

Opening speech of the Wiener Woche der Würde (Vienna Week of Dignity)

Dr. Zuzana Luckay Mihalcinova

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Abstract:

Dignity is a complex concept, which we can not easily be defined. Still, the phenomenon of dignity can not be ignored, deemed redundant or useless, because it is here with us to stay. Instead, I suggest a critical inquiry into the ways it has been used and draw conclusions from that, based on close scrutiny from trans-disciplinary perspectives. In my research I differentiate between human dignity, the abstract, theoretical, philosophical term and dignity as a quality, a descriptive conceptualization of the experience of dignity. Because normatives can not be derived from declarations, the correlation points of human dignity and dignity create an inner tension. In my work I argue against fixed definitions and subscribe to the importance of an ongoing open exchange of ideas. In my opening speech, I introduce possibilities for analyses of the meaning of dignity.

What is dignity? This is the question I have been asking myself and receiving the past 15 or so years. Frankly, I am not sure. What we know for sure is that it is a complex concept.

We can't define it but we feel it. We seem to know intuitively what dignity means, even if we can not grasp it by words.

It is so important for some of us that we are willing to go to the bitter end to defend it. Those who think have it wage wars against those who they think don't have it. The question follows: What is the use of a concept which can have such opposing meanings to people and trigger such conflicting behaviour. Does the word even have a descriptive value?

These are questions I attempt to find answers to in my work: To what degree is dignity an abstract term? How does the existence of the concept of dignity influence our lives?

In my research I differentiate between dignity and human dignity. Human dignity refers to humanity as a species. We can theorize about humans having dignity or not. Whether it is part of so-called human nature. So if all humans have dignity inherently it can not, by definition, be taken away nor given back, but what if someone feels that their dignity is taken away? Who am I to tell you that it is not because it can not be taken away because we all have it? Therefore, in my research, the term *dignity* operates on an individual, personal, spectrum of descriptive analyses. This is the qualitative level on which it can be taken away and regained. It is not fixed but it fluctuates via interaction.

Dignity is studied by various disciplines. In legal discourse it comes up in the human rights context and constitutional debates, but so it does in bioethics and artificial intelligence. It is

also the concern of philosophy, theology, religious studies, and natural law studies, which deal with the conceptualization of ‘human dignity’, or ‘dignity of man’, on an abstract level. On the other hand, the descriptive perspective on the concept, that is, dignity as individual experience, how it manifests in behaviour and in social interaction, is studied within psychology, sociology, anthropology, cognitive sciences, neuroscience as well as aesthetics, linguistics, sociolinguistics and literature.

I propose not to take dignity for granted and subscribe to the idea that it is inherent, but neither to dismiss it as redundant, for example because we have the concept of ‘autonomy’. I rather observe that dignity is a concept that has become part of our making sense of our place in the world and that it also has a descriptive function, and I deal with that.

I propose not to view the concept of human dignity as something what is out there to be discovered. I suggest a critical examination of lines of thinking that claim to have discovered it, as well as consider new ways of thinking about it. This means a look into what dignity and human dignity meant in different times within socio-historical contexts and what, if any, consequences can be drawn from that. To put it bluntly it can serve as a lens through which we can view history. The various interpretations of dignity are strictly to be understood within socio-historical and cultural-anthropological contexts. The evolution of the concept is an ontological but also an epistemological and hermeneutical process. I put forward that the remnants of historically often outdated conceptualizations of dignity still inform us today and contribute to many misunderstandings, which then may play a role in conflicts. I argue against temporally fixed definitions of the idea of human worth.

We think about our worth based on our values. The different views on what constitutes our worth result from different value-systems. The usual claim being that we are all entitled to hold on to our values and resulting ideas of worth as long as they coexist in tolerance, whence human dignity functions as a social contract. But the reins of tolerance are not strong enough to hold the social contract. Because tolerance operates on the surface, based on repression, which is a short fuse and can be easily triggered for hatred and aggression.

This year 2018 is dedicated to sustainable peace by the UN, perhaps we can contemplate ‘the value of humanity in a person’, in a Kantian sense. We can grant normative capacity to our selves and others, in an active critique. I firmly believe that that is the way toward sustainable peace. Philosopher Jan Patocka wrote about peace as a phase of war, when the enemy gathers strength to retaliate. Sustainable peace can be achieved by autonomous human beings with respect for autonomy of persons. Understanding can only come from open inquiry and genuine interest in understanding other value systems, without preconceived ideas. It does not mean that we accept them as our own but we value its values as valid.

When the cultural relativity of interpretations of dignity arises we recognize that our ideas about what constitutes dignity are influenced by our background, our set of beliefs and values systems of what we see as our culture. In this analysis psychology needs a hand from history, anthropology, religious and cultural studies. When in turn we look at the implications of which effects the different ways of seeing dignity have on social interaction, group identity

formation and subsequent behaviour we enter the realm of political and legal sciences, conflict resolution, human rights and peace studies.

Since dignity is hardly ever argued against, it is possibly *the most powerful trigger*, because our sense and idea of worth remains centrally important for us and also makes us vulnerable. Vulnerable, because it can be used to extort us into things we would otherwise not subscribe to. The power of the concept of dignity has been recognized before, and various covert suggestions about how we should see our worth have been devised, serving immediate needs and put forward in ideologies, more or less blatantly, to justify hierarchization, oppression, exploitation and even war. To some of these ideologies, in hindsight, we now refer to as totalitarian, oppressive and fundamentally wrong. We can say that the condemnation of these totalitarian ideologies has led to a process of attempting to create circumstances infertile for them to flourish. We can perhaps interpret the French Revolution, the end of colonization proper and human rights declarations as a manifestation of this attempt.

Lately, we have had attempts to come up with a universally valid definition of dignity, precisely to avoid the possibility of it being abused. The latest major attempt for a fixed definition is the 1948 United Nations human rights treaty. The human rights declaration *declares* an underlying or overriding level on which all humans are equal, regardless of what we perceive as our own worth, or what is thought of by others as our worth.

To the most common understanding, human dignity is non-negotiable. We humans, are often reluctant to admit vulnerability, which however, is a most basic human characteristic and one which binds us together in interdependency. Failure to see this is a failure to recognise equal human worth.

Human rights *declare* the existence of human dignity, and from this declaration norms are derived: because we all have human dignity we *should* behave accordingly with each other. But, norms can not be derived from declarations.

It is important to remember that dignity does not exist in isolation but in the sense of Levinas's philosophy, through being with the other. I am human because you are human says the *Ubuntu* philosophy.

This Viennese Week of Dignity is dedicated to the work of Viktor Frankl. In his seminal work *Man's Search for Meaning* he wrote that anyone under any circumstances can decide what will become of him: people can retain their human dignity even in a concentration camp. He claims that we have an inner freedom to make a choice.

We, all who are here today have made a choice of not ignoring dignity, not dismissing it as a lofty ideal, but also not taking it for granted. We decided to spend a few days in a critical inquiry of what it means to have dignity and ultimately what it means to be human.