

RESPECT FOR HUMAN DIGNITY AS AN EMOTION AND VIRTUE

Adam C. Pelsler

Abstract: Although it does not appear on many traditional lists of the virtues, respect for human dignity is an important virtue in its own right that is characterized as much by emotions as by other mental states and actions. The virtue of respect for human dignity essentially involves the dispositions to feel the emotion of respect for the dignity of others and an emotional sense of one's own dignity. As exemplified by Nelson Mandela, this virtue also involves a keen perceptual sensitivity to humiliating and degrading treatment, along with dispositions to protest, correct, and prevent such treatment. The person with the virtue of respect for human dignity also will be disposed to feel indignation toward willful violations of human dignity, compassion for those whose dignity is violated, and various positive emotions in response to victories for human dignity. Although this virtue closely resembles other, more widely recognized, virtues, such as justice and love, it nevertheless is appropriate to treat respect for human dignity as a distinct virtue, as well as an emotion.

Respect for human dignity has received a good deal of recent philosophical attention, especially by neo-Kantian ethicists who, following Kant, focus on the moral duty of respect and treat respect for human dignity as an attitude, a judgment, a commitment to an action-guiding maxim, a feeling, or some combination of these (see, e.g., [Korsgaard 1996a](#), [Sherman 1998](#), [Bagnoli 2003](#), [Anderson 2008](#), and [Darwall 2008](#)). Appeals to respect for human dignity also feature prominently in the recent literature in applied ethics (especially medical ethics), where the claim that a particular practice violates human dignity is generally understood to be a condemnation of the strongest sort, but where there is much debate over just what grounds and constitutes human dignity and over which practices count as violations of it (see, e.g., [Pellegrino et al. 2009](#)). Despite the concurrence of this growth of moral reflection on respect for human dignity with the revival of philosophical interest in the virtues, very little attention has been given to respect for human dignity *as a virtue*. While I do not deny that there is a duty of respect, or that the term “respect” can refer to an attitude,

judgment, or commitment, my focus in the present essay is on the nature of the virtue of respect for human dignity and, especially, on the emotional dispositions constitutive of the virtue. As the following analysis will reveal, respect for human dignity is an important virtue in its own right that is characterized as much by emotions as by other mental states and actions.

1 Human Dignity and the Emotion(s) of Respect

In his attempt to explicate the notion of human dignity, especially as that concept has informed the work of the President's Council on Bioethics, Gilbert Meilaender (2009) distinguishes two conceptions of human dignity: an "aristocratic" or "comparative" conception of dignity and an "egalitarian" or "non-comparative" conception. On both of these conceptions human dignity is a kind of worthiness of respect. According to the comparative conception of human dignity, some people have more dignity than others on the basis of their possession of special talents, moral excellences, or important social position. In keeping with this aristocratic notion of dignity, we sometimes call those who hold important social positions "dignitaries." In fact, Leon Kass has argued that the etymology of the term "dignity" encourages just such an aristocratic conception: "In all its meanings it is a term of distinction. Dignity is not something which, like a nose or a navel, is to be expected or found in every living human being. In principle, it is aristocratic" (2002, 246).

By contrast with the comparative, aristocratic conception of human dignity, the non-comparative, egalitarian conception has it that all human persons have equal dignity regardless of their comparative excellence or lack thereof. On this conception, human dignity is understood as a kind of inherent value or worthiness of respect that is a property of all people, not in virtue of their comparative social status, but rather in virtue of their moral status as persons. Against Kass's etymological argument, Meilaender contends that the non-comparative conception of human dignity has come to be the dominant conception in Western society and that it is this conception of human dignity that informs our democratic commitment to the equal worth of all people (2009, 261–266). In fact, Meilaender argues that in light of the close conceptual link between human dignity and human equality, "A concept of dignity that emphasizes differences of worth falls harshly on our ears" (261). Elizabeth Anscombe highlights this conceptual association of human dignity with human equality, writing, "There is just one impregnable equality of all human beings. It lies in the value and dignity of being a human being" (2005, 67). Likewise, in his recent book on the topic, George Kateb explains that his analysis of human dignity is informed by the assumption that "the dignity of every individual is equal to that of every other; which is to say that every human being has a *status* equal to that of all others" (2011, 5). In a very insightful discussion of the development of the various conceptions of human dignity

in Western thought, Michael Rosen acknowledges that there is not one universally agreed upon concept of human dignity, but he, too, expresses sympathies with a non-comparative, egalitarian conception of dignity according to which “dignity embodies a claim beyond the general claims that human beings have on one another in virtue of the intrinsic value of their personhood” (2012, 128).

Insofar as the comparative excellences of some human persons and the inherent, non-comparative moral worth of all human persons are broadly moral excellences, they both properly inspire respect. As Robert Roberts puts the point,

If we are rational, we feel greater respect for persons of integrity and high moral achievement than for moral slackers and the vicious. But the moral life, in some traditions, requires a respect for persons that is blind to such differences (while still being an attribution of a broadly moral property). (2003, 266–267)

Representing one such moral tradition, Kantianism, Stephen Darwall (1977) argues for a distinction between two kinds of respect—“appraisal respect” and “recognition respect”—that roughly parallels the foregoing distinction between the two conceptions of human dignity. Darwall explains that whereas one’s worthiness of appraisal respect depends on the comparative value of one’s human excellences and achievements, recognition respect is due to all persons in virtue of their equal moral worth.

Without saying anything yet about what sorts of behaviors or mental states constitute these distinct kinds of respect, it should be obvious that the virtuously respectful person will properly respect both the non-comparative worth and comparative excellences, especially the broadly moral excellences (c.f., Roberts 2003, 266, and Darwall 1977), of all human beings. Yet, while there arguably is a general virtue of respect that involves respect for both comparative and non-comparative human value, I shall limit my focus here to the more narrowly defined virtue of respect for human dignity. I say it is more narrowly defined because, following Anscombe, Meilaender, Kateb, and many others, I take it that the central notion of human dignity is the non-comparative, egalitarian conception of human value discussed above and that it is a deep concern for and appreciation of this value—the value of human persons as such—that lies at the heart of the virtue of respect for human dignity. Even if the virtue of respect for human dignity is a sub-species of a more general virtue of respect, the (sub-)virtue of respect for human dignity deserves special moral attention because it is a bulwark against violations of human dignity, the moral significance of which typically far outweighs that of failures to respect the comparative excellences of those who possess rare talents or virtues. While it can be prideful, arrogant, and boorish to fail to appreciate or show proper deference to the “best” among us for their rare excellences, failures

to properly respect the inherent human dignity of even the “least” among us are typically inhumane, cruel, and brutal. A virtue that protects us from participating in and condoning such atrocities is worth considering on its own (more on this in [section 4](#)).

In order to illuminate the nature of the virtue of respect for human dignity, I must first clarify what is involved in respecting the dignity of persons as such. Darwall defines recognition respect in the following way: “to have recognition respect for persons is to give proper weight [in deliberation about how to act] to the fact that they are persons” (1977, 39). He acknowledges a role for an attitude of “regard” in recognition respect, arguing that “To have recognition respect for something is to regard that fact as itself placing restrictions on what it is permissible for one to do” (40), but he allows no essential role for feelings or emotions in recognition respect.¹ So, for Darwall, the regard constitutive of recognition respect amounts to a kind of moral-epistemic attitude, a willingness to take into account in our moral deliberations the personhood of others and the moral restraints on our own action that their personhood entails. While respect for human dignity certainly must involve such deliberative regard for the personhood of others, an account of respect for human dignity in terms of such an attitude will be incomplete if it does not also include a concern for the dignity of others for their own sakes and the emotions to which such a concern gives rise. A moralistic would-be murderer might regard the fact that his desired victim is a person with dignity as reason enough not to kill her, even while begrudging that same fact. It seems right to say that the would-be murderer has some respect for his desired victim’s dignity (would that more murderers had such moral hang-ups!), but his respect for her dignity is far less than ideal since he does not have a sense or feeling of respect for her as a person with moral worth. We might say that his respect for her dignity is indirect since he feels a respect for the moral law and he recognizes that the moral law requires that he not murder persons (of which she is one), but he feels no direct respect for her as a person.

Generalizing to the level of character, we can say that the virtue of respect for human dignity will be incomplete without a disposition to *feel* respect for all who are worthy of it. Here, I take it that the feeling of respect is an emotion and I follow Roberts (2003) in thinking of emotions as “concern-based construals,” or evaluative perceptions.² According to this perceptual account of emotions, when someone feels the emotion of respect for another, she is experientially struck by that person’s worthiness in much the way that we ordinarily are struck by the appearance of the objects in our visual fields. That is, in the emotion of respect, the subject does not merely judge that the object of her emotion is worthy of respect

¹ Darwall briefly discusses “feelings of respect” (39), but he relegates such moral sentiments to an ancillary role in appraisal respect and says nothing of the role of feelings or emotions in recognition respect.

² For complimentary analyses of the emotions, see [Pelsler 2014](#) and [Zagzebski 2004](#), ch. 2.

and commit to treating her appropriately; rather, the object of respect really *appears* or *seems* to the subject to be worthy of her emotion of respect and deserving of certain kinds of respectful treatment (or at least deserving of protection from ill-treatment).

On this view, respect, like other paradigmatic emotion types, is not merely a physiological “feeling” since, in addition to whatever physiology might be involved, it also has conceptual content, which can be expressed in the form of a proposition. Roberts offers the following “defining proposition” for the generic emotion of respect: “*X is worthy in Y important way and deserves benign attention and good treatment on account of Y; may he (it) be so treated*” (2003, 266, italics in original). When the respect in question is respect for human dignity, the “important way” in which the object of respect is worthy is precisely the inherent dignity she possesses in virtue of her humanness or, if you prefer, her personhood. Just as we would not call a person ideally generous who gives to the needy begrudgingly or merely out of a sense of moral duty and not out of love and concern for the needy themselves, so too we should not think of a person as ideally respectful of human dignity if she treats others with respect outwardly, but feels condescension toward them or is indifferent toward their basic value as human persons. In addition to being disposed to treat others respectfully and to judge that they are worthy of respect (both emotional and behavioral), the person with the full virtue of respect for human dignity will be perceptually attuned to the dignity of others; that is, she will be disposed to perceive their dignity directly through her emotion of respect.

This perceptual account of emotions requires that in order to experience the emotion of respect for human dignity one must be in possession of a concept of human dignity. While this might strike some as too stringent an intellectual requirement for the experience of the emotion, it is important to note that merely having a concept of human dignity that can help structure one’s emotional perception does not require that one have a sophisticated understanding of the concept or that one be able to articulate the meaning of the concept specifically in terms of human dignity. It is enough, rather, to have a concept of the inherent and equal worth of all people, however inchoate and underdeveloped that concept might be. Moreover, the concept might be gained in and through one’s initial emotional-perceptual experience of the basic worth of others, so the subject need not possess the concept of dignity prior to any experience of it. As the subject’s concept is developed and formed by a particular moral tradition, which typically happens through participation in the life of a moral community that includes both explicit teachings and communal practices, the subject’s emotional perception of human dignity will take on a new shape. Insofar as divergent moral traditions understand the nature and grounds of human dignity differently, members of different traditions whose understandings of the moral concept have been formed and informed by their respective traditions will come to have slightly different emotions of respect for human dignity.

Take, for example, the differences between Kantian respect for human dignity and Christian respect for human dignity. As Carla Bagnoli explains, “On the Kantian view, respect is due and exacted on the basis of recognition of autonomy, the capacity to act on the basis of moral reasons, that in which humanity resides” (2007, 113; c.f., Darwall 2008). By contrast, the Christian understanding of human dignity is based on the beliefs that all humans are created equally in the image of God (the doctrine of the *imago Dei*) and that God himself became human in the person of Jesus the Christ (the doctrine of the Incarnation), thereby underscoring the special value of humanness.³ In light of these divergent understandings of the grounds of human dignity, Roberts identifies distinct defining propositions for the emotions of Kantian and Christian moral respect (what I have here been calling respect for human dignity). The defining proposition for Kantian respect for human dignity is as follows: “*The dignity of each person, as a rational moral chooser and thus as the subject of possible rational interests, is of surpassing importance; S has such dignity; may S’s own interests therefore be taken as strict limits in dealing with him*” (2003, 267, italics in original). Contrast Roberts’s defining proposition for Christian respect for human dignity: “*The dignity of each person, as a creature made in the image of God, is of surpassing importance; S has such dignity; may S’s own interests therefore be taken seriously in dealing with him*” (268, italics in original). In other words, while the fully integrated Kantian who feels respect for the dignity of another sees her as an inherently valuable, autonomous, rational moral chooser, the fully integrated Christian who feels respect for the dignity of another sees her as an inherently valuable creature made in the image of God. Both emotions are instances of respect for human dignity, but the content of the concept of human dignity employed in the two emotional perceptions differs according to the differing understandings of the grounds of the inherent worth of human beings.

As argued above, a disposition to perceive the inherent worth of others through an emotion of respect for human dignity is an essential element of the virtue of respect for human dignity. Thus, insofar as there are tradition-specific versions of the emotion of respect for human dignity, there also will be tradition-specific versions of the virtue of respect for human dignity. The virtuous respecifier of human dignity will see others as inherently valuable in the way distinctive of her moral tradition. While we might rightly consider a variety of dispositions to emotionally perceive the dignity of others as human excellences, however, this should not be taken to entail relativism about the grounds of human dignity. Given the assumption that all human beings possess human dignity, any emotion that enables us to perceive directly the dignity of others will be accurate at that level, but at most one

³ For an overview of some recent discussions of this theological conception of human dignity, see Wright 2014.

among the competing views of the grounds of human dignity can be correct. Accordingly, some tradition-specific virtues of respect for human dignity will be better than others as they involve more accurate understandings of the nature of human dignity and, thus, more accurate emotional-perceptual dispositions.

2 Self-Respect and Sense of Dignity

In addition to being disposed to perceive the inherent worth of others through an emotion of respect, the person who exemplifies the virtue of respect for human dignity will be disposed to perceive her own dignity. It is for this reason that the virtue of respect for human dignity, which might be thought of primarily as an other-regarding virtue, has an important self-regarding aspect. Indeed, the person with the virtue of respect for human dignity will be disposed not only to feel and show respect for others, but also to feel and show respect for herself. Robin Dillon (1997) compellingly argues that the attitudes and judgments of worth characteristic of the kinds of appraisal and recognition respect identified by Darwall are not adequate to account for the phenomenology of self-respect, since it is possible to have both appraisal and recognition respect, as Darwall defines them, toward oneself while still lacking an emotional sense of one's own worth. Dillon thus posits a third kind of self-respect, which she terms "basal self-respect," that is characterized by a first-order emotional awareness or perception of one's own worth. Emphasizing the perceptual nature of the emotional basis of self-respect, Dillon describes basal self-respect as "a more fundamental orientation toward the self that underlies recognition and evaluative [i.e., appraisal] self-respect, a prereflective, unarticulated, emotionally laden presuppositional interpretive framework, an implicit 'seeing oneself as' or 'taking oneself to be' that structures our explicit experiences of self and worth" (241). As Dillon's observations suggest, there is an emotion of self-respect that is a self-regarding version of the emotion of respect for human dignity. To experience the emotion of self-respect is to perceive (construe) oneself as a person with inherent worth who is worthy of the respect of oneself and others. As with respect for the dignity of others, through the emotion of self-respect the subject's worthiness of respect strikes her with a kind of perceptual vividness and immediacy.

It is important to note here that a perceptual construal is not a judgment or belief. Just as most people familiar with the Müller-Lyer illusion construe the two equal lines as unequal in length without judging that they are unequal in length, one can construe oneself as having dignity (i.e., one can have an emotional sense of dignity) without believing that one has dignity, though this is perhaps rare—people who have no trouble experiencing themselves emotionally as worthy of respect tend not to have any trouble believing that they are worthy of respect. Conversely, and perhaps more commonly, one can believe that one has dignity without construing oneself

as having dignity, but this creates an uncomfortable psychological tension that seems difficult to maintain for long.⁴ Once a person has ceased to see or feel that she is worthy of respect, it is very difficult to maintain a belief that she is so worthy. Just as we tend to trust the deliverances of our sense perceptions—that is, we tend to believe our eyes—so too we tend to trust our feelings, our emotional perceptions of the world. The virtue of respect for human dignity thus involves not only believing about oneself that one is valuable and worthy of respect, but also the disposition to experience oneself emotionally (i.e., to perceive or construe oneself) as worthy of respect.

In fact, it is common to refer to a strong emotional sense of and corresponding belief in one's own worth simply as one's dignity. As a case in point, Nelson Mandela, a great champion and exemplar of respect for human dignity, wrote in his autobiography that "Prison and the authorities conspire to rob each man of his dignity. In and of itself, that assured that I would survive, for any man or institution that tries to rob me of my dignity will lose because I will not part with it at any price or under any pressure" (2013, 391). But if human dignity is something that persons have inherently (i.e., in virtue of their simply being persons), how can we make sense of Mandela's guards' attempts to rob him of his dignity, or Mandela's own apparent sense that maintaining his dignity was somehow up to him, or under his control? To answer this question we must distinguish between Mandela's dignity and what we might call his *sense of dignity* (or, to use Dillon's terminology, his basal self-respect). Mandela was in possession not only of the basic human dignity shared by all people, but also of a keen awareness and appreciation of his own dignity and that of others. He not only was worthy of respect in virtue of his moral status as a human person; he also confidently experienced himself as worthy of such respect. This emotional sense of self-worth partially constituted his virtue of respect for human dignity. Indeed, part of what set Mandela apart from other victims and critics of apartheid as a virtuous exemplar was the strength of his determination never to let anyone make him feel that he was unworthy of their respect or his own. In spite of the degrading realities of apartheid and 27 years of harsh and often abusive imprisonment, Mandela never lost his sense of his own dignity as a person. It was this sense or feeling of himself as being worthy of respect that his guards might have succeeded in robbing from him, but that he never let them.

As exemplified by Mandela, the virtue of respect for human dignity essentially involves the dispositions to perceive the dignity of oneself and others through emotions of respect. Yet, experience reveals that in the less than fully virtuous among us, self-respect and respect for others can come apart. We see this both in those people who, lacking self-respect, tend to experience themselves as less worthy of respect (for human dignity) than

⁴ For some examples of this phenomena, see Dillon 1997, 232–233.

others, as well as in those prideful individuals who are disposed to experience others as less worthy of respect (for human dignity) than themselves. It would be a mistake, however, to think of self-respect and respect for others as entirely independent, psychologically or developmentally. For, the equal dignity of all persons entails that the other-regarding and self-regarding aspects of respect for human dignity are inextricably linked. In Anscombe's sharp criticism of the widespread practice of abortion, which she took to be a gross violation of human dignity, she observes,

This lack of reverence, of respect for that dignity of human nature so wonderfully created by God, is lack of regard for the one impregnable equality of all human beings. Lacking it, you cannot revere the dignity of your own human-ness, that is the dignity of that same human nature in yourself. You may value yourself highly as a tennis player or a natural scientist, but without a change of heart you cannot value yourself as a human, a *Mensch*. For you have shewn the value you set on a human life as such. You are willing to extinguish it as suits you or as suits the people who want you to do so. (2005, 72)

Whatever one thinks of Anscombe's view of abortion, she is right that failing to respect the value of the humanness of other human beings undermines our respect for ourselves as human beings. Likewise, failing to respect one's own dignity undermines one's ability to feel and show proper respect for the dignity of others. Christine Korsgaard has put this point in a distinctively Kantian way, writing, "If you view yourself as having a value-conferring status in virtue of the power of rational choice, you must view anyone who has the power of rational choice as having, in virtue of that power, a value-conferring status" (1996b, 123). More generally, since human dignity is the value possessed by all persons as persons, one cannot fully respect and appreciate the dignity of one without respecting and appreciating the dignity of all. The virtue of respect for human dignity is thus perhaps more closely tied to the equal worth of all persons than any of the other virtues.⁵

The close connection between respect for one's own dignity and respect for the dignity of others has led many to suggest that acting so as to violate the human dignity of others actually violates one's own dignity and thus that a sense of one's own dignity includes a sense that to violate the dignity of others would be beneath one's dignity. Michael Pritchard acknowledges this point in his discussion of the relationship between justice and dignity: "The notion of dignity also enters into the concern that one not be an agent of injustice. Given an opportunity to gain at the expense of injustice to others, someone with a sense of justice may regard resorting to such means

⁵ Here it might be objected that respect for human dignity is merely an aspect of another virtue that emphasizes human equality such as justice or love. I address this concern in [section 4](#).

as beneath his dignity” (1972, 307–308). Moreover, it might be thought that one can lose or forfeit one’s dignity by showing disregard for the dignity of oneself or others. While a well-developed sense of dignity will involve a sense that actions which violate one’s own dignity or another’s are beneath one’s dignity (i.e., undignified), possessing such a well-developed sense of dignity is not a condition for possessing dignity. Indeed, no matter how much one might violate one’s own dignity or that of others and, hence, be deserving of correction or punishment, one cannot forfeit one’s claim to the basic respect due all human beings.⁶ This is what Anscombe means by calling the equal dignity of human beings “impregnable.” Indeed, “The equality of human beings in the worth and dignity of being human is one that can’t be taken away, no matter how much it is violated. Violations remain *violations*” (Anscombe 2005, 68, italics in original).

3 Violations of Human Dignity: Degradation and Humiliation

Having identified the central role that the emotions of self-respect and respect for others play in the virtue of respect for human dignity, I now turn to a consideration of some of the other dispositions constitutive of the virtue. In addition to being disposed to perceive her own dignity and the dignity of others through the emotion(s) of respect, the person with the virtue of respect for human dignity will be acutely aware of the basic human dignity possessed by all people and will *be for* their dignity in the sense made current by Robert Adams. Adams has pointed out that a person can be for a good, such as human dignity, in a variety of ways including “loving it, liking it, respecting it, wanting it, wishing for it, appreciating it, thinking highly of it, speaking in favor of it and otherwise intentionally standing for it symbolically, acting to promote or protect it, and being disposed to do such things” (2006, 15–16). While in Robben Island Prison, Mandela demonstrated his deep concern to protect and promote respect for the dignity of others by filing a complaint with the prison authorities about the policy to require black prisoners to wear shorts, instead of long pants, as a way of reminding them that they are “boys.” When the authorities finally conceded and brought Mandela, but not his fellow black inmates, a pair of long pants, Mandela refused to wear them until they had provided long pants for everyone (Mandela 2013, 387–388).

As we can see in this example, the person with the virtue of respect for human dignity will be especially attuned to perceive violations of human dignity and she will be disposed to take action to protest and redress such violations. Two paradigmatic kinds of violations of human dignity are worth considering here: the degrading and the humiliating. Although

⁶ Recognition of this fact underlies the prohibition against cruel and unusual punishments in the Eighth Amendment to the US Constitution and in many other national and international declarations of human rights.

degrading situations are often humiliating and vice versa, the two can come apart. This is because degrading treatment is fundamentally a violation of a person's dignity, while humiliating treatment is a violation of (or, more precisely, a direct threat to) a person's sense of dignity, as described above. This distinction is too often missed by theorists who treat human dignity and a sense of dignity (or self-esteem) as interchangeable concepts (see, e.g., Gross 2006, 49–56).

Consider, for instance, that a person with a very strong sense of her own dignity might endure degrading realities without experiencing humiliation as a result. Even though we might be inclined to refer to the treatment as humiliating in a kind of counterfactual or objective sense—William Ian Miller refers to such objectively humiliating treatment as “Humiliation with a big H” (1993, 167, bold in original)—the hypothetical victim need not experience the emotion of humiliation. Roberts describes the emotion of humiliation in the following way: “Humiliation is a construal of oneself as having been *shown to be* or having been *made to appear* to be unrespectable (unworthy) by some action or event that puts one's real or apparent unworthiness on display for others” (2003, 233, italics in original). Notice that on this analysis of humiliation even the person with a strong sense of her own dignity might experience the emotion of humiliation without losing her emotional sense of dignity; for, even while continuing to construe herself as worthy through her emotion of self-respect, she might also construe herself as having been made to appear (misleadingly) to others as unworthy of their respect. This presents a deep psychological tension, however, since it seems to be a feature of the phenomenology of humiliation that the humiliated subject takes on the second-personal perspective of her audience to a degree. To be precise, the emotion of humiliation involves the construal of oneself as being construed by others as unworthy. To emotionally experience herself this way, as opposed to merely judging that others perceive her as unworthy, the humiliated subject must see herself as she is being seen by (i.e., as she appears to) the other. The humiliated but self-respecting subject is thus in possession of competing appearances of herself, even if only momentarily: she at once appears to herself as worthy from her own first-personal perspective and as unworthy from the second-personal perspective of the others, which she “takes on” in seeing herself as she is being seen by them. Since we tend to trust perceptual appearances as guides to the way things really are, the humiliated but self-respecting subject is left in the uncomfortable epistemic position of having to distrust one of the appearances of herself in favor of the other. This is why humiliating treatment poses a direct threat to a person's sense of dignity. This is also why an exceptionally strong emotional sense of one's own worthiness mitigates feelings of humiliation—the person who vividly appears to herself as worthy of respect is unlikely to perceptually-emotionally experience herself as being seen by others as unworthy (as opposed to judging in a

non-perceptual way that others see her this way), except perhaps in the most extremely degrading circumstances.

Interestingly, a person with very little or no self-respect (i.e., sense of dignity) might also endure degrading realities without being humiliated by them since she has come to accept them as the lot she deserves. Miller thus observes that “There is a paradox in the torturer’s making someone feel humiliated. He must make sure that the victims continue to retain an image of themselves as worthy of respect, because the feeling of humiliation depends on some part of the self’s ability to see things with an undegraded sensibility” (1993, 166). So, paradoxically, while a strong sense of dignity or self-respect can protect against feelings of humiliation, some sense of dignity is a necessary precondition of feelings of humiliation.

It is also the case that a person may have too lofty a sense of his own value and a misguided sense of what is “beneath” him, and, hence, feel humiliated by treatment that is not in itself degrading (treatment that is not, in Miller’s terminology, Humiliation with a big H). Such an overblown sense of self-worth is a vice and is commonly referred to as a “sense of entitlement.” Consider, for example, the star high school athlete who is humiliated by having to play on the second team in college, or the formerly wealthy investment banker who lost his job and now finds looking for blue-collar work humiliating. Neither playing on the second team, nor seeking blue-collar work is, in itself, degrading, so while such demotions in social status might be humbling, the person who feels humiliated by them has perhaps tied his sense of self-worth too tightly to his social status or prior achievements. To use Dillon’s and Darwall’s terminologies, we might say that his basal self-respect is too dependent on the grounds of his appraisal self-respect (i.e., his comparative excellences or achievements) when it should be tracking the grounds of his recognition self-respect (i.e., his moral worth as a person).

Miller takes examples like these to be paradigmatic instances of humiliation and argues that pretension is a precondition for the experience of humiliation: “humiliation depends on the deflation of pretension” (137). His account becomes strained, however, when he tries to explain why pretension is necessary for “Humiliations with a big H” such as rape, torture, and murder, where it is the victim’s basic dignity, as opposed a pretentiously inflated ego, that is violated. He argues that “the pretension being deflated in that upside-down sadistic world is different . . . the claim of the torturer, the concentration camp guard, the ideologues of ethnic, racial, and religious genocide, is that the humanity of their victims is a pretense” (165). Of course, the victims of such atrocities are correct to view themselves as members of the human community who possess basic human dignity. This is not a pretentious, but an accurate self-evaluation. Therefore, it seems wrong to say that pretension is a necessary pre-condition for humiliation. As Miller points out in the passage cited above, some positive self-evaluation is necessary for the experience of humiliation, but such a self-evaluation

need not be overblown and pretentious; it might be an accurate and even virtuous sense of dignity. Indeed, the person with the virtue of respect for human dignity will have a sense of self-worth that is neither deficient nor based on comparative excellences. A virtuous sense of dignity is, therefore, an example of an Aristotelian mean. The vices at either extreme are lack of self-respect (deficiency of the sense of dignity) and entitlement (misplaced sense of self-worth, a kind of excess of comparative self-evaluation).⁷

Yet, despite the fact that an oversensitivity to humiliation can be vicious, in an effort to cultivate proper self-respect and respect for the dignity of others, it is important to avoid eliciting humiliation whenever possible (even if by objectively non-degrading means), since having a sense of dignity or self-respect is essential to living a flourishing human life. Although he understood self-respect to include more than an emotional sense of dignity, John Rawls took self-respect to include “a person’s sense of his own value” and he rightly counted self-respect among the “primary goods” of human life (1971, 440). Humiliation threatens this basic human good. Moreover, given that all humans have dignity and thus are deserving of respect, the emotion of humiliation (however it is elicited) is an inaccurate self-perception, since it represents the subject to herself as being less than worthy of respect.⁸ In addition to threatening the psychological health of the humiliated, therefore, humiliation is an inaccurate self-perception, which also can give rise to inaccurate perceptions of the dignity of others. Pritchard cautions in this regard that we must be especially attentive to the way that failures to achieve certain kinds of personal integrity can threaten a healthy sense of dignity. He explains,

the various forms of personal integrity are to a large extent human achievements rather than things that merely happen to persons. This is clear in the case of being able to coordinate one’s goals and activities in leading a relatively satisfying life; but it is no less true of learning to walk and talk, activities we take for granted. These achievements often give one a sense of accomplishment, enhancing self-esteem. But equally if not more important, failure can

⁷ In arguing that lack of self-respect can be a vice, I am not suggesting that people who have low self-respect or very little sense of their own dignity are blameworthy for their condition. Many people lack self-respect due to harsh, abusive mistreatment by others. While it seems right to say that it would be a broadly moral improvement for such persons to regain a sense of their own worth, it does not seem right to blame them if they are unable to do so. We might even admire them more in light of their low sense of self-worth for their courage in overcoming adversity or for the love and respect they show to others. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.

⁸ There might be a kind of humiliation or another emotion related to humiliation through which the subject sees herself (perhaps accurately) as having lost some worthiness of comparative (appraisal) respect without seeing herself as being absent basic dignity. Yet, even if it might be possible to cultivate such an emotion, most people’s emotion of humiliation does not seem to be so discriminating.

result in loss of self-esteem. Thus the slow reader may feel inferior to his classmates not just in reading but as a human being. This feeling of inferiority may be intensified by criticism or ridicule. What is essential to a healthy sense of dignity is learning to accept one's shortcomings without feeling that they render one less than fully human. Unfortunately, this is sometimes difficult in a society that measures human worth by competitive success and physical appearance. (1972, 303)

As Pritchard here suggests, if our goal is to encourage a healthy and accurate sense of dignity, when we encounter those whose sense of self-worth is tied to their comparative merit, accomplishments, or social status, we must find ways to affirm their basic worth as a person while helping them to see in non-humiliating ways that their value as a human being is not undermined by any failures of performance or comparative merit.

Since the virtue of respect for human dignity involves a deep concern for the value of human dignity and for that value to be respected, the person who has this virtue will be disposed to notice and make efforts to prevent and correct degrading institutions and actions that violate the human dignity of others, as well as humiliating treatment that threatens people's sense of dignity. Consider, by way of illustration, the following story recounted by Mandela in his autobiography about an event that took place during the early days of his imprisonment on Robben Island:

On one of our first days pounding rocks, a warder commanded Kathy to take a wheelbarrow filled with gravel to the truck parked by the entrance. Kathy was a slender fellow unused to hard physical labor. He could not budge the wheelbarrow. The warders yelled: "*Laat daardie kruiwa loop!*" (Let that wheelbarrow move!) As Kathy managed to nudge it forward, the wheelbarrow looked as if it would tip over, and the warders began to laugh. Kathy, I could see, was determined not to give them cause for mirth. I knew how to maneuver the wheelbarrows, and I jumped up to help him. Before being ordered to sit down, I managed to tell Kathy to wheel it slowly, that it was a matter of balance not strength. He nodded and then carefully moved the wheelbarrow across the courtyard. The warders stopped smiling. (2013, 386)

While there is nothing inherently degrading about the task of pushing a heavy wheelbarrow full of rocks, being made to push a wheelbarrow full of rocks by abusive prison guards who are looking for an opportunity to make one a laughing stock is degrading. And, for one with a fragile sense of dignity, failure to accomplish such a "basic" physical task can be quite humiliating (akin to the kind of failures of personal integrity

highlighted by Pritchard). Had Mandela not stepped in and advised Kathy on how to balance the wheelbarrow, Kathy's inability to accomplish the task gracefully and the ensuing jeers of the prison guards likely would have threatened Kathy's emotional sense of his own worthiness of respect, even if only momentarily. Exemplifying the virtue of respect for human dignity, Mandela immediately recognized this threat to Kathy's dignity (and sense of dignity) and risked punishment to prevent it. As Mandela modelled in this instance and in his objection to the policy requiring black prisoners to wear shorts, the person with the virtue of respect for human dignity will be sensitive to the fact that what counts as degrading and humiliating will vary depending on culture and circumstance. The person with the virtue of respect for human dignity thus will make efforts to understand the cultural values, perspectives, and individual sensitivities of others. That acts of degradation or humiliation can be culturally informed, however, does not make them any less objectively degrading or humiliating. As Rosen observes,

What *counts* as humiliating or degrading treatment varies drastically from culture to culture, but that is no reason for relativism: the idea that humiliation or degradation counts as a violation of human dignity has a very good claim to be universal even though the practices by which that may be expressed vary. (2012, 127, italics in original)

In addition to being disposed to notice violations of human dignity, the person with the virtue of respect for human dignity will also be disposed to construe such violations negatively through emotions such as indignation toward disrespectful persons and compassion toward those whose dignity is not being properly respected. Although he does not reflect on his own emotional states in the above scenario, we can imagine that Mandela felt compassion toward Kathy and likely indignation toward the jeering guards. The person who respects human dignity also will be disposed to feel negative emotions in response to her own failures to respect the dignity of others. Indeed, "regard for the dignity of others is shown in the tendencies to make amends, feel apologetic, guilty, or remorseful when one thinks he has treated others unjustly" (Pritchard 1972, 308). While such negative emotional perceptions of oneself as having violated human dignity will be no part of the perfected virtue of human dignity (since such a person will by definition never violate human dignity), they might figure hypothetically in the moral deliberation of the person with the full virtue and they will figure in the virtue insofar as it is possessed imperfectly, which is as much as most of us can hope for.

The virtue of respect for human dignity also includes dispositions to experience joy, gratitude, and other positive emotions in response to victories for the cause of human dignity. Consider, for example, Mandela's

emotional response when the warders of Robben Island Prison finally gave in to his request to be given long pants:

From the first day, I had protested about being forced to wear short trousers. I demanded to see the head of the prison and made a list of complaints. The warders ignored my protests, but by the end of the second week, I found a pair of old khaki trousers unceremoniously dumped on the floor of my cell. No pin-striped three-piece suit has ever pleased me as much. (2013, 387)

While Mandela's recounting of his emotional response here is not very specific, he seems to articulate a sense of joy at having his concern for just treatment satisfied. He might also have felt mildly grateful toward the warders, not because their "gift" of the long pants was generous or undeserved, but rather because in acquiescing to his request they revealed a small degree of respect, perhaps even at the cost of losing face. Mandela's deep concern for respect for human dignity also gave rise to the positive emotion of hope whenever he saw evidence that the prospects for eventual racial freedom and equality were good:

I never lost hope that this great transformation would occur. Not only because of the great heroes I have already cited, but because of the courage of the ordinary men and women of my country. I always knew deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. . . . Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to the limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. (622)

Unfortunately, Mandela's satisfaction with the pants was short-lived, since he soon learned that he was the only prisoner who had been issued long pants. Even near the end of his life, Mandela only allowed himself to rejoice momentarily in the victories for racial freedom and equality in South Africa, recognizing that his struggle was far from over: "I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended" (625).

4 Respect for Human Dignity among the Virtues

I have shown thus far that the virtue of respect for human dignity essentially involves the dispositions to feel and show respect for oneself and others, to notice, protest, correct, and prevent humiliating and degrading treatment, and to feel compassion for the victims of such treatment and indignation

toward those who willfully violate the dignity of others, as well as positive emotions in response to the successful promotion of (or prospects for) human dignity. At this point, it might be wondered whether respect for human dignity is a virtue in its own right or whether the set of dispositions highlighted here properly belong to another, more traditionally recognized, virtue such as justice or love. I do not deny that the virtue of respect for human dignity, as I have presented it here, admits of a significant degree of overlap with both justice and love, considered as virtues. In fact, I suspect that the close connection and overlap between these virtues partly explains why respect for human dignity has not been included on many traditional lists of the virtues. I nevertheless maintain that it is appropriate and useful to treat the virtue of respect for human dignity as a distinct, even if not a wholly independent, virtue. In support of this claim, I shall briefly consider respect for human dignity in relation to both justice and love, beginning with the former.

In much the same way that the virtue of respect for human dignity involves an emotional sense of the dignity of oneself and others, the virtue of justice involves what Rawls (1963) terms “the sense of justice.” Emphasizing the centrality of emotion in the sense of justice, Rawls writes, “The sense of justice is no mere moral conception formed by the understanding alone, but a true sentiment of the heart enlightened by reason” (281). Indeed, the person who exemplifies the virtue of justice will be disposed to notice injustices and will be deeply concerned to rectify past injustices and prevent future ones. She will also be disposed to experience a variety of negative emotions in response to injustices and positive emotions in response to victories for justice. Any plausible theory of justice will certainly count violations of human dignity such as slavery, murder, torture, rape, and other forms of sexual assault among the grossest of injustices. There is thus a great deal of overlap between the virtues of justice and respect for human dignity. Recognizing this, Pritchard argues that a sense of justice will be sorely diminished if not informed by a strong sense of one’s own dignity and the dignity of others: “the lower one’s regard is for his own dignity, the less perceptive he will be of injustices done to him” and “the lower the regard one has for the dignity of another, the less perceptive he will be of injustices to that other” (1972, 301). In fact, Pritchard goes as far as to argue that the concept of human dignity provides the moral content to the principles of justice, suggesting that without it “the distinctively moral aspects of justice will be absent; and the claims of justice will be at best legalistic and at worst arbitrary” (300–301). Despite this close connection, indeed overlap, between respect for human dignity and justice, I take it that the virtue of respect for human dignity ought to be understood as distinct from the virtue of justice for three primary reasons.

First, while it should be obvious that all violations of human dignity are injustices, it is not at all obvious that all injustices are violations of human dignity. On some theories of justice, for example, substantial

inequalities between social classes in terms of access to wealth or social goods such as education or health care are counted as injustices. Even granting such a view, it seems an open question whether such inequalities amount to violations of human dignity. While the child who grows up in an impoverished neighborhood and thus has less access to quality education than her peers who grow up in wealthier communities is arguably the victim of a kind of social injustice, it is not obvious that her human dignity is being violated, either by the individuals or the institutions responsible for educational funding and policies, especially if those individuals and institutions are working hard to redress the inequality and especially if the goods to which she has access exceed certain minimum standards of humaneness.

Secondly, as discussed above, the person who exemplifies the virtue of respect for human dignity will be sensitive, not only to degrading treatment that violates human dignity, but also to the threat that humiliation poses to people's sense of their own dignity. Yet, as I argued above, not all humiliating treatment is degrading; that is, not everything that might humiliate a person violates her basic worth as a person. Emotional-perceptual sensitivity to the threat of humiliation grounded in a concern for the sense of dignity of another nevertheless seems to be an essential aspect of the virtue of respect for human dignity. Such sensitivity does not, by contrast, seem to be essential to the virtue of justice, despite Pritchard's suggestion otherwise. The person with the virtue of justice will no doubt be concerned to prevent and correct humiliating treatment insofar as what is humiliating is also typically degrading (and, hence, unjust), but as long as justice is being done, it does not seem an essential aspect of the virtue of justice that the just person be motivated to promote a healthy sense of dignity and self-respect in others. The person who possesses the virtue of respect for human dignity, by contrast, is essentially concerned to promote respect for human dignity (and not merely justice) and this entails a concern to promote self-respect or sense of dignity among all people.

Lastly, even if a case could be made that the virtue of respect for human dignity is not distinct from the virtue of justice, it would still seem to be such an important aspect of the virtue of justice that it deserves careful reflection and efforts at cultivation on its own. That is, even if all the perceptual, emotional, and action dispositions constitutive of the virtue of respect for human dignity could properly be said to belong to the broader virtue of justice (a claim I doubt for the reasons given above), they would still be so important a protection against violations of human dignity that philosophers, psychologists, and other scholars interested in the virtues ought to focus as much energy on understanding and learning to develop the (sub-)virtue of respect for human dignity as they have on other more traditionally recognized virtues.

What, then, of love? Iris Murdoch (1997) argues that Kantian respect cannot serve as the primary mode of the mutual recognition foundational

to morality, but rather that love or “loving attention” must be the basic form of moral regard of others. In her discussion of the relationship between Murdoch’s loving attention and the Kantian feeling of respect, however, Carla Bagnoli (2003) contends that the two concepts are virtually equivalent. As she puts it, “Not only do respect and loving attention work likewise and exhibit a similar phenomenology, they also rest on a common conception of moral deliberation” (507). While it would be a digression to evaluate the merits of Bagnoli’s argument here, her argument points to the fact that some tradition-specific understandings of love might resemble quite closely certain tradition-specific understandings of respect for human dignity. It certainly seems right, after all, to say that perfected love of other human beings will include respect for their dignity and that perfected self-love (assuming self-love can be virtuous) will include self-respect. But, at least according to some moral traditions, love requires more than respect for the dignity of others. Love might require, for example, a radical form of self-sacrifice that is not required by respect for human dignity. This is true on the Christian understanding of agape, or neighbor-love, the archetypal example of which is Jesus’s self-sacrificial death on a Roman cross for the salvation of humanity. Indeed, for Christians, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Even if it can be argued that such self-sacrifice is not strictly required by Christian love, it nevertheless is exemplary of Christian love in a way that it does not seem to be exemplary of respect for human dignity (even Christian respect for human dignity). For at least some traditions, then, love and respect for human dignity are distinct concepts, even if the latter is entailed by the former.

Should we conclude then that respect for human dignity is merely an aspect or sub-virtue of love and not a separate virtue? Perhaps it would not be inappropriate to classify the virtues this way, but if a virtue’s being entailed by love means that we cannot treat it as a separate and distinct virtue, we might find ourselves hard-pressed to identify any virtue, at least any interpersonal virtue, as distinct from love.⁹ In addition to respect for human dignity, the traditional virtues of compassion, generosity, and justice (not to mention other, less widely appreciated, virtues, such as forgivingness and mercy) also seem to be entailed by perfect love. Since each of these virtues is an excellence with respect to a particular domain of loving actions and emotions toward others, however, it is useful to conceive of them as distinct sets of dispositions and to work toward the cultivation of them individually, even if they turn out to be interdependent and mutually reinforcing. I suggest that the same is true of respect for human dignity. Rather than unduly restricting our moral psychological

⁹ Similarly, it might be thought that most, if not all, vices are, in one way or another, failures or perversions of love.

vocabulary by relegating respect for human dignity to the status of a sub-virtue, we ought to consider it as the important and distinct moral virtue it is. Moreover, even if our ultimate goal for the moral life is to learn to love one another more perfectly, our goal will be well-served if we start by learning to have compassion on one another, to be generous toward each other, to pursue justice for all, and to cultivate the virtue of respect for human dignity.

Adam C. Pelsler

E-mail : adam.pelsler@usafa.edu

References:

- Adams, Robert Merrihew. 2006. *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2008. "Emotions in Kant's Later Moral Philosophy: Honour and the Phenomenology of Moral Value." In *Kant's Ethics of Virtue*, edited by Monika Betzler, 123–145. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter.
- Anscombe, Elizabeth. 2005. "The Dignity of the Human Being." In *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*, edited by Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, 67–76. Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic.
- Bagnoli, Carla. 2003. "Respect and Loving Attention." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33 (4): 483–515.
- Bagnoli, Carla. 2007. "Respect and Membership in the Moral Community." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10 (2): 113–128. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10677-006-9053-3>.
- Darwall, Stephen. 1977. "Two Kinds of Respect." *Ethics* 88 (1): 36–49. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/292054>.
- Darwall, Stephen. 2008. "Kant on Respect, Dignity, and the Duty of Respect." In *Kant's Ethics of Virtue*, edited by Monika Betzler, 175–199. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter.
- Dillon, Robin S. 1997. "Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political." *Ethics* 107 (2): 226–249. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/233719>.
- Gross, Michael. 2006. *Bioethics and Armed Conflict: Moral Dilemmas of Medicine and War*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Kass, Leon. 2002. *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*. San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books.
- Kateb, George. 2011. *Human Dignity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Korsgaard, Christine. 1996a. "Creating the Kingdom of Ends: Reciprocity and Responsibility in Personal Relations." In *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, edited by Christine Korsgaard, 188–222. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Korsgaard, Christine. 1996b. "Kant's Formula of Humanity." In *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, edited by Christine Korsgaard, 106–132. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mandela, Nelson. 2013. *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Meilaender, Gilbert. 2009. "Human Dignity: Exploring and Explicating the Council's Vision." In *Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on*

Acknowledgements I am grateful to Ryan West, Bill Rhodes, the participants and audiences of the US Air Force Academy's 2014 National Character and Leadership Symposium Scholars Forum, and the anonymous referees for this journal for helpful comments on previous drafts.

Disclaimer The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Air Force, the US Department of Defense, or the US government.

- Bioethics*, edited by Edmund D. Pellegrino, Adam Schulman, and Thomas W. Merrill, 253–277. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Miller, William Ian. 1993. *Humiliation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Murdoch, Iris. 1997. *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. Edited by Peter Conradi. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Pellegrino, Edmund D., Adam Schulman, and Thomas W. Merrill, eds. 2009. *Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Pelser, Adam C. 2014. "Emotion, Evaluative Perception, and Epistemic Justification." In *Emotion and Value*, edited by Sabine Roeser and Cain Todd, 106–122. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pritchard, Michael S. 1972. "Human Dignity and Justice." *Ethics* 82 (4): 299–313. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/291853>.
- Rawls, John. 1963. "The Sense of Justice." *Philosophical Review* 72 (3): 281–305. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2183165>.
- Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Roberts, Robert C. 2003. *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosen, Michael. 2012. *Dignity: Its History and Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sherman, Nancy. 1998. "Concrete Kantian Respect." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15 (1): 119–148. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0265052500003095>.
- Wright, John W. 2014. "Human Dignity and the Image of God—A Review Essay." *Christian Scholar's Review* 44 (1): 67–82.
- Zagzebski, Linda. 2004. *Divine Motivation Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.