

Dignity and Animals. Does it Make Sense to Apply the Concept of Dignity to all Sentient Beings?

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Abstract Although the idea of dignity has always been applied to human beings and although its role is far from being uncontroversial, some recent works in animal ethics have tried to apply the idea of dignity to animals. The aim of this paper is to discuss critically whether these attempts are convincing and sensible. In order to assess these proposals, I put forward two formal conditions that any conception of dignity must meet (non-redundancy and normative determinacy) and outline three main approaches which might justify the application of dignity to animals: the species-based approach, moral individualism and the relational approach. Discussing in particular works by Martha Nussbaum and Michael Meyer I argue that no approach can convincingly justify the extension of dignity to animals because all fail to meet the formal conditions and do not provide an appropriate basis for animal dignity. I conclude by arguing that the recognition of the moral importance of animals and their defense should appeal to other normative concepts which are more appropriate than dignity.

Keywords Animals · Dignity · Moral status · Respect · Speciesism

1 Introduction

Traditionally dignity has been considered a concept applicable only to human beings. The predominance of Kantian interpretations of dignity has lent support to the idea that a fundamental requirement for being considered to have dignity is the possession of such typical human properties as moral agency, a high level of rationality, capacity to deliberate, and so on. However, recent theories in animal ethics have argued that at least some animals possess a considerable level of rationality, if not some forms of moral attitude. On the basis of such considerations, two opposed tendencies have emerged. On the one hand, it has been questioned

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whether so-called ‘human marginal cases’ (such as permanently mentally handicapped human beings, elders suffering from severe forms of dementia and so on)¹ can possess dignity insofar as they permanently lack the capacities (full rationality and moral agency) necessary to the attribution of human dignity. Attributing dignity to human marginal cases and not to animals having the same (or even superior) morally relevant characteristics would amount to speciesism, that is an unwarranted discrimination based on a morally irrelevant feature (mere species membership). On the other hand, some theorists have argued that we can meaningfully extend the notion of dignity to all (sentient) animals. Such an extension is one of the many instances of the proposals aimed at including animals in the human moral community. The aim of this paper is to analyze critically this latter issue. In particular, I will assess whether a specific and meaningful concept of animal dignity can be outlined.

The paper will unfold as follows. In the second section, I will propose two formal conditions to be met by any plausible account of dignity. In the third section, I will discuss three possible approaches to defining animal dignity (the species-based approach, moral individualism and the relational approach) and assess in particular the attempts by Martha Nussbaum and Michael Meyer, as representatives of the first two. In the final section, I will discuss some applications of the idea of dignity to animals (circuses and genetic engineering), applications which do not constitute an attempt to reformulate the very idea of dignity. Although my conclusions will mostly be critical, my argument does not in principle exclude the possibility of a definition of animal dignity being convincingly outlined.

As a way of preliminary clarification it is important to remark that within the diverse meanings and uses of dignity I will only be concerned with that which is also called “human dignity” or “dignity of the human person”, that is dignity as a property conferring moral status, respect and rights on individuals. In other words, as my aim is not to discuss the general meaning of the concept of dignity, I will not refer to the other senses of dignity, such as dignity as the considerability connected to a certain social role, dignity as a special posture, or dignity as moral excellence.

2 Varieties of Dignity and Formal Conditions

Some have argued that dignity cannot ground human rights (Schroeder 2012) and, thus, it cannot serve the main normative purpose it is supposed to discharge. I cannot discuss here whether dignity can play the role of grounding moral status and moral rights. My starting point will be conditional. If one accepts that on some accounts dignity is a meaningful notion and can ground moral status and moral rights, we need some conditions to be met for the application of the idea of dignity to animals to make sense as a distinctive concept. The problem is that, even if we admit that dignity makes sense normatively, it seems we have no uncontroversial standard against which the possibility of extending dignity to animals may be assessed.² Indeed, the very notion of dignity is generally controversial. The traditional but still

¹ This expression has been queried *qua* misleading and such other expressions as “species overlap” have been proposed. Although I share some of these worries, for simplicity I stick to the traditional expression.

² Perhaps there is only one element shared by all accounts of dignity, which is the idea that dignity entails intrinsic value. But intrinsic value is an ambiguous concept in its turn because it has been predicated on diverse things across different dimensions. To cut a long story very short, in this paper I will be concerned only with a sense of intrinsic, *qua* opposed to extrinsic. This opposition concerns the source of value. In this sense, an object has intrinsic value if and only if its value depends solely on its intrinsic or inherent properties; while it has extrinsic value if its value depends on the relation it has with other objects (Korsgaard 2005, 82).

prevailing Kantian approach understands dignity as an intrinsic value which is typically (if not only) possessed by persons in virtue of some morally relevant characteristic (autonomy). On the contrary, Bird (2013) and others have claimed that it is not only by virtue of possessing some inherent properties alone that we have dignity. It is, rather, the practice of respecting other individuals which properly confers dignity.

Furthermore, even if there were little controversy about the idea of dignity, it is plausible to assume that applying dignity to animals might require a deep reformulation of it, because the current conceptions of human dignity sit uncomfortably with the attribution of dignity to animals. Hence, given the controversy about the meaning and role of dignity and the unusual possibility of applying it to animals, we need to pursue a different strategy in order to assess whether this possible application makes sense.

To do so, I discuss the following proposals defining the idea of animal dignity through two formal conditions independent of specific conceptions of dignity. The formal conditions are: 1) *non-redundancy*, and 2) *normative determinacy*. They require that a conception of dignity:

- 1) be non-redundant, namely that it could not be reducible to other independent normative notions, and
- 2) deliver a determinate normative requirement, and not just assign a considerable worth to the beings having dignity.

The condition of non-redundancy hardly seems controversial because it responds to the general desideratum of conceptual parsimony. If a concept, whether normative or descriptive, may be reduced to another concept without losing any significant part of it, then we have a *prima facie* reason not to use it as a useful conceptual tool for philosophical analysis. There might be other reasons to use it. For instance, if the concept to which it is reduced is a difficult and technical one, the reducible concept might still be useful to convey an idea in a more commonsensical or rhetorical way. But from the philosophical standpoint non-redundancy seems a fundamental, although not sufficient, condition. Moreover, meeting this condition seems especially important for dignity, because some critics have argued that dignity is useless (Macklin 2003).

To explain the need for the second condition we have to provide further and more specific arguments. Why should dignity deliver any determinate normative requirement and guide action? Why couldn't dignity just be a purely evaluative notion, referring to the moral status of an individual without any normative prescription? After all, any understanding of dignity holds that the idea of dignity includes such evaluative components as having intrinsic value, being of a higher rank, or having considerable moral status. One might argue that these ideas are purely evaluative components which have *per se* no practical requirement. There are many normative ideas which generate no determinate practical requirement. Consider the case of goodness, which is such a general mark of positive evaluation that its general definition – good as worthy of positive moral consideration – tells us very little, if anything, about what we ought to do towards a good thing.

Now consider the case of dignity. Even if that is the case, we might still argue that dignity is not a purely evaluative notion. If we are to meet the first condition, as non-redundancy seemed an obvious requirement, dignity is to be something more than its fundamental evaluative component which, depending on the conception, might consist

in having intrinsic value, having higher rank, and/or considerable moral status. Hence, dignity must include other evaluative components or a prescriptive dimension. If the notion of dignity includes another evaluative component besides the alternatives just mentioned, it is not clear what other normative components can be added at such a basic level constituted by intrinsic value. Other candidates, such as ‘commendable’ and ‘good’ do not seem to add anything important to the fundamental evaluative component. Other less basic evaluative notions, such as ‘courageous’, ‘generous’, and so on, do not seem applicable because they do not concern the most basic and fundamental features which have to do with dignity. The other alternative is more plausible because one of the very few things that diverse accounts of dignity have in common is that dignity commands respect and the attribution of rights. This means that the idea of dignity includes a prescriptive dimension beyond its including intrinsic value. What dignity specifically requires in terms of actions and attitudes varies across different accounts, and may be something either very general or more specific. But the point I want to make is that for dignity to be a useful normative notion it cannot just be a mark of positive evaluation.

The need for the two conditions above in an account of dignity also stems from the following considerations.³ Whatever conception of dignity we employ, dignity seems to explain why certain properties have a specific (and special) value. To illustrate the conceptual role of dignity consider the standard Kantian idea of dignity. On this view, persons have dignity in virtue of certain features (rationality and capacity for moral agency) which have intrinsic worth. Dignity further demands that those who have dignity be treated appropriately, that is with respect. More generally, we may say that dignity has a double role: it explains why certain properties (rationality, capacity for agency, personal traits) have a special value and it demands an appropriate moral response. Call the first role the *axiological function* of dignity, and the second role the *prescriptive function*.

Regarding the possibility of ascribing dignity to animals, it would probably be the case that the appropriate treatment commanded by dignity is not respect for full moral agency (an abstention from interfering with the moral agency of individuals). Insofar as animals probably do not possess full moral agency, it might be the case that animal dignity commands another sort of appropriate treatment. For instance, it might be the case that animal dignity commands that we take sentience into consideration and do not cause suffering to sentient beings. Whatever the correct solution is, my point here is to emphasize that for dignity, in order to have a plausible normative role, it must explain why certain features merit a high positive evaluation (axiological function) and what we ought to do to respond to this high-value (prescriptive function).

In what follows I will discuss three possible approaches to defining animal dignity: the species-based approach, moral individualism and the relational approach. In the final section, I will also assess some applications of features of human dignity to animals which do not attempt to redefine the idea of dignity.

³ To prevent a final concern about the need for these two conditions it must be said that they have to be taken with a pinch of salt. Indeed, one may be worried about the seeming stringency of these conditions and remark that, if strictly understood, they would rule out other standard normative concepts which are usually considered reliable and sound. I share these concerns but want to emphasize that I will not use these conditions as excluding criteria which have to be met fully in order for a conception to be admissible. Rather, I will try to employ them as considerations of plausibility among others.

3 Three Approaches to Extending Dignity to Animals

First and foremost, we have to face the problem of the basis of dignity. What is the property shared by humans and animals the possession of which confers dignity upon its holders? Or even more generally, does dignity inhere in properties of individuals or in relations between individuals? There are three general strategies which might be adopted: a species-based approach, moral individualism⁴ and a relational approach. These three alternatives seem to represent all the plausible possibilities at stake, insofar as the basis of dignity may be a property inherent in individual traits or not inherent in individual traits. If it is a property inherent in individual traits, it should be either a property shared by an individual with other members of the same species (the species-based approach), or a morally relevant trans-specific property (moral individualism). If the basis of dignity is not inherent in properties possessed by individuals it cannot but be something conferred by relations with other individuals (the relational approach).

3.1 The Species-Based Approach

One might pursue a species-based approach holding that the basis of dignity is conferred by species-specific features. On this view, each species is valuable in itself insofar as it is the source of a unique and natural standard of good life for its members. However, obviously, all animal species differ from one another. Hence, the theoretical problem of this approach is to find out on what basis a single moral notion may be employed given species diversity. In what follows, to illustrate the possibility of a species-based attribution of dignity to animals I will analyze Martha Nussbaum's theory.

As known, Nussbaum upholds the capability approach according to which institutions and individuals have a duty to protect and promote the flourishing of an individual's capabilities. This idea, in Nussbaum's view, is not only fully applicable to non-human animals, but also finds in animals its metaphysical root. Indeed, against the Kantian version of dignity and personhood she contends that our dignity is an "animal sort of dignity, and that very sort of dignity could not be possessed by a being who was not mortal and vulnerable, just as the beauty of a cherry tree in bloom could not be possessed by a diamond" (Nussbaum 2006, 132).

The capability approach grounds the moral considerability of a being on its natural capacities for a good life. Nussbaum's Aristotelian account defines dignity as the worth of a form of life in its full and natural expression. What does this idea of animal dignity demand? It requires that basic needs of animals be satisfied. To know what such needs are we have to look at the standard of the species. "We should bear in mind that any child born into a species has the dignity relevant to that species, whether or not it seems to have the "basic capabilities" relevant to that species. The species norm is evaluative" (Nussbaum 2006, 347). Let us leave aside the possible charge of speciesism that this passage might provoke. After all, a species-based account of the standard to assess the goodness of one's life might be plausible, at

⁴ I borrow the standard expression 'moral individualism' from Rachels (1990, 173–4) to indicate a term opposing species-based stances.

least methodologically, because species-norm may help us establish what the most important capacities for each species are.

The underlying connection between the basic needs and the ideal of flourishing is the idea that the fact of being an animal of a certain species attributes dignity to a being because each species expresses a different form of life with different capabilities. “This Aristotelian conception situates human morality and rationality firmly within human animality, and insists that human animality itself has dignity. There is dignity in human neediness, in the human temporal history of birth, growth, and decline, and in relations of interdependency and asymmetrical dependency, as well as in (relatively) independent activity.” (Nussbaum 2006, 356).⁵

Let us consider the normative implications of Nussbaum’s use of dignity. Unlike the traditional account, according to which dignity demands respect, in Nussbaum’s view the appropriate moral response to the recognition of the dignity of a non-human animal requires us to take care of the needs of an individual. That might mean providing food, an appropriate environment, and taking care of the animal in case of suffering. In sum, all these actions imply the provision of help or assistance to a needy being. This represents a huge change in the idea of dignity, in particular as far as its traditional connection with respect is concerned. But this is not, *per se*, a problem. After all, if we are to take seriously the possibility of applying dignity to animals, we have to make room for animal dignity generating moral implications that are possibly diverse from human dignity. Rather, the relation between satisfying the basic needs and promoting the flourishing deserves further scrutiny. The normative demands of the capability approach include both a number of positive duties (e.g., providing care to an animal or restoring the ecosystem of a certain species) as well as many negative duties (typically of non-interference).⁶

In the light of this, Nussbaum’s idea of animal dignity seems an all-purpose notion: it includes awe-inspiring intrinsic value, it requires taking care of all needs, it justifies the provision of the means for flourishing, and it might also demand non-interference with the life of animals in certain cases. One may worry about the complexity of the relationship between all these elements. We may say that this is not a problem because the capability approach does not use monist criteria of moral assessment and the correlated normative prescriptions, for it is, rather, grounded on the intrinsic value (dignity) of such complex and thick notions as species.

I do not want to put in question all the normative and justificatory apparatus of the capability approach. My more limited concern is that if we accept that dignity justifies all these normative requirements, paradoxically dignity loses its normative specificity. This might occur because from the idea of dignity, which for some theorists is already controversial in its more restricted and specific version, Nussbaum aims to derive (nearly) all what we consider good, just, and morally obligatory. One may say that this charge is unfair because human dignity has also been appealed to in order to defend diverse human goods (privacy, autonomy, political participation, access to food). Hence, why should we adopt a stricter standard for animal dignity? My reply is twofold. First, I may rejoin that these uses of human dignity are misplaced and unclear as well. Second, it does not seem unfair because the multiplicity of uses

⁵ Nussbaum (2009, 254) calls it the “Aristotelian-Marxian account”.

⁶ See Claassen (2014) on the disparate and possibly opposing implications of the application of the capability approach to animals and ecosystems.

and functions of human dignity also depend on the variety of its commonsensical uses. By contrast, the idea of animal dignity is not frequently used and, to make the case for it, it seems necessary that, at least in its first philosophical theorization, it pass more demanding requirements of conceptual clarity and specificity.

At this point, we should ask what kind of function dignity plays. If dignity is to play a grounding function in that it justifies the attribution of special moral status, respect, and right to be assisted to all those beings having dignity, it is unclear how it can do so given that in Nussbaum's view there is no single morally relevant property on which dignity rests. This concern specifically relates to Nussbaum's attempt to ground the capability approach in the notion of dignity, not the normative content of the capability approach. On the one hand, she seems a bit elusive on the issue of grounding because in principle she claims that "there is no respectable way to deny the equal dignity of creatures across species" (Nussbaum 2006, 383). But this intuition cannot be fully vindicated, she says, and remains a metaphysical hunch without public support. On the other hand, the specific normative claims she puts forward seem plausible⁷ but it is not clear whether all should be grounded in the idea of dignity or have an independent moral plausibility.

The most thorny problem is, however, a methodological one: How can we justify the attribution of rights to meet the demands of the capability approach, if dignity is to be predicated on as many diverse properties as the number of species? My worry is that if dignity is to be used to recognize the value of many features (naturalness, neediness, flourishing) and to justify corresponding duties, we seem to have no clear connection between features upon which dignity supervenes and the ensuing normative implications. Indeed, in Nussbaum's account dignity seems to cover all good and commendable aspects at the axiological and prescriptive level.

In sum, Nussbaum's idea of animal dignity seems to meet the formal condition of normative determinacy because she provides rather specific normative implications. But it is unclear whether it meets the first condition of non-redundancy because it is unclear whether it discharges a specific normative work which cannot be done by other notions and it is doubtful that the idea of animal dignity can justify all the ensuing normative requirements.⁸ Why not ground many duties to help and protect animals in first level standard moral principles? Why appeal to dignity?

Now we are in a position better to appreciate the overall plausibility of a species-based approach to animal dignity. As all species differ from one another and have nothing in common, any species-based approach to the attribution of dignity to animals must ground this attribution in the fact of species membership. This means that any species membership must be accorded a sort of special value, which consists in its dignity. Nussbaum echoes this idea in the following way. "The approach is animated by the Aristotelian sense that there is something wonderful and worthy of awe in any complex natural organism – and so it is all ready, in that spirit, to accord respect to animals and recognize their dignity." (Nussbaum 2006, 93–4). But, if dignity is attributed to the fact of being a member of a species (whether human or animal), we might ask how the huge diversity of species could justify the possession of a unique moral property. Why should we find both the life of a mammal and of a snake worthy of awe? It seems that the only common property we

⁷ "[A]dequate opportunities for nutrition and physical activity; freedom from pain, squalor and cruelty; freedom to act in ways that are characteristic of the species ...; freedom from fear ...; a chance to enjoy the light and air in tranquility" (Nussbaum 2006, 326).

⁸ In a similar way Cochrane (2010, 240) held that much of what Nussbaum wants to protect by appeal to dignity may be covered by reference to "opportunities for wellbeing" of all sentient creatures.

may appeal to is naturalness, whose vagueness and controversial character is, however, notorious. Nussbaum herself devotes a section of her book to forestalling the charge that the capability approach entails a sort of “nature worship” because many natural events are wrong. However, if so, given Nussbaum’s awareness of this problem, on what basis may dignity be predicated upon many different animals and normative situations? In sum, it is not clear in the species-based approach what grounds dignity beyond species-belonging, which is not an acceptable ground insofar as it probably begs the question. Hence, despite its normative interest, the role of dignity in the capability approach, *qua* normative foundation, raises some doubts.

3.2 Moral Individualism

Moral individualism holds that dignity should be attributed to all individuals possessing the morally relevant property constituting dignity. For the sake of simplicity I’ll only refer to a single property, but the same discourse applies if we use a set of properties. If the former approach holds that the attribution of dignity and the appropriate treatment depends on species’ peculiarities, here the attribution of dignity rests on the possession of a feature which cuts across species membership. Although this approach seems to solve the problem encountered by the previous approach, in that a single trans-specific property justifies the attribution of a specific status, its main problem revolves around the relation between the criteria of inclusion in the domain of dignity and the possibility of satisfying the type of moral commitment (whether egalitarian or non-egalitarian) for which dignity is usually invoked.

Moral individualism may be driven by an egalitarian or non-egalitarian commitment. If we are egalitarian moral individualists we face the problem of attributing equal treatment to variable morally relevant properties. Egalitarian theorists have addressed the problem of the basis of equality through the use of the idea of range property (Carter 2011). To ground equal treatment on the basis of a varying morally relevant underlying feature (moral agency, rationality, sentience, etc.), egalitarian moral individualists should establish a threshold. Each individual above this threshold is said to possess the range property of, for instance, being a moral agent. The range property is a binary property and the varying degrees of possession of the subvening morally relevant property (e.g., rationality) do not affect the egalitarian possession of the range property. The minimum threshold of possession of the morally relevant feature is necessary to recognize that, although all individuals possess varying degrees of the morally relevant property, they fall within a specified range wherein the attribution of an egalitarian moral consideration is still considered appropriate, despite the variation. In other words, the threshold ensures that, despite the variation, there is still a meaningful proportionality between attribution of a certain moral consideration and the underlying feature. This conceptual approach may be applied to animals.⁹ The problem with an egalitarian range property meant to attribute dignity to animals has regard to where the threshold is posited. On the one hand there is the problem of exclusion. If the threshold is posited at the lowest levels of sentience so as to be as inclusive of all those animals having the slightest form of sentience as possible, we solve the risk of unjustifiedly excluding animals just below the threshold. But, if so, we have the problem of attributing equal dignity to such diverse beings, thus stretching equal dignity to its limits. In this case we would face a problem of proportionality because the same moral notion, which has distinctiveness and higher rank in its typical features, would be applied to such differentiated beings with such a considerable variation of morally

⁹ Regan (1983, 240–1) has employed a range property to grant that certain animals have an equal moral standing. In Regan’s account all mammals at the age of 1 year (threshold) have the capacity to be subject-of-a-life (range property), and must be accorded rights.

relevant features that dignity would risk losing its specificity and normative bite.¹⁰ On the other hand, if we put the threshold at a higher level, say to include only animals having more sophisticated (and similar) levels of sentience, we are more congruent with the principle of proportionality, and equal dignity would make more sense. But, if so, we discriminate against lower levels of sentience and this account would not constitute an extension of dignity to animals. Hence, egalitarian moral individualism does not provide a plausible ground to extend dignity to animals.

Non-egalitarian moral individualism at first seems incompatible with the usual egalitarian commitment included in the idea of dignity. By admitting inequality of dignity, aren't we losing one of its most important characteristics? To respond to this question it is worth discussing Michael Meyer's proposal for the application of dignity to animals. Meyer (2001) holds that it is possible to extend the idea of dignity to all sentient beings, provided that we employ a minimal idea of dignity. In order to do so, we must outline the core of the idea of dignity and distinguish it from human dignity. The resulting framework is a very general idea of dignity, which includes both human dignity and simple dignity. Only the former attaches to human persons and has the usual features associated with dignity, that is the grounding of respect and human rights. The latter is inclusive of the moral status of all sentient beings while still retaining the basic features of the idea of dignity. In this second sense, "having dignity is having (1) an intrinsic moral worth and (2) an independent moral status." (Meyer 2001, 117).

In the light of this, we may ask how far the idea of simple dignity may be extended. Indeed, some hold that it is not only non-human animals that have intrinsic moral worth and independent moral status, because all living beings, including plants, are also worthy of such moral consideration (Taylor 1986). This is a very controversial statement, but the point I want to make here is that if we accept Meyer's minimal account of dignity we should in principle also be ready to apply the concept of dignity for plants, as Meyer himself mentions. Whether it is sound to do so or not depends on the basis for the attribution of dignity, that is on the property to which dignity attributes a positive moral evaluation (axiological function).

If we admitted that there are no conceptual barriers to rebutting these claims, we may ask if it makes good sense to make such extensions. In sum, what is the point of doing so? The overall upshot of Meyer's attempt seems a bit disappointing. "Indeed, when properly understood the general concept of dignity is a moral idea that can serve well whatever future expansions of our moral concern seem called for by a more generous and ever increasing understanding of the nonhuman world." (Meyer 2001, 125). Here, dignity seems just a moral tag, a sort of reminder of the domain of moral considerability. If so, we might agree that simple dignity can be applicable to all sentient beings (and beyond). At this point we may ask whether the idea of simple dignity thus explained meets the two criteria above (non-redundancy and normative determinacy).

Perhaps simple dignity meets the first condition in that the components necessary for simple dignity to obtain are twofold: intrinsic moral worth and independent moral status. It might be argued that independent moral status implies intrinsic moral worth, thus collapsing simple dignity into independent moral status and not meeting the first requirement. But I won't put forward and further discuss this criticism because the next problem seems more interesting and relevant to the specific concern of this paper.

Regarding the second condition, what is the appropriate moral response to the possession of simple dignity? Meyer does not clarify this point. We may just gesture toward a possible

¹⁰ For an overall critique of such egalitarian perspectives and a defence of the proportionality principle, see Knapp (2009).

response. We might suppose that simple dignity requires of us not to cause suffering to all those beings that possess sentience. Granting this very plausible implication, we may go back to the starting question and ask how we can face the fact that, on Meyer's view, dignity comes in degrees that reflect the very diverse levels of worth of sentient beings.

Meyer is aware of a possible problem with an inegalitarian account and solves it by admitting that the general concept of dignity allows for differences, but human dignity is safeguarded as an egalitarian concept and is superior to simple dignity (Meyer 2001, 123). However, if we admit that simple dignity comes in degrees correlated to the level of sentience of a being, we may ask what kind of normative implications would follow from this picture. The problem I see is not that simple and human dignity would command different types of moral response, which would be unsurprising and probably also morally sensible, but that within the idea of simple dignity there should be as many types of response as levels of sentience. If that is the case, dignity would be normatively not determinate and to know what to do one ought to look at the underlying level of sentience. In such a case it is unclear how dignity could make any fundamental normative work, for instance, to protect the claims of those beings having lower dignity over the claims of beings having higher dignity (typically humans). Simple dignity coming in degrees and covering all levels of sentience would merely risk attributing a varying level of moral considerability to all sentient beings. But if dignity merely amounts to moral considerability it seems to lack specificity and might be reduced to the pure moral considerability generated by sentience. But if that is the case we do not meet the first criterion.¹¹ In sum, despite its clarity and conceptual appeal, inegalitarian moral individualism faces the problem of giving dignity a normative role which is not merely reducible to moral considerability.

3.3 The Relational Approach

The third option to ground dignity is the relational approach. In this case, dignity would be attributed by the relations between individuals capable of conferring dignity through their acts and attitudes. This approach is relational because it is not the possession of a property alone that entitles an individual to the attribution of dignity, which is not something that individuals 'have' (Bird 2013, 159). Dignity is, rather, generated and conferred by certain types of relations and conduct of individuals who relate to each other so as to respond appropriately to certain features which command an appropriate treatment. For instance, human dignity is conferred when we morally take autonomy into due consideration and respect it, that is refrain from interfering with it. To assess the plausibility of this approach, first, we have to ask whether humans and animals can have relations conferring dignity. Second, we must better understand the types of relations that ground dignity, in particular whether it makes sense to admit a unilateral attribution of dignity or not.

Regarding the first problem, if we assume that dignity-conferring relations must have some level of reciprocity, only for a very few animals (in particular some mammals) can there be some forms of cooperative relations which might resemble the interactions between (human)

¹¹ In their attempt to make sense of the 1992 Swiss constitutional reform recognizing dignity (Würde) to living beings, Balzer et al. (2000) even more clearly incur similar problems. Indeed, they claim that a concept of dignity suitable to animals consists in the idea that all biological entities having a good of their own have an inherent value. Clearly, there are huge variations in dignity and no determinate prescriptive implications follow because the mere ascription of inherent value grants only a minimal moral considerability whose importance should, though, be weighed against other interests. For similar critiques to this position see Jaber (2002).

moral agents that are the grounds for the recognition of dignity. Hence, the prospect of applying this account of dignity to animals seems rather limited. Although it has been claimed that in some animals we can find many forms of moral attitude and behavior, animals, even the most developed ones, lack the capacity for full moral agency. Indeed, even if cooperative, animals are not capable of performing such actions as recognizing moral status, properly reciprocating, acting on principles, and so on. Of course humans and animals have multiple types of meaningful relations which deserve appropriate moral consideration in their own terms. But these relations are structurally unequal. One might retort that even among human beings there are structurally unequal and non-reciprocating relations which, at least in some accounts, do not prevent the possibility of dignity being attributed. Consider, for instance, the attribution of dignity to severely mentally impaired humans. To see whether this response is convincing, we must consider the next point.

Regarding the second issue, in a relational approach, if it is only one part that is capable of conferring dignity (humans), the receiving part (animals) may obtain a certain high moral consideration even if not reciprocating. If we admit that dignity may also be unilaterally conferred on beings that cannot reciprocate and confer dignity in their turn, be they marginal human beings or animals, one may ask how and on what basis dignity may be conferred. There are two possible routes. If dignity is relationally conferred upon the possession of a non-relational property, that is if we confer dignity in virtue of a property possessed by the dignified individual prior to our relational attribution of dignity, we are no longer in a pure relational approach and the considerations made about the species-based approach and moral individualism still apply here. Relations here specify that dignity is conferred by other individuals, and not possessed by individuals alone; but relations do not ground dignity. If, instead, dignity-conferring relations are totally independent of non-relational properties possessed by the dignified individual, any kind of being in any circumstance may be dignified provided that there is a human individual capable of dignifying it who is willing to do so. In this sense, not only animals and plants, but also inanimate objects may be dignified. However, on this account, the attribution of dignity may end up being an arbitrary act lacking proper good motivations, thus risking losing its moral properties which make dignity so important. Hence, the relational account of dignity does not seem appropriate to solve our problem with the attribution of dignity to animals.

4 Other Uses of Animal Dignity and Concluding Remarks

Although the three possible approaches above are likely to be a complete taxonomy of the attempts to redefine the concept of dignity so as to make it suitable to animals, they do not cover other applications of the idea of dignity to animals which do not seek to redefine the concept. Although this is not the main aim of this paper, which was, rather, meant to address the conceptual issue, a brief analysis of these further occurrences of animal dignity is in order. Indeed, it seems plausible to appeal to dignity to capture some moral concerns regarding possibly problematic issues that cannot be accounted for by other concepts. Such cases involve certain uses of animals that are deemed morally unacceptable despite not necessarily involving animal suffering.¹² To illustrate this issue I will discuss two prominent cases of possibly improper treatment of animals: circuses and genetic engineering.

¹² I am grateful to an anonymous journal's reviewer for pressing me also to consider these uses of dignity.

Some have argued that in circus performances animals are mistreated even if they do not (appear to) suffer and the main problem is not the limitation of their liberty. Cataldi (2002), in particular, has claimed that the use of bears in circuses is especially wrong because bears are trained to act contrary to their nature with a view to providing humans with a comic show. Cataldi (2002, 117) specifically claims that the violation of dignity lies in the failure to respect the inherent value of animals in shows that ridicule them because “forcing circus animals to dress and behave like human beings actually *detracts* from their dignity”. One may say that the major wrong committed to bears here is their exploitation. But, this is even worse in many other uses of animals, such as industrial farming or scientific experimentation. Does the appeal to animal dignity consist in more than the denouncing of animal exploitation? On this view, dignity seems to play the specific normative role of condemning the fact that the improper use of animals is done for the purpose of ridiculing them by making them appear what they are not, for instance, by dressing them like humans. However, if the specific violation of dignity of animals in circuses is that they are ridiculed, one may ask why this should be seen as such a serious wrong that it has to be characterized in terms of a violation of dignity. Ridiculing persons by dressing them improperly or stripping them naked is a violation of their dignity because we think that human dignity is connected to a sphere of concealment and self-control in persons. But how can we say that this is appropriate and relevant for animals? Is having control of one’s appearance a fundamental interest of animals which ought to be covered by a duty grounded in dignity? Failing a theory explaining why this is so, one may have doubts and suspect that this move conceals a sort of anthropomorphization of animals according to which animals should be accorded a typical human interest regarding control over one’s appearance.¹³ This might make sense if we consider such highly socialized animals as pets because pets are involved in a network of human expectations and social interactions. But it does not mean that other types of animals (e.g., bears) have types of interests, to be protected by dignity, which are typical human interests.

More generally on animals in circuses, we may think that capturing a wild animal and keeping it in captivity is a violation of its dignity. I suspect many people would share this moral reaction if they see, for instance, a lion in a cage. In this case, the idea of dignity serves to express a sense of indignation caused by the experience of seeing an animal in such an unnatural condition. My sense is that this is a genuine and probably sensible moral response. However, from a philosophical perspective, it is not clear to me why we should appeal to dignity, if we can describe the wrongness of this situation in terms of hindering the animal’s liberty and violating its interest in living a natural life.

Regarding the issue of genetic manipulation of animals, Gavrell Ortiz (2004) employs the idea of dignity to reject the argument that the genetic engineering of animals is admissible because it does not affect their well-being. This argument has been proposed particularly, but not only, to support the possibility of modifying animals so as to deprive them of consciousness, thus serving human purposes (as food) without their welfare being affected. Indeed, such animals would not have, strictly speaking, welfare. The idea of dignity, Gavrell Ortiz contends, is helpful in rejecting this claim because it supplements the (weak) argument that by

¹³ Anderson (2004, 281) takes up the same problem and claims that animals have a dignity that bars us from ridiculing them, for instance by taking a dog and “spray-painting graffiti on its fur”. On this view, dignity is not a standard inherent in animals independent of their relations with humans, because the dignity of an animal “is what is required to make it decent for human society, for the particular, species-specific ways in which humans relate to them” (Anderson 2004, 282). Again, in this account too, it is not clear how the normative content of animal dignity does not stem from an anthropomorphization of animals.

genetically engineering animals we violate their integrity. Integrity is, indeed, already violated by many practices considered admissible. Instead, she claims that, by genetically engineering animals so as to change their natural functioning and setting, we infringe the goods in which a typical animal's life consists. However, Gavrell Ortiz's conclusion is rather minimal because the dignity-based argument just gives us a *prima facie* reason – that has to be weighed against other reasons – not to genetically engineer animals because it is not clear whether, for animals, we can speak of non-negotiable goods that, like human autonomy, have to be protected categorically by dignity. The problem with this thesis is that the idea of dignity is strategically appealed to in order to protect animals (Gavrell Ortiz 2004, 109). However, its implications are left indeterminate by the author herself. In other words, dignity should supplement the normative shortcomings of the idea of integrity but does not reach the conclusion of ruling out the admissibility of genetic engineering as it has been called upon to do. This problem is due to an ambiguity in Gavrell Ortiz's argument because it relies on two different accounts of dignity for the preference of either of which she gives no clue. The first account conceives of dignity as the promotion of goods related to animal welfare; in the second account, animal dignity may conflict with animal welfare (Gavrell Ortiz 2004, 112). In sum, this argument is confused and it is just not clear here whether dignity does any significant normative job.

What conclusion should we draw from these considerations? It seems impossible to outline a coherent account of animal dignity. It seems impossible to square the features usually associated with dignity (intrinsic value, higher rank, distinctiveness, determinate moral treatment) with the huge variations across animal forms of life. If these variations are taken appropriately into consideration by an account based on species, it is unclear what the common ground justifying our attribution of dignity to all species could be. If we are moral individualists, such variations are accounted for through a property (e.g., sentience) possessed by all animals worthy of moral consideration, and we face the problems of excluding some animals or we have a short circuit between the level of sentience, dignity and the appropriate moral response. If we accept the non-egalitarian approach (hierarchy of dignity as suggested by Meyer) we are left with an idea of dignity which is indeterminate or of no moral use because it would justify and replicate the differences of worth and the prevalence of the beings (typically humans) who have a higher dignity over beings with lower dignity. Dignity-conferring relations do not seem to be applicable even to the most developed animals. Finally, some prominent applications of features of human dignity to animal treatment raise problems of anthropomorphization or lack normative grip.

Although there is still controversy over the exact meaning and scope of human dignity, the possible extensions of the general idea of dignity to animals which we have considered do not seem to fare very well. Attempts to ground the moral considerability of animals, their rights, and certain types of normative treatment owed to them would do better to appeal to other normative resources than to the idea of dignity. Although my argument certainly does not exclude in principle the possibility that a convincing conception of animal dignity may be outlined, it has shown what conditions such a conception should meet.

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