bearing, lifestyle and behavior.

2) Kant on dignity and servility

Kant’s concept of dignity is one of the main sources for the understanding of dignity as an absolute worth. However, as Oliver Sensen and others have shown, Kant refers back to the ancient idea of a noble status of the human being in nature, which is due to the faculties of reason and morality. Sensen thoroughly investigates how Kant picks up a Stoic notion of dignity not as ‘an inner value’ but as ‘a relational property of being elevated’, based on the assumption that ‘human beings are elevated over the rest of nature in virtue of being free’ (Sensen, 2009, p.310). In this respect dignity is akin to sublimity (Erhabenheit) and calls for reverence (Achtung). Kantian dignity and the

distinctness, delimitation, and distance” that imply a certain invulnerability, and finally “features of self-contained serenity”(Kolnai, 1976, p.251 and pp.253f.). Like Kolnai’s account my project of combining both types of dignity is closely linked to understanding it as a thick ethical concept.

⁷ Alternatively, dignity can also be understood as being given by God within the framework of type A. Rosen (pp.90-99) and Waldron (pp.27-30) discuss the influences of the Catholic tradition on the modern concept of human dignity and on legislation. In this paper I will confine myself to discussing secular accounts of dignity.

⁸ Peter Bieri (2013) suggests understanding dignity as a way of life or a manner of living one’s life – “*eine Art zu leben*”.

traditional paradigm share a focus on duties towards oneself and not on rights: ‘The elevated position brought privileges, but it also implies duties to carry oneself and behave in accordance with one’s status’ (p.312). Dignity thus must be realized and calls for a particular attitude towards oneself. It is not absolute, but relational, whereby the fundamental relation is an internal relation of the person who is owing something to herself.

Kant describes the duty of self-esteem, which is directed against servility in the following passage of *The Doctrine of Virtue*:

Since he must regard himself not only as a person generally but also as a *human being*, that is, as a person who has duties his own reason lays upon him, his insignificance as a *human animal* may not infringe upon his consciousness of his dignity *as a rational human being*, and he should not disavow the moral self-esteem of such a being, that is he should pursue his end, which is in itself a duty, not abjectly, not in a *servile spirit (animo servili)* as if he were seeking a favor, not disavowing his dignity, but always with consciousness of his sublime moral predisposition (which is already contained in the concept of virtue). And this *self-esteem* is a duty of man to himself. (Kant 1996, p.186 [435])

Later Kant adds: ‘Be no man’s lackey. – Do not let others tread with impunity on your rights’ (M VI 436).

The Kantian dignity of the person is based on the dignity of the moral law, by which human beings autonomously legislate themselves.⁹ When Kant uses the term dignity in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* he mainly refers to the dignity of the moral law or of reason as such.¹⁰

After implementing the Formula of Humanity of the Categorical Imperative that says that each person ought to ‘treat itself and all others never merely as means, but always at the same time as end in itself’ (Kant 2002, p.51 [433]), he introduces the highly influential ‘idea of the dignity of a rational being that obeys no law except that which at the same time it gives itself’ (p.52 [434]). He defines dignity as being ‘elevated above all price’, (ibid.). What has dignity ‘admits of no equivalent’, it does not ‘merely [have] a relative worth, i.e., a price, but rather an inner worth’

⁹ It would go beyond the task of this paper to discuss the complex debates about Kant’s understanding of autonomy as self-legislation. I agree to Pauline Kleingeld and Marcus Willaschek (2019) who point out that Kant does not actually state that the Moral Law as such is self-legislated. It is valid a priori and independent from any legislator. It is thus the capacity to recognise the Moral Law and its validity and to govern oneself according to its principles that is fundamental for the dignity of the person – a dignity that is in a way borrowed from the dignity of the Moral Law and practical reason.

¹⁰ For an overview of potential critical objections against Kant’s account of dignity in the *Groundwork* see see Samuel J. Kerstein’s “Kantian dignity. A critique” (2014).

(pp.52f. [434f.]). It is nonnegotiable and irreplaceable. According to Kant these features of dignity include ‘the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself’ (ibid.). And he continues:

Now morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, because only through morality is it possible to be a legislative member in the realm of ends. Thus, morality and humanity, insofar as it is capable of morality, is that alone which has dignity. (p.53 [435])

Morality and humanity are inseparably intertwined in Kant’s account of dignity. It is the human being as a moral being (or at least as a potentially moral being), which has dignity, and thus must be treated as an end in itself. This also means that a person ought to treat herself as an end in itself in order to correspond to her own dignity.

In the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant underlines again that it contradicts the Categorical Imperative to treat oneself as a mere means and specifies this by defining it as a vice to ‘throw oneself away and make oneself an object of contempt’ through ‘lying, avarice, and false humility (servility)’ (Kant 1996, p.175 [420]). The core problem of this vice lies in ‘making himself a plaything of mere inclinations and hence a thing’ (ibid.) instead of making use of his capacity to act according to his own principles and thereby to his own freedom.

Any person has a duty toward herself to realize – and not to violate – her innate dignity as an autonomous person according to Kant. Each person owes this to herself. The person as *homo noumenon* can impose duties on herself as *homo phainomenon*. Kant’s distinction between the *homo noumenon*, the human being as the citizen of the realm of pure reason, and the *homo phainomenon*, the human being that is situated in a not merely reasonable phenomenal world, does not necessarily have to be regarded as an old-fashioned metaphysical theory. I would rather underline that this distinction offers the option of regarding oneself as a human being from two perspectives, which can also be described as an ideal and a non-ideal perspective. Kant is well aware of the fact that the complete picture of the human being has to include both perspectives. This is the reason why he adds reflections on casuistic questions to his non-empirically grounded moral philosophy in the *Metaphysics of Moral* in order to describe, inter alia, how the relations of persons to their own dignity can look like in ‘real life’ and which problems can occur.

In Kant’s theory of dignity, the internal relationship of a person to herself, to her own principles

and maxims and to her own rational capacities is thus most important. A person ought to respect herself as a person – which means to respect herself as an autonomous moral being. So far, the argument of the *Doctrine of Virtue* can be regarded as a specification of what Kant has already laid out in the *Groundwork* – apart from the statement that the virtue which is opposed to the vices of lying, avarice and servility ‘could be called *love of honor*’ (ibid.). How is this reference to *honor* related to Kant’s understanding of dignity as the incommensurable *worth* of a person that asks for recognition respect? Is Michael Rosen right when he states that ‘Kant’s ethics is an ethics of duty, but it might also be called an ethics of respectfulness, an ethics of honor or even an ethics of reverence’? (Rosen, 2012, p.143) This is true only insofar as respect, honour and reverence are first and foremost owed to the moral law and to persons as autonomous agents who are binding themselves to that law. Still, we can find some traces of a broader understanding of honour and interesting links between self-respect and self-esteem, in particular in Kant’s thoughts on servility.

Kant uses the term “self-respect” (*Selbstachtung*) in order to describe the respect for the morally autonomous person, referring to the “equal standing” of persons and to the power of the “attribution of authority”, while “self-esteem” (*Selbstschätzung*) is related to a “judgement of merits” (Bagnoli, 2009, p.484). It is important for him to distinguish sharply between these two relations to oneself. As Elizabeth Anderson has shown, it can be regarded as revolutionary achievement of Kant’s ethics that he “reverses the relations of respect and esteem” in comparison to the traditional ethics of honour (Anderson, 2008, p.140) Instead of binding respect to the esteem of particular merits or to a social standard, Kant introduces an egalitarian ethics of respect towards “the humanity one shares with everyone else” while moral esteem is owed to “taking respect for one’s own and others’ humanity as one’s end” (ibid.). Though Anderson points out that some problematic “hierarchical features of the honour ethic persist” (ibid.) in Kant’s ethics, she underlines that he “rightly stresses the moral importance of cultivating a sense of personal dignity” in order to avoid that people agree to suppression or fail to defend their rights (p.144f.).¹¹

In the passage on servility (*Von der Kriecherei*) in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, we find hints at an ideal of dignity that is related to appraisal respect¹² or self-esteem and that has to be realized

¹¹ Kant’s most problematic example of valuing honour higher than life is the case of a rape victim who should rather give up her life than succumb to rape in order to protect humanity in her own person, see Anderson, 2008, 142f.

¹² For a definition of “appraisal respect” in contrast to “recognition respect”, see Darwall, 2006, pp.122-126.

through one's individual performance. The German word 'Kriecherei' that is usually translated as 'servility' is a nominalization of the verb 'kriechen' which means 'to creep' or 'to crawl'. So right from the start, Kant's observations on servility are closely related to body language as an expression of a lack of self-esteem. A dignity that ought to be expressed and is dependent on one's upright posture (literarily as well as in the figurative sense) seems to differ fundamentally from the inviolable and inherent worth of the humanity in the person. One could say that the rather abstract idea of the humanity in the person does not 'have a body'. Still, obviously Kant implies that its dignity can be embodied.

Why exactly is it so important for Kant not to creep or bow before others? One of the core ideas that made Kant's theory of dignity so popular and successful is the idea of equality. However, it would be too easy to reduce this equality to the presupposition of an equal value that is 'just given' and distributed in equal shares between all human beings. The equality that Kant presupposes is an equality of rights that is based on an equality of capacities – the capacities of reason and moral autonomy that characterize a person.

When Kant unfolds his theory of servility, he first points out that it is the human being 'as a person (homo noumenon)' who 'possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world. He can measure himself with every other being of this kind and value himself on the footing of equality with them' (Kant, 1996, p.186 [434f.]). Keeping one's equality to all other rational beings and value oneself 'on the footing' of this equality thus plays an important role in the understanding of the vice of servility.

Servility (Kriecherei) as a violation of one's own dignity is defined as 'waiving any claim to moral worth in oneself, in the belief that one will thereby acquire a borrowed worth' (p.187 [435]). The core problem is thus that one exchanges one's real worth as a person against a merely borrowed worth by 'belittling one's own moral worth merely as a means to acquiring the favor of another' (ibid.). Such a borrowed worth is deficient and dependent on the favour of the other or, in more contemporary terminology, on the view of the other and his estimation of one's own performance, achievements, qualities, of one's bearing or of one's social role and status. Kant's disregard of this borrowed worth is connected to his general project of establishing a moral theory that is independent from contingencies, in particular from the contingency and instability of happiness.

Following moral norms cannot guarantee happiness (or Aristotelian *eudaimonia*), it is directed towards making someone 'glückswürdig', thus worthy of happiness (whereby the German word 'würdig' is akin to 'Würde', the German word for 'dignity'). Likewise, the worth of a person shall not be at the mercy of others and dependent on their evaluations. It can only be stable and free from contingencies if it is grounded in the absolute worth of morality.

Kant's illustrates his idea of servility by means of examples (p.188 [437]): Someone becomes another man's lackey and allows him to step on his rights. This is clearly a violation of the equality of rights – the interesting thing is that the violation is committed by the person who subordinates himself to the other. Parasites, flatterers and beggars accept favours of others and become dependent on them as well as debtors who cannot pay back their debt. 'Complaining and whining, even crying out in bodily pain' are utterances of servility through showing one's weakness and vulnerability. Body language is important again when Kant criticizes any kind of 'kneeling down or prostrating oneself,' be it for religious reasons or out of idolatry, in place of respecting the dignity of 'an ideal represented to you by your own reason'. As stated above, any kind of 'bowing and scraping' violates one's own dignity, as well as the 'pedantry' of 'tributes of respect in words and manners'. Kant closes his paragraph on casuistic questions with the conclusion about 'one who makes himself a worm', after remarking that the Germans are the world champions in this pedantry, though there is still a very general human propensity towards servility.

All the examples of servile behaviour can be regarded as proof of what is the core of Kant's conception of dignity: an equally high status of all human beings as persons who possess the capacities of reason and morality that ought to be respected by themselves and by others. The duty toward oneself to respect one's own dignity is so important, because this equality can only be realized on the basis of self-respect. However, the images of concrete forms of servile behaviour that are evoked are associated with the idea that dignity ought to be embodied and performed and that one can violate one's own dignity in a rather subtle manner through particular habits, behaviour patterns and ways of life. In order to understand how the ideal of dignity as a correspondence of one's own self-relation and one's relation to others to an absolute worth of the person can be realized within a phenomenal, not merely reasonable, non-ideal world and by individuals who are citizens of this world as well as of the realm of pure reason, a broader

understanding of respecting one's own dignity is needed. It has to integrate aspects of embodiment and self-expression and of self-esteem for one's individual personality.

3) Servility, Self-Respect and Dignity reconsidered

In his famous paper on *Servility and Self-Respect* Thomas E. Hill picks up the special Kantian notion of self-respect and transforms it into 'respect not for one's merits but respect for one's rights' (Hill, 1973, p.97). He regards the lack of self-respect of a servile person as a lack of respect towards the system of morality that ought to coordinate and protect the rights of persons. The servile person has the wrong 'attitude concerning one's rightful place in a moral community' (p. 90).

In *Self-Respect Reconsidered* (1982) there is an interesting shift in Hill's argumentation. Self-respect here requires not to deny one's moral, but also one's *personal* standards or not to sell them (and thus oneself) below value. Hill states that 'there are ways in which we feel everyone should respect himself which have little to do with either acknowledging one's merits or appreciating one's rights' (p.130). He gives the example of an artist who alters his masterpiece because it is not accepted by his contemporaries and sells cheap copies of it. He takes this decision though he knows that he sells his work under value and feels disgust at that fact. Hill underlines that this decision is not immoral. What he wants to point out is that self-respect is neither only linked to one's moral status as a rights-bearer nor to one's merits that are acknowledged by oneself and by others. The artist knows the quality of his work and thus knows his merits. What he neglects is a set of personal standards that are not moral standards (at least not in a narrower sense) – in this case not only aesthetic standards, but also standards of lifestyle, of taste, of social interaction and comportment. These standards are personal, because they are standards 'by which one is prepared to judge oneself even if they are not extended to others' (p.133f.). Disrespect of these standards leads to 'losing face with oneself' (p.134).

When it comes to personal standards the problem of servility is no longer a lack of recognition of the system of morality. But it can still be described as the problem of not recognizing oneself as an equal member of a system of shared norms or standards: a socio-cultural system of coexistence

and communication. Though the artist in the example binds himself to his own standards and does not judge every other person according to them, these standards do not come out of nowhere. He wants to correspond to a certain ideal of the artist and of the value of artistic creation. His 'self-respect reconsidered' is thus linked to an external normative framework.

Gesa Lindeman offers a definition of human dignity that combines Kantian notions with a similar link to such a broader normative framework:

Human dignity is the quality a human being has as generally recognized social person open to participation in diverse forms of communication. As a human being, a person has dignity because he or she is not only a means to an end within functionally specified communication, but also a human being beyond particular ends. As such, the human being within the context of functional differentiation is an end in him or herself. [...]the crucial point is the openness for further communication. (Lindemann, 2014, p.197f.)

Accordingly, to violate one's dignity would consist in subordinating oneself completely to one's function in a social role in such a way that this role excludes oneself from the opportunity of participating in communication with others on an equal footing. Lindemann describes human dignity from a sociological perspective 'conceived as a structural feature of modern societies, which are characterized by functional differentiation' (p.191). Modern societies face the challenge of dealing with a tension between a strong individualization and an attribution of moral priority to individual personalities on the one hand and a reduction of individual persons to their individualized functions and specialist roles on the other hand. This reduction and functionalization will be thwarted by respecting the individual as an end in itself with his or her own voice and an ability to participate in communicative exchange.

Let me develop the idea of openness for communication a bit further: It is related to a B-type understanding of dignity, because forms of expression, like body posture or the use of particular conversational skills, are decisive for the opportunity to participate in the practice of open communication. The ideal of being an equal partner of communication is related to the ideal of the person as a potentially reasonable member in the Kingdom of Ends as well as to the idea of embodying one's own dignity and realizing a dignified attitude towards oneself. Respecting oneself in both regards is essential for the opportunity of open communication on an equal footing,

which is essential for the realization of dignity in a (non-ideal) social world where persons incorporate roles and want to realize and express their individual personalities.

Does Lindemann's approach help to explain Hill's example of the artist? It seems that this artist does not treat himself as a mere means to the end of fulfilling a social function. He neither excludes himself completely from the possibility of communicating with others on an equal footing. Nevertheless, one can imagine that he himself as well as others will probably measure him and his decisions against the personal standards that he usually embodies and expresses in his role as an artist. These standards are both individual standards – rooted in the individuality of his artistic expression – and common social standards – rooted in his social function as an artist. His falling short of these standards will affect his communication with others in his specific role, it will thus affect the communicative exchange with other artists or art experts, all his communication about art etc.

To what extent can the artist's behaviour be described as a violation of his own dignity? He does not completely 'make himself a worm' by throwing away his status as a person, but he still can be regarded as a 'worm-artist' or a wormlike version of himself in comparison to his higher personal standards. One could describe his behavior as 'Kriecherei', not so much in terms of bowing and scraping before others, but in terms of creeping below his own standards. He is not exchanging his moral worth against the borrowed worth of other's appreciation. But he is exchanging a worth that he establishes by giving himself standards and by creating his work of art according to his standards against the borrowed worth of the money that he receives for the copies of his altered paintings. Though the reference to the artwork and to the realm of aesthetic standards may be a little bit misleading, Hill's example is not meant to be an example of disrespecting an absolute objective aesthetic value. The problem with the artist's self-respect lies in the fact, that he adapts his actions to the taste and mercy of others, who first neglect the worth of his artwork and then pay for the copies that he has adapted to their taste. Though he does not disrespect his *moral* autonomy he disrespects his *personal* autonomy and thus another important aspect of his capacity for self-determination.

According to Kant all worth and value is defined by a law – which could be interpreted as a stronger version of what Hill calls a standard. Now, only *giving* the law and *determining* the values has dignity. It has an absolute value, because it is that which one should value and would automatically

value according to reason. However, given that there are other values than moral values – such as aesthetic values or values of a meaningful life – one could still say that the capacity to determine the standards for these values has dignity. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to discuss to what extent and how exactly Kant allows for the idea of non-moral values and whether the capacity to set the standards for such values would have an absolute value according to *reason*. Anyway, within a Kantian framework the moral law is definitively always overriding any other potential standards and values.

Let us take a step beyond the Kantian framework: For the successful functioning of concrete acts of interpersonal communication and social interaction on an equal footing, it can be equally important to respect oneself as the representative of a certain social group, as a representative of humanity, as a person with moral autonomy in the Kantian sense and as the individual, embodied person that is talking face to face with another individual and claims respect for her personal standards. These different forms of self-respect and self-esteem do not exclude each other. They can go hand in hand within a broader understanding of respecting one's own dignity which is the fundamental basis for respecting each other and realizing successful interaction and communication of equals.¹³

If we reconsider self-respect – by combining self-respect towards oneself as a person in the Kantian sense with self-esteem and appreciating oneself as an individual personality, with personal beliefs and standards and with an individual voice – the duty to avoid servility must be reconsidered as well. It turns into a twofold duty to respect oneself as a person *and* as an individual personality aiming at successful interaction and communication with other persons in the Kingdom of Ends in the Kantian sense as well as in a 'kingdom of flourishing social interaction'.

To understand oneself as a being with dignity in a comprehensive sense means to recognize a double claim of dignity, which refers both to the understanding of dignity as the absolute claim of a value inherent in human beings qua being human (A) and to dignity as a relational attitude, practice or lifestyle of individual human beings who are striving for the realization of this absolute

¹³ The importance of an equal footing has been translated into a very concrete form of interpersonal communication in Philip Pettit's "eyeball test" as a proof of non-domination: "It says that people will be adequately resourced and protected in the exercise of their basic liberties to the extent that, absent excessive timidity or the like, they are enabled by the most demanding local standards to look one another in the eye without reason for fear or deference." (Pettit, 2014, p. 99)

claim (B). Fulfilling one's duty to oneself to correspond to one's own dignity thus implies

- to respect oneself as a rational and moral autonomous person who gives oneself principles and sets oneself ends.
- to appreciate oneself as an individual, self-determined personality who chooses particular goals or personal standards and shapes one's individual identity and lifestyle in dignity.

One who respects his own dignity respects different aspects of his normative authority over his own life (cf. Schaber, 2012). The double duty towards oneself to correspond to one's own dignity is the basis of a duty to respect the dignity of others in both ways as well. However, the duty against oneself not to make oneself a worm should not just be regarded as a means to the end of valuing and treating others adequately or of contributing to the system of morality. The claim to fully respect the dignity of the person is simply the same – whether it is owed to another person or to the person that you are.

4) Dignity as a duty towards oneself

Let me explain why self-appreciation as described under B is highly important within a comprehensive understanding of dignity as a duty to oneself. It is deeply rooted in experiences of pride and shame and offers a very intuitive approach to understanding the general idea of owing something to yourself. Eva Weber-Guskar rightly points out that the importance of a B-type understanding of dignity is particularly relevant wherever people fight for their own dignity – against suppression, discrimination or social conditions that support servility. They do not only stand up for being recognized as moral beings and rights-bearers, they also fight for being appreciated for being the individual beings they are and in being able to determine their own personal standards. The struggle for dignity is in many cases connected to a struggle not to be reduced to one certain aspect of one's own identity – not even to the highly important aspect of being a moral agent and reasonable person.

As stated above, Michael Rosen regards it as the basis of Kantian ethics that we have duties toward ourselves, which means that 'our duties are so deep a part of us that we could not be the people

that we are without having them.’ In the Kantian framework this means that ‘by failing to respect the humanity of others we actually undermine humanity in ourselves’ (Rosen, 2012, 157). Now, according to Thomas Hill the personal standards on which you are ready to judge yourself are ‘inescapably a part of oneself’ (Hill, 1982, p.134). And Hill’s artist who disrespects his own standards is not the artist or individual person that he had been before this act of disrespect. According to these two very similar lines of thought one can thus argue that the inherent character that is often attributed to dignity lies in the fact that dignity makes a binding claim on ourselves towards ourselves. The binding force that turns the claim into a duty lies in the fact that we ‘could not be the people we are’ without accepting the authority of this internal claim. This account of dignity as a duty toward oneself is still compatible with the idea that dignity is based in social practice, insofar as any kind of self-relation of persons is situated in a realm of social interaction and communicative practice.

Though I argue for a double duty towards oneself to respect one’s own dignity according to type A and B, I would like to insist on the following distinction between the forms of the obligation:

The duty towards oneself to respect one’s A-type dignity is a duty in the Kantian sense: the necessity of an action out of respect for law. The duty of self-respect and the resulting avoidance of servile behaviour is based on respect for the moral law, respectively for one’s own moral autonomy. It must be maintained because it is necessary to remain able to regard oneself as an autonomous, moral and rational person and to realize one’s capacity for morality – and thus one’s dignity. Otherwise one would lose one’s status as a person.

The duty, or – in distinction from Kantian terminology – the obligation toward oneself to respect one’s B-type dignity is rooted in a self-commitment which is closely related to an intersubjective commitment. It is a practical necessity in the sense that ‘our practical self-understanding contains necessary elements that necessarily imply the recognition of the principle of dignity’ (Göbel and Düwell, 2017, p.68)¹⁴ This practical necessity is not a logical necessity in the strict sense. What is meant is rather that the practice of the recognition of dignity is such a constitutive element of personal practical identity that a complete neglect of it would call for a complete revision of one’s self-constitution. Despite all the contingency and uncertainty that the claim to an individual-

¹⁴ Translated from German: ‘unser praktisches Selbstverständnis [enthält] notwendige Elemente [...], die notwendig die Anerkennung des Würde-Prinzips implizieren’.

personal dignity or a life in dignity entails, it is an essential element of the self-understanding of persons in modern societies to owe themselves self-esteem as individual personalities. This claim is valid if one assumes that persons are 'irreplaceable' and 'priceless' as individuals and not only as representatives of humanity or as persons in the strict Kantian sense. Even if such an individual worth is not objectively 'there' or clearly determinable, this idea of personal dignity is something that people essentially attribute to each other and claim for themselves. Based on principally respecting this self-conception, the claim to realize a dignified individual bearing and lifestyle that is successfully embedded in socio-cultural and communicative contexts is to be regarded as necessary and binding for oneself and for others. This claim is connected to a claim to contribute to the success and development of such contexts, and to prevent the development of social contexts that foster servile behavior.

5) One who makes oneself a worm – and the others who step on him

So far, my reflections on dignity as a duty towards oneself have been based on the idea that one can, but one ought not to 'make oneself a worm' or throw away one's own dignity (cf. Kant, 1996, p.182 [429]). Let us finally take a closer look at the second half of the Kantian quote: 'One who makes himself a worm *cannot complain afterwards if people step on him.*' What exactly does it mean, that the 'worm' cannot complain? Does he throw away his right to complain or to stand up for his rights? Anderson calls this the "forfeiture principle" (Anderson, 2008, 144). Kant indeed might have had in mind such radical consequences of making oneself a worm. At least he suggests in *The Doctrine of Right* that a person 'who by his crime has forfeited his personality' is subject to property law, can be owned by another person and shall be treated according to the right to a thing (Kant, 1996, p.127 [358]). This is striking as Kant argues against slavery elsewhere,¹⁵ based on the argument that it is wrong in principle to throw away or sell one's own freedom, precisely because it is true that a human being must live in dignity in order to avoid throwing away his humanity (cf. Kant, 2004, p. 173 [217]).

¹⁵ The fact that Kant is not consistent in his argumentation on slavery and makes use of racist arguments is currently discussed controversially. See for, example, Kleingeld (2019).

Does a criminal who disrespects his dignity as a human being and his status as a person by acting fundamentally against the moral law literally throw away his status as an equal rights-bearer? Should he thus be treated as a thing or as a worm? This would have radical consequences for penal law and punishment.

I think it would be an over-interpretation of the idea of ‘making oneself a worm’ to presuppose that persons who neglect their duty toward themselves to respect their own dignity depersonalize or dehumanize themselves completely. Marcia Baron seems to agree, when she states that,

[i]n Kantian terms, moral personality is not something that one *may* throw away [...] persons have duties to themselves which are incompatible with playing the role of baby doll or puppy dog. (Baron, 1985, p.394)

Baron's statement implies that in the violation of the duty to value oneself, one does not actually depersonalize oneself, but merely plays a non-personal role – by acting doglike or subordinating oneself to others like a little doll. Similarly, you never do actually make yourself into a worm, you just play worm. Now, humans are quite capable of playing humiliating roles in a sovereign manner, for example to pursue a certain purpose. Accordingly, an artist with high personal and aesthetic standards can still decide to make a living by selling some commissioned works that do not correspond to his own standards without remorse, if he is not reduced by others and does not reduce himself to the role of the commission artist. Nevertheless, whenever a degrading role is taken on, a certain self-abasement remains as well as the risk of abandoning one's status to the mercy of others. However, real self-deprecation only occurs when someone loses himself in the game of playing the worm and no longer perceives, let alone appreciates, other aspects of himself.

According to the duty to correspond to one's own dignity, it is obvious that a person should not make herself a worm. It is obvious as well that people do not simply become worms (and not just because of the material, physical problems that this would entail). It may be possible to bow and scrape before others while still being well aware of the fact that one is just playing a particular role – for example the role of a servant – without really violating one's dignity as a person. But even if a person loses herself or her self-respect in behaving ‘like a worm’, it remains a central human ability to distance oneself from one's own behaviour, to re-evaluate it and thus to keep the chance

to leave the degrading position again.¹⁶ Accordingly, the person who has 'made himself a worm' or behaved like a worm, retains the right to demand recognition again, if others step on him. However, he will only succeed in this if he also succeeds in looking at himself as a human being – as an autonomous person with a unique personality – and thus in respecting his own dignity.

After all, human beings cannot completely and irreversibly 'make themselves worms' for two reasons:

1. *Human beings cannot make themselves worms, because the yardstick by which they are measured by others and by themselves always remains the yardstick of humanity.*

Aaron Bunch formulates this accordingly:

The dignity of humanity is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it grants me the authority to claim respect from other persons. On the other hand, if I refuse to assert that claim, if I throw it away, the humanity is the ideal by which others find me contemptible. (Bunch, 2014, p.87f.)

My dignity as a human being gives me the right to assert my claim to the recognition of others. But if I do not assert this claim and throw away my dignity, I will still be regarded as human by others. I am measured by the standard of humanity, and I am disregarded precisely because I miss it. Beyond Bunch's thesis, this does not only apply to the judgement of others. The ideal of humanity also remains the yardstick of one's own self-evaluation.

2. *Human beings cannot make themselves worms, because people can see themselves and each other from the point of view of humanity as potential partners of interaction and communication with a potential practical significance for each other.*

This applies regardless of the current state of a person or of how he or she has changed, for example due to age or illness.¹⁷ One can assume that one can also continue to see the potential of a person with dignity in a self-degraded person. And in any case one can assume that one *should* do this

¹⁶ Carla Bagnoli (2009) develops an interesting philosophical case study of moral self-transformation and its relation to self-respect and autonomy.

¹⁷ In her investigations on *Staying Alive* (2014) Marya Schechtman points out that human beings with such severe illnesses as well as coma patients are still treated as potential partners of interaction by other persons and ought thus to be respected as persons.

from the point of view of humanity by respecting their capacity to fulfil their duty towards themselves and to respect their own dignity.

It is thus important not to succumb to the temptation to step on the one who has made himself a worm, but always consider his or her ability no longer to crawl, but to stand up again. This is actually one of the core ideas of respecting human dignity at law and in court by ‘respecting the dignity of those to whom the norms are applied as beings capable of explaining themselves’ (Waldron and Dan-Cohen, 2012, p.54), by not treating criminals according to property law even if they have committed crimes against their own humanity, and by understanding punishments as means of rehabilitation and social reintegration.

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