

Dignity: personal, social, human

Suzy Killmister¹

Published online: 22 September 2016
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Abstract The goal of this paper is to sketch and defend a novel conception of dignity. I begin by offering three desiderata that a theory of dignity should be able to satisfy: it should be able to explain why all human beings are owed respect, and what kind of respect we are owed; it should be able to explain how acts such as torture damage dignity, and what kinds of harms this brings about; and finally, it should be able to explain why dignity is held to a higher degree by certain individuals. After demonstrating that the dominant, Kantian-inspired conception of dignity cannot fulfill these desiderata, I develop a novel conception of dignity that centers around the role of normative standards. Dignity, on this conception, involves being subject to, and then upholding, relevant normative standards; to violate someone's dignity is to prevent them from upholding those standards. Importantly, these standards can have either a subjective or a communal source, which in turn explains both the agential and social harms that accompany dignity violations. I then draw on the idea of social dignity to explain human dignity. Unlike the dominant philosophical conception, I take human dignity to be a status that is conferred, rather than a status that is inherent.

Keywords Dignity · Respect · Shame

1 Introduction

Dignity is back in style. In recent years a number of innovative and provocative works have been published, each attempting to make sense of what at times appears

✉ Suzy Killmister
suzy.killmister@uconn.edu

¹ Philosophy Department, Human Rights Institute, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

a frustratingly nebulous concept.¹ Dignity has been variously conceived as an inherent feature that all human beings possess;² a status that we confer on one another;³ the marker of someone with a particularly composed manner⁴; a quality of someone who evinces self-respect and/or authenticity;⁵ or some disjunctive combination of the above.⁶ While my purpose in this paper is to develop a positive theory of dignity, it is motivated by a concern that extant conceptions of dignity fall short. They fall short because they cannot do the moral work that dignity is typically called upon to do—either because they focus exclusively on an overly narrow conception of dignity, or because they cleave dignity in twain, allocating different moral work to distinct and independent conceptions of dignity.

While there is clearly disagreement about the exact nature of the moral work dignity is called upon to do, three significant clusters can be identified.⁷ First, dignity has something to do with the respect persons command, *qua* human beings.⁸ A good conception of dignity should thus explain why the mere fact of being human commands respect, and what kind of respect it commands. Call this the *universalist* desideratum. Second, dignity is the kind of feature that can be damaged, or persons can be stripped of—particularly if they are subject to severe humiliation, and most paradigmatically if they have been tortured.⁹ A good conception of dignity should thus be able to explain how acts such as torture *reduce* dignity (as opposed to merely being an ‘affront’ to dignity),¹⁰ and what kinds of harms such reductions

¹ See Beitz (2013), Bird (2014), Debes (2009), Habermas (2010), Kateb (2011), Luban (2015), McCrudden (2013), Rosen (2012), Schroeder (2008), Tasioulas (2012) and Waldron (2012). To get some sense of the staggering variety of understandings of dignity in circulation, both cross-culturally and across academic disciplines, I recommend browsing through a random sampling of the 60 or so chapters that make up the Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity Düwell et al. (2014). See also Malpas and Lickiss (2007).

² See Kateb (2011), Nussbaum (2006) and Tasioulas (2012).

³ See Bird (2014) and Waldron (2012). I should flag at the outset that this is closest to the conception of dignity I put forward here, though my account differs significantly from both Waldron’s and Bird’s, not least through the inclusion of what I call ‘personal dignity’.

⁴ See Meyer (1989).

⁵ See Dworkin (2011) and Margalit (2009).

⁶ See Kolnai (1976), Rosen (2012) and Schroeder (2008).

⁷ I leave aside those views which declare dignity to be unable to do any moral work at all. See Macklin (2003) and Pinker (2008).

⁸ This is closely connected to the appeals that are commonly made to dignity in many human rights documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which opens with reference to “the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family”. See UN General Assembly (1948, 1966a, b) See also Darwall (2006) and Feinberg (1970).

⁹ See esp. Luban (2009), and Margalit (2009). But c.f. Daniel Statman (2000), who challenges the presumed connection between dignity and humiliation.

¹⁰ We often speak of ‘violations’ of dignity, particularly where torture is concerned. I will be avoiding that term throughout this paper, because it invites confusion: to violate something can mean to harm it; but we can also violate a rule or a norm. For the former meaning of dignity violation, I will refer to ‘harming’ or ‘damaging’ dignity—or in extreme cases, ‘stripping the agent of her dignity’. For the latter meaning of dignity violation, I will refer to ‘affronts to dignity’; these will be cases in which the perpetrator fails to treat the agent in accordance with her dignity, but her dignity remains undamaged.

bring in their stead. Call this the *vulnerability* desideratum. Finally, though perhaps least importantly, dignity picks out an admirable feature that some individuals exhibit to a higher degree than others, particularly in the face of pressure to capitulate.¹¹ If possible, our conception of dignity should also be able to explain why dignity is a virtue held to a higher degree by certain individuals. Call this the *achievement* desideratum.

My goal in this paper is to develop a conception of dignity that can satisfy all three desiderata, and thus perform the moral work that dignity is called upon to do.¹² Now it might be objected that this project is misguided from the outset. Why think that any one conception of dignity should be able to fulfil all three desiderata, rather than think (as many clearly do) that the different desiderata show that at least two distinct concepts masquerade under the same term?¹³ Indeed, it might be thought that dignity is analogous to respect in this regard. As Stephen Darwall so famously argued, there is not one but two kinds of respect: what he calls ‘recognition respect’ and what he calls ‘appraisal respect’.¹⁴ Moreover, these two kinds of respect map fairly neatly onto the three desiderata that I have identified. Perhaps, one might claim, the universalist desideratum points us towards a kind of dignity that underpins recognition respect, while the vulnerability and achievement desiderata point us towards a distinct kind of dignity that comes in degrees and can be lost, and thus commands divergent levels of appraisal respect.

Once we start thinking this way, it becomes very easy to see the kind of dignity that fulfils the universalist desideratum as the philosophically important concept, while the kind of dignity that fulfils the vulnerability and achievement desiderata comes to be seen as relatively trivial, if not a downright philosophical embarrassment. Since this latter kind of dignity carries with it old-fashioned notions of status and honor, it might be tempting to think we’ve outgrown it. Conversely, since the universalist-oriented kind of dignity promises an appropriately egalitarian basis for moral thought, it might be tempting to place all our moral eggs in that conceptual basket.

Such a move would be premature. While fulfilling the universalist desideratum is clearly important, so too is fulfilling the vulnerability desideratum. Without it, our conception of dignity would fail to accord with the lived experiences of those who complain that their dignity has been damaged or even destroyed, and we would lose

¹¹ Brennan and Lo (2007), Hursthouse (2007), Kolnai (1976), Maroth (2014) and Schroeder (2008).

¹² My methodology here is thus distinct from that recommend by Debes (2009). Debes suggest we should start with a metatheory of dignity, which involves identifying the abstract ‘form’ of dignity. While it might be tempting to think that specifying the form of dignity is just another way of specifying the desiderata that concept must satisfy, this would be to overlook a deeper methodological difference. According to Debes, “The fundamental methodological starting point of any theory of dignity must be to examine the nature of dignity—not its normative upshot (p. 50).” By contrast, I do not think dignity’s desiderata can be specified independently of dignity’s normative upshot; the normative upshot determines what those desiderata must be. My approach is thus much more pragmatist than Debes’.

¹³ For claims that the term ‘dignity’ invokes at least two distinct concepts, see Brennan and Lo (2007), Kolnai (1976), Rosen (2012), Schroeder (2008), and Spiegelberg (1971). For resistance to the splitting of dignity into two or more concepts, see Hursthouse (2007).

¹⁴ Darwall (1977).

one valuable avenue for understanding the nature of such harms. If it were in fact possible to develop a conception of dignity that fulfilled both desiderata, we would have good reason to so.

In addition, while the achievement desideratum is admittedly less important than the other two, it nonetheless has moral import insofar as it is used as a measure of human virtue. Were it possible to develop a conception that could fulfil the achievement desideratum alongside the other two, then this would be a significant mark in such a conception's favor.

The purpose of this paper is to develop just such a conception. Doing so will involve drawing out distinct pathways to what I will be calling 'personal dignity' and 'social dignity'. While these two forms of dignity differ in some respects, it is important to be clear that they are sub-divisions within a single unified conception, which centres around the idea of being subject to, and then upholding, normative standards. Crucially, this subjection to normative standards is something that we *do*, rather than a reflection of some deeper, practice-independent fact: in slogan form, we have dignity because we give ourselves dignity.

2 Why the dominant conception of dignity won't do

The most common way in which dignity is thought about within the philosophical community is, very broadly-speaking, Kantian.¹⁵ This is a conception on which dignity is an inherent feature of persons, one that attains universally, and does not admit of degrees. Moreover, it's in virtue of this feature that human beings are taken to command a certain form of respect. In other words, dignity is that 'special something' inside us all, in virtue of which we are all equally entitled to be treated with respect.

It might seem that this conception of dignity would be custom-made to fulfil the universalist desideratum. I will be arguing, however, that it is not in fact particularly well suited to do so. First, though, I aim to show that it cannot adequately fulfil either the vulnerability desideratum or the achievement desideratum.

It is clear from the outset that the dominant conception cannot fulfil the achievement desideratum: it cannot explain why some people exhibit dignity to a higher degree than others, because dignity is taken to be a universal feature that does not admit of degrees. Since many philosophers seem to think that this is in fact a benefit of the conception, rather than a bug, I will not press this point here, other than to note that this thought is typically motivated by a concern that recognition of variable dignity would entail variability in the respect persons are owed, *qua* human beings. I will aim to show below, however, that this entailment does not follow in the conception of dignity that I am developing.

¹⁵ See Kant (1976). To be fair to Kant, this conception is only very tangentially related to his work (notwithstanding the ubiquity of references to him). Almost no one who invokes his name in explicating a contemporary theory of dignity retains the moral core that is so central to Kant; the closest theories extract a non-moralized conception of self-determination as the grounding of dignity (see esp. Griffin 2008).

Let's turn, then, to the vulnerability desideratum: can the dominant conception explain why some acts damage an agent's dignity? First, it is very hard to see how *anything* could damage dignity, from the perspective of the dominant conception. This is because dignity is taken to be universal and invariable: we can't lose it, and it doesn't admit of degrees. At best, we can perhaps say that some acts are an *affront* to the dignity of the victim. But this analysis simply does not accord with agents' lived experiences—particularly when we consider extreme cases such as torture. Consider this representative statement from Mr. al-Rawi, who was tortured in Abu Ghraib: "I feel I lost my dignity [...] I couldn't even raise my head in my house when I went home." And he goes on, "I broke off the relationship with my fiancée because I felt I couldn't get my dignity back".¹⁶ A conception of dignity needs to be able to explain (or at least explain away) statements such as these.

It is important to capture the range of harms that are done to agents such as Mr. al-Rawi. While we can of course identify many moral wrongs involved in torture that do not make reference to dignity, and others that make reference only to dignity as the dominant conception understands it, such analyses risk leaving out much that is important. Mr. al-Rawi isn't just physically and emotionally harmed; and it is not just that his captors failed to treat him with the respect that he is owed (as true as both these claims are). Torture inflicts a very particular kind of damage; something about the agent changes when she is tortured, which victims find it helpful to describe in terms of damage to, or loss of, their dignity. Unless and until we find an alternative name for what changes, there is some reason to take victims at their word, and see if we can accommodate their experiences with our conception of dignity.

This reasoning does not just apply to extreme cases such as torture. In much more mundane cases, agents find it fitting to describe their experiences in terms of damage or loss of dignity. Hospitalization; menial labor; routine harassment; even events as trivial as the proverbial slipping on a banana peel: in these and countless other cases, agents turn to the language of dignity. Importantly, these aren't appeals to dignity that mesh comfortably with the dominant conception: the claim is not (or not merely) that their dignity has been *disrespected*; the claim is that their dignity has taken a hit, it's been damaged. Insofar as the dominant conception struggles to accommodate such claims, there is some motivation for looking elsewhere.

There is a move available to the dominant conception here, which has been most clearly defended by Pablo Gilabert.¹⁷ As Gilabert notes, it is possible to draw a distinction between what he calls 'status-dignity' and 'condition-dignity'. Status-dignity refers to the universally shared capacities in virtue of which we're owed respect (keeping this account within the dominant conception), while condition-dignity refers to the extent to which we're able to exercise those capacities.

¹⁶ Cited in Rory McCarthy, "They Abused Me and Stole My Dignity", *The Guardian*, May 12 2004, at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/may/13/iraq.rorymccarthy1?redirection=guardian>, accessed 09/10/2015.

¹⁷ Gilabert (2011, 2015), see also Herbert Spiegelberg, who suggests a similar distinction: (1971, pp. 54–55).

Although this move would allow Gilabert to say that people can have their condition-dignity damaged, there is still a respect in which it does not fully satisfy the vulnerability desideratum. While Gilabert has the resources to say *that* certain acts damage dignity, his account struggles to explain *why*. If we imagine situations in which agents claim their dignity has been harmed, it is not at all clear that these will correspond with situations in which people are prevented from exercising their capacities, and vice versa. The harm we commit when we prevent someone from exercising their capacities (say by imprisoning them¹⁸) is very different from the harm we commit when we perform acts that people typically describe as rendering them undignified (say by leaving them naked on a hospital trolley¹⁹). A conception of dignity needs to be able to explain this distinctive harm.

The dominant conception thus faces a *prima facie* struggle in satisfying either the vulnerability or the achievement desideratum. If there were no alternative conception, this may not be sufficient to cast doubt upon its viability. As I will show below, however, it *is* possible to develop a conception of dignity that satisfies all three desiderata. Before spelling out that conception, though, something needs to be said about the dominant conception's ability to satisfy the universalist desideratum. Perhaps surprisingly, the dominant conception faces a challenge here, too.

The key challenge facing the dominant conception emerges in response to a question it cannot avoid answering: what is the 'special something', in virtue of which we're owed respect, actually supposed to be? For those who follow the Kantian origins of this conception closely, a ready answer is available: we have dignity because we are capable of giving the moral law to ourselves.²⁰ Or to put it more bluntly, we have dignity because, and insofar as, we are rational creatures. However, it follows from this claim that infants and the severely cognitively disabled do not have dignity. And since dignity grounds the claim that individuals must be treated with respect (i.e. as ends rather than means), we are invited towards the particularly distasteful conclusion that the severely cognitively disabled need not be treated as ends in themselves.²¹

It may be tempting at this point to try to rescue the dominant picture by distancing it from its Kantian origins. We may, for instance, try to identify dignity

¹⁸ This is not to deny that imprisonment can damage dignity—as it is actually practiced in most parts of the world, it almost certainly does. If Gilabert is right, though, dignified imprisonment should be an oxymoron.

¹⁹ For a good synthesis of the empirical data on how people see their dignity as threatened in healthcare settings, see (Barclay 2016).

²⁰ Kant (1976).

²¹ As Robin Dillon notes, “in claiming that only rational beings are ends in themselves deserving of respect, [Kantian ethics] licenses treating all things which aren't persons as mere means to the ends of rational beings, and so it supports morally abhorrent attitudes of domination and exploitation toward all nonpersons and toward our natural environment.” (2003) Debes' warning about dignity is also instructive here. As he notes: “the great boon of introducing human dignity hides a possible baneful shadow—namely, the ability not simply to repress, depress, or otherwise redefine the agency of a subject, but to banish that agency altogether” .

with some feature/s of humans other than rationality.²² This is a particularly tricky move to pull off, though, if the features we're looking for need to be inherent to *all* human beings. We cannot, for instance, point to human sociability, or creativity, or even self-consciousness, since for any feature that depends on certain cognitive capacities, there will be some human beings who lack them. This leaves features such as vulnerability, which are arguably universally shared. But then the problem shifts: if we have dignity in virtue of our vulnerability, why do we not share this dignity with other equally vulnerable creatures? And why does our vulnerability command *respect*, as opposed to some other attitude?

There is one more response advocates of the dominant conception sometimes make. Rather than taking dignity to pick out some feature that all human beings share, the argument goes, we can pick out features that are common to *humanity*, and then attribute dignity to all human beings on the basis that they share a nature with the persons who *do* possess the relevant features.²³ The challenge such views confront is to explain what it is about 'sharing a nature' that justifies according respect to all human beings, rather than just to those who actually possess the relevant features. The problem such views face is analogous to the challenge that confronts rule utilitarianism: if the reason why human beings as a category are special is because they typically exhibit feature *x*, *y*, or *z*, then why should I treat as special a human being who lacks features *x*, *y*, and *z*?²⁴ While we can of course simply give all human beings the benefit of the doubt (our ability to discern others' inherent features being questionable, at best), this doesn't address the root of the problem. We need some explanation as to why the features that are doing all the moral work need not be held by those we are bound to respect.²⁵

I do not expect these overly brief arguments to convince anyone devoted to the dominant conception. What I *am* suggesting is that the dominant conception, which takes dignity to be an inherent and inalienable feature of persons, faces significant *prima facie* challenges in satisfying the three desiderata laid out above. Given these

²² For theories in this vein, see, i.e. Darwall (2006) and Margalit (2009) and Nussbaum (2006).

²³ Variations on this move are defended by, among others, Kateb (2011), Nussbaum (2006), Sulmasy (2007) and Tasioulas (2012).

²⁴ The way in which Sulmasy explains the move is instructive in illuminating its limitations. As he puts it, "the logic of natural kinds suggests that one picks individuals out as members of the kind not because they express all the necessary and sufficient predicates to be classified as a member of the species, but by virtue of their inclusion under the extension of the natural kind that, as a kind, has those capacities (p. 16)". The example he uses to illuminate this point is bananas: even if 'banana' is defined as a yellow fruit of a certain shape, he notes, some things that qualify as bananas will be green, or of a different shape. Fair enough. But note what happens if we shift from talking about what counts as a banana, to what makes bananas special. If we start saying that bananas are owed certain treatment *because they're yellow*, it doesn't follow that the green bananas are owed that treatment just because they're members of the same natural kind. The same is true for human beings. If we say that human beings are owed certain treatment because they're rational, it doesn't follow that the non-rational human beings are owed that treatment just because they're members of the same natural kind.

²⁵ For a similar critique, see Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2013). To anticipate, my conception of human dignity actually shares some features with the view that I am challenging here. As will hopefully become clear, however, my conception can discharge the challenge through reconceiving humanity as a social rather than a natural kind.

challenges it is worth considering whether an alternative conception offers a more straightforward way to do so.

3 Towards a new conception of dignity

I have suggested that the conception of dignity sketched above is the most dominant within philosophical circles. It is not, however, the conception of dignity that has the most general currency. A quick scan of Google Image results for the term ‘dignity’ reveals some common themes. Military funerals are prominent, as are certain members of the royal family. More represented than perhaps any topic, though, are images related in some way to elderly care. Coming at things from the other direction, a search for ‘indignity’ most commonly returns some combination of alcohol and indecent exposure (drunken public urination was perhaps the most common image of all²⁶).

Now of course Google Images cannot solve our conceptual puzzles for us. Nonetheless, I think this popular understanding of what it is to have or lack dignity offers a useful entry-way into thinking about what dignity might be. In particular, it can help in the articulation of a conception of dignity that is tailored to satisfying the third desideratum; with some modification, that conception will then be shown to be capable of fulfilling all three desiderata.

To be clear: I am not suggesting that public usage such as that identified in a Google search *settles* the meaning of dignity. The role of these common usages is just a springboard for developing my own theory of dignity, which is unashamedly revisionist. To put this another way: I take my theory of dignity to be accountable to the moral uses to which dignity is put, which I’ve identified with the three desiderata. As will become clear as we proceed, this results in a theory that departs fairly radically from popular conceptions of what dignity is.

With that clarification in mind, it seems that to lack dignity, on the popular understanding, is to *fail to abide by some normative standard*. This is why those perceived as undignified so often appear without their pants on. The regular appearance of alcohol is also easily explicable on this understanding, since alcohol so often leads us to abandon our standards.

On the popular understanding, then, dignity can be seen as *the upholding of standards*. This explains why the Queen of England is so frequently considered a paradigm of dignity, given that she is such a famous stickler for the stiff upper lip.²⁷ It also makes sense of the common images of military funerals: soldiers at such events are subject to strict protocol, which is adhered to even in the face of what is

²⁶ I should add that it was *women* publicly urinating that most readily seemed to attract the label ‘undignified’. This points to just one of many ways in which talk of dignity can signal social norms that are discriminatory and/or oppressive. As I will go on to note in the concluding section of this paper, developing a plausible conception of dignity should in no ways be seen as signalling unconditional support for upholding dignity on all occasions.

²⁷ It also explains why her husband, the notoriously gaffe-prone Prince Phillip, is so rarely described as dignified.

presumably a time of very high emotion. Finally, elderly care is often a site at which personal standards become difficult to uphold. When people decry the loss of dignity in old age homes, what they seem to have in mind are the way in which the elderly are toileted, whether they are dressed in accordance with their own sense of decorum, and so forth. These deeply personal standards become difficult for the elderly to uphold independently, and unfortunately elderly care can be better or worse at helping them do so.²⁸

This popular usage is the suggestive starting point for what I'm calling personal dignity. We *have* personal dignity, I propose, in virtue of recognizing some or other normative standards. We *are dignified* when we uphold those standards. More carefully, we come to have the *status* of a dignity-bearer because we recognize standards of behavior and bearing, which we take to have normative force over us. The status of personal dignity is thus constituted through an agent's recognition of the normative force of certain standards. *Being dignified*, on the other hand, requires an individual to *uphold* the standards that they recognize. We are *more dignified*, on this conception, the greater the extent to which we uphold our standards, and/or the higher the standards to which we hold ourselves.²⁹ Conversely, we are *less dignified* when we fail to uphold our standards, or if the standards that we recognize are very weak.

It is important to stress that the standards relevant to personal dignity are purely subjective. These standard can be understood by the agent as moral requirements, religious strictures, demands of etiquette, or any combination of the above. They can range over what we wear, how we speak, what we eat, or our public bearing. Nonetheless, the standards relevant to personal dignity do not extend to *all* normative standards recognized by the agent. For example, when an individual runs a red light she does not, typically, render herself any less dignified, and this is so even if she recognizes the normative standard of obeying traffic signals.

What we need is a narrowing of the normative standards relevant to dignity. I propose the following: the standards relevant to dignity are standards the violation of which the agent takes to be shameful. When an agent does something that is undignified, then, she is doing something that she considers to be shameful. For the Queen of England, burping in public, or even using the wrong fork, presumably meets this test. For most people (at least in North America) running a red light typically does not meet this test.

To summarize, then, an agent's dignity is constituted—she comes to *have* dignity—through her recognition of normative standards, the violation of which she

²⁸ Killmister (2010).

²⁹ C.f. Meyer (1989). Meyer takes the *having* of dignity to depend (in part) on the capacity for self-control, while the *expression* of dignity depends on the exercise of self-control. This is also one way to read Kolnai's discussion of uncontrolled passion: Kolnai notes that in being swept away by passion, the agent nonetheless expresses some amount of dignity. On my account, that would be explained by the fact that the agent acknowledges the standards she is violating, even at the moment she violates them. Unlike Meyer and Kolnai, though, my account offers an explanation as to the source of the standards by which the agent's dignity is measured.

takes to be shameful. She gains (loses) dignity when her behavior upholds (contravenes) the standards she recognizes.

It follows naturally from this conception of dignity that to force someone to contravene one of her standards would damage her dignity; she becomes less dignified in virtue of not being able to uphold that standards. If an agent holds himself to a normative standard of appearing in public clothed, then to force him to appear in public naked damages his dignity. Similarly, if an agent holds herself to a normative standard of appearing in public with her head covered, then forcing her to appear in public with her head exposed damages her dignity.

We are now in a position to consider how well this conception of personal dignity fares according to the three desiderata given above. Unsurprisingly, while it fares quite well with respect to the achievement desideratum, it faces difficulties with both the universalist and vulnerability desiderata.

The achievement desideratum is straightforwardly fulfilled, because it is built into the conception: some individuals are more dignified than others because some individuals hold themselves to higher standards, and some individuals are better at upholding their standards. Take the Queen of England again. We can make sense of the assumption that she is highly dignified by considering the stringency of the standards that she takes herself to be required to uphold, and her success in upholding them. Similarly, Nelson Mandela is rightly admired for upholding standards of comportment—in particular, a high level of grace and compassion—even in the most trying of circumstances. On the flip side, consider the ubiquity of public drunken urination in a Google Image search for ‘undignified’. On my conception of personal dignity this is straightforwardly explicable, since we typically assume that such people *do* recognize standards of comportment which public urination violates, and are simply failing to uphold these standards in the moment.

Turning to the vulnerability desideratum, we see mixed results. On the one hand, the proposed conception has a ready explanation for when and how dignity can be damaged. In healthcare settings, as noted above, we often struggle to maintain our own standards of decorum and independence, and hence struggle to retain our dignity. Even more clearly, the proposed conception can show how *humiliation* damages dignity. Humiliation attempts to instill shame, and so to succeed it must target something the victim finds shameful, and force her to do or be that. The proposed conception also offers a straightforward explanation as to the nature of the harm that accompanies acts that damage dignity. They are harms to her agency, insofar as they prevent the victim from doing and being what she has deemed herself required to do and be.

That said, this explanation misses something important about some paradigm cases of damage to dignity. In particular, it struggles to fully account for the dignity-related harms of humiliation. While personal shame is clearly a central aspect of humiliation, it is not the only aspect. What the proposed conception fails to accommodate is the extent to which humiliation is so often *public*. Typically, when an individual is humiliated she is not only held up as violating her own standards, but is also held up as violating *social* standards, and is thus subject to public shaming as well as subjective shame. The proposed account does not currently have

room for such an observation, because it is focused exclusively on the relationship between the individual and her own internalized standards.

However, the proposed account runs into an even more significant problem. Because dignity is constituted through a cognitive process, it is only possessed by those capable of such a cognitive process. In other words, an agent only *has* dignity if she recognizes some or other normative standards, the violation of which she considers shameful. Assuming there are at least some forms of cognitive disability that preclude individuals from recognizing *any* normative standards, then on the proposed account those individuals would not have dignity. With respect to the vulnerability desideratum, if the severely cognitively disabled do not have dignity, then nothing we do to them can damage their dignity.

This observation also makes clear the central difficulty the proposed account has with the universalist desideratum. In a nutshell, it is not universalist, because it excludes the severely cognitively disabled. While central, this is not the only difficulty the proposed account has in fulfilling the universalist desideratum. In particular, the proposed account struggles to explain the connection between dignity and respect. While it is relatively straightforward to show how the proposed account is action-guiding, insofar as causing someone to experience shame is a *prima facie* harm, this doesn't yet show what respecting someone's dignity has to do with respecting them as a person. The worry here is that any attempt to close this gap will result in collapsing respect for dignity into respect for autonomy, insofar as it amounts to respecting their capacity to determine their own behavior.³⁰

A possible response to these shortcomings would be to throw out the proposed conception of dignity and start again, either by refashioning the dominant conception, or by pursuing an entirely novel path. I am optimistic, however, that the proposed conception can be rehabilitated.

4 From personal to social dignity

The core idea presented in Sect. 3 is that dignity is constituted by the agent's recognition of normative standards. This way of thinking about dignity is unable to accommodate the dignity of the severely cognitively disabled because it ties dignity to the subjective determinations of individual agents; as such, agents who are unable to make such subjective determinations do not have dignity.

There is, however, an alternative way to understand the connection between normative standards and dignity. I noted in the introduction that dignity is constituted through being *subject to* normative standards. To personally recognize such standards is one way in which to be subject to them. It is not, however, the only way. An agent's dignity can also be constituted through being subject to standards that her *community* recognizes as binding on members. Just as in the original presentation, not all of the community's standards will be relevant to dignity:

³⁰ C.f. Macklin (2003). I say more about how what I'm now calling personal dignity differs from autonomy in Killmister (2010).

dignity will be constituted through being subject to standards the violation of which the community takes to be shameful. I will call this sub-set of dignity ‘social dignity’, to contrast it with the ‘personal dignity’ that is constituted by subjective recognition.³¹

To see how this extension works in practice, it will be helpful to focus on an example. Consider the following hypothetical case:

Nora has a severe cognitive disability. One of the effects of this disability is that she does not recognise any standards of conduct: she experiences no shame, irrespective of what she does, and she remains unmoved by any attempt to instil norms of behaviour. One day a group of young men cajole Nora into stripping naked, take photos of her in various compromising poses, and share the photos widely on social media.

On the proposed account, what is happening here has no effect on Nora’s *personal* dignity, because the standards that she is being forced to contravene are not her own. Nonetheless, this would still be a paradigmatic case of damaging an agent’s dignity, because Nora’s *social* dignity is being damaged.

To see why this is so, it is important to stress that what the young men are doing here is deliberately putting Nora into a situation in which she is transgressing the community’s norms of sexual conduct. In other words, they are deliberately humiliating her. Importantly, their attempts at humiliation only make sense if Nora is in fact recognized as being subject to the norms that are being broken. It is relevant that the young men in this example are choosing to sexually humiliate a young woman, and not an inanimate object, like a rock. It makes no sense to try to humiliate rocks, because there are no standards that a rock can violate. Young women, by contrast—even cognitively disabled young women—can violate a good many social norms, and it is this (admittedly regrettable) fact about our social world that lies behind the cruelty of the young men’s behavior.³² Ironically, then, the young men’s attack on Nora’s dignity actually serves to reaffirm her *possession* of dignity. So Nora clearly *has* dignity, because she is subject to the normative standards of her community (otherwise, the attempt at humiliation would make no sense). And she clearly has her dignity *damaged* because she is being forced to contravene those standards (that is the whole point of the humiliation).

To summarize, on the proposed account there is a dual pathway to having dignity: an agent comes to have *personal* dignity through recognizing normative standards the violation of which she takes to be shameful; an agent comes to have

³¹ I am thus using the term ‘social dignity’ to mean something very different from Jurgen Habermas, who uses it to refer to the honor attached to highly stratified social statuses. See Habermas (2010).

³² While humiliation provides the most obvious example of damaging dignity, it is by no means the only one. What matters is that the individual is being forced to contravene normative standards, and so is being put in a position that her community considers shameful. So even if the young men in the example saw Nora as no more a member of their community than a rock, and had thus not been engaged in humiliation, this would still constitute damage to her social dignity, since the broader community’s norms of sexual conduct were still being contravened. Similarly, if an individual were left in a state of utter destitution by a natural disaster, rather than by the deliberate actions of an oppressive government, she may find herself unable to uphold the standards of the community, and hence her social dignity would be damaged.

social dignity through being a member of a community that recognizes normative standards for members, the violation of which are considered shameful.³³

While in many cases an individual's personal and social dignity will both be constituted by the same normative standards—after all, many of us internalize the standards of our community—it is important to note that they can come apart. As we have just seen with Nora, they may come apart because an individual lacks personal dignity, while having social dignity. But they can also come apart because the standards the agent recognizes for herself differ from the standards she is subject to as a member of a particular community. This means, in turn, that the extent to which an agent is dignified may depend on whether we are asking about her personal or her social dignity: in some cases, increases in personal dignity may come at the expense of social dignity, and vice versa. Tragically, then, acts that may be necessary to uphold personal dignity may simultaneously damage social dignity, and vice versa.

Let's return to our desiderata, and see how well the proposed conception of dignity can fulfil them now that the distinction between personal and social dignity has been introduced. Since the achievement desideratum was already fulfilled on the original presentation, and the addition of social dignity does nothing to impair this, I will focus here just on the universalist and vulnerability desiderata.

In terms of the vulnerability desideratum, the introduction of social dignity addresses one key worry: we now have a much richer understanding of the harms that accompany acts that damage an agent's dignity. Not only do such acts harm agency, by preventing the agent from doing or being that which she requires herself to do or be; they also prevent her from doing or being that which is required of her by her community. This is a distinctly *social* harm, one which can be understood in terms of loss of social standing. The community is being asked to view the victim as a transgressor, or as a lesser member. To explain this harm, we need to appeal to the social nature of the norms that are being violated.

³³ This has echoes of how Rhonda Howard defines dignity: "I define human dignity as *the particular cultural understandings of the inner moral worth of the human person and his or her proper political relations with society*". Howard (1992, p. 83) emphasis in original) Note that, *contra* Howard, inner worth plays no role in my account; nor are the proper relations with society restricted to the political. Compare, also, what Daniel Sulmasy calls 'attributed dignity': "By attributed dignity, I mean that worth or value that human beings confer upon others by acts of attribution. The act of conferring this worth or value may be accomplished individually or communally, but it always involves a choice. Attributed dignity is, in a sense, created. It constitutes a conventional form of value". As he goes on to clarify, however, his attributed dignity is restricted to a form of appraisal respect: "we attribute worth or value to those we consider to be dignitaries, those we admire, those who carry themselves in a particular way, or those who have certain talents, skills, or powers." Sulmasy (2007, p. 12). My account makes no such assumption. Finally, social dignity has some overlap with what Kolnai calls 'dignity as a quality'. Amongst the things he classes as undignified: "everything that is antithetic to distance, discretion, boundaries, articulation, individuation and autonomy [...] indiscriminate community or consorting or intimacy, promiscuity, domineeringness and servility [...] brutish and noisy, or even naively unreserved and of-a-piece self-assertion, self- assurance and self-complacency; self-pity, emotionalism, exhibitionism, demonstrativeness [...] untruthfulness and unguineness; hypocrisy, false pretence and the whole empire of the showy, flashy and gaudy, the Kitsch, [...] all that is levity, frivolity, irrelevance, shallowness, needless triviality." Kolnai (1976, p. 263). Kolnai does not say, however, what he thinks the source of these rather idiosyncratic standards is supposed to be. Moreover, he denies any connection between 'dignity as quality' and 'human dignity'. As I will go on to argue in Sect. 6, I think that human dignity is actually a species of social dignity.

The introduction of social dignity also goes some way to addressing the worry about exclusion. Individuals do not need any particular cognitive capacities to have social dignity, and so all human beings are potentially victims of dignity-related harms. This same observation applies to the universalist criteria: all human beings are bearers of dignity, insofar as they are a member of some community or other.

Admittedly, this does leave the dignity of some individuals contingent on social practices. Anyone unable (or unwilling) to recognize standards for themselves will only have dignity provided they are subject to the normative standards of some or other community. It is thus at least conceptually possible that someone could fail to have dignity conferred on them.

That said, it is hard to see how *any* conception of dignity could do better than this limited contingency. Compare the dominant approach, on which we identify some feature of persons in virtue of which they have dignity. It is hard to imagine what that feature could be like, such that every human being has it and it can never be lost. If we are to avoid mere table-thumping insistence that being human carries with it some intrinsic, valuable feature that grounds our dignity, we would do well to consider the possibility that the feature in question is *conferred*—which is precisely the move that the proposed conception makes.³⁴ Moreover, as I will argue in Sect. 6 below, there is one community that *all* human beings are members of: namely, the human community. I will return to this point shortly.

While the introduction of social dignity helps accommodate worries about inclusion, it does not address the other concern raised above about the universalist desideratum, namely the connection between dignity and respect. It is to that challenge that I now turn.

5 From indignity to disrespect

I have claimed that social dignity is constituted through being subject to normative standards that hold for members of a community. Social dignity is action-guiding, both for the agent herself and for others around her, since violating the relevant norms, or forcing another to violate them, will render her socially undignified, thus harming her through lower her social standing.

This does not yet explain, however, what the connection is supposed to be between dignity and *respect*. This connection can be explained via the notion of status. Being a member of a community places normative demands on other members to treat you in ways appropriate to your status as a member of that community.³⁵ Since dignity is constituted through this membership, it follows that one's status as a member and one's dignity are deeply entwined. To fail to respect

³⁴ On the benefits of construing dignity as conferred, see (Bird, 2014).

³⁵ There are overlaps here with Waldron's theory of dignity, whereby dignity is conceived in terms of a rank or status that has been extended to all persons (see Waldron (2012)) The main difference between the proposed account and Waldron's is that Waldron is only providing an explanation of what I will be calling *human* dignity: he leaves no room for what I am calling personal dignity, which we confer on ourselves, or social dignity, where this refers to communities smaller than the global one.

someone's status as a member of your community, then, is to fail to respect her dignity as a member of your community.

To see how this works, consider the community of judges. On my theory, the social dignity of each individual judge (*qua* judge) is constituted by being subject to the norms of the community of judges. So judges are expected to comport themselves in certain ways, to dress in certain ways, and so forth. A judge can be less dignified, *qua* judge, by failing to uphold those standards, and she can have her dignity damaged *qua* judge if others force her to contravene those standards (perhaps by stealing her wig, if she is in a Commonwealth nation). But being a judge also confers a particular status, which commands a certain kind of respect. For example, we are all expected to rise when a judge enters the room, and to address her by her title. Failure to do so is a failure to respect her status as a judge, and as such it is a failure to respect her dignity as a judge. Importantly, the respect one is due *qua* judge does not track the extent to which one is dignified *qua* judge (though sufficient indignity may suffice to get one ejected from the community). Two judges who uphold judicial standards to differing degrees will still command the same judicial respect. This point helps alleviate a worry raised earlier, i.e. that allowing for differential levels of dignity entails differential respect.

Failure to respect an agent's dignity is a harm, but it is not best thought of as *damaging* dignity. Dignity is damaged when an agent is (forced to be) *undignified*, in the sense that she fails to uphold the standards that apply to her. When an agent's dignity is disrespected, however, there is no standard that *she* is failing to uphold, and so her dignity is not damaged. Her dignity is, however, affronted.

While affronts to dignity do not damage dignity, there are important moral features they share with acts that *do* damage dignity. In particular, an affront to dignity carries the very same harm as does damage to social dignity. When someone's dignity is affronted her social standing is affected, because her aggressor is positioning her as less than a full member of the relevant community. He is expressing that she is not worthy of the treatment that is expected for members of that community.

Importantly, the harms associated with affronts to dignity vary in significance. The extent to which one's social standing is reduced depends both on the level of disrespect being shown (there is a difference between ignorantly failing to respect someone's status as a member of a community, and deliberately mocking that status) and on who is doing the disrespecting (a high-standing official in a community typically has more power to reduce someone's social standing than does a child). So there is a difference in the affront to dignity a judge experiences when a child does not stand for her, because she does not realize she has to, and when the District Attorney refuses to stand.³⁶

Moreover, the moral import of this reduction in social standing turns centrally on the community within which one's standing is damaged. There is an important moral difference between having one's status as a judge brought into question, and

³⁶ This same observation applies to damaging an agent's dignity. Who is forcing the victim to violate her standards, and which norms they are forcing her to violate, significantly affect the degree of harm caused.

having one's status as a human being brought into question. This brings us to the final piece of the conceptual puzzle—human dignity.

6 Human dignity as social dignity

I have argued that social dignity is constituted through membership in a community for whom normative standards apply. These communities can be varied and overlapping: any given individual might have judicial dignity, national dignity, family dignity, and so forth. There is one community, however, that deserves special attention. This is the community of human beings.

I propose that it is a social fact about our current world that we have constituted a global community of human beings, and in doing so have created human dignity.³⁷ While this human community shares its boundaries with the species boundary, it is not in virtue of species membership per se that human beings have dignity, and are entitled to respect. Rather, just as we have for the judicial community, we have endowed the human community with meaning. To put this point slightly more forcefully: there is nothing special about the boundary around the species 'human being' apart from the meaning that we've imbued it with.³⁸ Nonetheless, every human being is entitled to respect *qua* human, since this is part of the meaning that has been constructed for the human community.³⁹

This final step brings us full circle back to something that looks on the surface very like the dominant conception of dignity. Since membership in the global community is a universal feature of human beings, and it is this feature that commands respect *qua* human being, membership is now playing the normative role that rationality did for the Kantian conception. However, it is doing this without necessarily excluding some human beings from dignity's reach. Moreover, exactly what is required to show respect, on this account, cannot be simply read off the fact of species membership. The respect commanded by human beings is a social norm

³⁷ Habermas likewise suggests that human dignity is a political achievement; though he ties it much more closely to the emergence of the constitutional state. See Habermas (2010). Bertram Morris, too, sees dignity as constituted by social relations Morris (1946). More precisely, he sees dignity as a virtue that emerges through human communication. Unlike my account, though, dignity for Morris is not a status that we confer on one another.

³⁸ This is in stark contrast to how dignity—and humanity—is typically understood. Compare, for instance, this statement from Teresa Iglesias, which she puts forward as a 'bedrock truth': "To be a human being is not a status conferred upon me by anyone. Nor is this a status that I, nor anyone else, can confer upon others. We are natural beings, and find ourselves existing as what we are, human beings" Iglesias (2001). This departure is one way in which the proposed account falls short of fully satisfying the three desiderata: the universalist desideratum would be better fulfilled by an account that could show why all human beings are owed respect on the basis of some intrinsic and inalienable feature. As should be clear, I do not think such an account is possible. I am thus privileging the universality portion of the universalist desideratum, over its demand for an intrinsic justification.

³⁹ Much more needs to be said about how this social meaning is constructed, and who has the power to do so. In short: I do not take this to have been a unanimous global agreement. As for all social norms, some agents wield more power in their construction and shape than others (this is yet another way in which dignity is a morally ambivalent concept). I say more on this point, and how it connects to human dignity's role in grounding human rights, in (Killmister, ms).

that we have constructed, and can modify in the future, rather than an immutable moral fact.

Before offering some concluding thoughts on this novel conception of dignity, a final objection must be addressed. I have charged the dominant conception with the challenge of showing which feature of persons justifies the attribution of dignity, and suggested that this challenge cannot be met. But it may be tempting to offer a *tu quoque* challenge against me. On the proposed conception of dignity, what matters for those unable to confer dignity upon themselves is that they are recognized as a member of some community, and I have suggested that—fortunately—all human beings are in fact members of the human community. But here is the problem: don't we come to be members of a community in virtue of some feature that we possess? This is a particular problem for the proposed conception, because what I have suggested lies behind membership is being subject to the standards of the community. With respect to the human community, this suggests that only the morally responsible—and so only the cognitively able—can have human dignity.

While forceful, this objection is not insurmountable. All too briefly, the idea is that while the status that members of a community attain is intimately connected to the normative standards members of the community are subject to, membership in the community and subjection to normative standards can in practice come apart. Who is a member, along with the respect that membership commands, is itself a social construct, and there is no reason to think that we cannot—or have not—allowed what we might think of as 'honorary membership'. If this is right, then what emerges is the possibility that some individuals can be vulnerable to *affronts* to their human dignity, even while they cannot have their human dignity *damaged*: this is because it might be possible to have the status of human dignity, through membership in the human community, without in fact being subject to the relevant standards.

7 Concluding thoughts

The proposed conception of dignity centers around the idea that to have dignity is to be subject to normative standards. It turns out that there are in fact two distinct types of dignity that an individual may possess: personal dignity and social dignity. While not all human beings possess personal dignity, all human beings have at least one form of social dignity, because all human beings have human dignity.

With respect to both individual and social dignity, it is possible for an agent to be more or less dignified. What matters is the extent to which she upholds, respectively, her own standards and the standards of the communities of which she's a member. Moreover, it is possible for either kind of dignity to be damaged. Dignity is damaged when an agent transgresses (or is forced to transgress) a standard to which she is subject. Forcing someone to transgress such a standard matters morally, though for slightly different reasons depending on whether personal or social dignity is at stake. Damaging someone's personal dignity matter morally because doing so is a harm to agency: the target is prevented from being who she takes herself to be required to be. Damaging someone's social dignity, on

the other hand, matters morally because it inflicts a social cost: the target loses social standing, insofar as she is forced to do something the community considers shameful.

Finally, social dignity is closely connected to the normative demand to respect persons. Community membership typically grants its members a certain status, *qua* members, which entitles them to a kind of respect appropriate to the community of which they're a member. Since all human beings have *human* dignity, they are owed the respect appropriate to their status as human beings.

The proposed account satisfies all three desiderata laid out at the outset. It can account for the fact that all human beings are owed respect, *qua* humans, and explain (at least formally) what kind of respect they are owed—namely, the kind of respect that we have collectively deemed appropriate to membership in the human community. It can account for the fact that certain acts damage dignity, and it can explain why this is a moral wrong. Finally, and most straightforwardly, it is compatible with some individuals having more dignity than others.

In closing, I want to explore one final benefit of the proposed conception of dignity, namely that it can account for the moral ambivalence of dignity. I take this to be a benefit of the account, rather than a flaw, because acknowledging the moral ambivalence of dignity helps illuminate the moral texture of cases in which dignity is at stake.

Consider a young woman contemplating undergoing an infibulation. Assume this woman accepts the norms of her community, whereby failure to have this procedure done is deeply shameful. Since we are imagining that the young woman has internalized the relevant standards, *and* that they apply to her in virtue of her membership in her local community, both her personal and her social dignity would be damaged if she were prevented from undergoing the procedure. However, this woman is also a member of the broader global community. It is at least arguable that to fail to intervene in this procedure would be to fail to respect her as a person—it would be an affront to her dignity, and thus damage her social standing *qua* human being. Whatever happens, then, this young woman's dignity will be affected, and she will be harmed.

I will not attempt to adjudicate this moral dilemma here. I will instead use it to draw out two closely related implications of the proposed conception of dignity. First, dignity cannot be a trumping value, because it can conflict with itself.⁴⁰ We must therefore be prepared to weigh the harms of a prospective dignity violation against other harms, whether dignitarian or otherwise. Second, and more importantly, the fact that someone will be harmed through a dignity violation may give us very little reason not to violate their dignity. This is because the proposed conception of dignity makes no reference to the morality of the standards via which dignity is constituted and maintained. When the standards via which someone maintains their dignity are harmful, whether to themselves or to others, we may have good reason to try to dismantle those standards. While it would behoove us to try do so in ways other than through forcing the individual to contravene those

⁴⁰ C.f. Debes (2009, p. 64).

standards, sometimes dignity violations may be a necessary pathway to achieving a more important moral good. Consider the young woman contemplating undergoing infibulation: while it is clearly important to attempt to change the relevant standards from within, it is arguably also important in the meantime to prevent her undergoing a procedure that dehumanizes her.

This conclusion becomes all the more pressing when upholding one individual's dignity causes harm to others. Consider an individual with deeply racist standards, such that he would consider it shameful to come into physical contact with a person of color. As a society we can either uphold this person's dignity by, for example, ensuring they are never treated by a black doctor; or we can violate their dignity by refusing to make the necessary accommodations. I, for one, think it's clear that it is permissible—and perhaps even morally required—to violate such an individual's dignity, as part of a broader process of encouraging them to change their standards.

The moral ambivalence of the proposed conception of dignity is undeniable. Nonetheless, I take this ambivalence to actually be a mark in the conception's favor. It is not a coincidence that dignity has connotations of hierarchy and pomposity, and for a conception of dignity to cleanse itself of these connotations can lead us to overlook the challenges dignity poses to our moral lives. That said, it would be just as much of a mistake to simply dismiss dignity as a concept for a bygone era, which in our enlightened, egalitarian age we can do without. For as long as we do still hold ourselves, and one another, to standards, we are vulnerable to a range of harms that the concept of dignity is invaluable in identifying and understanding. And while we may sometimes be justified in inflicting those harms on one another, we do ourselves no favors by pretending that they are not, in fact, harms. Dignity may not be an unalloyed moral good, but it is far from useless.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank audiences at the University of Connecticut, Monash University, and the 'Dignity, Respect, and Self-Respect' conference in Bologna for very helpful feedback. I am particularly grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal, whose insightful comments have undoubtedly improved this paper.

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