



An Anatomy of Human Dignity; Dissecting the Heart of Humanistic Management

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Received: 15 May 2024 / Accepted: 30 May 2024
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Abstract

Human dignity is introduced in the humanistic management school to distinguish humanistic from economic perspectives on organizational business practices. Placing human dignity at the core of management leads to a different outlook on doing business, organizing and leading. Within the humanistic management literature, there are several distinct paths to ground human dignity in humanistic management. One school views human dignity as a form of motivation, another focuses on its value-laden components, and still others view human dignity as a form of human development. We introduce relational anthropology as a fourth possibility, emphasizing relationality in the notion of human dignity, with love at its core as the essence of human experience. However, as the experience of human dignity is universally human, culturally specific and extremely personal, interpretations of experienced dignity could be very different for different people. We continue to discuss a cosmopolitan view on human dignity, in which we reject both naïve universalism and lazy relativism, pointing to the challenge of leading moral plurality. We close by summarizing the different approaches to human dignity in a conciliatory framework and outline why we believe an explicit emphasis on qualitative, phenomenological research is the best way forward, bringing love to the stage as the potentially unifying principle for humanistic management.

Keywords Human dignity · Humanistic management · Relational anthropology · Love

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Introduction

Human dignity, as a fundamental moral concept, plays a pivotal role in promoting the overall wellbeing of a society. This assertion is underscored by its explicit recognition in various national constitutions, such as the German constitution, where it is prominently enshrined in the first paragraph. The inclusion of human dignity in these constitutional texts highlights its significance as a guiding principle for governance and social interaction.

In resonance with Immanuel Kant's philosophy, it is imperative that individuals refrain from treating others merely as objects or tools to achieve their own goals. Instead, it is crucial to recognize the intrinsic worth of each human being, acknowledging them as ends in themselves.

In the realm of social sciences, Charles Taylor, as highlighted in his seminal work 'Sources of the Self', (1989) has argued that the influence of reductionist naturalism has led to a noticeable avoidance of critical inquiries into the foundational underpinnings of human dignity. Taylor's perspective underscores a broader trend in social sciences, where an overreliance on reductionist and mechanistic explanations rooted in naturalistic paradigms has inhibited a deeper exploration of the philosophical and ethical dimensions surrounding human dignity. Such reductionist approaches often prioritize quantifiable and empirically observable factors while neglecting the intricate and nuanced aspects of human existence that contribute to the concept of human dignity (Flyvbjerg 2001/2019).

Taylor's critique serves as a reminder of the importance of multidisciplinary and holistic perspectives within the social sciences to address complex questions related to the basis of human dignity, ensuring a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this fundamental moral concept.

Although human dignity is an important concept in various social sciences, especially in the broad tradition of Personalism (Smith 2010), it has mostly lost its place in management and organizational studies (Pirson 2014, 2017a). In the last few decades, scholars from different disciplines have started to challenge the concept of human nature based on *homo economicus*, as it ignores the social nature of human beings and does not seem to do justice to the normativity of human beings (Sayer 2011).

The nature of human nature is essentially a social condition (Nes et al. 2021). In order to better understand the general organizational practices that could contribute to human dignity in organization and business studies, various scholars have taken on the challenge of researching human dignity in the workplace, either conceptually or empirically.¹

In his doctoral thesis on the recognition of human dignity through organizations, David Wah (2020) provides an overview of 32 definitions of dignity. With this article, we aim to address the foundations and meaning of the concept of human dignity in the humanistic management literature.² We aim to provide insight on how the search for operationalization

¹In the last two decades, empirical research has been conducted by Hodson (2001), Lamont (2002), Bolton (2007), Lucas (2015), Hicks (2018), Pirson et al. (2023), and McGhee and his colleagues (2022). More conceptual work was taken on by Mitchell (2015), Bal (2017) and Matheson and her colleagues (2021). Yet the most influential organizational theory which puts human dignity at its core is Donaldson and Walsh's Theory of business (2015).

²Recent bibliometric analysis (Koon 2021) indicates a substantial upswing in the interest of management scholars in humanistic management over the past two decades. The humanistic management school focusses on human motivations beyond self-interest and utility maximization, and gives fundamental priority to affirming human dignity in business (Dierksmeier 2011; Pirson 2014, 2017; Donaldson and Walsh 2015;

of the concept can help improve management and organizational practice, despite its ambiguity (Pirson 2017). In order to bring human dignity back into the business of business, the notion of human dignity must indeed be “given clear contours” (Dierksmeier 2011, p. 10). Not the exact parameters of these contours, but the dynamic process of continuous delineation is of interest here.³

Human Dignity as a Guiding Principle in Humanistic Management

Human dignity is introduced in the humanistic management school to distinct humanistic from economic perspectives on organizational business practices (Pirson 2017). Placing human dignity at the core of management leads to a different outlook on doing business, organizing and leading.

What Is a Business for?

Donaldson and Walsh’s theory (2015) has been instrumental in the development of humanistic management. The theory of business starts with a question: what is business actually for?

Donaldson and Walsh point to Amartya Sen who echoes their question and claims there are two possible answers; either businesses exist to achieve a good and just society, or business is concerned with profits and rewards (Sen 2001, p. 52 in Donaldson and Walsh 2015). Donaldson and Walsh posit that businesses generally focusses on the narrow purpose of profits, while ignoring the first purpose of achieving a good society. When it comes to determining how to organize themselves in order to achieve a good society, organizations should focus on at least four key ideas; purpose, accountability, control and business success (Donaldson and Walsh 2015). The authors present a normative and empirical theory, appraising the business success as optimized collective value, subject to clearing the *dignity threshold* (ibid).

Donaldson and Walsh (2015) define the dignity threshold as “the minimum level of respect accorded to each business participant (meaning everyone affected by the organization, which stretches beyond the reach of the word *shareholder*) necessary to allow the agglomeration of benefit to qualify as business success” (p 188, definition 9, parenthesis by authors). They define dignity as “an intrinsic value prescribing that each business participant be treated with respect, compatible with each person’s inherent worth” (p 188, definition 8). They refer to human dignity as the inherent and unconditional dignity every human being possesses, independent of behavior, and establish the dignity threshold as the moral foundation for all business activity. The problem is how to define what compartment is below,

Pirson et al. 2016; Bal 2017; Kostera and Pirson 2017). Nevertheless, the ambiguous definition of human dignity does not always receive enough attention (Latemore et al. 2020) and the humanistic management school is criticized for failing to elaborate on “the problematization of the concept [of human dignity], its theoretical/epistemological discussion, and in particular, the visibility of its application and extension to MOS [management and organizational studies]” (Mandiola 2018, p. 385).

³The concept of human dignity serves different roles in management thinking, ranging from a full paradigmatic shift (Waddock 2022; Pirson 2017; Laloux 2014), the protection of human rights (Kateb 2011; Gohl 2018), or providing direction for organizing business practice (Dierksmeier 2011; Pirson 2014; Donaldson and Walsh 2015; Pirson et al. 2016).

on, or above this threshold. Donaldson and Walsh (2015) recognize this difficulty, and give their readers two important pointers. First, following Kant (1959, p. 54, in Donaldson and Walsh 2015) to always “act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.” Donaldson and Walsh affirm that a minimum level of dignity is achieved by treating fellow humans not merely as means or instruments, not even in a business organization’s production function. Second, since the threshold represents the bare minimum level of dignity that needs to be accorded to each business participant, the threshold can be viewed as prohibiting indignity. Donaldson and Walsh (2015) find that the optimization process of collective value must include the recognition of participant’s dignity. This is simply our duty as humans, as “in failing to respect the humanity of others we actually undermine humanity in ourselves” (Rosen 2012, p. 157).

They conclude that organizations that aim to achieve a good society should be creating collective value (purpose), be accountable to all affected (in the past, present and future), control should be about prohibiting any assault on participant’s dignity, and success is achieved by optimized (not maximized) collective value (Donaldson and Walsh 2015, p. 195). Although they acknowledge many different ways in which business can achieve this collective value, they stress that organizations should act on “the normative pressure to serve as agents of world benefit by a quest to honor human dignity when they produce, exchange, and distribute goods and service” (ibid, p.195).

This alternative theory of business requires a different way of organizing. The Integrative Justice Framework (Santos and Lacznik 2021) (IJF) provides organizations with the means to qualitatively evaluate what Donaldson and Walsh keep quite obscure; to what extent do organizations act ethically, in the pursuit of a good and just society? These evaluative elements (Santos and Lacznik 2021) include:

1. the co-creation of value (Donaldson and Walsh’s ‘purpose’ dimension),
2. the amplification of the voice of the stakeholder (Donaldson and Walsh’s ‘accountability’ dimension),
3. long term value management (Donaldson and Walsh’s ‘success’ dimension),
4. authentic engagement with non-exploitive intent (Donaldson and Walsh’s ‘control’ dimension).

These four elements of the Integral Justice Framework (IJF) align closely with Laloux’s (2014) concept of a ‘teal organization’. This novel organizational model necessitates a fundamental shift in paradigm—according to Laloux, a new stage of consciousness—from traditional profit-driven and growth-focused structures to a more evolutionary approach to organizing. Central to this paradigm is a holistic perspective on organizations, viewing them as dynamic and constantly evolving entities (Laloux 2014). Drawing from Laloux’s framework, teal organizations can be situated within the conceptual dimensions elucidated by Donaldson and Walsh (2015). Within teal organizations, the business’s purpose is perceived as evolutionary and fluid, accountability is rooted in systemic integrity and the holistic well-being of the organization, governance is characterized by decentralized and self-organizing mechanisms, and success is defined by achieving holistic alignment across all organizational levels (Laloux 2014).

Although a teal organization can be humanistic, a humanistic organization does not necessarily represent a teal organization. In contrast to the work of Laloux the concept of

human dignity is explicitly present in the humanistic management and organizational literature (Von Kimakowitz et al. 2010). A humanistic organizational archetype is characterized by unconditional respect of human dignity in every person, an awareness which is fostered by love (Lee 2022). This can lead to a diversity of organizational forms supporting the alternative theory of business as defined by Donaldson and Walsh. Human dignity as a normative concept is the condition for organizing a successful business.

Human Dignity as the Ethical Heart of Humanistic Management

Researching the concept of human dignity in the context of management and organizational studies irrevocably leads to an encounter with the stream of management called humanistic management. Since the establishment of the Humanistic Management Network (Spitzeck et al. 2010) by an intercultural and interdisciplinary group of scientist, the academic interest in humanistic management has risen dramatically (Koon 2021). Their goal is to offer humanistic views to business and organizing by focusing on the systemic, organizational and individual level. They define Humanistic Management as a style of management that unconditionally respects human dignity (Spitzeck et al. 2010; Melé 2016), invites ethical reflection and ongoing dialogue with stakeholders (Von Kimakowitz et al. 2011; Melé 2016).

Melé (2016) notes that humanistic management can be defined and understood in various, yet complementary ways, which all focus on human wholeness, and human absoluteness. A humanistic firm is “in essence, a community, and communities can be built up through the sense of belonging, the awareness of common purposes, the links among those who form the community and the willingness to cooperate for achieving common goals” (Melé 2016, p. 48).⁴ Although there are different approaches to humanism leading to different flavors of humanistic management (which will be discussed in the next paragraphs), human dignity is a key aspect of the humanistic ethos. There are four pillars of humanistic management embedded in the humanistic ethos (Von Kimakowitz et al. 2011; Melé 2016).

1. Humanistic management should protect and promote the individual’s human dignity and aim to create the conditions for individual flourishing (Melé 2016).
2. Humanistic management strives for the common good in society (collective well-being) and sustainability (caring for and protecting the natural ecosystem) (ibid).
3. The (private or public) organization is regarded as a community of care in which people aim to and are stimulated to flourish (ibid).
4. The purpose of business is to create value for all stakeholders, without doing harm to any (ibid).

Overall, human dignity lies at the heart of humanistic management. Yet how can it guide business practice?

⁴Melé (2016) proposes seven key aspects that can help analyze and define humanism and thus inform humanistic management: including a holistic view on the human person (proposition 1), respect for the uniqueness of each person (prop. 2), respecting, protecting and promoting human dignity (prop. 3), viewing human beings as in permanent development towards flourishing (prop. 4), emphasizing individual freedom and responsibility to the social world (prop. 5), respecting the worth and interconnectedness of the entire living ecosystem (prop. 6) and finally recognizing human beings as self-transcending meaning seeking beings (prop. 7).

Operationalizing Human Dignity in Business Practice

First and foremost it is perceived as a general ethical category (following Kant), in which “dignity serves as a general principle of humanity, rooted across global spiritual and religious traditions” (Pirson 2017, p. 111). Dignity can be attributed to humanity as a species, focusing on universality and unconditionality, or to a person, conditional and contingent, in the form of intrinsic value of a virtue or virtuous behavior (Kateb 2011). Dignity can even be attributed to activities (e.g. those activities requiring higher faculties), specific relations (such as marriage), and even institutions (e.g. democracy), while transcending humanity in ecology (Gaia, spirituality) or in the divine (God, religion) (Pirson 2017).

Nussbaum’s concept of dignity makes a distinction between human dignity as related to capabilities, functionings and flourishing (see the paragraph ‘human development and capabilities’), and dignity related to rights and entitlement. This rights-related view on dignity creates space to “giving animals rights to a set of capabilities as well” (Claassen 2014, p. 243), a notion of dignity she defends passionately in her latest work ‘Justice for Animals’ (2023). Nussbaum’s view is supported and even extended by philosophers such as Latour (2015) and Morton (2010), who both emphasize that human beings are fully part of and interconnected with nature (Morton’s concept of ‘mesh’) and are in no way entitled to more or different rights than other animals or parts of the ecosystem; all forms of being are of equal value. The focus on *human* dignity in humanistic management can give the (false) impression that humanists are only concerned with human beings, yet it is clear that many modern humanists are concerned with matters such as sustainability,⁵ human interconnectedness to nature and our ecosystem. Although humanistic management focusses on *human* dignity, emphasizing personhood and humanity as a species,⁶ this does not mean that there is no room for views on dignity that transcend humanity.

Pirson and his colleagues (2016) attempted to find a reconciliation of the different interpretations of human dignity. The first dichotomy they encounter is whether to view human dignity as a category or as a continuum. As a categorical idea, dignity can be perceived as an immaterial good (following Kant), holding intrinsic value, which is valued on account of itself (Rosen 2012). It can be either present, or not. Donaldson and Walsh (2015) point to slavery as an example; no matter how well you may treat your slave, enslaving people is denying their dignity, period. Human dignity can however also be seen as a continuum (Pirson et al. 2016). Following the Aristotelean quest for *eudaimonia* (Aristotle 1998), dignity can be put on a scale, from denied or violated dignity, to the protection and promotion of dignity. In this view, with the aim to flourish, the absence of indignity is simply not enough.

⁵“In focusing on humans, humanism does not ignore the fact that the Earth is the common home of all humans but this home is also inhabited by other living beings. In the use of natural resources, it promotes a sense of stewardship” (Melé 2016, p. 44)

⁶It is this universal search for dignity in humanity as a species that created room for Lawrence’s four drive model to enter into Pirson’s humanistic management model, flirting with evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychology is used and abused for a variety of purposes, e.g. proof of human beings being naturally selfish or aggressive (Vandermassen 2005), with the word ‘naturally’ giving the statement a sort of undeniability, as a human property of choice is apparently set in stone. Social Darwinism in particular has proven harmful, as it bases its theory on the false assumption that the strongest in society wins, and has abused Darwin’s work to attempt to prove a biological foundation to inequalities within society. What evolutionary psychology has actually shown, is that human beings are not just ‘naturally’ rational and selfish, but also cooperating and loving creatures (Lawrence and Nohria 2002; Lawrence 2010; Nullens and Van Nes 2021a).

Pirson and his colleagues (2016) reconcile both interpretations by arguing that one should always treat people with dignity as meant by the dignity category; do not ignore or violate dignity, as people are inherently dignified and vulnerable to harm. Yet if a business aims to be truly humanistic, one needs to pay attention to the dignity continuum, in which not violating dignity is not enough.

Now two other distinct interpretations of human dignity become apparent; on the one hand, human dignity as inherent and universal, on the other hand, human dignity as earned and contingent. Yet Pirson and his colleagues find these concepts to be complementary and especially relevant for business; as inherent and universal dignity requires protection, earned and contingent dignity needs promotion (2016). People are not only vulnerable to harm, but also capable of flourishing; the first needs protection, the latter, promotion. Kant agreed with the two-faced nature of dignity as unconditional in principle and conditional in actuality. “Every human being has dignity (Würde) in his or her ability to be moral. [...] only those who do in fact lead moral lives deserve the praise of personal ethical value (Wert).” (in Pirson et al. 2016, p. 469, quoting Dierksmeier 2015, p. 38).

In 2017, the year that Pirson publishes his book on the Humanistic Management Model, Pirson presents different organizational archetypes by plotting the pillars of humanistic management on two axis: the organizational purpose which is driven by either wealth or well-being, versus the role human dignity plays in the organization; is it either ignored, protected or promoted. The three levels of dealing with dignity as defined by Pirson can be broken down into Melé’s (2014) human quality treatments, which range from maltreatment (1), indifference (2), justice (3), care (4) to development (5).

The table below—Table 1—summarizes the role of human dignity in the organizational business practice (Pirson 2017).

While the Humanistic Management Network has contributed significantly to conceptualizing human dignity in the context of humanistic management, operationalizing human dignity in a humanistic management context proves quite a challenge (Fu et al. 2020). Attempts to measure human dignity in organizations have been made by Pirson, Hicks and colleagues (Pirson et al. 2023), and Thomas and Lucas (2019), yet whether these capture the essence of the concept depends partly on one’s view of the concept and where it is grounded.

Table 1 Role of human dignity in the organizational business practice (adapted from Pirson 2017)

Role of dignity	Ignore	Protect	Promote
Type of dignity	No dignity	Inherent, universal and unconditional	Earned, contingent and conditional
Human quality treatment	Maltreatment or indifference	Justice	Care and development
Wealth creation	Economism	Bounded economism	Enlightened economism
Well-being creation	Bureaucratic	Bounded humanism	Pure humanism

Grounding Human Dignity in Humanistic Management

In the realm of humanistic management literature, various philosophical and social-psychological underpinnings provide a basis for integrating human dignity into organizational practices.⁷ Humanistic management has evolved significantly over time. The initial approach, developed in the 1960s and 1970s as a theory of **motivation** (Melé 2003). Inspired by Maslow's work, managers were encouraged to address human needs in order to improve organizational outcomes; the human person—individual and social—was of less interest (ibid). A subsequent approach emerged in the 1980s and 1990s and centered on **organizational culture**, building on the idea that context and thus organizational cultures have a large influence on the behavior of its members (ibid). This approach emphasizes the intrinsic value of human dignity (Adler 2021; Taylor 1989; Sayer 2011). A third approach—which is still emerging—considers the organization as a community of persons. This approach takes human needs and motivations into account while adding an ethical aspect to the need for **self-actualization**. This perspective grounds human dignity in processes of personal development (Rogers 1951/2021; Sen 2001; Nussbaum 2011). Yet, in addition, it takes the **social nature of human beings** as a starting point for the formation of communities and real bonds (Melé 2015). By combining elements from the earlier approaches, this emerging perspective enriches the concept of humanistic management with a greater emphasis on ethical reflection and fostering genuine bonds within the organizational community. Rooted in relational anthropology, this viewpoint highlights the individual's inherent capacity for empathy and love within economic contexts (Scheler 1973; Levinas 1969; Fromm 1959/2017; Nullens 2021; Hummels et al. 2021).

These philosophical frameworks collectively inform how human dignity can be foundational to organizational ethos and practice. Although presented here as distinct and partly successive, we draw the reader's attention to their interrelated and overlapping nature. We expand hereafter on these four approaches, as separate but interconnected organs forming the body of human dignity within the humanistic management context.

Motivation and Universal Drives

Historically, humanistic management was developed as a theory of motivation (Melé 2003), inspired by Maslow's work (Maslow 1943). Managers were essentially seen as motivators and encouraged to learn about their employee's motivations in order to help them achieve their goals (Lilienthal 1967, in Melé 2003).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943) orders human needs and possibilities as developing in a quite predictable yet not fully deterministic⁸ sense (Frick 1974). Its first four levels—physiological needs, safety needs, social needs and esteem needs—are motivated by the need to avoid something negative; deficiency needs (Maslow 1943). The original final level—self-actualization—focusses on growth, aiming to attain something positive (ibid).

⁷Human dignity is a multifaceted moral and legal concept, the philosophical underpinnings of which are intricate and extend beyond the confines of this essay. For a comprehensive exploration of this inquiry, see Debes (2023).

⁸Although the hierarchy of needs—often visualized as a pyramid in popular management literature—claimed that deficit needs needed to be fulfilled before people could reach growth needs, Maslow later corrected himself by stating that his initial work gave “the false impression that a need must be satisfied 100 percent before the next need emerges” (Maslow 1987, p. 69).

Maslow developed and refined his theory over many years, and added three more growth layers. Based on his research on peak performance, he added cognitive and aesthetic needs (Maslow 1970), placing them above deficiency needs, but under self-actualization. He added a final layer, self-transcendence⁹ (Maslow 1970a) following a conversation with a holocaust survivor who shared a great insight of experience; although the most basic needs were not fulfilled in the concentration camps, it were the ‘higher’ needs such as meaning, value and love, that helped him survive (Frankl 1985).¹⁰ Although the initial theory of motivation as applied to a business environment may not have been truly humanistic in that it still emphasized the motivation of employees as an instrument to increase company profit, the underlying idea of attending to human needs has inspired contemporary humanistic management scholars such as Michael Pirson to employ motivational theories to operationalize human dignity.

Donaldson and Walsh introduced the concept of a dignity threshold as a minimum level of dignity required for business success, which in turn is defined as the creation of collective value (2015). To protect this minimum level of dignity, Pirson proposes a set of universal human drives underlying motivation that need to be addressed to a minimum threshold level: the four drive model (Lawrence and Nohria 2002; Lawrence 2010). Pirson connects the four drive model (Lawrence 2010) and the concept of a minimum threshold necessary to protecting human dignity (Donaldson and Walsh 2015) in the humanistic management model (2017). By meeting the dignity threshold, the protection of human dignity is ensured. However, true human flourishing is achieved only through the promotion of human dignity, beyond this minimum level (Pirson 2017). Good leadership in the humanistic leadership model is thus defined as the type of leadership that is directed at well-being through the promotion of dignity (*ibid*).

Paul Lawrence’s four drive model (2010) proposes four drives that evolved in human beings as survival mechanisms, operationalized as criteria used by human brains in evaluating and decision making. Humans share two of these drives with other animals, the other two are uniquely human (Lawrence 2010). Humans share the drive to acquire (dA)—to stay alive and procreate - and the drive to defend (dD)—the drive to defend what is acquired - with all other animals. Although people can satisfy these drives in a many different ways, often together with other people, there are two more independent drives that are unique to humans and have developed over the course of human evolution. The drive to bond (dB) separated humans from the animal kingdom, initially to support the formation of the family bond, in the transition from *homo habilis* to *homo erectus* (Lawrence 2010). Lawrence defines dB as “the drive to form long-term, mutually caring and trusting relationships with other people” (*ibid*, p. 14). The drive to comprehend (dC) emerged in the transition from *homo erectus* to *homo sapiens*, and is defined by Lawrence as “the drive to learn, create, innovate and make sense of the world and oneself” (*ibid*, p. 14). Lawrence provides evidence that the various drives are truly independent, based on how they manifest in human brains as independent neural structures (Lawrence 2010).

⁹Corresponding to Melé’s 7th proposition, see note 4 (Melé 2016)

¹⁰Unfortunately, Aguado and his colleagues (in Kostera and Pirson 2018) use the original version of Maslow’s hierarchy to translate abstract principles of dignity and measure the level of dignity present in the organization, with self-actualization as the highest need. While Kyle et al. (2017) connect human dignity to higher order needs of self-actualization and belonging, they also do not refer to this top level of self-transcendent needs that seem to point to more relational aspects of dignity.

Finding balance in the four drives is a core concept in the four drive model. In the humanistic perspective, all drives contribute to a personal sense of dignity and well-being (Lawrence and Pirson 2015; Pirson 2018). Truly humanistic leaders therefore should appeal to all human drives that underly motivation; through reward systems (catering to the dA), and performance management processes (catering to the dD), while simultaneously attending to people's need to feel embedded in a group (dB) with whom they share a sense of purpose (dC) (Nohria et al. 2008).

The dignity threshold (Donaldson and Walsh 2015; Pirson 2017, p. 73) refers to the basic level of fulfillment of human drives to ensure survival. In the humanistic management model of human nature, the human dignity threshold is presented as a baseline in each drive, and a matter of balance in the four drives, requiring minimum fulfillments of each. The human dignity as a baseline concept is based on the idea of human rights for everyone (Pirson 2014, 2017; Pirson et al. 2016). This is why the humanistic management model makes an important distinction between protecting and promoting human dignity (Pirson 2017).

Lawrence's four drives model resembles Maslow's hierarchy of needs, but is also very different in one important aspect; the four drives model does not represent a hierarchy in any way. The four drives model claims all four drives are equally important and need attending to, especially from leaders, to at least achieve a minimum level of experienced dignity, the dignity threshold (Lawrence 2010; Donaldson and Walsh 2015). This level of human dignity needs protection, as people are vulnerable to harm if the level of dignity falls below this threshold. Although the dignity threshold is either met or not (as a category), this does not capture the promotion of well-being (on a continuum). Dignity is unconditional as a part of human nature (Rosen 2012). Humans not only have the uniquely human feature of self-consciousness, but also have the unique ability to reflect on this consciousness (Taylor 1989), giving human beings both free and moral agency.¹¹ The basis for unconditional dignity lies in this possibility, not in its execution (ibid). Human life in this view has "intrinsic, inherent, unconditional and universal value that needs to be protected" (Pirson 2017, p. 113). Acting with unconditional dignity towards others does not depend on the awareness of the benefit it brings someone to be treated with dignity (Rosen 2012), it is part of our humanity to act in this way exactly because of our capability to free and moral agency. The performative, conditional form of dignity however is found in the specific and contingent balance that is achieved between all four drives, which does not just protect against harm, but promotes well-being (ibid).¹²

Furthermore, the four drive model withstands the general criticism on humanistic theories of focusing on the autonomous individual too much. Although motivation is an individual attribute, the four drive model recognizes the relationality of human beings in the drive to bond, and the need for ethical reflection and sense making in the drive to comprehend (Nes et al. 2021). This corresponds to Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (Ryan 2012) which claims similar human drives in the need for autonomy, relatedness and competence, linked to motivation, engagement and performance. The drives also align with the need for ethical and spiritual dimensions of motivations as found by Matheson and her colleagues

¹¹ The combination of freedom and a capacity to morality does not always lead to moral choices, but to the possibility of it (Wright 1994).

¹² When Michael Pirson (2018a) created a scale on which to measure the four drives and predict work related outcomes such as employee engagement and motivation, the results confirmed that the experienced satisfaction on the four drives do indeed significantly predict a personal sense of dignity.

(2021) in their proposed dignity framework based on internal, external, transcendent and religious dignity motivations. The relationality and transcendent aspect of human dignity is clearly finding its way into the new humanistic theories of motivation and human dignity.

The most recent operationalization of human dignity was designed by Michael Pirson in collaboration with Donna Hicks and other colleagues (Pirson et al. 2023). They established a Dignity Scale that measures intrinsic value within social contexts, operationalizing dignity on an individual level as personal dignity, as a relation to leadership as managerial dignity, and related to organizational culture as organizational dignity. The scale is not built on the four drives though, but uses Hicks' ten elements of dignity (Hicks 2018), which include: acceptance of identity, recognition, acknowledgment, inclusion, safety, fairness, independence, understanding, benefit of the doubt and accountability. The scale consists of a list of dignity expressions in the social context, assuming that the invisible concept of dignity manifests in interactions (Mitchell 2015; Bal 2017; Pirson et al. 2023).

Values and Freedom

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

Another humanistic approach to human dignity is the view elaborated on by Dierksmeier, in which human dignity is approached as the supreme moral value (2015). In this view, the notion of human dignity represents the intrinsic value of human beings (Donaldson and Walsh 2015). An intrinsic value is a positive value, where the object itself provides reason for acting (ibid), guiding and justifying choices on the deepest level (Donaldson 2021). Donaldson calls these higher-level values 'hypernorms', guiding lower-order value creation through a creative process of practical reasoning (ibid). This is why bringing human dignity into the business realm is not a matter of construct redundancy (Bal 2017), as one could argue that values like 'respect' or 'fairness' represent human dignity; in fact, these are simply expressions of human dignity, manifestations, yet the overarching concept of human dignity is not quite captured by it.

Social and cultural contexts and values affect individual motivation and behavior, and authority figures such as team leaders can support or impair the level of internalization of values in a culture (Ryan 2012). As people internalize behaviors that are valued by important others in their environment (Taylor 1989), a shared social identity facilitates the creation of a sense of shared purpose (Haslam et al. 2010), integrating the socially transmitted motivations as intrinsic goals pursued for autonomous motives (Ryan 2012). In other words: a leader who can create a shared social identity and appeals to all human needs or drives, can make team members feel embedded in a shared culture *and* intrinsically motivated to work towards a shared purpose (Haslam et al. 2010).

If we view human dignity as the supreme moral value, a hypernorm, representing the intrinsic value of human beings, which values underpin this human dignity, steering moral decision making? Although group dynamics offer the context of interactions between individuals and identify the underlying relevant values that define dignity within a particular group (Mitchell 2015), some underlying moral values seem to be recognized universally as contributing to human dignity.

A fundamental value is freedom, particularly emphasizing positive freedom for the development of our human capabilities.¹³ Dierksmeier (2015) argues that freedom, as a crucial element of dignity, extends beyond merely safeguarding rights for personal development; it also encompasses a responsibility—a duty—to uphold the dignity of others. Dierksmeier claims that, although counterintuitive, Kant explains human freedom *from* the ability to realize morality; as unconditionally free moral agents we can choose whether or not to live a moral life. “Our capacity for moral freedom must be seen as the true source of the unique status of the human being and its dignity.” (Dierksmeier 2015, p. 38). It is thus the universal capacity for morality that is the source of unconditional human dignity, not moral behavior as such (Pirson et al. 2016). The source of conditional dignity lies in the capacity to be moral, yet we are free to choose whether or not to actually comport ourselves with dignity (Kateb 2011). The relationship between freedom and duty implies that the former is constrained by the latter (*ibid*), which means dignity constrains freedom. This apparent contradiction however is elegantly solved by Kant, who attributes absolute (unconditional) dignity to human beings as such, but conditional dignity to persons based on their moral worthiness (*ibid*).

Freedom can be interpreted either quantitatively or qualitatively (Dierksmeier 2019). The quantitative view of freedom is about maximization, serving personal liberty by acquiring wealth and other material goods one can quantify. The qualitative view of freedom is concerned with shaping freedom in such a way that the individual right to be free is not constrained but protected by a responsibility for the freedom of others, a responsibility that Dierksmeier refers to as ‘a cosmopolitan responsibility’ (*ibid*). The concept of qualitative freedom entails a type of freedom that is based on human equality. If all human beings have the right to be free, it means I am only truly free when I take responsibility for the freedom of others, enabling universal freedom through temporal (intergenerational) and spatial (global) extensions of commitment (Dierksmeier 2018, 2019). Qualitative freedom reconciles individual and societal freedoms in such a way that everyone can live freely (*ibid*). As quantitative freedom serves the idea of *homo economicus* (focusing on the individual freedom to acquire—and defend—material wealth), qualitative freedom supports the *conditio humana* based on the ultimate intrinsic value of human dignity of not only the self, but others as well, stressing the relationality of the experience of freedom (*ibid*).¹⁴

The idea of qualitative freedom has allowed Dierksmeier to insist on the (Aristotelean and teleological) aim towards a common good, while simultaneously recognizing the (Kantian and liberal) diversity of conceptions of the good (Gohl 2018). “Respect for dignity means hence to protect the capacity (the freedom) of the human being to define its own ends, ideally but not always actually, in the pursuit of a moral life.” (Dierksmeier 2015, p. 38)

As a founding member of the humanistic management network as well as its formative philosophical mind, Dierksmeier’s work on freedom as an essential aspect of dignity has been influential in shaping the humanistic management school, and forms the starting point of the humanistic management model (see Fig. 1).

¹³ In our discussion on the capability approach to human development, freedom is introduced as a positive freedom to develop capabilities, a form of free agency of people to actualize their faculties (Sen 2001). This type of freedom requires a minimum level of available capabilities to allow people to exercise their freedom. Below this threshold, one can no longer lead a free and dignified life (Sen 2001; Nussbaum 2011).

¹⁴ This is reflected in Melé’s 5th proposition, where the need to balance individual freedom and sociability is stressed (Melé 2016).

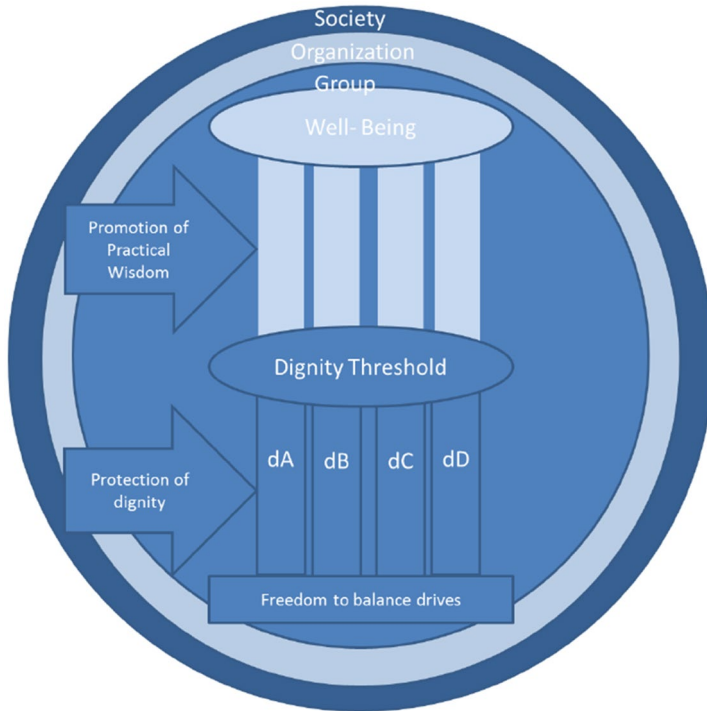


Fig. 1 Humanistic management model (Pirson 2017)

Human Development and Capabilities

A third humanistic approach to human dignity is the view of human dignity as human development. Rogers' (1951/2021) humanistic psychological theory and his view on personhood points us in the direction of a reconciliation of human dignity as a form of motivation, a value driven concept and a form of human development. Rogers adheres to the deterministic idea of a biological basis to human development. He finds human beings to be unique and different from animals because of our self-consciousness (which Taylor specifies by pointing to the human ability to reflect on this self-consciousness), giving us the freedom of choice. As human beings, we strive to experience our selves as coherent and organized wholes ('being'), while simultaneously being part of a process of evolution ('becoming') (Rogers 1951/2021). Rogers finds that our behavior is driven by our goal directed attempts to satisfy human needs, while cultural conditioning influences the different manifestations of our human search to fulfill these needs, as we experience tensions between values we directly experience (phenomenological view) and those we introjected (Rogers 1951/2021; Taylor 1989). Introjections can be very useful, but need to be experienced in order to be truly internalized: "the emergence of value systems which are unique and personal for each individual, and which are changed by the changing evidence of organic experience, yet which are at the same time deeply socialized, possessing a high degree of similarity in their essentials" (Rogers 1951/2021, p. 524). To self-actualize and develop, in Rogers' theory, means to test social values introjected from the culture to arrive at personal values, enhanc-

ing the human person to behave in meaningful and balanced ways satisfying all needs while resolving his or her internal conflicts (*ibid*).

Melé (2016) introduces human development as one of the seven key aspects of humanism in general (proposition 4) informing both the humanistic ethos and humanistic management practices, explaining: “Humanism sees the human being in permanent development and calls on him or her to flourish as a human. This is the responsibility of each person, but since the material, social and cultural environment can favor it, humanism seeks to foster the conditions for such flourishing including appropriate well-being (development).” (2015, pp. 42–43). The humanistic view that human dignity cannot be achieved without a favorable environment to human development is clearly linked to the capability approach.

This approach was developed by Amartya Sen, originally as an alternative to traditional welfare economics who define well-being as a combination of income and utility (Westermann-Behaylo et al. 2016). In the capability approach, not just the right but the actual capability for human development is central (*ibid*). Development to Sen is not just the accumulation of wealth, but rather a quest for living a flourishing life (Westermann-Behaylo et al. 2016). Sen defines wellbeing in terms of freedom and capabilities; wellbeing is achieved when people are free—have the means and opportunity—to actualize their capabilities into functionings (Sen 1999/2001). A capability is defined as the ability or freedom to choose to be or do something that one has reason to value; a functioning is the actual being and doing that the individual chooses (*ibid*). For example, a capability can be the availability of medical care provided by a government, the functioning is the actual use of this facility by citizens. As each individual has multiple capabilities—capability sets—available to her, functionings can be incompatible and lead to difficult choices (Sen 1985, in Westermann-Behaylo et al. 2016).¹⁵

With a threshold level of capabilities in mind—a minimum level of capabilities that need to be available to people to allow them to live a dignified and free life—Nussbaum proposed the following ten capabilities: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; nature/other species; play; and control over one’s political and material environment (Nussbaum 2011).¹⁶

The capability approach is a humanistic approach to human development as it aims to protect and promote human dignity by creating the conditions for flourishing (Sen Sen 2001; Melé 2016). Freedom of agency is assumed only when a minimum level of capabilities are available to the individual, implying that circumstances in which the capability threshold

¹⁵The notion of dignity was introduced in the capability approach by Martha Nussbaum (2011) as an underlying normative criterion for a just society (Nussbaum 2002 in Westermann-Behaylo et al. 2016). Nussbaum finds that Sen’s work is not specific enough in defining which capabilities are required to promote this more just society (Nussbaum 2000, in Westermann-Behaylo et al. 2016) and how the idea of freedom holds in circumstances so void of capabilities available to a person that they have no possibility of living a dignified, free life. Nussbaum finds that (unconditional) human dignity should form the moral basis upon which a minimum level of capabilities is established. Conditional elements of dignity can be actualized into functionings through free choice and agency to live up to their potential (Nussbaum 1998, in Westermann-Behaylo et al. 2016).

¹⁶There has been academic debate on whether or not it is possible and desirable to specify a list of capabilities (Robeyns 2003 in Westermann-Behaylo et al. 2016), and if so, “which capabilities are so central to human dignity that they apply in all times and places and to all social institutions” (Westermann-Behaylo et al. 2016, p. 533). Notwithstanding, the capability approach has inspired several indices of well-being used by the United Nations including the Human Development Index and Human Poverty Index, who base their measurements on the theoretical grounds of the capability approach (Stewart 2013).

is not met, make it impossible for people to lead a free and dignified life. The capability approach is usually applied to a societal level of analysis, yet can be useful for organizing business practice around a human dignity threshold. Since the humanistic management model builds on the concept of a dignity threshold as the capability approach builds on a capability threshold, the two approaches seem compatible, but fit for different purposes and levels of analysis. Nonetheless, the capability approach draws renewed attention to the context of human development and how important it is to protect dignity by creating the conditions for flourishing. Dignity is not just present intra- or interpersonally, but can also be limited or promoted by contextual circumstances including an organizational culture.

Relational Anthropology and Love

Finally, a relational anthropology underpins the notion of human dignity by emphasizing our interconnectedness and the dynamics of our interactions as individuals. Beginning with Martin Buber's exploration, a significant inquiry into the contrasting dynamics of the I-Thou relationship versus the I-it relationship has emerged. Building upon this foundation, the social psychoanalyst and humanist Erich Fromm delineates two fundamental modes of human experience: having and being (Fromm 1976). Both of these modes are indispensable for human flourishing. The concept of 'having' portrays individuals as either consumers or producers (often referred to as human resources), according to Fromm. He argues that our highest expression of humanity lies in our capacity to nurture meaningful connections and demonstrate empathy towards others. At the core of this perspective is the understanding that love, in its myriad forms, encapsulates the essence of the human experience. This intrinsic human need for connection and intimacy is frequently undermined within the framework of capitalist systems, which tend to reduce individuals to mere producers and consumers. In such contexts, the intrinsic value of human relationships is eclipsed by materialistic pursuits and the commodification of human experiences. Consequently, the profound significance of love and relationality becomes obscured, potentially resulting in a sense of alienation and a pathological estrangement from one's own humanity (Fromm 1959/2017).

Love is especially present in the organizational practice of promoting dignity, as this requires care and development, Melé's fourth and fifth level of human quality treatment (2014). On these levels, empathy, compassion and emotional intelligence become paramount (Melé 2015). What makes love in leadership difficult is that it requires authentic attention for the person in each individual situation (Melé 2015; Lee 2022) to promote flourishing. This resembles parental love in the unconditionality of it; no matter how bad a child may disappoint, an unconditional love will save the relationship. This love manifests in an esteem for wholeness, trying to promote the best in an individual person (Rogers 1951/2021; Melé 2015). Although flourishing is at least partly an individual's personal responsibility, it is the environment and the people in it which have a huge influence on such processes, for better or worse (Taylor 1989). Virtuous behavior is stimulated by loving leadership (Hendriks et al. 2020).

However, love transcends mere ethical considerations; it lies at the heart of our identity as human beings and shapes our understanding of human dignity. Fundamentally, humans are inherently social and relational creatures. In the sphere of economics and business, operations occur within intricate networks of relationships built upon mutual trust. It is crucial to acknowledge that human dignity is intimately intertwined with our innate capacity for

forming bonds and nurturing connections rooted in love. An anthropology of relationships within the economic sphere aims to navigate a nuanced equilibrium among self-interest, freedom, and sympathy.¹⁷ Informed by Max Scheler's phenomenological anthropology, and Levinas philosophy of the Other,¹⁸ Nullens and colleagues advocate for conceptualizing the human person as an individual inherently driven by a fundamental need for profound relationships, meaning, and the sacred—a construct encapsulated as “homo amans.” Within this relational- phenomenological framework, the essence of human dignity is ultimately defined. In accordance with the philosophy of Max Scheler, it becomes evident that genuine values conducive to human flourishing are discernible solely through the lens of love. Love, far from being merely an ethical construct, transcends into the realm of epistemology, serving as a fundamental category for understanding and apprehending these values. Max Scheler proposed a hierarchical order of values in his work, “Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values,” which includes material, vital, sensory-experiential, economic, social, intellectual, and spiritual values. According to Scheler, these values build upon each other, with spiritual values such as love and compassion holding the highest significance as they contribute most significantly to human flourishing.¹⁹ This perspective, encapsulated by the concept of homo amans (Nullens and Van Nes 2021a), underscores the significance of nurturing meaningful connections and fostering a culture of empathy and understanding within organizational contexts.

Beginning with a phenomenological understanding of human relationships, Hummels and Nullens propose an “agapeic turn” (Hummels et al. 2021; Hummels and Nullens 2022) in work and organizing. This turn of perspective draws inspiration from the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and the priority of the Other as not to be controlled, but as inherently different. Levinas's philosophy emphasizes the ethical imperative of acknowledging and prioritizing the needs of others over our own self-interest and desire to master. In the context of work and organizing, this entails a shift towards a relational approach that values empathy, care, and ethical responsibility in interpersonal interactions and organizational practices.

In promoting dignity, a loving and caring leader can play a key role (Héjj 2019; Hummels et al. 2021). Human dignity manifests in the potentiating relationships of care with our parents, teachers and managers- and with our children, students and team members, (McCaslin 2008). Leadership at its best can function as such a caring relation of power (Sayer 2011), aiming to protect and promote dignity, helping people flourish (Sayer 2011). This point is supported by McCaslin (2008) when he coins the term ‘potentiating’ for leading, teaching and parenting, by promoting the actualization of their potential. We are all socialized

¹⁷This perspective resonates with the themes elucidated in Adam Smith's seminal works, particularly “The Theory of Moral Sentiments” (1759) and “The Wealth of Nations” (1776).

¹⁸Especially Levinas' call for a de-totalising recognition of the other—in our case for instance employees—through the development of decision- making structures that allow ‘the other’ to express herself or himself (Levinas 1969).

¹⁹The concept of “homo amans” by Max Scheler contrasts with Immanuel Kant's view, which grounds human dignity in rational autonomy (1973). While Kant emphasizes formal reasoning, Scheler complements this by highlighting the emotional dimensions of human value experience (material ethics). Additionally, Scheler distinguishes from Nietzsche by emphasizing universal value phenomena over individual creation of values and relativism. Love, for Scheler, serves both as a moral concept and an epistemic category for understanding higher values (Nullens 2018). Conversely, Scheler identifies “resentment” as a destructive force, devaluing values and human dignity (2007).

through such relations of care, an element often missed in academia, including the notion of love in these socialization processes (Sayer 2011).

Defining love is possible in many ways (Hummels et al. 2021), yet often organizations are reluctant to use the word ‘love’ in a business context. For the purpose of infusing humanistic organizational practices with love, we suggest the definition Fredrickson posits (2013), as it might not infuse the usual discomfort the word ‘love’ tends to in practitioners raised in the economic tradition. Fredrickson defines love as “potent interpersonal moments of shared positivity” (2013, p. 41), which, together with biobehavioral synchrony (such as mirroring behavior) and mutual care, form instances of positive resonance.

Even defined as positive resonance, the notion of love may seem too soft to fit in a business context (Hummels et al. 2021), yet should not be dismissed for not fitting in a loveless business paradigm. Promoting human dignity requires more from leaders than complying to rights based rules supporting the notion of equality, or protecting freedoms that allow people to develop threshold capabilities. Promoting dignity is about hope, through an optimistic outlook and willingness to act on a better future for all (Nullens 2021; Nullens and Van Nes 2021a); faith, in humanity as a creative (and not just a destructive) force with the potential to contribute to the good and the beautiful (Bodelier 2022); and love, as the ultimate value underlying human dignity, seeing the potential of humanity in one single person (Scheler in Joas 2000). It is important to note that although this conditional type of dignity may not manifest (yet), it is love that can bring it out through potentiating leadership (McCaslin 2008). Such leaders can create an environment in which people feel safe to show their vulnerability (Hicks 2018), and can actualize their potential to thrive and contribute to a collective well-being, a common good.

A Cosmopolitan View on Human Dignity

The hope for a cosmopolitan world society is a humanist hope (Appiah 2006/2007; Kunneman and Suransky 2011) based on key elements of the humanistic ethos; the belief in and the emphasis on progress, reason, individualism and inclusiveness (Nida-Rümelin, 2009). Individualism in this context does not point to a lack of connectedness or empathy, but is connected to the concept of unconditional dignity: each person is inherently valuable, regardless of collective identities defined by race, gender et cetera. This sometimes causes the (mis)interpretation of equality as equivalence, of being of equal value or being the same. In denying that differences exist between individuals based on their social identities (Tajfel and Turner 1979), including their culture, gender or anything else, the potential intergroup conflicts are not solved but just ignored. Acknowledging differences has become suspect in the light of the ‘woke’ trend supporting the emancipation of members of suppressed groups in society (Neiman 2023). Historically, this is a completely understandable allergy (Stuurman 2009), as abuse of power has so often happened by a dominant group of people at the expense of another (or many others), and this still happens every day. Differences in behavior, communication style, habits et cetera between people belonging to different groups are often evaluated negatively from the perspective of the dominant majority and evaluated as ‘less’, making the dominant group appear superior. Yet inclusive, true cosmopolitanism requires us to acknowledge the differences we perceive, without judgment, and embrace the different interpretations as an opportunity to reflect and to engage in open dialogue about

how a group chooses to deal with this polyphony. A cosmopolitan view on humanity promotes a world of polyphony, of cultural and therefore moral pluralism (Cherry 2009; Stuurman 2009; Ellemers and Gilder 2022). Yet this is easier said than done, as moral differences often lead to poor intergroup relations (Ellemers and Gilder 2022).

The idea of protecting a universal and unconditional human dignity - as expressed in the universal declaration of human rights - advocates a cosmopolitan humanism with a universal view on human dignity (Bodelier 2009; Rodríguez-Luesma et al. 2014). Yet universal human rights may not be neutral nor universal, and all good intentions aside, cause more problems than they solve outside of the western countries (Henrich 2020). Furthermore, as Slavoj Žižek (in Bodelier 2009, p. 124) claims, any universality is tainted by a particular value system and implies hidden exclusion. Kunneman and Suransky (2011) point to two pitfalls in this respect; naïve universalism, and lazy relativism. In this section we address both these pitfalls, and close with the challenge of leading moral plurality in the context of humanistic management.

Naïve Universalism

The notion of human dignity has been criticized for being a specifically Western concern, with a culturally biased focus on the individual, emphasizing autonomy over relationality (Mitchell 2015). However, Müller pointed out that the difference between genesis and validity should not be confused (Müller 2012). Enlightenment values that emerged in the West are not necessarily restricted to the West in its validity (Brown 2010). No set of values can fit every time and space (Baggini 2008/2019), while different contexts do not necessarily breed diverging views either (Sen 2006, in Dierksmeier 2011). Implying that human dignity is not an important concept beyond the West can even be interpreted as imperialistic, questioning the inherent human dignity of all people by ascertaining that some apparently have no interest in protecting their dignity against harm or oppression (ibid).

Although cultural conceptions of ‘the good’ exist, there is a universal aspect to flourishing or suffering emerging from our existing nature (Sayer 2011). Anthropologists tend to support some form of ethical subjectivism (relativism), implying that people in different societies will follow different moral codes, which are all equally ‘good’, within their particular contexts. Yet ethical judgments are about something, they have a claim in reality (Smith 2010; Sayer 2011), and are not arbitrary. Human well-being or ill-being is not just subjective. Human beings are all vulnerable to suffering and capable of flourishing (Nussbaum 2011; Sayer 2011). Sayer argues that “universalism is not the problem in the liberal universalism based on the notion of an adult, unencumbered, implicitly male, individual subject acting in the public sphere of modern societies and characterized by his capacity for reason, the problem is universalism is too narrowly based” (Sayer 2011, p. 142).

Within the humanistic management school, it is Claus Dierksmeier who is particularly concerned with the potentially global applicability of the humanistic business paradigm. He argues that the concept of human dignity can serve as a “bedrock for intercultural dialogue and cooperation” (Dierksmeier and Dierksmeier 2016, p. 103), especially since “a substantial ethical consensus across temporal and cultural divides” has been reached, a type of “global ethics” (ibid).

The Global Ethics (Weltethos) project started with Hans Küng’s “Declaration towards a global ethic” in 1993, built on two basic principles and four values. The principles are the

principle of humanity, and the golden rule of reciprocity (Gohl 2018). The values include respect for life, honesty and fairness, truthfulness, and respect and love for one another (ibid). This work found its way to Davos, the World Economic Forum, and finally to the United Nations. In 2009, the original declaration formed the foundation of the Manifesto for a Global Economic Ethic, affirming that “being human must be the ethical yardstick for all economic action” (Gohl 2018, p. 170), which is the principle of humanity. The second principle is to respect the individual, the third involves to do good, and the fourth appeals to reciprocity- based on the golden rule “What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others” (ibid, p. 166). The articles continue to lay out the implications of these basic four Weltethos values to include non-violence, respect for life, justice, solidarity, honesty, tolerance, mutual esteem and partnership (Gohl 2018). K ung’s intention is for political and business leaders to start using this set of principles and values to transform towards responsible business conduct (Gohl 2018).

In 2012, Claus Dierksmeier was asked to follow up Hans K ung as director of the Weltethos Institute, with the assignment to contribute in two ways; by laying a secular foundation and sharpen the argument for the Weltethos idea (Gohl 2018). To do so, Dierksmeier introduces freedom as a foundational value, specifically the notion of qualitative freedom, providing ‘unity in diversity’ (Von Kimakowitz 2013). This qualitative type of freedom represents a “cosmopolitan understanding of freedom as planetary responsibility” (Gohl 2018, p. 175). This qualitative understanding of freedom would allow everyone the same opportunity to exercise their freedom, while being free to choose how to exercise this freedom to “lead a life that human beings have reason to value” (Sen, 1999, in Gohl 2018). Although Western ideas with regard to freedom or dignity should “not be uncritically worshipped as ultimate capstones of human wisdom” (Dierksmeier 2011, p. 21) they can actually be helpful in shaping the global debate on the value of human life for all human beings everywhere. Yet defining human dignity solely as unconditional, a-social and context free presents conceptual difficulties (Mitchell 2015). Although the importance of protecting an unconditional human dignity threshold against harm cannot be overrated, it does not do justice to the diversity of interpretations and meaning people may attribute to the notion of human dignity, especially across time (historically) and place (culturally). The human person is not just part of humanity, but is also a singular and particular individual (Adler, in Teixeira and Oliveira 2021), in a temporal, spatial and relational context (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961).

Lazy Relativism

The logic of communicating about values is different than a rational argumentative discourse, yet the affective dimension of values does not make values irrational as values depend on reason and intersubjective plausibility (Joas 2000). Although different cultures have different conceptions of flourishing and well-being, our subjective views on our well-being are not merely subjective (Sayer 2011). Our subjective views and feelings are about objective states of being that are independent of the self (ibid). “There are many kinds of well-being, but not just any way of life constitutes well-being” (ibid, p. 135). This objectivist conception of well-being (and dignity) doesn’t assume universalism; it is compatible with pluralism, but not relativism (ibid). Neiman (2023) stresses this point in her critique on tribalism as opposed to universalism; a shared human dignity does not imply that we are all

the same, it just implies that we are connected by our shared humanity and strengthened by cultural pluralism (p. 54).

Research by Haidt and Joseph (2004) points to five universal foundations—‘modules’-of morality. These modules underpin the moral systems cultures develop, yet are present in all humans from birth. Their Moral Foundations Theory claims that a first draft of the moral mind has evolved and is present from birth (nativism), while cultural learning edits this draft during development (Haidt and Joseph 2004). This moral modularity is built on five universal moral foundations based on ‘intuitive ethics’: compassion (don’t do harm), reciprocity (be fair), hierarchy (respect for authority), purity (respect sanctity and aesthetics) and outsiders (in-group loyalty). Yet although these mechanisms may be general, their expression will depend a good deal on cultural context (Appiah 2008/2009; Graham et al. 2013). Furthermore, ‘doing the right thing’ is only one aspect of morality (Taylor 1989). Values related to ‘being’ are meant to help people understand the meaning of being human, of living life. What we value is not simply relative, it is defined by qualitative contrasts, which can be irreconcilable between - and even within—cultures (ibid).

Leading Moral Plurality

The humanistic management focus extends beyond the boundaries of the usual view of leadership, counterbalancing a merely economic view of business (Davila et al. 2013). The social relations in which leaders develop, the moral work they need to perform, and the aim to have a positive impact on the common good, are the foundation of humanistic global leadership (ibid). Davila et al. (2013) support the view that successful humanistic leaders should think of themselves as cosmopolitans, as citizens of the world, linked to their stakeholders through a shared humanity.

Rodríguez-Luesma et al. (2014) define humanistic leadership as a value-infused dialogue of global leaders and local stakeholders. As global leaders encounter ‘the other’ on a daily basis, humanism is—in their perspective—almost synonymous with cosmopolitanism as it is so closely tied to the processes of trans nationalization and globalization (ibid). Rodríguez-Luesma et al. (2014) refer to a pluralistic, value-rich conception of cosmopolitanism as “the coexistence of multiple modernities” and simultaneously recognize that a humanistic view of management demands the recognition of “the common core to every human being” (ibid, p. 83). In this view, global leaders become humanistic when the dialogue with stakeholders entails learning about other’s systems of values. In other words; global leaders have to learn to manage moral plurality.

Dunn et al. (2012) find that most global leadership models focus too narrowly on either cognitive or affective intelligence, IQ or EQ, to explore the concept. They integrate Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory (Gardner 1983/2004) in a Global Leadership Model by connecting different types of intelligence to global leadership domains. Dunn et al. (2012) suggest four domains in which global leaders need to be competent in order to tap into global talent and potential; the task level, relationship level, awareness level and the purpose level (see Fig. 2).

In the economic leadership paradigm, the focus lies mostly on the drives to achieve (dA) and defend (dD). Leaders engage in task-related, transactional relations with their employees for which their cognitive ability (IQ) to maximize results suffices. Yet the

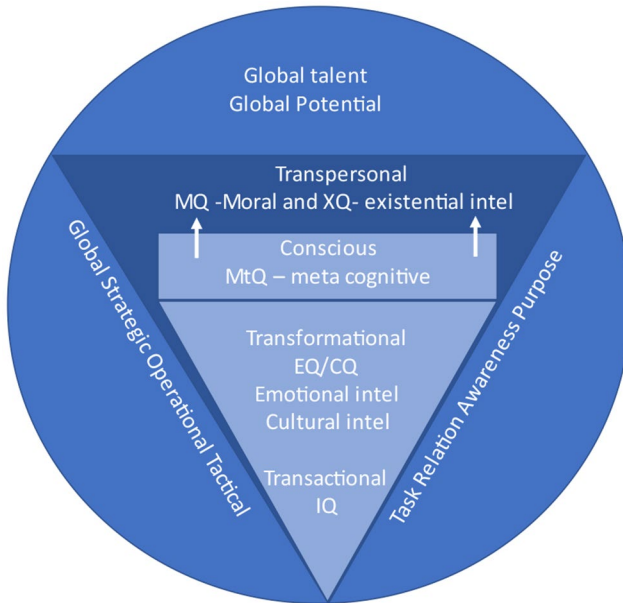


Fig. 2 Global leadership model (Dunn et al. 2012)

humanistic paradigm stresses the importance of two additional drives; the drive to bond (dB) and the drive to comprehend (dC).

In the Global Leadership Model, Dunn and his colleagues introduce the relation domain to draw attention to the emotional and cultural intelligences (EQ and CQ) needed to address this drive to bond. Despite a traditional focus on the leader as a special individual with specific traits employing the right incentives (the ‘prejudice of leadership’ as Haslam and his colleagues call this), a large part of effective leadership lies in the leader’s capacity to mobilize followers through creating a shared social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Haslam et al. 2010; Hicks 2016; Ellemers and Gilder 2022). In this view, leaders are ‘entrepreneurs of identity’, as social identity is the key unifying construct for groups (Haslam et al. 2010).

The Global Leadership Model (GLM) furthermore introduce the purpose domain to draw attention to moral and existential intelligence (Gardner 1983/2004). They relate the domain to transpersonal leadership, which requires “leaders who maximize people’s potential to exceed their self-imposed limitations [...] who are not satisfied with quantitative measures of success” (Dunn et al. 2012, p. 9). The addition of the ‘purpose’ domain is based on the complexity theory perspective (Sherman and Schultz 1998 in Dunn et al. 2012) which emerged during globalization (Dunn et al. 2012). Rosen (2012) finds we all carry the dignity of humanity in our person as “we are the embodiment of a transcendent value” (p. 150). He explains that the reader should interpret this as a Kantian duty to act with dignity not only towards others, but towards ourselves, as moral agents, and that every denial of human dignity in any human being brings harm to humanity as a whole. This transcendent way of thinking about human dignity has found its way into leadership research in the form of transpersonal leadership styles as described by Dunn et al. (2012). Transpersonal leadership is purpose driven and requires both moral and existential intelligence (Dunn et al. 2012).

Potentiating leadership (McCaslin 2008) is a form of transpersonal leadership that seems to fit quite naturally within the humanistic management context.

A Conciliatory Framework: Approaches to Human Dignity at Work

Table 2 summarizes the different approaches to the role of human dignity at work in the context of humanistic management. It incorporates Melé's Human Quality Treatments (2014), Gardner's multiple intelligences connected to the different leadership styles based on Dunn et al. (2012), Lawrence's four drives theory of drives underlying motivations (2010), and connects them to the main values underlying human dignity; equality, freedom and love. From left to right, each level builds on the prior level, evolving organizational business practice from abusive, to transactional, relational and finally potentiating practices. In this final stage, all motivational drives (Lawrence 2010) are being protected and promoted (Pirson 2017), moral and existential intelligence (Gardner in Dunn et al. 2012) are addressed, leaders engage in loving, and potentiating (McCaslin 2008) relations of care (Melé 2014) with collective well-being or the common good as the purpose of organizational business practices (Donaldson and Walsh 2015).

Suggestions for Further Research

Humanistic management practices need to go beyond those which acknowledge an inherent and universal human dignity, or those which reward a performative and conditional expression of earned dignity. Although earned dignity refers to the dignity manifested in virtuous comportment (Kant's *Wert*), we find that truly potentiating relationships do not just promote dignity by rewarding it with love when it manifests, but are based on an unconditional type of love of humanity and the human person that does *not* require any proof (*Würde*). In this special issue, Lee and Wellinghoff (2024) refer to something similar when they address Kierkegaard's idea that we can 'love for the good in others' (Lee, 2022); the manifestation of good is secondary to a faith in its presence in all of us. Through loving leadership, a person's potential is simply assumed, and is lovingly invited to manifest within the relation of unconditional love.

Natural sciences are no longer anthropocentric. Similarly, we should no longer place natural science at the center of the humanities and social sciences (Taylor 1989). As a 'thick' ethical concept (Appiah 2008/2009; Waldron 2009), the experience of human dignity is highly personal, influenced by one's socio-cultural upbringing and context (Appiah 2006/2007). Truly humanistic organizational business practices emerge through the promotion of human dignity (Melé 2014). Yet, as the experience of human dignity is both universally human, culturally specific and extremely personal, interpretations of experienced dignity could be very different for different people.

By prioritizing qualitative, phronetic research²⁰ approaches, future researchers can capture the richness and complexity of human experiences, perceptions, and interpretations related to dignity. A *phronetic* lens would enable a thorough examination of the subjec-

²⁰ Phronetic research focuses on values, not universal or relativist, but contextual ethics, pluralistic. It is the social context of the reference group that determines the claim of validity (hence its pluralistic nature) (Flyvbjerg 2001/2019).

Table 2 Approaches to the role of human dignity at work

Role of human dignity at work		Not violating dignity	Protect a human dignity threshold, doing no harm	Promote dignity above the human dignity threshold
Human quality treatment (Melé)	Maltreatment	Indifference	Justice	Care and development
Leadership style (Dunn et al.)	Authoritarian	Transactional	Relational (Haslam)	Potentiating (McCaslin)/Virtuous (Hendriks)
Intelligence* (Gardner)	Lack of MQ and XQ	IQ	EQ/CQ	MQ and XQ (<i>phronesis</i>)
Motivation (Lawrence)	Drive to acquire and defend	Drive to acquire and defend	Drive to acquire, defend, bond and comprehend (on threshold level)	Drive to acquire, defend, bond and comprehend (on a personally optimized level)
Nature of human nature	Survival of the strongest	Homo economicus	People are vulnerable to harm	People have the potential to flourish
Underlying value	Fear	Equality	Freedom	Love
Approach to human dignity in organizational business practice	Human dignity is not important People hold no special place on earth Each of us act based on self-interest alone	Human dignity is about human rights Compliance with the law We are all equal before the law	Freedom to develop at least a minimum of capabilities to meet the dignity threshold We are all equal and free	Human dignity is inherent and universal Every person holds the potential for conditional dignity through self-actualization and contributing to collective well-being We are all equal, free and deserving of love
Human concern	Abuse of people is acceptable	Using people is acceptable	Human beings are special and vulnerable to harm.	Human beings are special, and every person holds a potential to flourish.

*MQ moral intelligence, XQ existential intelligence, EQ emotional intelligence, CQ cultural intelligence, IQ cognitive intelligence

tive dimensions of dignity, highlighting its universal resonance while also acknowledging its contextual nuances (Flyvbjerg 2001/2019). Leading moral plurality requires a form of *phronetic leadership*, promoting human dignity with moral and existential intelligence (Dunn et al. 2012) within potentiating relations of love and care.

Conclusion

With this article, we aimed to dissect the heart of humanistic management, dismembering human dignity as its foundational concept. The concept of human dignity appeared to be grounded in various philosophical and social- psychological approaches, as separate but interconnected organs forming the body of human dignity within the humanistic management context. Although each approach supports the pillars of the humanistic management ethos (Von Kimakowitz et al. 2011; Melé 2016), merely attempting to reduce human dignity to a universal set of motivations, values or capabilities does not seem to do justice to the human condition.

A focus on sameness, emphasizing universal elements in human dignity, overlooks the exploration of the phenomenological aspects, namely, the human experience of dignity as articulated by Kateb (2011). We should be aware that what people believe is good or bad for humans is context dependent, and that there is no one general principle by which all difference can be resolved (Flyvbjerg 2001/2019). Human dignity is—at least partly—a social construct. A phenomenological approach to reality seeks to unveil the richness and depth of human experience by closely attending to the ways in which phenomena manifest in our lived world. It represents a philosophical perspective that underscores the subjective experience of phenomena as they are perceived and interpreted.²¹ With the rejection of both naïve universalism and lazy relativism, we find ourselves facing the challenge of moral pluralism (Cherry 2009; Stuurman 2009; Ellemers and Gilder 2022).

We introduce a relational anthropology to draw attention to another way of grounding human dignity, one pointing to the social nature of human beings and our inherent capacity for love. Rather than adhering strictly to a set of doctrines or beliefs, humanistic management is unified by its commitment to advancing human dignity in a business context. Love, as the ultimate value underlying human dignity, could be the ‘unifying principle’ for humanistic management (Lee 2022), especially in a context of moral pluralism (Ellemers and Gilder 2022).

Acknowledgements We would like to thank Prof. Dr. Harry Hummels of Maastricht University and Prof. Dr. Matthew Lee of Harvard University for reviewing and commenting on earlier versions of this paper. For discussions on the topic and comments on the paper, thank you to Prof. Dr. Robert Jan Blomme of Nyenrode Business University. As always, any remaining errors are our own.

²¹ Phenomenology examines how we experience phenomena and their meanings, encompassing perception, memory, emotion, social activity and more. It sheds light on our existence as a source of reality and differs from scientific reductionism. Notable phenomenological philosophers include E. Husserl, M. Heidegger, M. Merleau-Ponty, M. Scheler, H. Arendt, E. Levinas, P. Ricoeur, J. Derrida, C. Taylor (Moran and Mooney 2002). This approach to dignity and the human person stands in contrast to a search of universal ‘essence’ and/or a scientific-materialistic reductionism (Smith 2010)

Funding Open access funding provided by The University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, The Netherlands. No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript. The authors have no financial or proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.

Data Availability The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing Interests The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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