

## **Notes on Human Dignity as a Concept That Can Be Taught**

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The theme for the December 2019 HumanDHS Workshop is “Can We Teach Dignity? Becoming Lifelong Apprentices of Dignity from Childhood Throughout All Ages.” In thinking about whether and how dignity can be taught, I would like to submit the following considerations.

If we think of human dignity as an action verb, we may distill its essence to require *active* awareness and *active* affirmation, which can be taught and learned. We may consider here thinking of dignity as the “dismantling of the hierarchy,” or “dismantling of the power gradient,” as Evelin Lindner has proposed in her recent presentation in Norway. We may also consider re-conceptualizing the concept of *power* itself, to represent tapping into the intricately interwoven life force at the root system of all of nature and all human beings. In a recent *New York Times* article, reference is made to author Russell Hoban asking us to “imagine power in terms of convergence and alignment, not as the expression of individual capacities in lethal competition” (Rowan Williams, “A Lesson for a Dystopian World” May 27, 2019). At the same time, we can still contemplate interpretations of human dignity grounded in inherency, intrinsic worth. In this respect, a human being has dignity as a member of the human species, without dignity having to be taught, learned, or “achieved,” and without dignity being dependent on anyone’s attribution. These are really two very different ways of using the term “*dignity*,” they are not interchangeable, and I think it helps clear away confusions and ambiguities if we specify, every time we use the term, the sense in which we are using it.

Questions remain. First, in the *intrinsic worth* interpretation, if we probe, for example, the hypothetical lifeboat scenario – the lifeboat can only accommodate a limited number of people and the survival of the group/society/species is at stake. We may imagine the situation wherein some people may be deemed to be more worthy of saving than others (***if there is not voluntary consensus*** about which lives should be saved, then inevitably someone/some people are deemed to have less dignity than others). However, in the intrinsic worth conceptualization, how could it be that one is to be sacrificed involuntarily so that others may survive? What happens to that person’s dignity?

Perhaps using a lifeboat scenario of panic in the face of imminent death, as a test case to affirm or disconfirm equal human dignity, is misplaced. Perhaps this is not most indicative of human potential in realizing a civilization characterized by dignism. Perhaps even in the lifeboat scenario, if we imagine this occurring in conditions of a dignity culture, it would not be a matter

of involuntarily deeming some persons to have lower ranking, lesser worth, lesser dignity. Domination would be absent, therefore, equal dignity could be realizable. Sociologist Nicolas Christakis, in an interview about his recent book, *Blueprint: the Evolutionary Origins of a*

*Good Society*, discusses the kind of positive hierarchy that derives naturally from those who can teach us something beneficial – the opposite of dominance hierarchy.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfkePVOzHUo>). Maybe some aspects of dignity can be taught through this lens.

If we think of dignity as something to be *taught and learned*, cultivated, as part of human development, does this discount the inherency, or intrinsic worth usage, at least somewhat? How do these differing interpretations and usages of the concept of dignity intersect? It may help to think of teaching awareness of dignity as part of the cumulative knowledge that humans transmit culturally, across generations, which in turn, affects how we develop and evolve (?).

An approach taken by psychologist Steven Pinker in his article on "The Stupidity Of Dignity" (*New Republic*, May 28, 2008) may be instructive here. He wrote this in reaction to the religious community's appropriation of the term *dignity* to interfere disproportionately in bioethics, such as in policies regarding life enhancing medical technologies, autopsies, and contraception - in the name of some religious concept of *inherent dignity*. Pinker claims the concepts of autonomy

and respect adequately cover the territory of dignity without risking the harm injected by religious tempers. Evelin Lindner, in her recent talk in Norway notes that a problem with autonomy is that it overemphasizes individualism and does not include the *unity* that *dignism* assumes and requires. This would seem to put to rest use of "autonomy" and "respect" as adequate substitutes for dignity.

More emphatically, dignity as encompassing *unity* aligns with the evolutionary lens of humans as *simultaneously individual and social organisms*. Human dignity, as an action verb, may be most firmly grounded in our understanding of ourselves as a biologically evolved species, in a shared cosmos that is comprised of physical and chemical laws, within which human existence has been rendered possible. There has to be dignity in acknowledging this, our mutually perceptible, fundamental human condition. Humility stems from this. And this can be taught and learned.

Another remaining question returns to the tension between dignity of the individual and dignity of the group. We are all too aware of the dangers of privileging particular group identities, and in so doing, the severe risks of violating individual dignity. Yet, if, as a species, we have evolved to have some version of greater affinity for and greater trust in one's own group, the question becomes, what happens if this is *no longer adaptive*. We have clearly seen evidence that group- preference can be overcome, and expanded to include groups of "Others," and even all humankind, or all living things...yet we see this is an exceptionally slow, fragile, uneven and unstable process. At best, if we are successful at *identifying* the conditions necessary for fostering such development of expanded affinity and trust, outside of one's own group, then surely *creating and maintaining* such conditions is a monumental task. Consistent with multi- level selection in evolutionary theory, identity has evolved at the individual and group levels *in tandem*. And physical evolution has been found to occur *in reciprocity* with culturally transmitted behavioral changes. Nicolas Christakis, referred to above, also suggests that the human qualities which developed as in-group biases, that may pose dangers of causing damaging beliefs, values and behaviors, have also *helped* humans to develop qualities such as warmth, affinity and, importantly,

cooperation. So, again, we may think of human dignity as a potent opportunity for teaching and learning, a potent example of cultural transmission of knowledge, as a process that depicts a purposeful human feedback loop – the conscious input into our own evolution.

Two other considerations I would like to offer:

1. In response to the issue of people who claim to *voluntarily prefer* systems of human ranking, and acceptance of one's own inferior status, we try to clarify and strengthen ways to demonstrate why such rankings are as unnecessary as they are undesirable.
  - Critics will claim we are imposing beliefs and values on people who believe otherwise, i.e., “brainwashing” people.
  - Refutation of this might parallel social theorist Michael Warner's insistence that genuine autonomy implies access to information and experience (The Trouble With Normal, 1999). As such, in responding to claims of preference for one's own inferior ranking, we may rightfully inquire into that person's access to relevant information and experience as a genuine basis for the claimed preference.
2. If specifically defining human dignity may be problematic, perhaps we can instead attempt to merely suggest its defining characteristics, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz did in trying to define “common sense” (“Common Sense as a Cultural System,” 1983).
  - Does *dignity* require *love*? Why or why not? Can love be taught? Are we capable of demonstrating and respecting human dignity equally for everyone without *loving* everyone? Why or why not?

At HumanDHS we try to promote the idea and ideal of equal dignity within the human family. We plant seeds: ideational seeds, motivational seeds, instructional seeds. Skeptics laugh, or worse. We keep at it because we know of no alternative that brings greater surety of peaceful coexistence and human flourishing.